The Struggle for HLP rights in Post-Assad Syria

Reclaiming What Was Taken

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Executive Summary

- For over a decade, the Assad regime systematically weaponized legal frameworks –including Decree 66, Law No. 10, and sweeping counterterrorism laws – to enable mass property confiscations. Framed as redevelopment or public safety measures, these laws allowed regime-aligned actors to seize property without due process. Entire neighbourhoods were demolished, ownership records were destroyed or manipulated, and countless families were dispossessed with no legal recourse.

- Since the regime's collapse, Syria's transitional authorities have taken cautious but notable steps to dismantle this legacy. Initial reforms include halting property transfers, establishing administrative restitution committees, reviewing controversial redevelopment schemes, and reversing politically motivated asset seizures. While progress has been uneven and constrained by structural weakness, these steps reflect a growing political will to address past injustices.

- On the ground, Syrians are also forging their own paths to restitution. In a fragmented legal landscape, people are turning to direct re-entry, community mediation, grassroots advocacy, and formal legal channels when possible. Restitution committees have delivered results in cases supported by clear documentation. But more complex claims, especially those involving forged deeds or contested sales, remain stuck in limbo. Where courts are slow or inaccessible, informal mediation has filled critical gaps, and advocacy campaigns are building momentum, particularly around emblematic cases like Marota City.

- Despite these advances, major challenges persist. Syria's property system is fragmented, outdated, and underfunded. Courts are overwhelmed, land registries lack digitization, and overlapping legal directives often obstruct justice. Thousands of properties remain contested or occupied, while displaced Syrians face major obstacles to proving ownership. Women, and other marginalized groups (such as refugees and displaced people) face additional legal and societal barriers due to discriminatory laws and patriarchal norms.

- Despite these hurdles, a path forward is possible. This report sets out an actionable roadmap anchored in justice, equity, and accountability. It calls for repealing repressive laws, establishing a national restitution commission, designing inclusive compensation mechanisms, expanding legal aid, improving dispute resolution, and protecting vulnerable populations. Ongoing international engagement will be essential to support these efforts.

- Restoring HLP rights is not simply a technical or legal task – it is a political and moral imperative. Without meaningful restitution, return, reconstruction, and reconciliation will remain out of reach. But if done right, it offers Syria a rare chance to rebuild its future on the foundation of justice, dignity, and lasting peace.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Assad regime's collapse, Syria entered a fragile but historic period of transition. Among the many legacies of conflict and authoritarian rule, few are as far-reaching – or as politically charged – as the systematic violation of housing, land, and property (HLP) rights. This crisis, rooted in decades of legal manipulation and governance by coercion, intensified dramatically after 2011. Under the pretexts of redevelopment, counterterrorism, and national interest, the Assad regime and its allies deployed a vast legal and bureaucratic arsenal to displace communities, demolish neighbourhoods, loot properties, confiscate land, and reassign ownership. What appeared on paper as lawful planning or security policy was, in practice, a deliberate strategy to punish dissent, reward loyalty, and reengineer the country's demographic and political landscape.[1]

These violations were not isolated acts of wartime opportunism; they were structural and calculated. Entire districts were emptied, often without warning or compensation, while state institutions rubber-stamped land transfers to regime-aligned elites. While the exact scale of these violations remains unclear, initial reports suggest that thousands of Syrians – at home and in exile – were stripped of their most basic assets, often with no way to contest or reverse what had been done.[2]

Attempts to resist or redress these injustices during the conflict were largely futile, as the regime continued to weaponize HLP laws and stifle any legal or political opposition. But the regime's fall in December 2024 has opened a rare window to confront this legacy. For many, this turning point is not just about political change, but about the possibility of finally restoring stolen homes, repairing social ruptures, and laying the groundwork for a Syria built on justice, not repression.

Restoring HLP rights is not simply a legal formality. It is a political and moral imperative that touches thousands of Syrian family. Without credible mechanisms for restitution, compensation, and reform, national reconciliation will remain hollow. Reconstruction will falter. And the voluntary, dignified return of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) will remain out of reach. HLP justice, in short, is not a side issue. It is central to Syria's recovery.

Yet the path ahead is daunting. Syria's post-conflict property landscape is defined by overlapping claims, missing records, inconsistent laws, and weakened institutions. The legal architecture used to facilitate mass dispossession remains largely intact. Transitional authorities, while signalling a willingness to act, face immense structural, legal, and political constraints.

This report aims to chart a clear path forward. It provides the first evidence-based overview of how HLP violations are being addressed during the initial six months of Syria's post-regime transition. It traces how legal frameworks were weaponized by the Assad regime to enable systematic dispossession. It also reviews the initial steps taken by transitional authorities and institutions, and documents the range of formal and informal efforts underway to reclaim property.

1 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Damascus, February 2025.
2 Al Zien, A. (2019), 'Legal Obstacles to HLP Rights in Syria', PAX, March 2019, https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/import/legal-obstacles-policy-brief-pax.pdf.

In addition, the report identifies the key obstacles to effective HLP restitution and offers a set of actionable recommendations to tackle both the underlying drivers and the immediate consequences of this crisis.

At the core of this research are 40 semi-structured interviews conducted between January and June 2025 with legal practitioners, civil society workers, notables, affected residents, analysts, and human rights advocates. These conversations – conducted both in person and remotely – were conducted under the Chatham House Rule to ensure the safety of participants and encourage open, candid dialogue. The report also draws on court documents, legal records, official circulars, policy statements, and investigative media reports made public since the regime's fall.

While recognising that HLP violations were committed across Syria by various actors both before and after the fall of the regime, this report focuses exclusively on violations perpetrated by the Syrian regime within territories under its control between 2011 and 2014. This narrowed scope reflects the disproportionate scale of violations committed by the Syrian regime and is intended to enable a more focused and indepth analysis.

By tracing the contours of Syria's early response to HLP violations, this report serves both as a diagnostic and a roadmap. It identifies emerging practices, gaps, and challenges while offering concrete, forward-looking recommendations for policymakers, legal experts, international organisations, and affected communities. Reclaiming property, in this context, is not just about land or deeds; it is about restoring dignity, affirming citizenship, and rebuilding the social fabric on which a new Syria must stand.

▼ The Syrian revolution flag is draped on a damaged building in Homs on February 2025 ,10. © Louai Beshara / AFP

HLP Violations: Laws and Practices of Dispossession

Since the start of the uprising in 2011, the regime passed a series of laws and decrees that created the legal scaffolding for systematic dispossession. These instruments, presented as tools for counterterrorism, reconstruction, or administrative modernization, were used to justify mass property seizures, forced evictions, and the reallocation of land to regime-aligned interests.[3]

But the law was only one part of the machinery. In practice, these legal frameworks were enforced through coercive state institutions, courts lacking independence, and networks of cronies, officials, brokers, and militia leaders who turned property seizure into both a tool of repression and a source of enrichment. Entire neighbourhoods were bulldozed. Land titles were forged or reassigned. Families labelled as "terrorists" lost their homes without trial. At the same time, regime loyalists were rewarded with confiscated assets, reshaping Syria's social geography and punishing those who had risen up.[4]

This section provides an overview of the legal mechanisms and abusive practices that enabled this system of dispossession. It first outlines the core laws and decrees that undermined property rights – including anti-terrorism legislation, redevelopment mandates, and military service penalties. It then traces how these laws were exploited in practice: through forged documents, predatory evictions, politicized seizures, and illegal occupation. Together, these laws and their enforcement mechanisms formed a coherent and devastating system – one that weaponized legality to entrench power, silence dissent, and erase communities.

The Laws Behind the Land Grabs

The legal foundation for Syria's system of property dispossession was carefully engineered over more than a decade. Through a patchwork of laws and decrees – many passed under the guise of modernization or counterterrorism – the regime institutionalized

3 PAX and Impunity Watch (2020), 'Violations of Housing, Land and Property Rights: An Obstacle to Peace in Syria', PAX and Impunity Watch, March 2020, https://paxforpeace.nl/publications/violations-of-housing-land-and-property-rights-an-obstacle-to-peace-in-syria/.

4 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Damascus, February 2025.

mechanisms that enabled large-scale, legally sanctioned property seizures. What emerges is a legal architecture not merely complicit in abuse but central to it – one that turned the law from a shield into a weapon.

Law No. 19 and Decree 63 of 2012: Anti-Terrorism Legislations

The law established Syria's Anti-Terrorism Court and granted it sweeping authority to confiscate the property of individuals charged with terrorism. The definition of terrorism under Law No. 19 is so broad that it affects thousands of Syrians who engaged in political, civic or humanitarian activities. Complementing this, Legislative Decree No. 63 empowered the judicial police to seize property even prior to a conviction. Previously, criminal seizure was limited to assets directly used in the commission of a terrorist act. Decree 63 drastically expanded this power.

Together, these laws created a broad legal framework that enabled the state to confiscate any assets – real estate, bank accounts, businesses, or agricultural land – linked to individuals accused of terrorism. Crucially, the framework allowed property to be seized not just from the accused, but also from their relatives and associates, institutionalizing collective punishment. The Commission for Counter-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing was also granted the power to seize property based solely on suspicion, without the need for a court ruling or due process. The absence of judicial safeguards or appeals mechanisms stripped individuals of the right to defend themselves or recover their property.[5]

Legislative Decree No. 66 of 2012: The Blueprint for Dispossession

Presented as an urban renewal measure, Legislative Decree No. 66 granted the Syrian government broad authority to redevelop areas within the Damascus governorate, particularly targeting densely populated informal settlements.[6] These zones, often characterized by unregulated housing, were stripped of the legal protections afforded under prior expropriation and urban development laws. The decree effectively nullified individual property rights and replaced them with shareholder-based entitlements in future redevelopment projects.

In theory, the law mandated compensation through shares in the new developments. In practice, however, it lacked mechanisms to guarantee fair compensation, legal recourse, or transparency. Critically, residents were often given impractically short deadlines to prove ownership. Without formal documentation, which many lacked due to displacement or poverty, they were excluded from any claims to their property. The government was thus able to seize land without offering adequate compensation or alternative housing, enabling a top-down planning process that disproportionately affected the most vulnerable communities. The result was legalized dispossession under the guise of reconstruction.[7]

Law No. 33 of 2017: Real Estate Document Restoration

The law was designed to reconstruct or replace land registries and property titles lost or destroyed by war. However, legal experts raised serious concerns about its vague drafting and susceptibility to abuse. The law gives courts broad powers to reconstitute ownership records, enforces brief deadlines for objections, and places the onus on displaced owners – many of whom have no knowledge that proceedings concerning their property are taking place.

This created a significant risk that properties may be re-registered to others – such as current occupants – without the knowledge or consent of rightful owners who are often abroad or displaced. Once finalized, these new records are legally binding, leaving no recourse for correction or recovery. Law No. 33 thus threatens not only the principles of justice but the very possibility of restitution. Experts warn that, combined with Syria's weak legal safeguards, it could enable fraudulent claims and institutionalize dispossession.

The process itself is deeply inaccessible for many. Short response windows, high legal and administrative costs, and the inability of many displaced Syrians to return make it nearly impossible to assert rights. Many cadastral offices also lack the resources to carry out accurate and fair restorations, increasing the potential for errors and abuse. Critics further point to the law's lack of transparency and excessive administrative discretion, which can result in arbitrary decisions without oversight.[8]

5 Al Zien (2019), 'Legal Obstacles to HLP Rights in Syria'.
6 The Syria Report (2022), 'Decree No. 66 of 2012 on the Establishment of Two Development Zones in Damascus', The Syria Report, July 2022, https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/decree-no-66-of-2012-on-the-establishment-of-two-development-zones-in-damascus/.
7 esearch interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
8 Syrians For Truth & Justice (2023), 'A Reading of the Real Estate Documents Restoration Law No. 33 of 2017', Syrians For Truth & Justice, January 2023, https://stj-sy.org/en/a-reading-of-the-real-estate-documents-restoration-law-no-33-of-2017/.

▲ The Syrian national flag flies atop a building in a devastated street in Hajar al-Aswad near Damascus as the Assad Regime reclaimed control over the neighborhood in May 2018.. © Louai Beshara / AFP

Law No. 35 of 2017: Confiscation of Assets for Failure to Perform Military Service

Law No. 35 of 2017 authorizes the Military Recruitment Directorate to seize both movable and immovable property from Syrian males who have not fulfilled their mandatory military service. By age 45, individuals must have either completed their service or paid the so-called "age passing substitute," a financial penalty for exemption. Under this law, the Minister of Defence can initiate property seizures against anyone who fails to meet these obligations. If the required payment – set at $8,000 – is not made within three months of notification, the individual may face additional penalties, including up to one year in prison or an extra fine of up to $2,000.[9]

The implementation of this law has raised serious concerns about property rights and due process. It disproportionately impacts Syrians who fled the country due to conflict and are unable to return to settle their military status. Critics argue that the law's enforcement lacks transparency, opening the door to arbitrary or politically motivated seizures with little to no legal recourse. In practice, Law No. 35 has become a coercive tool used to pressure expatriates and refugees into compliance. It effectively forces them to choose between returning to Syria under potentially dangerous conditions or forfeiting their assets. This has further complicated the possibility of return for many displaced Syrians and undermines efforts to restore their property rights.[10]

Law No 10 of 2018: Legalizing Property Confiscation on a National Scale

In April 2018, the Syrian government enacted Law No. 10, extending the approach of Decree 66 from Damascus to the entire country. It gave the Ministry of Local Administration sweeping powers to designate any area as a redevelopment zone, regardless of whether it had been damaged by war or neglect. Although the law cited public infrastructure and social housing as its aims, in practice, it was used to assert control over areas viewed as politically troublesome. Once an area was designated, property owners had just 30 days to present proof of ownership, a virtually unachievable requirement for many Syrians displaced by the conflict.

9 Al Mustafa, M. (2023), 'Fight or Flight: The Syrian Conscription Nightmare', ISPI, June 2023, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/fight-or-flight-the-syrian-conscription-nightmare-130593.

10 The Syria Report (2021), 'Amendment to Military Service Law Raises Serious Concerns Over Syrians' Real Estate Rights', The Syria Report, February 2021, https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/amendment-to-military-service-law-raises-serious-concerns-over-syrians%E2%80%99-real-estate-rights/.

The mass displacement of millions, coupled with practical barriers such as travel restrictions, security risks, and the loss or destruction of records, made it nearly impossible for affected individuals to meet the deadline. These challenges were especially severe for internally displaced persons, refugees abroad, and residents of informal housing, who often lacked official documentation. Under the law, once property was appropriated, ownership rights were voided.

Former owners were issued shares in the new development, based on a state-calculated valuation involving factors like location and condition. However, recipients of these shares were barred from selling or transferring them, stripping them of practical control over their former property. Those unable to prove ownership, particularly the displaced, the families of missing persons, and the deceased, faced the complete loss of rights. Although the government later claimed to ease the deadline through amendments, procedural opacity and bureaucratic obstacles remained unchanged.[11]

Operationalizing Dispossession

The implementation of Syria's property laws during the conflict went far beyond legislative text. In practice, these laws enabled a sprawling system of abuse – one rooted in forged documents, violent evictions, politicized seizures, and the repurposing of entire neighbourhoods. Property theft became institutionalized, with entire communities displaced and their assets reassigned to regime loyalists. These violations took on multiple forms, ranging from silent bureaucratic fraud to overt demolition campaigns.

Forged Ownership and Legal Manipulation

The vague drafting of Law No. 33, combined with widespread corruption and a politicized environment hostile to perceived dissidents, created fertile ground for regime-linked individuals and networks to violate HLP rights through document forgery and orchestrated fraud. Law No. 33 granted administrative and judicial bodies broad discretion to reconstitute ownership titles, often without transparency or safeguards for absentee owners. This legal gap was exploited by regime-affiliated cells to carry out coordinated property seizures using forged documents and fabricated sales.[12]

These operations typically targeted vacant or abandoned homes, particularly those belonging to displaced or detained individuals. Fraudsters gathered any available ownership documents and constructed fake chains of title, simulating multiple internal sales to make the transactions appear authentic. Courts – either complicit or negligent – often validated these transfers based solely on staged witness testimony, without verifying signatures or fingerprints.[13] One of the most documented examples occurred in Al-Tadhamon, near rural Damascus, where a cell reportedly linked to the Military Intelligence Directorate, led by Saleh Al-Ras ("Abu Montajab"), played a central role in the systematic seizure of dissidents' properties through forged deeds and fraudulent transactions.[14]

The prevalence of these practices has reportedly encouraged additional fraud, including impersonation of rightful heirs using falsified inheritance certificates, counterfeit contracts, and false witnesses. Law No. 33's procedural flaws – such as short objection periods and reliance on limited public notices – further enabled these abuses, preventing real owners from reclaiming their rights. Together, these manipulations allowed regime affiliates to launder stolen properties into the legal system, masking dispossession behind the illusion of legitimacy.[15]

Mass Evictions Under the Guise of Redevelopment

The Syrian regime systematically used Decree 66 – and later Law No. 10 – as tools of dispossession. Though framed as modern urban planning initiatives, these laws enabled the mass expropriation of property in informal settlements such as Mezzeh and Kafr Sousa, areas predominantly inhabited by low-income families and known for anti-regime sentiment. Entire districts were reclassified and eviction orders issued with little to no notice. Residents were given extremely short deadlines to prove ownership – an impossible task for many lacking formal documents. Failure to comply resulted in total loss of property rights. These policies culminated in projects like Marota and Basilia cities, where thousands were forcibly displaced with

11 Amnesty (2018), 'Syria: New property law punishes the displaced and could obstruct investigation of war crimes', Amnesty, May 2018, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/syria-new-property-law-punishes-the-displaced-and-could-obstruct-investigation-of-war-crimes/.
12 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
13 Nassar, A. (2021), 'With government complicity, Syrians' property falls victim to forgery', Syria Direct, March 2021, https://syriadirect.org/with-government-complicity-syrians-property-falls-victim-to-forgery/.
14 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Aleppo, February 2025.
15 Nassar (2021), 'With government complicity, Syrians' property falls victim to forgery'.

little to no compensation or resettlement options. The new developments catered almost exclusively to regime-aligned elites, effectively erasing the original communities from the urban fabric.[16]

Critically, these legal manoeuvres were often paired with deliberate physical destruction. Human rights organizations have documented the regime's use of excessive and indiscriminate force to obliterate entire neighbourhoods, turning them into prime targets for redevelopment. The Syrian army's widespread use of artillery, aerial bombardments – including barrel bombs – and targeted demolitions devastated cities such as Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Aleppo, and Daraa. Even after retaking control, regime forces reportedly continued demolishing residential areas under pretexts of military necessity, safety concerns, or urban redesign. In practice, this destruction – often justified as removing rebel tunnels or unsafe structures – was aimed at preventing displaced residents from returning, thereby uprooting entire communities and clearing the way for state-controlled reconstruction efforts.[17]

Property Confiscation as a Tool of Repression

The Assad regime systematically turned property confiscation into both a formal and extra-legal tool of repression. Under vague justifications such as counterterrorism, tens of thousands of Syrians had their homes, land, and assets seized without due process. Simply being labelled a "terrorist" – often without credible evidence – was enough for the regime's politically controlled Anti-Terrorism Court to issue swift convictions and authorize expropriation. Entire families accused of dissent saw their properties confiscated or redistributed to regime-affiliated elites. These laws criminalized not just political opposition but even mere residency in former opposition-held areas. By 2025, official figures showed that at least 91,000 Syrians had been subjected to asset seizure orders between 2012 and 2024 – underscoring the scale at which property was weaponized to punish perceived enemies of the regime.[18]

Law No. 35 of 2017 further expanded this machinery of control by authorizing the confiscation of assets from individuals who failed to complete mandatory military service. Although its full impact remains undocumented, the law has disproportionately affected Syrians who fled the country and are unable to return, making it a coercive instrument that blocks return and complicates restitution. In many cases, seized properties were handed out as rewards to regime loyalists and militia leaders – effectively "repopulating strategic areas with regime loyalists" while displacing those who had resisted Assad's rule. This manipulation of property rights – punishing one part of society while enriching another – amounted to collective punishment and deliberate social engineering, designed to reshape the demographic and political landscape of key communities.[19]

Dispossession Through Occupation and Intimidation

The illegal occupation of private property by individuals affiliated with the regime – or those connected to them – was a widespread tactic used to violate HLP rights throughout the Syrian conflict. Regime-aligned forces and loyalists seized homes and land, particularly in opposition-held areas, targeting properties that were either desirable or abandoned by fleeing residents. These assets were often converted into military bases, security centres, or handed over to loyalist families and individuals with ties to powerful regime figures.[20]

This practice was deeply intertwined with Syria's broader legal and political environment. The absence of the rule of law, along with vaguely enforced decrees such as Decree 66 (2012), allowed illegal occupation to persist unchecked. Meanwhile, laws like Law No. 33 (2017) provided legal mechanisms for occupiers to formalize these appropriations, effectively legitimizing the theft and making it permanent. For original property owners, reclaiming their homes was not only legally complex – it was dangerous.[21]

Many of those who occupied these homes were embedded within military or security networks, enabling them to use state institutions, including the courts, to their advantage. Dispossessed owners often feared retaliation if they attempted to challenge them. Under the broad and politicized Anti-Terrorism Law (No. 19 of 2012), occupiers could easily accuse returnees of terrorism, resulting in arrest, detention, or further asset seizure. With no due process or legal safeguards, these threats were credible and severe. As a result, many Syrians refrained from asserting their rights – trapped between dispossession and fear.[22]

16 Research interview with a Syrian human rights advocate, Damascus, February 2025.
17 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Damascus, June 2025.
18 Enab Baladi (2025), Presidential decree cancels precautionary asset seizure on Syrians', Enab Baladi, May 2025, https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/05/presidential-decree-cancels-precautionary-asset-seizure-on-syrians/?so=recent.
19 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
20 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
21 Research interview with a local notable, Daraa, February 2025.
22 Research interview with a Syrian lawyer, Aleppo, April 2025.

Transitional Authorities' Approach to HLP Violations

Since taking power, Syria's transitional authorities have taken cautious steps to address the widespread HLP violations perpetrated under the Assad regime. Acknowledging the deep legacy of dispossession and legal abuse, officials have started rolling back key policies and introducing structural reforms – signalling a shift in both intent and direction. Several laws are now under review, with some already slated for repeal. In parallel, emergency measures have been enacted to freeze property transfers and safeguard cadastral records during the fragile transition period.

Progress has been uneven – hampered by institutional weakness, legal uncertainty, and the absence of a functioning legislature. Still, these actions represent a fragile but significant break from the repressive legal apparatus of the past. This section examines the initial tools and mechanisms deployed by the transitional authorities to address HLP violations. It covers the suspension of property ownership transfers, the creation of restitution committees, the cancellation of politically motivated asset seizures, and the halting of controversial urban development projects.

Suspension of Property Ownership Transfers

In the wake of the Assad regime's fall, the caretaker government introduced emergency legal measures to suspend property ownership transfers, as a precautionary measure to safeguard cadastral records. In mid-December 2024, the Ministry of Justice issued a directive suspending all court operations. Although courts were later permitted to gradually resume, the Ministry instructed them to continue halting proceedings related to real estate – particularly property sale confirmation claims – and to refrain from issuing rulings.

This suspension was justified as a precaution to prevent the transfer of properties owned by individuals implicated in crimes under the former regime, since

such properties could later be subject to confiscation. The directive also aimed to combat fraud in real estate transactions and restructure the administration of property affairs.[23] Expanding on this effort, the General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs issued Circular No. 1 on January 21, 2025. The circular suspended all documentation related to the creation, transfer, or modification of real property rights – including the registration of legal disputes and litigation notices.[24]

The Ministry of Justice reinforced this action with a corresponding circular prohibiting courts from registering lawsuits related to property sale validation. While no formal explanation was provided for the cadastral freeze, it was widely seen as a measure to safeguard HLP rights. In practical terms, the freeze rendered it legally impossible to complete any court-sanctioned property sale. Under Syrian law, confirming a sale typically requires placing a litigation notice on the property's land registry record – a procedure that was suspended. The Directorate of Cadastral Affairs indicated that these measures would remain in effect until further coordination with relevant authorities.[25]

Some limited relief came on February 18, when the General Directorate of Real Estate Affairs issued a new circular allowing the placement and removal of legal notices on properties – provided the submitted documents were verified as authentic. Legal notices, issued by civil courts, serve to flag properties under dispute and alert third parties that transactions involving them may be contested. However, this measure did not lift the ban on registering property sale contracts, meaning ownership transfers remained legally blocked.[26]

While these emergency measures were designed to protect property records from manipulation, they have significantly disrupted the real estate market and contributed to the rise of informal practices in contract documentation.[27]

Special Restitution Committees

To address the widespread problem of illegal occupation of private property, several governorates have established special committees to process ownership claims and facilitate the return of seized properties. These committees offer a faster, administrative alternative to lengthy and costly court proceedings, particularly in cases of clear and unlawful seizure where claimants possess valid ownership documents. Their legal foundation lies in Article 45 of the 2011 Local Administration Law, which empowers governors to resolve cases of "blatant seizure" (ghasb bayyin) administratively, without the need for a judicial ruling.[28]

Claims must be submitted in person at designated offices – commonly referred to as the "one-stop window" – and accompanied by supporting documents such as property deeds, land registry extracts, or certified court rulings. Upon receipt, the committee verifies each claim in coordination with relevant public institutions, including the land registry, civil records office, criminal records bureau, and the Ministry of Justice. When documentation is complete, restitution can proceed swiftly.[29]

As these committees are established through individual governorate decrees, the timing of their formation and the scope of their mandates vary. In Homs, for example, the governor issued a decree on January 13, 2025, creating the "Blatant Seizure Committee" (Lajnat al-Ghasb al-Bayyin).[30] Damascus followed with a similar directive on February 12, while Aleppo established its committee on March 4.[31] In Hama, a committee was formed on May 19 with an expanded mandate to include properties confiscated through counterterrorism court rulings or informally registered in the name of the

23 The Syria Report (2025), 'Government Suspends All Transactions Over Real Estate Property', The Syria Report, February 2025, https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/government-suspends-all-transactions-over-real-estate-property/.
24 Ibid.
25 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
26 Research interview with a Syrian lawyer, Damascus, February 2025.
27 Research interview with a local notable, Daraa, February 2025.
28 The Syria Report (2025), Governorates Establish Committees to Restore Seized Properties', The Syria Report, June 2025, https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/governorates-establish-committees-to-restore-seized-properties/.
29 Research interview with a Syrian lawyer, Aleppo, February 2025.
30 Hibr Press (2025), 'The 'Blatant Seizure Committee': A Step Toward Recovering Stolen Properties in Homs', Hibr Press, February 2025, https://hibrpress.com/v2/لجنة-الاستيلاء-على-العقارات-وخطوة-نحو-استعادة-الممتلكات-المغتصبة-في-حمص/.
31 Syria TV (2025), 'Aleppo Governorate Opens Complaints Process for 'Blatant Seizure' of Properties', Syria TV, March 2025 https://www.syria.tv/305613; Syria TV (2025), 'Damascus Governorate Begins Accepting Complaints on Residential Property Encroachments', Syria TV, February 2025, https://www.syria.tv/302897.

Syrian state.[32]

While these committees provide a critical administrative mechanism for property restitution, their accessibility and effectiveness differ across governorates. Concerns have also been raised about whether committee members possess the legal expertise and HLP-specific knowledge needed to resolve complex cases fairly and uphold due process.[33]

Cancellation of Asset Seizure Orders

The transitional authorities have begun reviewing laws and decrees that were used to violate HLP rights under the Assad regime. In an interview with Syria TV on January 9, 2025, caretaker Justice Minister Shadi al-Wisi stated that the government is actively exploring legal avenues to return property to its rightful owners. He emphasized that the caretaker administration is prioritizing the review of all unjust legislation used to dispossess citizens and is working on mechanisms to address these violations retroactively. A central focus of this effort is Decree No. 10, which enabled widespread property expropriation under the guise of urban redevelopment. According to the minister, a committee has been established to evaluate how best to repeal the decree and propose legal measures to mitigate the harm it has caused since its enactment.[34]

Although no final decision has been made on Decree No. 10, the transitional government has already taken significant steps elsewhere. On May 12, 2025, Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa issued Presidential Decree No. 16, nullifying all "precautionary" property seizure orders issued by the Ministry of Finance between 2012 and 2024. At a press conference the same day, Finance Minister Mohammed Yosr Bernieh publicly confirmed the decree. He acknowledged that these politically motivated seizures were based on unlawful directives from certain security agencies and lacked any foundation in proper legal procedures or court rulings. He noted that many of the confiscations targeted citizens for their support of the Syrian revolution. On behalf of the Finance Ministry, he issued a formal apology, revealing that more than 91,000 Syrians had lost property due to these unjust actions.[35]

Following the decree, the Ministers of Justice, Interior, and Finance – Mazhar Al-Weiss, Anas Khattab, and Mohammad Yasser Barniyah, respectively – met to coordinate implementation. The ministries agreed to form specialized committees, composed of relevant government bodies, to compile lists of individuals whose movable and immovable assets remain under seizure. These committees are tasked with reviewing, sorting, and processing the cases.[36]

While Decree No. 16 of 2025 marks a meaningful step toward addressing property rights violations, it leaves critical gaps unaddressed. It only lifts precautionary seizure orders issued by security agencies under Law No. 63 of 2012, excluding those made by judicial authorities such as the Antiterrorism Court, investigating judges, and public prosecutors. It also does not reverse executive seizures – i.e., cases where property was permanently confiscated following a court ruling. Furthermore, the decree does not reform or repeal Law No. 63 itself, nor does it curtail the broad powers granted to security agencies. As a result, many individuals – especially those whose property was seized via judicial rulings or who were convicted in absentia – remain outside the scope of relief provided.[37]

Suspension of Controversial Development Projects

In February, media reports surfaced indicating that Syria's transitional authorities had halted progress on two contentious real estate developments in Damascus – Marota City and Basilia City – both initiated under Decree No. 66 of 2012.[38] Subsequent reports, however,

32 Syria TV (2025), 'Hama Governorate Opens File on Properties Confiscated and Seized Under the Ousted Regime ', Syria TV, March 2025, https://www.syria.tv/315557.

33 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, April 2025.

34 Syria TV (2025), 'Interview with caretaker Justice Minister', Twitter, January 2025, https://x.com/syr_television/status/1877486556639854923.

35 Al Issa, J. (2025), 'Measures Precede the Lifting of Provisional Seizures in Syria', Enab Baladi, May 2025, https://www.enabbaladi.net/754597/إجراءات-تسبق-رفع-الحجز-التحفظي-في-سوريا/.

36 Ibid.

37 The Syria Report (2025), 'Decree No. 16 Lifts Security Seizures Without Dismantling the Exceptional Framework', The Syria Report, June 2025, https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/decree-no-16-lifts-security-seizures-without-dismantling-the-exceptional-framework/.

38 The Syria Report (2025), 'Basilia City Between Ongoing Allocations and Freeze Rumours: The Fate of Decree 66 at Stake', The Syria Report, February 2025, https://hlp.syria-report.com/?p=615049.

suggest that authorities are considering relaunching the projects in a revised form.[39] These projects, widely seen as emblematic of the HLP violations committed during the conflict, are managed by the Damascus Governorate through the Directorate for Implementing Decree No. 66 and Damascus Cham Holding, a company affiliated with the governorate. Although licensing procedures and preliminary construction began on some residential plots, none have been fully completed.[40]

Damascus Cham Holding has long faced criticism for failing to deliver on its obligations related to alternative housing, which were subject to strict eligibility requirements. Despite the passage of several years since the initial evictions, displaced residents have yet to receive the promised housing – deepening their financial hardship. The projects have also been condemned for the unfair valuation of land and shares, disproportionately affecting property owners unable to prove ownership due to persecution or restrictions by security agencies. [41]

Despite growing public concern, transitional authorities issued no formal statement until mid-April, when Governor Maher Marwan publicly confirmed the suspension. He pledged to address the grievances of those affected and stated that the governorate had been reviewing the projects for several months, identifying key issues and assessing the responsibilities of all stakeholders – including its own role. The governor also announced that legal amendments were being prepared to support the process.[42]

While reaffirming the government's commitment to large-scale development, Marwan emphasized the importance of safeguarding the rights of displaced residents. He noted that all designated plots allocated to rightful owners will eventually be returned, though they are currently held in joint ownership. He added that the land will be redistributed in a structured manner once the urban planning process is completed.

Marwan also stated that he had tasked a specialized committee – working in coordination with both the current and former administrative councils of projects such as Marota City and Basilia City – with reviewing citizen grievances. A newly appointed technical team is now assessing outstanding issues in an effort to reach a satisfactory resolution in the near term. [43] However, despite these assurances, the transitional authorities have yet to present a clear roadmap or comprehensive policy on how they plan to address the HLP violations and financial liabilities resulting from the launch – and continued delays – of these redevelopment initiatives.[44]

39 The Syria Report (2025), 'Marota and Basilia After the Regime's Fall: A Postponed Project and Allottees Still Without Housing', The Syria Report, July 2025, https://hlp.syria-report.com/?p=615186
40 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Damascus, June 2025.
41 Merhej, M. (2025), 'Victims of Decree 66 Renew Their Demands for Rights', Enab Baladi, March 2025 https://www.enabbaladi.net/745496/وق-حب-قبل-اطفال-نوددجي-66-موسر-طا-وررضتم/.
42 Syria TV (2025), 'Damascus Governor Pledges Justice for Those Affected by the Marota and Basilia City Projects', Syria TV, April 2025, https://www.syria.tv/310979.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.

▼ In Aleppo, a wall painting shows a map of Syria dressed with the revolution flag connected to two lungs, named "citizens" and "expatriates". January 2025 7. © Elisa Gestri/ Sipa USA.

Reclaiming HLP Rights in Practice

As formal mechanisms for housing, land, and property (HLP) restitution remain limited and inconsistently applied, many affected individuals are forging their own paths to reclaim what was taken. Some returnees have managed to reoccupy their homes – especially where properties were abandoned or where occupants lacked the means to resist. Others have turned to newly established restitution committees, while many more are pursuing legal claims despite high costs, missing documentation, and long delays.

Where official remedies fall short – or pose risks – community-based mediation has stepped in to offer faster, less confrontational solutions. At the same time, advocacy groups and impacted individuals continue to mobilize around key demands, particularly in response to controversial redevelopment projects like Marota City, where formal justice mechanisms have yet to deliver results.

This chapter examines how HLP rights are being pursued on the ground – through self-help strategies, emerging administrative channels, legal proceedings, informal mediation, and grassroots advocacy. While the report highlights these emerging trends, it does not evaluate how effective they are or explore the possible risks they may introduce. Assessing their actual impact, scale, accessibility, and long-term viability requires a level of analysis that exceeds the scope and resources of this study.

Quick Self-Help Measures

Following the fall of the regime in Syria, many frustrated property owners began taking matters into their own hands to reclaim homes occupied during the conflict. These self-help efforts ranged from peaceful re-entry to direct confrontations and threats of force. Largely improvised, their success depended on the owner's social standing, the occupant's legal claim, and the balance of power on the ground. Displaced Syrians who could access their home areas returned quickly to check on their properties. Those unable to return in person typically relied on relatives to do so on their behalf. When they discovered their homes occupied – whether by squatters or individuals installed through regime patronage – they often attempted to reclaim them directly, bypassing formal legal channels.[45]

The most straightforward recoveries occurred when homes had been abandoned at the moment of regime

45 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Aleppo, April 2025.

collapse, leaving former occupants without protection or justification. In such cases, owners often re-entered their homes, changed the locks, and either moved in themselves or entrusted relatives to manage the property.[46] For instance, a 38-year-old former fighter returned from Idlib to find his family's house in Masaken Barzeh vacant. It had been given to a young military officer from Latakia during the war, but the officer fled with his family in early December after the collapse of the regime. With no one contesting the claim, the fighter moved back in without resistance.[47]

Other cases were more complicated. In homes that remained occupied, the outcomes of self-help measures varied depending on the power dynamics between claimants and occupants. Since legal channels were de facto suspended, many returnees used direct measures to get their properties back. Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa reportedly returned to his family's home in Damascus's Mazeh district the day the regime fell. He found another family living there with regime-issued authorization and gave them three days to vacate. They complied, likely due to his political stature.[48]

In cases where occupants refused to leave, tensions often escalated. Some property owners resorted to verbal threats or leveraged connections to armed groups and local security forces. Others arrived with fighters to intimidate or physically evict the residents. While not all encounters turned violent, many involved threats, confrontations, or forcible removals.[49] For example, a Syrian refugee from Deir ez-Zor, now living in Europe, asked relatives to reclaim his family home. He initially advised them to act peacefully to avoid escalation. However, when the current residents – claiming they had been given the house by the previous owner – refused to leave, he instructed his relatives to escalate. A group of fighters linked to transitional authorities accompanied them. Feeling threatened, the occupants pleaded to stay, citing that they had nowhere else to go, but their request was denied. Lacking the power to resist, they left the property.[50]

It's important to note that regaining physical control of a home does not resolve questions of legal ownership – especially when the evicted party holds documents supporting their claim. In such cases, the displaced family can file a legal case and present evidence. However, those who successfully retake their homes often hold a significant advantage, as they are typically allowed to remain on the property until a court issues a ruling – a process that can take years. In some instances, the matter ends there, particularly if the displaced party chooses not to contest the eviction.[51]

Research shows that while these self-help measures were widespread in the early months following the regime's fall, they have become increasingly rare. Authorities have moved to curb such actions, viewing them as unlawful regardless of the legitimacy of the underlying property claims. Today, attempting to reclaim a property through force or intimidation can result in arrest, as the state seeks to prevent further conflict and reassert formal legal control.[52]

Special Restitution Committees

As forcible self-help measures have become increasingly risky, more individuals are turning to formal channels to reclaim properties in cases of clear and unlawful seizure – particularly when they possess valid ownership documents. To file a claim, applicants must submit the following documents in person at the designated "one-stop window" office affiliated with these committees:[53]

- A written complaint
- A copy of a personal ID
- Proof of property ownership (e.g., title deed, recent land registry extract, or certified court ruling)

Once submitted, the committee verifies the claim in coordination with relevant public institutions, including the land registry, civil records office, criminal records office, and the Ministry of Justice. If the documentation is complete, the property can often be restored quickly, with the support of security forces to enforce the decision.[54] A returnee from Aleppo who successfully reclaimed his home shared his experience:

"When I returned to my property in Aleppo, I found another family living there. I tried reasoning with them, but they were uncooperative. I didn't want to resort to

46 Research interview with a Syrian human rights advocate, Damascus, February 2025.
47 Research interview with a Syrian lawyer, Damascus, June 2025.
48 BBC (2024), "al-Sharaa in Mezzha', BBC, December 2024, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c7850d7x4vlo.
49 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
50 Research interview with a Syrian refugee from Deir ez-Zor, Europe, January 2025.
51 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Aleppo, February 2025
52 Research interview with a local notable, Aleppo, February 2025
53 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
54 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, April 2025.

threats or force, so once the committee was formed in Aleppo, I hired a lawyer. Fortunately, I had all the necessary documents. The committee reviewed my file, interviewed me, and asked whether I had witnesses to support my claim, which I did. They then sent a request to General Security to investigate the current occupant's status and any claims he might have. After the investigation, General Security returned the file to the committee, which concluded that my claim was valid and issued an order for the family to be evicted. The house was then returned to me."[55]

While there are no comprehensive official statistics on how many people have benefited from these committees, the Homs committee reported in a late April interview that it had received over 4,000 claims since its formation in January – and continues to receive new cases daily. The committee stated that the success rate for property restitution is exceptionally high – ranging from 90% to 100% in cases where all supporting documents are provided.[56] A lawyer from Aleppo gave a similar assessment of the committee's performance in his governorate. However, he noted that its effectiveness is largely limited to straightforward cases with full legal documentation. According to his estimates, over 90% of HLP (housing, land, and property) violations in Aleppo fall outside this category, either because the affected individuals lack proper documents or because the cases are complicated by forged contracts or falsified land records.[57]

Notably, the committee established in Hama in May allows applicants to file claims to restore ownership of properties seized by the former regime – both provisional and executive ones. In such cases, applicants need to submit a written complaint and proof of property ownership for the seizure to be lifted.[58] Clear-cut cases, such as properties seized after their owners were designated as terrorists by the former regime, are supposed to be processed quickly, with the assets promptly returned to their rightful owners.[59]

However, it is not clear whether the mandate of similar committees in other areas will be expanded to process claims related to properties confiscated by the state. In the absence of that, people impacted may have to wait for the joint ministerial committee tasked with compiling lists of seized properties to issue decisions to all relevant state institutions to lift asset freezes. In principle, this process should restore full legal ownership and control. If it does not happen automatically, affected individuals can obtain a copy of the cancellation decision and personally follow up with the appropriate agencies to ensure the changes are implemented.[60]

Legal Proceedings

For those who have not yet reclaimed their properties, the formal legal process now appears to be the only formal viable path forward. However, this option is often costly, time-consuming, and the outcome is far from guaranteed. To initiate proceedings, claimants must file a case with a written complaint, a copy of a personal ID, and proof of property ownership (e.g., a title deed, recent land registry extract, or certified court ruling). If formal documentation is missing, claimants may file a "property ownership confirmation" lawsuit.[61] In such cases, courts may accept unofficial forms of evidence, such as:

- Testimonies from neighbours or witnesses
- Utility bills or service records in the claimant's name
- Photos or informal documents demonstrating use or possession
- Old rental agreements or official correspondence

The sufficiency of these alternative documents often depends on what legal documents the opposing party holds. In many cases, occupants present documents – or even prior court rulings – showing they purchased the property.[62] One such case involves Zaid, a refugee who returned from Europe to find his family home in Sayyida Zainab occupied. The current residents presented a 2020 sales contract issued by a regime-sanctioned real estate office, showing they had legally purchased the house. Zaid's father, Mofleh, had acquired the land through a 1980 court ruling, but the

55 Research interview with a domestic returnee, Aleppo, February 2025.
56 Syria 24 (2025), 'Homs: 'Blatant Seizure Committee' Returns Thousands of Properties to Their Owners After Years of Confiscation, Syria 24, April 2025, https://www.sy-24.com/147987/.
57 Research interview with a Syrian lawyer, Aleppo, April 2025.
58 Ultra Syria (2025), 'Hama governorate starts receiving complaints for seized prosperities', Ultra Syria, May 2025, https://ultrasyria.ultrasawt.com/ar/حماة-تتلقى-شكاوى-بشأن-العقارات-المستولى-عليها-من-قبل-فرع-العقاري-أخبار/ .
59 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Aleppo, February 2025.
60 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Damascus, June 2025.
61 Research interview with a Syrian human rights advocate, Damascus, February 2025.
62 Research interview with a Syrian refugee from Deir ez-Zor, Europe, January 2025.

deed was lost in a bombing. Mofleh later retrieved the ruling from official archives and filed a lawsuit to re-establish ownership and annul the allegedly fraudulent sale. The court is still reviewing the case, which – like many others – is complicated by missing documents and conflicting claims.[63]

In some cases, property sales were formalized through courts based on forged documents, impersonated identities, or coerced contracts. One example involves Mohammad, a resident of Damascus whose home in the upscale al-Malki district was seized in 2013. He alleges a war criminal used regime connections to take over the property. In 2014, Mohammad was arrested and pressured to sign a sales contract in exchange for his release. After enduring threats and fearing for his family's safety, he complied and later fled the country. Upon returning years later, he filed a legal complaint to reclaim his home, but it had already been registered under another name. The court placed the property under public prosecution custody, pending a full investigation. Mohammad has since received new threats urging him to drop the case.[64]

The situation is further complicated by forged ownership claims buried under layers of transactions. Properties are often resold multiple times – sometimes deliberately – to obscure the original fraud and make it harder to identify all the parties involved. This tactic of layering ownership not only diffuses responsibility but also stalls legal recovery efforts. A striking example comes from Al-Mashrou Al-Sabea ("Project Seven") in Lattakia, where Malek, a displaced person, attempted to reclaim his building, which had been illegally seized by a National Defence Forces (NDF) militia leader during the war. He soon discovered that the property had been subdivided and sold multiple times using forged contracts. The current occupants presented notarized contracts showing they had purchased the units in good faith. According to Malek's lawyer, the case is likely to drag on, as the court will need to investigate each transaction and question all involved parties.[65]

To invalidate a sale, the original owner must prove they were abroad, unaware of the transaction due to persecution or concealment, and did not sign or authorize the contract. But even that may not be

63 Research interview with a refugee returnee, Damascus, April 2025.
64 Research interview with a refugee returnee, Damascus, June 2025.
65 Research interview with a displace returnee, Lattakia, April 2025.

▼ In August 2025, a resident of Jobar district near Damascus is seen restoring his heavily damaged home that was completely destroyed in bombardments carried out by the Assad Regime. He returned to the area 12 years after being forced to flee. © Bakr Al Kasem / Anadolu

enough. Opposing parties can claim they had no knowledge that the sellers lacked legal ownership, presenting themselves as good-faith buyers. This further complicates the legal picture, especially because Article 13 of the Land Registry Law protects good-faith buyers from eviction or loss of property, provided the purchase is officially recorded in the Land Registry. In such cases, the courts are not just weighing two sides but must navigate complex, often contradictory, multi-party claims – some involving individuals who are now unreachable. If the original claimant lacks sufficient documents to prove ownership, their legal position becomes significantly weaker.[66]

Beyond individual disputes, legal proceedings are also being used to recover assets confiscated by the state. Given the scale of such cases and the limited institutional capacity during the transition period, the process of lifting property seizures is expected to be slow and bureaucratically burdensome. To avoid delays, some individuals are hiring lawyers to file court cases aimed at unfreezing assets. These cases often cite Presidential Decree No. 16 as legal grounds for reversing the seizure. If a court rules in their favour, letters are issued to the relevant authorities to formally lift the freeze and reinstate ownership rights. This legal path may be particularly important for those facing urgent property needs or blocked by administrative hurdles.[67]

However, additional challenges arise when confiscated properties were sold before the decree – especially those seized under Anti-Terrorism Court rulings and transferred through Law No. 26 of 2023. This law allowed ministries to sell, lease, or transfer confiscated properties, with proceeds directed to the state treasury. If such properties have since been sold to third parties, the legal process to reclaim them becomes far more complex. Affected individuals can still file lawsuits challenging the legitimacy of the sale and seeking to recover ownership. But currently, no clear legal framework exists for resolving these types of ownership disputes – leaving the outcome of such cases uncertain.[68]

Informal Mediation

The slow pace, high costs, and risks of intimidation associated with formal legal proceedings have made informal dispute resolution mechanisms increasingly appealing across Syria. As people recognize the limitations of the legal system, many are turning to community-based mediation committees to settle ownership disputes. These non-judicial dispute resolution committees have emerged organically and vary in how they are formed and who participates. The most common model involves both parties agreeing on the committee members – typically increasing the likelihood that they will respect the outcome.[69]

In other cases, respected community notables intervene on their own initiative to defuse tensions and prevent escalation. These committees often include elders, mukhtars, professionals, and local leaders.[70] One such example involves Amjad, who returned to Arbin in early 2025 to find strangers living in his home. The new occupant explained he had paid $16,000 to Amjad's brother, who had fraudulently sold the property using a power of attorney Amjad had issued years earlier for protection while displaced in Idlib. A physical altercation broke out between the brothers, leading to their detention. To prevent further conflict, several respected community figures stepped in and offered to mediate.[71]

The core function of these mediation committees is to provide quick, low-cost, and culturally appropriate solutions to real estate disputes. This grassroots approach offers several advantages: it avoids legal fees, bypasses court bureaucracy, and often prevents disputes from spiralling into violence. These committees typically aim for compromise, ensuring that no side walks away with everything.[72] In practice, the committee listens to both parties, hears from witnesses, and reviews any available documents before offering a decision. Since their authority is informal, their rulings are not legally binding unless both parties voluntarily ratify the outcome through official judicial channels.[73]

A case from Aleppo illustrates this in action. Ahmed returned to his home and discovered that Wael was living there, claiming to have bought it from a third party. After months of pursuing a legal case, both men realized that the process could drag on for years. They agreed to try informal mediation instead. A three-member committee was formed, and after reviewing the situation, it recommended that Ahmed pay Wael $5,000

66 Research interview with a Syrian lawyer, Damascus, February 2025.
67 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Damascus, April 2025.
68 Research interview with a Syrian lawyer, Aleppo, February 2025.
69 Research interview with a local notable, Daraa, February 2025.
70 Syrians For Truth & Justice (2025), 'Alternative Committees for Property and Personal Status Disputes', Syrians For Truth & Justice, April 2025, https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-alternative-committees-for-property-and-personal-status-disputes-response-to-power-vacuum-or-judiciary-marginalization/.
71 Research interview with a displace returnee, Damascus, February 2025.
72 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Aleppo, February 2025.
73 Research interview with a Syrian human rights advocate, Damascus, February 2025.

in exchange for signing papers relinquishing any claim to the property. This agreement was finalized in front of a notary, restoring Ahmed's legal ownership.

Although Wael had originally paid four times that amount for the flat, he recognized that he might lose everything if the court case continued – especially since the below-market price raised suspicions about the legitimacy of the sale. Ahmed, for his part, was reluctant to pay someone who had lived unlawfully in his home, but ultimately concluded that the $5,000 settlement was cheaper than legal fees over two or more years.[74] While informal mediation has emerged as a crucial stopgap during Syria's transitional period, it is far from a comprehensive solution. Many disputes remain unresolved, and in some cases, mediation efforts have escalated tensions rather than defused them – often due to the absence of relevant legal expertise, safeguards to ensure due process, or mechanisms to enforce outcomes.[75]

Advocacy and Lobbying

In the wake of widespread property rights violations tied to Decree No. 66, and amid the absence of effective legal remedies, advocacy and lobbying have become critical tools for those seeking justice. While a joint committee formed by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing and the Damascus Governorate is reviewing the controversial Marota and Basilia City redevelopment projects – and proposing new standards for future phases – it has yet to address past violations or offer redress to affected individuals. No official guidance has been issued on how to restore the rights of people whose properties were confiscated, undervalued, or forcibly redeveloped under the decree.[76]

With few options available through formal legal channels, many victims have turned to collective action. They have begun organizing, calling for transparency in the committee's work, and demanding concrete results. Some affected individuals have established an association to coordinate their demands and raise public awareness. At the core of their platform is a call for the full repeal of Decree No. 66 and the restoration of property rights to original owners. They argue that the decree was not a legitimate urban development initiative, but rather a legal tool used by the former regime to facilitate forced displacement and land appropriation under the guise of modernization.[77] This association has been active on social media, through petitions, and via direct engagement with authorities. In one notable instance, a delegation met with the Governor of Damascus, who expressed sympathy and hinted at a possible willingness to restore some rights – potentially at the expense of the governorate's share of the redevelopment. However, no concrete measures have followed.[78]

Restoring the status quo is legally and practically challenging. Many of those who were forcibly displaced accepted compensation or received regulatory shares years ago – some of which have since been sold. In addition, major capital has been invested, and construction in Marota and Basilia is already well advanced. These factors complicate any attempt to reverse transactions or reinstate pre-decree ownership rights. Legal experts acknowledge that repealing or amending Decree No. 66 is technically feasible, but it would require new legislation or a formal settlement framework – neither of which currently exists.[79] Given these complexities, some victims and legal professionals have adopted a more pragmatic approach. Rather than demanding full reversal, they are advocating for updated property valuations, fairer compensation, and faster access to alternative housing options.[80]

Despite the emergence of these restitution mechanisms, Syrians seeking to reclaim HLP rights still face a fragmented and severely constrained system. For most, restitution remains more a distant hope than a realistic possibility. One of the most significant obstacles is the widespread loss or inaccessibility of ownership documents. Institutional dysfunction further complicates the process. The bodies responsible for resolving claims – courts, cadastral offices, and local authorities – are under-resourced, lack trained personnel, and operate without integrated systems. As a result, decisions are often inconsistent, delayed, or contradictory, reflecting a broader absence of coherent legal and administrative coordination. Public trust in formal institutions remains low. Many Syrians avoid

74 Research interview with a displace returnee, Aleppo, February 2025.
75 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
76 Merhej (2025), 'Victims of Decree 66 Renew Their Demands for Rights'.
77 Research interview with a resident who was impacted by Decree No. 66, Damascus, June 2025.
78 Syria TV (2025), 'Damascus Governor Pledges Justice for Those Affected by the Marota and Basilia City Projects'.
79 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.
80 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Damascus, January 2025.

▲ Syrian internally displaced persons return to their homes following the fall of former president Bashar Al-Assad, in Hama, Syria, 07 April 2025. © Ahmad Fallaha/ EPA.

official mechanisms altogether, relying instead on informal mediation.[81]

Compounding these challenges is the persistence of repressive legal frameworks. Many of the laws that enabled mass expropriation remain in force, and reform efforts have been slow, fragmented, and inadequate. Claimants are left to navigate a confusing and opaque legal environment that offers little clarity or protection. Critically, no centralized national body exists to manage and adjudicate HLP claims. Nor is there a functioning compensation mechanism for cases where restitution is not possible. This institutional vacuum leaves thousands – especially those displaced abroad – without a clear path to assert their rights or seek alternative remedies. These burdens fall even more heavily on women and displaced families. Gender-discriminatory laws and customs continue to exclude women from property ownership and inheritance. Meanwhile, Syrians living in exile face steep legal, logistical, and financial barriers to participating in restitution processes.[82]

In sum, while the transitional period has introduced promising initiatives, they remain limited in scope and impact. Without comprehensive legal reform, institutional rebuilding, and inclusive, well-resourced mechanisms, restitution efforts will continue to fall short of the scale and urgency of Syria's HLP crisis.

81 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Damascus, June 2025.
82 Research interview with a Syrian refugee, Lebanon, February 2025.

Conclusion: Building a Just Path Forward

Syria's recovery cannot be measured solely by the reconstruction of roads, buildings, and institutions. True recovery hinges on whether Syrians can return home with their rights intact. HLP rights are not a technical detail of post-conflict planning; they are the backbone of justice, reconciliation, and stability As this report has shown, HLP violations, the legacy of systematic dispossession persists even after the fall of the Assad regime. Properties remain illegally occupied. Records are missing or falsified. And the institutions responsible for restitution are still weak, fragmented, or absent altogether.

But this damage is not irreversible. Syria's transitional period offers a rare and critical window to dismantle the machinery of dispossession and replace it with a rights-based framework for restitution. The choices made now will shape the country's trajectory for decades. That opportunity must be seized – quickly, credibly, and comprehensively. Symbolic gestures won't suffice. What's needed is a coordinated national strategy grounded in law, equity, and accountability. The path forward requires a sustained political commitment, institutional investment, and inclusive participation.

Reclaiming property is not just about recovering physical assets – it is about restoring dignity, rebuilding trust, and asserting that all Syrians have the right to return and rebuild. The following recommendations offer a practical roadmap for achieving goals. While these recommendations are primarily directed at Syria's transitional authorities, they also identify critical areas for engagement by donors, civil society organisations, and international agencies. These actors can play a vital role in reinforcing the efforts of the transitional authorities or, where appropriate, developing complementary initiatives in close cooperation with them.

- **Repeal and Reform Repressive HLP Laws:** To support the return of displaced Syrians and uphold property rights in line with international standards, the transitional authorities must urgently repeal or amend laws that enabled large-scale HLP violations. These include Decree No. 66 of 2012, Law No. 10 of 2018, Law No. 33 of 2017, the 2015 Urban Planning Law, and Article 12 of the Counter-Terrorism Law. All reforms should be clearly announced and embedded within a new constitutional framework that guarantees private property rights, mandates judicial oversight of expropriations, and ensures equal treatment under the law. A comprehensive review of post-conflict legal reforms must also be conducted to identify and eliminate discriminatory and contradictory provisions.

- **Establish a National HLP Restitution Commission:** A dedicated, independent commission should be established to process restitution claims nationwide. It must be accessible to refugees, IDPs, and other affected individuals through simplified procedures and flexible evidentiary standards that do not overly burden claimants. With decentralized offices and integration of existing property databases, the commission should coordinate with NGOs and civil registries to verify claims. Its decisions must be binding and enforceable without lengthy litigation. Priority should be given to vulnerable groups and urgent cases. With donor support, the commission could evolve into a permanent tribunal for resolving HLP disputes and ensuring enforcement.

- **Develop a Comprehensive Compensation Mechanism:** Where restitution is not feasible – due to factors such as property destruction or redevelopment – a robust compensation mechanism must be established. The transitional government should establish an HLP Compensation Fund, supported by international donors, repurposed assets, and public revenues. Compensation should reflect pre-war market values adjusted for inflation and include in-kind options such as alternative housing or land. Clear eligibility criteria, an appeals process, and safeguards against coercion are essential. A Transitional Compensation Law should affirm that accepting compensation does not nullify other claims. Public awareness campaigns and legal guidance will be crucial for building trust and ensuring fair participation.

- **Strengthen Dispute Resolution and Legal Capacity:** To prevent future bottlenecks and ensure equitable redress, Syria's dispute resolution system must be strengthened. Community-based HLP committees should be empowered and resourced to resolve local cases swiftly and transparently, with inclusive representation. Courts must enforce rulings, and evictions should be paired with humanitarian assistance to avoid further displacement. Legal professionals, including members of HLP committees, should receive training in HLP and international law, and free or low-cost legal aid must be made widely available. Interim measures should allow heirs of missing or deceased individuals to file claims, securing ownership rights while formal adjudication is pending.

- **Improve Access to Documentation and Property Records:** A national documentation initiative should be launched to help Syrians recover lost or damaged legal papers. This includes establishing one-stop centers and mobile teams where individuals can access land, civil, and judicial records in one place. Digital platforms must enable remote applications – especially for refugees abroad – and fees should be waived during the transitional period. In the absence of official records, alternative documentation should be accepted. Cadastral registries must be digitized, publicly accessible, and verified with community input. Public information campaigns are vital to inform citizens of their rights and how to access services.

- **Prevent New Violations and Address Post-Regime Abuses:** To protect progress, new HLP violations must be prevented and recent abuses addressed. Regulations should ban illegal occupations, and asset seizures. A full review of all post-2024 property actions must be conducted, with clear accountability mechanisms.[83] Besides, relevant authorities must be equipped to resolve emerging disputes and enforce protections.

- **Address HLP Violations by Non-State Actors:** A fair resolution of Syria's HLP crisis must also address violations committed by non-state actors. In Afrin, Kurds were displaced and their homes seized following Turkey-backed operations.[84] In Idlib, minority groups like Druze, Christians and Shiite have faced forced displacement and confiscation.[85] In the northeast, unresolved property claims stem from both historic grievances and recent conflict.[86] Transitional authorities should establish legal frameworks to investigate and address these violations

83 Syrians For Truth & Justice (2025), 'STJ Submits Report to Damascus Governorate on Cases of Home Seizures and Arbitrary Evictions of Homeowners in Harasta', Syrians For Truth & Justice, February 2025, https://stj-sy.org/en/stj-submits-report-to-damascus-governorate-on-cases-of-home-seizures-and-arbitrary-evictions-of-homeowners-in-harasta/.

84 Ali, S. (2025), 'Waning hopes: Will Damascus help Afrin's Kurds reclaim their homes?', Syria Direct, February 2024, https://syriadirect.org/will-damascus-help-afrins-kurds-reclaim-their-homes/.

85 Research interview with a Syrian civil society worker, Idlib, February 2025.

86 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Hasakah, April 2025.

through transparent, locally implemented restitution and compensation programs. Impartial committees – comprising community representatives and legal experts – must lead the effort. Where displaced families occupy seized properties, solutions must prioritize voluntary relocation and humanitarian support.

Ultimately, property is more than land or concrete – it is memory, belonging, and the foundation of recovery. Without justice in housing, land, and property, there can be no justice in Syria's broader transition. But if reclaimed, restored, and protected, HLP rights can be the cornerstone of a more equitable, stable, and inclusive future.

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Cover photo: Trucks carrying displaced families arrive in their village Kafr Sijna after more than five years in camps near the Syrian-Turkish border. May ,18 2025. © Ghaith Alsayed / AP Photo