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Gentrification and Urban Heritage
Under Authoritarian Rule –
the Case of Pre-war Damascus, Syria

Yannick Tobias Sudermann

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
The University of Edinburgh
2013
Declaration of own work

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that it is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Mössingen, 18th August 2014

Yannick Sudermann
Abstract

This thesis examines gentrification in the historic centre of the Syrian capital Damascus prior to the civil war beginning in spring 2011 and to what extent the authoritarian regime facilitated and benefited from gentrification and urban heritage as means of regime maintenance. In so doing it critically engages with and brings into dialogue bodies of literature that, on first sight, have not much in common: first, gentrification, the production of urban space for the better-off, a process which can now be observed globally; second, urban heritage (i.e. its use for economic, political or identity-related purposes); and third, authoritarian resilience, with a focus on the Middle East, a region where authoritarian regimes remained resilient to internal and external pressures for economic and political liberalization. The thesis identifies the advance of neoliberalism and alterations in Syria’s elite composition as the contexts in which the literatures as well as the processes under scrutiny overlap. Qualitative interviews with private and official stakeholders in gentrification and heritage preservation in Old Damascus form the empirical foundation of this study, complemented by the analysis of newspaper articles, internet sources and works of fiction.

Until 2011, gentrification emerged mainly in the form of commercialized historic property, a trend mainly driven by members of the upper and upper-middle classes, who were both producers and consumers of a gentrified Old Damascus. Beside the sheer interest in capital accumulation, stakeholders “used” the old city as a source of identity and an element of a Damascene heritage discourse. In addition to upper-class Damascenes’ economic and identity-related interests this thesis argues that authoritarian resilience, and thus the interests of the authoritarian state, developed into an additional aspect of gentrification and heritage promotion in Old Damascus, as the regime benefited from and facilitated both processes. Providing affluent parts of the population with a commodified landscape of consumption enabled the regime to domestically gain the support of consumers and those co-opted by privileged access to lucrative business opportunities in the old city (i.e. regime cronies and loyal entrepreneurs). Additionally, the promotion of a gentrified Old Damascus and its heritage as a tourist attraction functioned as an opportunity to upgrade the country’s negative image abroad. In conclusion, approaching authoritarian resilience through the analytical lenses of gentrification and heritage contributes to a broader understanding of urban transformations in authoritarian states. However, in the face of coercion through urban warfare, destruction and ethnic cleansing, it is unclear to what extent gentrification and heritage are still of importance for regime maintenance in Syria’s cities.
To my grandmothers

Marie-Luise Sudermann and Elisabeth Schmitt
Acknowledgements

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Contents

Declaration of own work ................................................................. ii
Abstract .............................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................. v
List of Figures .................................................................................... ix
List of Appendices ................................................................................ x
List of Abbreviations .......................................................................... xi
Note on the Transliteration of Arabic ................................................... xii

Introduction ....................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Debating Gentrification, Heritage, and Authoritarian Resilience .... 6
  1.1 Gentrification .................................................................................. 7
    1.1.1 Explanations of Gentrification ................................................... 8
    1.1.2 Displacement and Eviction ....................................................... 16
    1.1.3 Recent Debates ......................................................................... 19
  1.2. Heritage ......................................................................................... 36
    1.2.1 Defining Heritage .................................................................... 36
    1.2.2 A Short History of Heritage and the ‘Heritage-Gentrification-Nexus’.. 38
  1.3 Authoritarian Resilience ................................................................. 40
  1.4 Chapter Summary............................................................................ 45

Chapter 2: Gathering in the Harvest – Doing Fieldwork during the Crisis ...... 49
  2.1. Data Collection ............................................................................ 50
    2.1.1 Entering the Field and Sampling Strategies ............................... 51
    2.1.2 The Interview Encounters ....................................................... 54
    2.1.3 Additional Sources of Data ....................................................... 57
  2.2 Transcription and Data Analysis .................................................... 60
  2.3 On Ethical Concerns and Doing Fieldwork in an Authoritarian State ...... 64
  2.4 Damascus, the Crisis and Me – Researching (in) a City on the Brink of War. 67
  2.5 Chapter Summary............................................................................ 71

Chapter 3: Damascus: An Historical Portrait ........................................... 73
  3.1 Damascus during the Late Ottoman Period .................................... 76
  3.2 The French Mandate, 1920-1946 ................................................... 83
  3.3 Syria after 1946: From Independence to Authoritarian Rule ............... 91
    3.3.1 Hafiz al-Asad and Syria’s Post-Populist Turn ............................. 95
    3.3.2 Urban Developments, 1946-2000 ............................................. 97
  3.4 Between Boom and Crisis – Tourism and Real Estate under Bashar al-Asad101
  3.5 Chapter Summary............................................................................ 111

Chapter 4: Gentrification in One of the Oldest Continuously Inhabited Capitals ...................................................... 115
  4.1 Triggers and a Timeline of Gentrification in Old Damascus ............... 116
  4.2 Producers of Gentrification ............................................................ 129
  4.3 Displacement – The Social Impact of Gentrification ........................... 133
  4.4 Chapter Summary............................................................................ 137

Chapter 5: ‘We Make it Like the Original, Only Better…’ – Geographies of Heritage in Old Damascus .................................................. 139
  5.1 The Notables’ Heirs Are Back, Are They? Heritage between Authenticity, Nostalgia and Kitsch ................................................................. 139
    5.1.1 Alienation from the City ........................................................ 140
    5.1.2 Laying Claim on the Old City ................................................... 143
5.1.3 (Re-) Discovering Old Damascus ............................................................. 148
5.1.4 (Re-) Imagining Old Damascus and its Heritage .................................... 153
5.2 Commodifying Old Damascus – Heritage, Real Estate, and Tourism .......... 157
  5.2.1 Producing Old Damascene Heritage (1) – Cafés, Restaurants and Boutique Hotels ................................................................. 159
  5.2.2 Producing Old Damascene Heritage (2) – Branding the Cradle of Civilizations and the Selection of a Damascene Heritage ..................... 164
5.3 Chapter Summary ....................................................................................... 171

Chapter 6: Authoritarian Resilience and the City: The Politics of Gentrification and Heritage in the Syrian Capital Damascus ........................................ 173
  6.1 Syria under Bashar al-Asad – (Neo-)Liberalization without Democratization ........................................................................................................ 174
  6.2 The Authoritarian State and the City ....................................................... 180
    6.2.1 Remaining Resilient in the Urban Sphere: Selective Economic Opening and the Informalization of Urban Policy .................................... 182
    6.2.2 Getting Global - Upgrading Authoritarianism through International Diversification? ................................................................. 192
    6.2.3 Containing Civil Society ..................................................................... 196
    6.2.4 Contested Heritage and an Artist Quarter in Old Damascus .......... 201
  6.3 Chapter Summary ...................................................................................... 207

Chapter 7: Conclusions – Gentrification, Heritage, Authoritarian Rule and the Syrian Civil War ................................................................................. 210
  7.1 Gentrification, Heritage and Authoritarian Rule under Neo-liberal Globalization ............................................................................. 212
  7.2 It’s All About Class, Isn’t It? ..................................................................... 214
  7.3 Informality and Its Impact on Urban Policy in Old Damascus ............... 216
  7.4 The Diffusion of Gentrification, Heritage and Authoritarian Upgrading .... 218
  7.5 Gentrification, Heritage and Authoritarian Resilience during the Syrian Crisis – Theory and Empirical Findings Reconsidered .................... 221

Bibliography ....................................................................................................... 225
Appendices .......................................................................................................... 245
List of Figures

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework ................................................................. 6
Figure 2: Gentrification, Urban Heritage and Authoritarian Resilience: Connections and Potential for Social Conflict ................................................................. 47
Figure 3: Gentrification, Urban Heritage and Authoritarian Resilience: Production, Consumption and Class Dimensions ......................................................... 48
Figure 4: Restaurants and Boutique Hotels in Old Damascus .......................... 59
Figure 5: Overview: Syria’s Elites, 1946–2011 ............................................... 76
Figure 6: Damascus in 1929 ....................................................................... 86
Figure 7: Official Producers of Gentrification ............................................. 113
Figure 8: Producing a Gentrified Old Damascus: Formal and Informal Structures of Decision Making ................................................................. 114
Figure 9: International Arrivals to Syria, 1995-2012 ................................. 159
List of Appendices

Appendix 1 List of Interviewees ................................................................. 245
Appendix 2 Interview Guide ................................................................. 246
Appendix 3 Abandoned Courtyard House in Damascus ....................... 250
Appendix 4 Abandonment in the Jewish Quarter .................................. 250
Appendix 5 Residential Alley before Gentrification ............................... 251
Appendix 6 Residential Alley on the Gentrification Frontier ................. 251
Appendix 7 Boutique Hotel on the Gentrification Frontier 1 ................. 252
Appendix 8 Boutique Hotel on the Gentrification Frontier 2 ................. 252
Appendix 9 Strait Street in 2004 ........................................................... 253
Appendix 10 Strait Street in 2011 .......................................................... 253
Appendix 11 Suq Midhat Pasha in 2004 ................................................ 254
Appendix 12 Suq Midhat Pasha in 2011 ................................................ 254
Appendix 13 Traditional Old Damascene Coffee Shop ......................... 255
Appendix 14 Modern Café in Old Damascus ......................................... 255
Appendix 15 Historic Property under Construction ............................... 256
Appendix 16 ‘Beit Mamlouka’ – the First Boutique Hotel in Damascus .... 256
Appendix 17 Courtyard of the Boutique Hotel ‘Dar Mamlouka’ ............... 257
Appendix 18 Luxurious Room in the Boutique Hotel ‘Dar Mamlouka’ ...... 257
Appendix 19 Restaurant ‘Beit Jabri’ ........................................................ 258
Appendix 20 Courtyard of the Mustafa Ali Foundation ......................... 258
Appendix 21 New-built Gentrification in Old Damascus: Restaurant ‘Naranj’ ................................................................. 259
Appendix 22 New-built Gentrification in the Damascene Periphery ........ 259
Appendix 23 Replica of an Old Damascene Residential Alley ............... 260
Appendix 24 Damascus Today ............................................................... 261
Appendix 25 Old Damascus Today ........................................................ 262
Appendix 26 Tourist Map of Damascus ................................................... 263
Appendix 27 Master Plan for the Old City of Damascus ....................... 264
Appendix 28 Cafés, Restaurants and Boutique Hotels in Old Damascus ... 266
Appendix 29 Prospectus “Old City Highlights” ...................................... 269
Appendix 30 Prospectus Restaurant ‘Beit Jabri’ ..................................... 273
Appendix 31 Prospectus Boutique Hotel ‘Talisman’ ............................... 274
### List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKDN</td>
<td>Aga Khan Development Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOT</td>
<td>Build-Operate-Transfer</td>
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<tr>
<td>FDI</td>
<td>Foreign Direct Investment</td>
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<td>FSA</td>
<td>Free Syrian Army</td>
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<td>FYP</td>
<td>Fife Year Plan</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>GIZ</td>
<td>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTZ</td>
<td>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GONGO</td>
<td>Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDF</td>
<td>Israeli Defence Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFPO</td>
<td>Institut français du Proche-Orient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JICA</td>
<td>Japan International Cooperation Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAF</td>
<td>Mustafa Ali Fondation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAM</td>
<td>Municipal Administration Modernization Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoC</td>
<td>Ministry of Culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoD</td>
<td>Ministry of Defence</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoLA</td>
<td>Ministry of Local Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoT</td>
<td>Ministry of Tourism</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>OBG</td>
<td>Oxford Business Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Public Private Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>REDIC</td>
<td>Real Estate Investment and Development Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAA</td>
<td>Syrian Arab Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALSRA</td>
<td>Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANA</td>
<td>Syrian Arab News Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBH</td>
<td>Syria Boutique Hotels</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCS</td>
<td>Syrian Computer Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STD</td>
<td>Syria Trust for Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIF</td>
<td>Tourism Investment Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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Note on the Transliteration of Arabic

Arabic names, expressions and interview quotes were transcribed without using diacritic signs in order to preserve better legibility of the text.
Introduction

‘Only three and a half hours by plane from Germany, in the Syrian capital [Damascus], visitors find another world: In the souk, the market [...] activities resemble the Middle Ages. Veiled women with their purchases buzz through the streets; in small workshops artisans chisel and hammer objects made of wood and iron [...]’ (Poser 2001; author’s translation from German).

‘The gentrification of a 3,000-year-old neighborhood is underway in one of the world’s oldest inhabited cities, sending property values along ancient alleys soaring and turning a crumbling walled enclave into the most glamorous nightspot in the capital. […](Wilson 2004).

‘A decade or so ago, there was nowhere for visitors to stay in the Old City – nowhere with any degree of luxury, anyway. Then, in 2005, five years after President Bashar al-Assad (the somewhat gentler [sic] son of Syria’s long-term socialist dictator) came to power, extending a newly welcoming hand to tourists, the first boutique hotel opened. […] Restaurants and cafés now dot Straight Street. Souvenir shops and art galleries have opened’ (Pielou 2010).

The above quotations from selected articles published in leading Western newspapers between 2001 and 2010 illustrate a set of physical and social changes that took place in the old city of Damascus. While Poser’s (2001) account gives a romanticised view of a traditional, “exotic” place, Wilson (2004) describes – although from a rather sympathetic point of view – the early appearance of gentrification in the Syrian capital. Finally, Pielou (2010), who addresses an audience of potential tourists, looks back to a decade of rapid urban change at a long-neglected tourist destination. As its very title suggests, this thesis engages with gentrification, heritage and authoritarianism in the old city of the Syrian capital Damascus. For that reason, the following paragraphs briefly introduce the respective theoretical concepts. Furthermore, they delineate the location(s) under study and give an overview of the study’s chapters.

This thesis investigates the ways in which gentrification, ‘the reinvestment of CAPITAL at the urban centre, which is designed to produce space for a more affluent class of people than currently occupies that space’ (Smith 2000:294; emphasis in original), evolved in pre-war Damascus, where, the restoration of historic property for private or commercial use took the form of opening restaurants, boutique hotels and
arts galleries and indeed resembled changes to the urban landscape of gentrifying neighbourhoods elsewhere. Initially, gentrification entailed the rehabilitation of working class residential neighbourhoods by new middle class residents (Glass 1964), and gentrifiers were seen as the vanguard of a back-to-the-city movement (Laska and Spain 1980). As will be argued in this thesis, and despite some accounts of in-moving residents with an upper middle class background, gentrification in the old city of Damascus took the form of business activities rather than residential use. Furthermore, this study discusses the social and physical aspects of gentrification and its impacts on the city’s urban fabric and places these processes in the broader context of Damascene urban history, thereby placing the focus on both the timing of as well as the actors involved in the gentrification of one of the world’s oldest inhabited capitals.

Although at the time of investigation in spring 2011 gentrification could be observed in different parts of the Syrian capital, this thesis focuses primarily on gentrification in Old Damascus (see appendix 25), which is the area of the city where signs of the process could first be observed. Old Damascus, which Damascenes refer to as al-Sham al-qadima (Old Damascus), is located inside the Roman city walls. However, the city’s historic fabric stretches far beyond the intra-mural quarters, which were designated as a World Heritage Site in 1979. In the quarters Salihyya and ‘Uqayba located to the North, Suwayqa to the West as well as Chagour and Midan to the South of the city walls, one can find remarkable stocks of historic buildings. Thus, this thesis subsumes them – similarly to the intra-mural quarters labelled Old Damascus – under the terms ‘the old city’ and ‘the old town’, which are used synonymously. In order to distinguish the city’s modern quarters from the historic neighbourhoods of the old town, and for the sake of readability, I use the term New Damascus. I am well aware that the term is not used locally – instead, Damascenes tend to use the name of the neighbourhood they refer to.

Dealing with historic neighbourhoods prompts sensitivity to and awareness of issues related to the cultural heritage of the location. Therefore, the concept of heritage, which will be discussed in more depth in chapter 5, bears two connected sets of meanings: ‘On the one hand, it is associated with tourism and with sites of historical interest that
have been preserved for the nation. [...] On the other hand, it is used to describe a set of shared values and collective memories’ (Peckham 2003:1).

Both aspects of heritage had a significant impact on the urban transformations under scrutiny in this thesis. First, sharing both the legacy and the pain caused by the risk of losing “their” heritage made the descendants of traditional Damascene families develop a communal sense of entitlement to defining and claiming ownership of the city’s heritage. Second, as Pyburn argues, ‘no nationalist agenda is complete without a World Heritage site’ (2007:172 cited in Monteiro 2010:313), which means that the Syrian state had its say in the nomination of Old Damascus as a World Heritage Site and thus Syrian national heritage. Consequently, this thesis deals also with the Syrian state and its aims regarding the overlapping fields of heritage and gentrification (i.e. the motives of the state for getting involved as well as the forms of this involvement).

Until late 2010, when the Arab uprisings started, and because the first supposedly successful revolutions have faced increasing levels of resistance by the authoritarian regimes, Middle East analysts have inclined to characterize authoritarian political systems in the region as ‘resilient’ to political liberalization. Given the authoritarian character of the Syrian regime, the role played by state institutions in the gentrification process will be researched through the lens of authoritarianism. Focusing on the urban domain, I will scrutinize regime strategies that – intentionally or not – contributed to the resilience of authoritarianism prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in the spring of 2011, using, for instance, Heydemann’s (2007) concept of authoritarian upgrading.¹

Chapter 1 reviews literature on gentrification, heritage and authoritarianism and sets out the theoretical framework of the thesis. It addresses both gaps in the literature and thematic overlaps (i.e. the nexus between gentrification and heritage, gentrification and authoritarianism as well as authoritarianism and heritage). By reviewing literature that engages with gentrification in the Global South, and the Middle East in particular, chapter 1 connects the Damascene case to the broader gentrification literature.

¹ See also Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004:375) on ‘strategies of adaptation’.
The purpose of chapter 2 is to outline the methodological approach and the methods applied at different stages of the research process. As interview data represent the main source of information, particular emphasis is placed on strategies of data gathering (i.e. interviewing and transcription), as well as on data analysis. Furthermore, ethical issues are part of the discussion as are the implications of the current crisis in Syria for the decisions made in the course of the research process.

Chapter 3 scrutinizes major events in Damascene history under late-Ottoman rule (1830-1918), French mandatory rule (1920-1946), during the first decades after Syria’s independence (1946-1970) and under the reign of Hafiz al-Asad (1970-2000). By tracing specific historic events and their impact on urban development in the Syrian capital pertaining to spatial expansion and internal divisions, three intertwined processes are identified: rural-urban migration, suburbanization and the rise of new ruling elites.

Gentrification in the historic neighbourhoods of Damascus is at the core of chapter 4, which focuses on the impact of gentrification on both the physical and social structure of the old city. It argues that gentrification-like processes in Old Damascus not only had a specific timing but, prior to the Syrian War, they also followed a site-specific socio-political logic. In this way, it becomes obvious that – despite sharing striking similarities to gentrification elsewhere – the processes observed in (Old) Damascus evolved according to their very own dynamics. Therefore, the millennia-old cultural heritage of the city turns out to be of particular importance when it comes to how Damascenes both identify with and attempt to preserve their city.

While engaging with the concept of heritage, chapter 5 focuses on social and economic aspects of heritage conservation in Old Damascus and on how heritage conservation was interconnected with the gentrification process. The chapter scrutinises different dimensions of what Shaw (2005) labels ‘heritage-gentrification nexus’. Furthermore, the chapter emphasises how different actors (re-)claim ownership of the increasingly valued, and thus contested, historic core of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited capital.
The political dimension of the heritage-gentrification nexus in authoritarian Syria will be dealt with in chapter 6. Here, changes in the built environment of the city such as gentrification and heritage preservation are re-read through the analytical lens of a set of strategies employed by authoritarian regimes in order to facilitate authoritarian resilience.

Finally, chapter 7 brings together the findings from the previous chapters of this thesis and outlines implications of the Damascene case for the literature on gentrification, Middle Eastern authoritarianisms and heritage in the Middle Eastern city. Furthermore, it links the conclusions from the first – and hopefully last – decade under Bashar al-Asad’s rule to the civil-war-turned-crisis in Syria.
Chapter 1: Debating Gentrification, Heritage, and Authoritarian Resilience

This chapter aims to set the theoretical framework of the thesis by introducing the bodies of literature that form the cornerstones of this research: gentrification, heritage and authoritarian resilience. At first glance, these concepts seem not to have much in common as they originate from different branches of the social sciences: gentrification has been a prominent issue in contemporary urban studies since the 1970s, whereas authoritarian resilience is mainly researched by political scientists dealing with regime transformation. However, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, there are striking overlaps between the two concepts which are worth further enquiry. This is particularly the case with regard to urban heritage, which serves as an additional lens through which to approach transformations of the urban fabric in Old Damascus. The first sub-section of the chapter reviews relevant literature on gentrification (1.1), whereas the subsequent sections are devoted to urban heritage (1.2) and authoritarianism (1.3), with the latter focussing particularly on both the resilience and characteristics of authoritarianism in the Syrian context. Finally, I will address possible gaps in the literature and outline how they will inform the following chapters (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework
1.1 Gentrification

One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle-classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences [...]. Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed (Glass 1964: xviii-xix).

When sociologist Ruth Glass first coined the term gentrification in 1964, she referred to a process that was first considered to be an anomaly of the property market in central London. Almost two decades later, Smith defined gentrification as a ‘process by which working class residential neighbourhoods are rehabilitated by middle class homebuyers, landlords, and professional developers’ (Smith 1982:139). These ‘traditional’ definitions of gentrification share an emphasis on ‘direct displacement of the working class from residential quarters’ (Hackworth 2002:839) as well as a focus on the existing housing stock rather than on new-build structures. However, more recent definitions of gentrification overcome the debilitating and rigid conceptual boundaries of their predecessors by including both the commercial use of formerly residential property and brown field development. Along these lines, Hackworth defined gentrification as ‘the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users’ (Hackworth 2002:815). Similarly, Lees et al. (2008) integrated abandoned parcels of land as sites for the process into their definition of gentrification, thus allowing for the inclusion of new-build and other recent mutations of gentrification. Accordingly, gentrification is ‘the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle class residential or commercial use’ (xv), which can now be observed globally (Smith 2002; Atkinson and Bridge 2005; Lees 2012).

The worldwide appearance of gentrification suggests questions about where and when the process originally started. How has gentrification changed since the coinage of the term? What contexts can gentrification be observed in today? And, finally, what

---

2 As will be outlined below Smith (1996:39) later revoked this rather narrow definition in order to include redevelopment in the rubric of gentrification.
lessons can be learnt from the large and growing body of gentrification literature for investigating urban change in the Syrian capital Damascus?

While the first sub-section discusses different approaches to explaining gentrification (1.1.1), the fundamental, though often challenged, central relevance of displacement is examined in 1.1.2. Recent debates on gentrification (e.g. new-build gentrification, the increasing relevance of public policy and the revanchist city) are in the centre of 1.1.3, which also investigates how – in the context of globalization and neoliberalism – gentrification ‘cascades down the urban hierarchy’ (Atkinson and Bridge 2005:5) and can now be found beyond the urban core in cities in both in the Global South and the Global North.

1.1.1 Explanations of Gentrification

This section deals with two prominent interacting approaches to gentrification which were controversially discussed during the 1980s and 1990s. Slater labelled ‘the production-consumption (or Smith–Ley) debate in gentrification research the most overdrawn and misrepresented contest in the history of urban studies’ (2011:575; also Slater 2006:546). Consumption-side explanations are ‘theories that have explained gentrification as a consequence of changes in the industrial and occupational structure of advanced capitalist cities’ (Lees et al. 2008:90), whereas production-side explanations ‘explain how the possibility of winning enormous fortunes provides powerful incentives that shape the behaviour of individuals, groups and institutions that have a stake in what happens on the urban frontier’ (42).

Despite attempts to overcome the seemingly deep conceptual trenches between the two arguments by using alternative, less polarizing approaches to explain gentrification, the dichotomy dominated scholarly debate on gentrification during the 1980s and 1990s. I do not intend to review the gentrification debate of the past in its entirety (for an assessment of relevant literature see e.g. Hamnett 1991; Clark 1992; Lees 1994; 2000; Lees et al. 2008). However, it is vital to understand the main arguments of both positions as well as the main fault lines of the debate. Hamnett (1991) presented Smith
(production-side) and Ley (consumption-side) as the main proponents of two warring theoretical concepts. For Hamnett (1991:173),

the reason why the gentrification debate has attracted so much interest, and has been so hard fought, is that it is one of key theoretical battlegrounds of contemporary human geography which highlights the arguments between structure and agency, production and consumption, capital and culture, and supply and demand.

Hamnett misleadingly implied that the positions of consumption-side and production-side explanations were irreconcilable and ‘ensured that a generation of scholars saw gentrification in stark binary terms’ (Slater 2011:575). Examining the accounts of Smith and Ley reveals that the opposition between the two approaches was obviously less dramatic (see Slater 2006:746). In the late 1970s, Smith (1979) pointed out that ‘[a] broader theory of gentrification must take the role of producers as well as consumers into account’ (540). Despite his conviction that ‘the needs of production - in particular the need to earn profit - are a more decisive initiative behind gentrification than consumer preference’ Smith (1979:540) did not ignore the importance of consumption for explaining gentrification. Conversely, while recognizing the importance of Smith’s rent gap theory, and its merit in drawing ‘attention to the intermediaries in the land-market, the developers and financiers […] who were overlooked by arguments that were preoccupied exclusively with demand processes’ (Ley 1996:42), Ley criticised that ‘[t]he forces of production are privileged, while consumption issues are devaluated’ (ibid).

Frustrated by the consumption-versus-production debate, Clark (1992) advocated an approach to gentrification which takes into account the complementary character of consumption- and production-side explanations of gentrification, which literally represent two sides of the same coin: ‘Very briefly, the notion of complementarity says that even if competing theories are mutually exclusive due to incommensurable abstractions, they may both be true and necessary for a thorough description of that which the theories are about’ (Clark 1992:361). In this sense, Slater (2011) argues that ‘[it] does not matter whether production or consumption is viewed as more important in driving gentrification, so long as neither is completely ignored’ (575). I will briefly examine important aspects of both arguments below; however, I will discuss those
aspects which have increasingly been considered to be complementary components of a comprehensive approach to gentrification.

I shall now focus on important aspects of consumption-side and production-side explanations, supplemented by some reflection on overlaps with the concept of heritage. In the late 1970s, the first evidence of middle-class households opting for living in less affluent inner-city neighbourhoods could be documented in European and North-American cities (Hackworth and Smith 2001). Hoping for an end to the decay of their inner cities, local authorities and the media soon celebrated this change in consumer preferences as “urban revitalization” or “urban renaissance”. Many scholars embraced the back-to-the-city euphoria, which was, in fact, more a not-to-the-suburbs trend (see Smith 1979:540). As outlined above, research explaining gentrification as the outcome of the changed consumer preferences of the middle class became mainstream. Neo-classical explanations of suburbanization identified consumer preferences as the driving force inciting urban sprawl. The trend that began in the 1970s saw an increasing number of centrally located inner city neighbourhoods in urban centres across North America and Western Europe affected by gentrification. Scholarly attention to this phenomenon was also on the rise (see Ley 1996:33). Sudden changes in consumer preference for life in the inner city were used as an explanation of what Laska and Spain (1980) termed the ‘back-to-the-city’ movement. According to Ley (1996:38), these changed consumer preferences include easy access to workplace, shops and leisure activities as well as environmental amenities in both the built environment (e.g. architecture) and the physical environment (e.g. scenic views, a waterfront, etc.). Nevertheless, the fact that consumption-side as well as production-side explanations ‘emerged in reaction to the obfuscations of 1970s neoclassical economists’ take on gentrification’ (Slater 2011:574) is commonly overlooked. Proponents of consumption-side explanations targeted ‘simplistic neoclassical accounts of demographic changes and lifestyle preferences’ (575), whereas advocates of production-side explanations refused to consider gentrification as the manifestation of altered consumer preferences of certain segments of the middle class (574). Instead, they pointed to the role of both capital and the producers of gentrification, as will be outlined below.
Ley’s (1978; 1980) interpretation of gentrification was heavily informed by Bell’s (1973) controversial Post-industrial Thesis, namely the advent of a new middle class, ‘the expansion of the groups who transmitted theoretical knowledge, in professional, managerial, and technical positions’ (Ley 1994:54). Ley’s attention was directed at a particular subgroup which he describes as the cultural new class, such as ‘professionals in the arts and applied arts, the media, teaching, and social services […]’ (1994:15) who intend to enhance their standard of living but not just economically. But who are the gentrifiers? In this regard, Ley portrays members of the new cultural class as “social and cultural specialists”, including academics, other social scientists, arts and culture professionals, architects, clergy, and doctors, and those lawyers and other professionals outside the private sector’ (1994:57). Elsewhere, the author characterises these inner-city dwellers as primarily younger than 35 years-of-age, childless, often unmarried, highly educated, well paid and often consumption orientated. Nevertheless, he remarks that this stereotypic profile of a gentrifier ‘has become part of the folklore of the 1970s and 1980s’ (Ley 1996:35).

Having identified some characteristics of gentrifying individuals (the listed features are far from exhaustive), this chapter now turns to the rather fundamental question: Why do gentrifiers gentrify? It is obvious that incentives other than searching for accommodation close to the centre are the driving force behind gentrifiers’ preference for inner-city locations – and this is where consumption patterns gain momentum for explaining gentrification.

For Caulfield, ‘among the vital seeds of gentrification is emancipatory practice oriented toward particular use-values of older urban places that are felt to be diminished in current-day city-building’ (1989:622). Gentrification thus becomes a counter-discourse to both modernist urban design and the conformity of faceless suburbia. In other words

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3 ‘Modernist planning is said to reduce the city to the analogue of a machine, yielding 'depressing' and 'monotonous blocks of urban sameness,' a 'placeless' and 'absurd landscape we experience as [...] apart from us and indifferent to us,' the outcome of a 'paternalism' devoted to technique which, paradoxically, creates places that are 'dehumanising because they are excessively humanised' by a calculating rationality’ (Caulfield 1989:623).
‘[O]ld city places offer difference and freedom, privacy and fantasy, possibilities for carnival, where 'the ultimate word ... has not yet been spoken'; 'anything can happen - and it could happen right now’ […]’ (Caulfield 1989:625).

This understanding of the old city as a place of distinction attracted ‘marginal gentrifiers’ (Rose 1984) with a desire to elude quotidian domination whose motifs went beyond ‘a convenience for the journey to work’ (Ley 1994:69). They – among them many artists – rather opted for central city living, which is ‘constitutive of an urbane lifestyle’ (69), for reasons of education, gender, sexuality or ethnicity (for further assessment see Lees et al. 2008). The old city as a place of difference has thus become important for explanations of gentrification. The process, ‘[a]s its name suggests […] is intimately concerned with social class’ (Jager 1986:78). Based on the case of Victoriana in Melbourne, Jager (1986) investigated the specific ambiance of gentrified neighbourhoods, which he called ‘aesthetics of gentrification’ (78). He focused on the correlation between urban conservation and class constitution, namely the rise of the new middle class whereby ‘housing becomes a cultural investment with facadal display signifying social ascension’ (79). In this regard, ‘[t]he return to historical purity and authenticity’ (83) is the expression of gentrifiers’ increasing interest in the past of “their” neighbourhoods which often resembles ‘[t]he effacing of an industrial past and a working-class presence’ (ibid). Both ‘gentrification aesthetics’ (Jager 1986) and ‘desire’ (Caulfield 1989) for historic quarters with a prestigious past link the issues of urban conservation and class constitution intimately, and thereby become a threat for underprivileged residents of affected neighbourhoods.

However, Caulfield (1989:627) points out that the driving force behind displacement has not been the individual gentrifier of the early gentrification process but ‘the emergence of concerted entrepreneurial interest in old city space oriented to consumers whose self-image and property values are threatened by survival of any traces of a neighborhood's unfashionable past’. This entrepreneurial interest leads directly to production-side explanations of gentrification which ‘emerged in response to the

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4 As Zukin (1988) demonstrates in *Loft-Living*, the attention of the property-purchasing middle class is by no means limited to residential buildings of the high (Victorian) era – industrial buildings experience high demand, too.
problems and limitations of this new conventional wisdom of a shift in consumer preference’ (Lees et al. 2010:81).^5

Neil Smith, probably the most prominent advocate of production-side explanations of gentrification, remained sceptical and wondered ‘why central and inner areas of the city, which for decades could not satisfy the demands of the middle class, now appear to do so handsomely’ (Smith 1987:164). In contrast to the proponents of consumption-side explanations, Smith (1979:539) refuted the neoclassical consumer sovereignty explanations of gentrification as these assume that ‘suburbanization reflects the preference for space’ and that, in reverse, gentrification ‘is explained as the result of an alteration of preferences and/or a change in the constraints determining which preferences will or can be implemented’. Supported by empirical evidence from three gentrifying neighbourhoods in different US cities, the author was able to show that hardly 30 percent of the gentrifiers had previously been suburbanites, whereas the majority had been inner-city dwellers (539f). Smith (1979:540) further warned that explanations of gentrification which basically focused on gentrifiers’ actions and thereby ignored the role of such producers of gentrification as ‘builders, developers, landlords, mortgage lenders, government agencies, real estate agents, and tenants’ were extremely narrow. Thus, unconvinced by mainstream gentrification research in the late 1970s, Smith formulated a structuralist counter-concept, the ‘rent gap theory’, which explains gentrification as a result of the processes of capital accumulation. The rent gap can be understood as the devalorisation of capital in cases where the capitalised ground rent of a property is substantially lower than the potential ground rent that can be capitalised by changing the use of the respective property (or putting it to what planners call highest and best use). Accordingly, if the rent gap reaches a certain level, gentrification occurs as a process of reinvestment in inner-city real estate (Smith 1979:545).

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^5 Further domains of consumption explanations are education, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, meaning that ‘[f]or many researchers, gentrification, first and foremost involves people – not just circles of investments and fluctuations of capitalised ground rent’ (Lees et al. 2010:130).
It is important to ask what causes the widening of the rent gap up to a point that makes reinvestment in, and thus gentrification of, central city neighbourhoods profitable? Entrepreneurs, as producers of gentrification ‘have incentives to use a particular land parcel for the most profitable function possible given the available construction technology, prevailing regulations, building styles and fashions, nearby competitors, and local urban context’ (Lees et al. 2008:51). In certain contexts, disinvestment, a pre-stage of reinvestment, can be the most profitable use for a property. Smith schematically outlines disinvestment as a sequence of processes that determine the use of a property, starting directly after its construction (Smith 1979:544-545): Owner occupancy is dominant during the first years of the lifecycle of a structure, regularly followed by conversion to rental tenancy at a time when first repairs need to be done. Some landlords postpone investment in their property, a practice that results in undermaintenance and, consequently, the continued filtering down of income groups in a neighbourhood. The result is ‘the paradox of poor people living on valuable land in the heart of large, vibrant cities’ (Lees et al. 2008:54). Thus, financial institutions react by redlining the district, which finally faces abandonment. ‘[S]ustained disinvestment begins as a result of largely rational decisions by owners, landlords, local and national governments and an array of financial institutions’ (Bradford and Rubinowitz 1975 cited in Smith 1996:192). Once an area has undergone disinvestment, it is ‘ripe’ for a new circle of investment and gentrification. In this sense, Smith (1979:547) concludes his seminal article with the statement that ‘[g]entrification is a back to the city movement all right, but of capital rather than people’.

By challenging the idea of sovereign consumers’ rational choices as the driving force behind neighbourhood change, Smith’s rent gap theory represents an assault on mainstream urban theory. Some advocates of consumption-side explanations picked up the gauntlet. This was, as outlined above, the beginning of one of the most controversial and overdrawn debates in contemporary urban studies, which dominated, and to some extent paralysed, the discipline for more than a decade (see Slater 2006; 2011). It is not my intention to review again the rent gap debate, which has been comprehensively assessed elsewhere (Clark 1992; Lees 1994; Lees et al. 2008:55-59).
The essence of the debate is that neither side fully comprehends gentrification – both approaches represent one of the sides of the same coin. Feminist geographer Damaris Rose was one of the first authors to call for overcoming the encrusted polarity between consumption-side and production-side explanations. On the one hand, Rose (1984:51) criticised Marxist proponents of production-side explanations for empirically and analytically neglecting vital aspects of gentrification beyond mere economic processes. On the other hand, she criticised consumption-side explanations as they see gentrifiers ‘only in terms of their “consumption” habits and patterns’ (53). Rose, therefore, suggested a focus on the ‘production of gentrifiers’ by investigating the correlations between ‘gentrification and changes in the reproduction of labour power and people’ (53). Furthermore, she emphasised the need for research on ‘marginal gentrifiers’, mainly individuals with a ‘moderate income’ such as, for instance, first-time buyers who are attracted by the inner-city’s comparative affordability or (single) parents benefiting from the opportunity to combine family and employment in relative proximity (Rose 1984:58). Yet, by accentuating the role of the gentrifiers, Rose herself maintained the dualism between the two arguments. Sociologist Sharon Zukin informed the gentrification debate by highlighting how economic and cultural causes of gentrification associate (Zukin 1988). She pointed out that ‘[n]either capital nor culture alone can account for the nearly universal social nor spatial transformations gentrifiers have wrought’ (Zukin cited in Lees et al. 2010:231). However, it took almost another decade and numerous appeals for leaving the dichotomy of production-side and consumption-side explanations behind before both began to be investigated as complementary, non-exclusive aspects of the same phenomenon (Clark 1992; Lees 1994).
1.1.2 Displacement and Eviction

Until the late 1980s, the roots of gentrification were at the centre of scholarly attention, and this was, as Slater (2006:740) emphasised, ‘often in response to the clear injustice of the displacement of working-class residents’. However, only a few authors made efforts to conceptualize displacement (Grier and Grier 1978; Le Gates and Hartman 1981; Hartman et al. 1982). One of them was Marcuse (1986), who distinguished four types of displacement: First, ‘last resident displacement’ may refer either to economic (rent-increase) or to physical causes like landlord harassment or insufficient maintenance. Second, it is likely that former households occupying the same building were displaced, too. This is what Marcuse labels as ‘chain displacement’. Third, ‘exclusionary displacement’ takes place if a household is not permitted to move into a dwelling, by a change in conditions which affects that dwelling or its immediate surroundings, which (a) is beyond the household’s reasonable ability to control or prevent; (b) occurs despite the household’s being able to meet all previously imposed conditions of occupancy; (c) differs significantly and in a spatially concentrated fashion from changes in the housing market as a whole; and (d) makes occupancy by that household impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable (Marcuse 1986:156; see also Slater 2009:303).

Fourth, neighbourhoods often become less liveable for their original working-class residents because of the displacement of friends, the closure of shops and social services. The fact that these individuals are more likely to move is what Marcuse refers to as the ‘pressure of displacement’. In a rare attempt to further conceptualize displacement, Bernt and Holm (2009) add to Marcuse’s typology of displacement by bringing in both geographical scale and time. The authors distinguish economic and physical displacement which affect individual households, whereas the pressure of displacement and exclusionary displacement are directed at entire neighbourhoods. Moreover, last-resident displacement is directed at a particular moment in time, while chain displacement, exclusionary displacement and displacement pressure all refer to

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6 ‘When a family sees its neighbourhood changing dramatically, when all their friends are leaving, when stores are going out of business and new stores for other clientele are taking their place (or not at all replacing them), when changes in public transportation patterns, support services, are all clearly making the area less and less liveable, then the pressure of displacement is already severe, and its actuality only a matter of time. Families under such circumstances may even move as soon as they can’ (Marcuse 1986:157).
changes that take a consecutive period of time to happen’ (Bernt and Holm 2009:313-314).

Since the late 1980s, however, the local state has been embracing neoliberal urban policy and gentrification in particular. Nevertheless, not only elected officials and producers of gentrification were intrigued by the emerging “feel-good” terminology. When academics started to praise gentrification as an appropriate strategy to counter urban poverty and to ‘regenerate’ declining neighbourhoods (see Byrne 2003; for a critical assessment see Wyly and Hammel 2001), it became obvious that gentrification researchers, too, embraced creativity strategies. These were spearheaded by accounts like Landry’s (2000) ‘The Creative City’ or Florida’s (2002) ‘The Rise of the Creative Class’, which invoked simplistic policy guidelines such as focussing on the ‘3 T’s of economic development: Technology, Talent and Tolerance’ (Florida 2002:249). Since then ‘[t]he perception is no longer about rent increases, landlord harassment and working-class displacement, but rather street-level spectacles, trendy bars and cafés, i-Pods, social diversity and funky clothing outlets’ (Slater 2006:738). Consequently, scholarly and public attention was diverted from the negative effects of gentrification such as social inequality and the displacement of low-income residents (Slater 2006; see also exchange between Slater (2009; 2010) and Hamnett (2009; 2010) in CITY).

In 2005, a triumphant article appeared in USA Today (Hampson 2005), based on several studies by Freeman, Braconi and Vigdor (Freeman 2005; Freeman and Braconi 2004; Vigdor 2002). The authors used household mobility data to argue that the scale of displacement caused by gentrification was negligible. Their approach, and their data-set in particular, was problematic as it ‘[did] not include displaced households that left New York City, doubled up with other households, became homeless or entered the shelter system’ (Newman and Wyly 2006: 51; see also Slater 2006:748-749). At least since Slater (2006) criticized research agendas lauding the process of gentrification and thus re-ignited critical debate, the issue of the displacement of the working-class and poor households, without doubt the most serious effect of gentrification, was finally back on the research agenda.
Challenging the widespread assumption of gentrification being ‘the saviour of our cities’, Slater (2006:752) points out that it was shaped by critical intent to describe the disturbing effects of the middle classes arriving in working-class neighbourhoods and was researched in that critical spirit for many years. It has since been appropriated by those intent on finding and recommending quick-fix ‘solutions’ to complex urban problems, and in extreme cases depoliticized and called something else.

Accordingly, it would be a success if those opposing gentrification succeeded in communicating ‘that either unliveable disinvestment and decay or reinvestment and displacement’ (752) is, in fact, a false option for the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods. It should be made clear ‘that progress begins when gentrification is accepted as a problem and not as a solution to urban poverty and blight’ (752.).

The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (Volume 32, Issue 1, March 2008) invited gentrification scholars to comment on Slater’s article. Freeman, for instance, discarded Slater’s rejection of ‘uncritical’ research and emphasized ‘that displacement is not the entirety of the experience of those living in gentrifying neighborhoods’ (2008:187). Smith, by contrast, welcomed the article as ‘one of the most important urban geography articles of the last decade’ (2008:195) and warned of ‘the conservatizing of gentrification research’ (196) in terms of both funding and agenda setting. In this regard, Shaw observed that most policymakers and politicians embraced measures that resulted in rising property prices and, therefore, ‘prefer[ed] not to support research that might give them cause to react otherwise’ (Shaw 2008:192-193). Wacquant (2008) called Slater’s article ‘a timely wakeup call for scholars of class, space, and politics in the city’ (198) and was alarmed first, by the omission of the displacement of working-class residents from inner-city neighbourhoods; and second, at the frequent focus on ‘social mixing’ and the widespread use of a trivializing vocabulary. Over the past twenty years, these phenomena, which are by no means limited to the research of gentrification, have become parts of a wider ‘pattern of invisibility of the working class’ (Wacquant 2008:199) both in academia and the public sphere. Furthermore, the author points to a process of parallel extinction of the working class both physically from the inner city and literally from urban research, which is increasingly co-opted by the local state: ‘[a]nd both tendencies in turn reveal, confirm
1.1.3 Recent Debates

This thesis deals with gentrification in the centre of the Syrian capital Damascus, a Middle Eastern metropolis which is shaped by contrasting neighbourhoods: that is by historic areas and ‘modern’ quarters literally surrounded by vast informal settlements. Therefore, the following section of this chapter has two goals. First, it aims at presenting derivatives of gentrification, namely ‘tourism gentrification’, ‘new-build gentrification’ and ‘state-led gentrification’. As will be shown below, all these forms of gentrification have the potential to facilitate the analysis in the following chapters. The second goal is reviewing the characteristics of gentrification in the Global South and in the Arab World in particular.

21st Century Gentrification

Since the coinage of the term ‘gentrification’ in the mid-1960s, the process of gentrification has metamorphosed and its variants have proliferated (Lees et al. 2008:129). Nowadays, mutations of the term, which originally referred to a clearly defined irregularity in the London housing market, embrace facets as diverse as, for example, ‘rural gentrification’, ‘new-build gentrification’, ‘heritage gentrification’, ‘studentification’, ‘tourism gentrification’, ‘weekend- and evening gentrification’, ‘marginal gentrification’, ‘super gentrification’, ‘coastal gentrification’, ‘provincial gentrification’ and ‘state-led gentrification’. Scholars have started both emphasising how recent waves of gentrification pose a challenge to its conceptualisation and debating how 21st-century gentrification might be defined (Davidson and Lees 2005). Hackworth and Smith (2001) critically observed that ‘little explicit attempt has been made thus far to chronicling, much less theorising, these changes’ (Hackworth and Smith 2001:466, emphasis added). In contrast to early stage models of gentrification,
which appeared during the late 1970s and aimed at comprehending the process by defining a sequence of stages, Hackworth and Smith (2001) advocated a new stage model that divides up the history of gentrification into periods or ‘waves’ of gentrification. Their categorization was based on an analysis of the urban political economy in the US in general and, from the late 1960s onwards, of the changes in the gentrification process in New York in particular. The quality of state involvement during phases of economic growth as opposed to its relative reluctance in times of recession was thus used as a criterion for distinguishing three waves of gentrification.

The first wave of gentrification was a sporadic process in the north east of the USA and Western Europe prior to the year 1973. After a period of economic downturn, the authors singled out a second wave of gentrification between 1978 and 1988, characterised by the implementation of, and a struggle against, gentrification. Furthermore, Hackworth and Smith (2001) observed the proliferation beyond the ‘commonly suspected cities’ of New York and London. Finally, post-recession or third-wave gentrification, which followed the recession of the early 1990s, was dominated by an increase in both government intervention and the involvement of private capital.

Attempts to define gentrification in the 21st century ignited the debate on third-wave or post-recession gentrification and its manifold manifestations such as new-build gentrification. How should gentrification research deal with often centrally located redevelopment projects, which – regarding their impact on the affected neighbourhoods – significantly resemble ‘traditional’ gentrification? For decades, there existed at least some kind of agreement that gentrification and redevelopment were two independent processes (Smith 1982). Later Smith asked:

How, in the large context of changing social geographies, are we to distinguish adequately between the rehabilitation of nineteenth-century housing, the construction of new condominium towers, the opening of festival markets to attract local and not so local tourists, the proliferation of wine bars and boutiques for everything and the construction of modern and postmodern office buildings employing thousands of professionals, all looking for a place to live? (Smith 1996:39).
Lambert and Boddy (2002) claimed that gentrification, as opposed to what they term ‘residentialisation’ or ‘reurbanisation’ ‘referred primarily to a rather different type of “new middle class”, buying up older, often “historic” individual housing units and renovating and restoring them for their own use’ (Lambert and Boddy 2002:20; quoted in Davidson and Lees 2010). By contrast, in a reply to Boddy’s (2007) critique of their previous article (Davidson and Lees 2005), Davidson and Lees (2010:397-8) argued that ‘reurbanisation’ should be acknowledged as an example of third-wave gentrification and should emphasise that contemporary gentrification was by no means an exclusively residential process but could also be economic, political or commercial. Regarding Boddy’s (2007) article, Davidson and Lees (2010:398) raised three points of criticism: First, the simplifying and under-theorizing of displacement; second, the exclusive use of interviews with ““elites” with a vested interest in refuting the label “gentrification”; and, third, the preferred use of the positively connoted ‘class neutral label “reurbanization”’, which did not refer to displacement at all. Furthermore, they pointed out that gentrification took place beyond disinvested neighbourhoods, too, for example in the form of super-gentrification of areas that experienced gentrification and reinvestment previously (Davidson and Lees 2005:1168; Lees 2003 on super-gentrification). However, not all scholars embraced the trend towards a conceptual overstretch of gentrification. Wyly and Hammel (1998:303) observed that ‘recent criticisms of the coherence of theories of gentrification, […] and methods for assessing its extent and significance have cast doubt on the utility of further research on the subject’. Likewise, Bondi (1999:255) called attempts to widen definitions of gentrification ‘a burden’ and considered whether it was time ‘to allow it to disintegrate under the weight of these burdens’. While they appreciated these warnings, Davidson and Lees argued that ‘gentrification scholars need to allow the term gentrification enough elasticity to “open up new insights” and indeed to reflect the mutations in the 21st century of this increasingly active and somewhat different process’ (Davidson and Lees 2005:1187).

Another such 21st-century mutation is Gotham’s (2005) concept of ‘tourism gentrification’, which explains how an inner-city neighbourhood transforms ‘into a relatively affluent and exclusive enclave marked by a proliferation of corporate
entertainment and tourism venues’ (1099). Tourism, one of the largest and most rapidly growing industries, ‘is about the production of local difference, local cultures and different local histories that appeal to visitors’ tastes for the exotic and unique’ (Gotham 2005:1100-1101), and, like gentrification, it is an activity addressing middle-class desire. Another overlap is the fact that state policies function as the driving force behind both tourism and gentrification. In this regard, ‘tourism gentrification provides the conceptual link between production-side and demand-side explanations of gentrification while avoiding one-sided and reductive conceptions’ (1103). Worldwide neighbourhoods affected by tourism gentrification show striking similarities such as souvenir shops, fast food restaurants and cappuccino bars (1111). It is important to note that neighbourhoods that have experienced tourism gentrification attract not only affluent tourists but also members of the local elite. Based on research in several Brazilian cities, Rubino (2005:233) investigated how ‘[t]he affluent had constructed new and temporary bonds with the place’ while living in modern upscale quarters elsewhere in the city, and how they thus used inner-city space as non-residential ‘night or weekend gentrifiers which conflicts with other local users and counter-users of these spaces’. At the same time, attracted by the prospect of a profitable investment, local elites become directly involved in the tourism industry (Gotham 2005:1114; Herrera et al. 2007:279). Herrera et al.’s (2007) research on Santa Cruz de Tenerife is another rare account of research connecting gentrification, displacement and tourism. The authors demonstrate how that originally accidental connection has altered into an ‘increasingly intentional’ tactic and a ‘strategic goal of urban policy’ (Herrera et al. 2007:277). Furthermore, the authors point to the increasing overlap between the ‘target audience for gentrification’ and ‘the middle class that fuels tourism’ and continue that ‘[i]nsofar as gentrified neighborhoods become tourist destinations themselves, by dint of their new or recaptured distinctiveness, the separate logics and motives of tourism and gentrification begin to blur’ (Herrera et al. 2007:277). However, what makes Herrera et al.’s (2007) research particularly interesting for the Damascene case is the long-term perspective which facilitated the comparison of urban renewal in Santa Cruz, first under authoritarianism and later in a democratic system.
Gentrification, Urban Policy and the Revanchist City

Whether gentrification is urban, suburban, or rural, new-build or the renovation of existing stock, it refers, as its gentri-suffixes attest, to nothing more or less than the class dimensions of neighbourhood change – in short, not simply changes in the housing stock, but changes in housing class (Slater et al., 2004: 1144).

Until the mid-1980s, the ‘language of gentrification’ expressed a widespread awareness of the process and its negative effects on working-class communities. For critics of the process, the word ‘gentrification’ alone was the epitome of class dimensions in neighbourhoods under transformation. Those in favour of gentrification, many of them attracted by a spirit of optimism and ‘the sense of modernization’, opted for a ‘more anodyne terminology’ (Smith 1996:32). This feel-good jargon was dominated by terms like ‘urban revitalization’, ‘neighbourhood recycling’, ‘renewal’, ‘renaissance’, ‘beautification’ or ‘upgrading’ and diverted the attention from the underlying class issues of gentrification (Smith 1996:32; 2002:445; see also Imrie and Raco 2003).

Nevertheless, these substitutes in particular became increasingly popular among actors concerned with urban policy, such as politicians, bureaucrats and consultants as well as other professionals involved in the production of gentrification (Lees et al. 2010:447). This increasing interest in the process, or more precisely its substitutes, was, however, nothing new. Although policy-makers failed to successfully promote gentrification during the 1970s,

[t]he new wave of policy interest in the 1990s, by contrast, was much more cautious in its language, promotion and marketing – but much more ambitious in its efforts to remake inner-city space for middle-class and wealthy residents, investors, and tourists (Lees et al. 2010:447).

The new connection between gentrification and urban policy is traceable to a set of conditions, namely the economic and demographic concentration in metropolitan centres, the spread of state-sponsored neoliberal reforms and the creation of an international financial system, which turned a few global cities (Sassen 2001) into command centres in this concentration process. Additionally, due to the spread of
entrepreneurial practices, cities all over the world entered a stage of inter-city competition, aiming at joining the club of world cities (Robinson 2006:113; Lees et al. 2010:447). For Robinson (2006:113), this came to be expressed in literally ubiquitous processes like ‘place-marketing, tourist promotion, subsidies to attract productive enterprises [or] costly remaking of the urban environment’, the latter being directly linked to the process of gentrification.

Van Weesep (1994) called for including the nexus of policy and gentrification in research agendas. Yet, prior to the early 2000s, little scholarly attention was paid to the interrelations between globally applied agendas of urban renaissance and gentrification (Lees 2003:571; Lees and Ley 2008:2480; Uitermark et al. 2007:126). Recent research, however, elucidated the impact of state-led gentrification on cities and their inhabitants (see on Bilbao: Vicario and Moje (2005); on Rotterdam: Uitermark et al. (2007); on Shanghai: He (2007); on Istanbul: Islam 2010; on several South African cities: Visser and Kotze (2008)). Like Uitermark et al. (2007:127), who advocated a research focus that went ‘beyond the economic dimension’ and also included investigating ‘governmental and institutional dimensions’, Cameron and Coaffee suggested an alternative model in which ‘the main driver of gentrification is public policy, seeking to use ‘positive’ gentrification as an engine of urban regeneration’ (Cameron and Coaffee 2003:40). In addition to the spread of a planning jargon avoiding the ‘dirty word’ gentrification (Smith 1996) and an “entrepreneurial” turn in urban governance’ which facilitated a rise in inter-city competition (see above), issues such as safety and crime control became increasingly popular, resulting in the global proliferation of strategies like the privatization of public space (Mitchell 2003), zero-tolerance policing (see MacLeod 2002; Belina 2003), and spreading fear of an ‘unknown other’, namely the urban poor (Smith 1996).

Observing these changes in the context of New York, Smith (1996) formulated his controversial revanchist city thesis. He argued that, during the 1990s, conservative members of the political elite were supported by much of their middle-class clientele. The origin of the terms revanchists, revanchist city or urban revanchism, however, 7

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7 Revanche (French) = revenge
can be traced back to late 19th-century France. A decade after the country’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 and the uprising of the Paris Commune, poet-turned-soldier Paul Déroulède founded the Ligue des Patriotes, ‘a tightly organized, militant, antiparliamentarian, violent, and direct-action-orientated [right-wing] movement’ (Rutkoff 1974: 587; see also Sternhell 1971).

Similarly, during the 1990s, New York saw ‘an unabated litany of crime and violence, drugs and unemployment, immigration and depravity’ (Smith 1996:211), which followed the recession of the late 1980s. At that time, unemployment and social malaise became a common and ‘real’ threat felt by members of the predominately white middle class. These social conditions bred a widespread and vengeful right-wing reaction from political elites to the liberalism of the 1970s and the remains of the Keynesian welfare state (Smith 1999: 196). Just as the sans-patrie were the scapegoats for the Ligue des Patriotes in late-19th-century France, the sans domicile fixe (the homeless) and other marginalized social groups represented scapegoats attacked by New York’s revanchists:

Revenge against minorities, the working class, women, environmental legislation, gays and lesbians, immigrants became the increasingly common denominator of public discourse. Attacks on affirmative action and immigration policy, street violence against gays and homeless people, feminist bashing and police campaigns against political correctness and multiculturalism were the most visible vehicles of this reaction (Smith 1996: 44-45).

However, urban revanchism is more than middle-class action against the homeless and other minorities chosen as scapegoats on a local scale. In the context of neoliberal globalization, it rather represents a reaction ‘spearheaded from the standpoint of white and middle-class interests against those people who, they feel, stole their world (and their power) from them’ (Smith 1998: 10). Revanchist strategies and rhetoric are by far not limited to New York and can now be observed, for instance, in Rotterdam (Uitermark et al. 2007), Glasgow (MacLeod 2002) or Los Angeles (DeVerteuil 2006). Swanson’s (2007) article is one of the first accounts that address revanchist gentrification in the Global South, outlining convincingly the proliferation of revanchist policy. Based on research in Quito and Guayaquil, Swanson investigated
how neoliberal urban policy, different from that of the North in terms of economic, political and social differences, reached Ecuador. She observed how beggars and street vendors in Guayaquil faced harsh sanctions when they operated in regenerated areas, and how the municipality, with advice from New York police commissioner William Bratton, adapted additional measures of street control such as zero tolerance policing and CTTV surveillance (Swanson 2007:712). What makes these policies particularly worrisome is the fact that most individuals considered to be ‘urban undesirables’ belong to marginalized indigenous communities and ‘revenge is being enacted in a particularly repressive and racialised form’ (725).

Having discussed the proliferation of gentrification in connection with ‘new-build gentrification’, ‘tourism gentrification’, ‘state-led gentrification’ and revanchist urban policy, in the remainder of this section I will first focus on how gentrification became ‘thoroughly generalized as an urban strategy’ (Smith 2002:427). I then review literature addressing gentrification in the Global South, with an emphasis on the occurrence of the process in the Middle East.

Gentrification Globalized

Until the 1990s, gentrification was considered to be a ‘sporadic, quaint, and local anomaly in the housing markets of some command-center cities’ (Smith 2002: 427). In the early 2000s, gentrification was no longer restricted to cities in the Global North but became a ‘crucial urban strategy’ (440) embedded in the context of the global advance of neoliberalism and can now be detected globally. This means that ‘the impulse behind gentrification became generalized; its incidence [was] global, and it [was] densely connected into the circuits of global capital and cultural circulation’ (427). Consequently, ‘we might think of this as gentrification generalized’ (440).

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8 Together with former New York major Rudolph W. Giuliani, William J. Bratton co-authored Police Strategy No. 5, which was ‘dedicated to "reclaiming the public spaces of New York”’ and, more than any other document, ‘was a founding statement of a fin-de-siecle American revanchism in the urban landscape’ (Smith 1998:2).
The sprawl of gentrification or gentrification-like phenomena was ‘reminiscent of earlier waves of colonial and mercantile expansion’ (Atkinson and Bridge 2005:2) and could be traced back to the fact that prominent centrally located neighbourhoods all over the world were now literally conquered by members of the middle and upper classes. Due to their ‘new class’ occupations and their cosmopolitanism, Atkinson and Bridge provocatively described gentrifiers as the new colonial elite (3). Almost a decade earlier, Smith compared this influx of affluent dwellers into working-class neighbourhoods with the advance of the frontier in the American West of the 19th century (Smith 1996:189). Thus, the gentrification frontier did not only advance towards an increasing number of working-class neighbourhoods – it also ‘cascaded down the urban hierarchies of regions within the urban north’ (Atkinson and Bridge 2005:2) and, eventually, worldwide. After the end of the Cold War, neoliberal globalization overran the countries of the former Eastern Bloc and moved on to the developing countries. The first stirrings of gentrification could be noted globally and, as Smith (2002:427) demonstrated, included ‘the rapidly growing metropolitan economies of Asia, Latin America, and (to a lesser extent) Africa, as much as the command centers of Europe, North America and Japan’.

However, most research on gentrification published before the mid-2000s reveals a common tendency to focus on case studies on Anglo-American or Western European contexts and, since the fall of the Iron Curtain, some examples from Eastern Europe (see also Harris 2008:2411). Also, the contributions in Atkinson and Bridge (2005) include numerous case studies on Western, mostly Anglo-American contexts, but only a few contributions from the BRIC states (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Many cities in the Global South still remain off the map: In this context, Harris (2008) identified three interconnected processes that explain why gentrification became more visible after the late 1980s: first, as outlined above, the fact that gentrification centrifugally spread away from the (Western) urban core towards the global peripheries; second, the process of gentrification has been experienced as a practice intertwined with the cosmopolitan lifestyle of transnational capitalist elites (see also Rofe 2003); third, ‘gentrification has been understood as an important part of “neo-liberalism”’ (Harris 2008:2409). Harris also emphasised the lack of comparative studies on gentrification
which include cities in the Global South (2008:2411) and, therefore, chose a comparative approach to highlight the historic and spatial characteristics of gentrification processes in London and Mumbai. Furthermore, he criticised the ‘Eurocentric framing of a global spread of gentrification’ (2407). Instead, he advocated both learning from case studies on the Global South and from studying the issue of agency in the production and legitimization of gentrification (2409), for instance by asking who is responsible for the proliferation of what Davidson and Lees depicted as ‘gentrification blue-print’ (2005:1167).

Lees (2012) addressed the lack of mutual engagement between the literature on comparative urbanism and the literature on gentrification. She pushed further on to advocate comparative gentrification research and suggested applying research agendas of comparative urbanism. Here, gentrification research ‘can learn from the new literature on comparative urbanism, in particular moving towards a postcolonial approach to comparativism’ (Lees 2012:3). In this sense the author urges future researchers to be aware of the parallel character of different forms of gentrification: ‘For example, in 2011 inner London is experiencing the typical first wave/pioneer sweat equity type of gentrification, alongside third wave, state-led new-build gentrification and stalled gentrification’ (Lees 2012: 4).

Like in the Global North, gentrification in the Global South materializes in the context of neoliberalism often in the forms of state-led gentrification or new-built gentrification. This raises the question of whether the proliferation of gentrification indeed follows a pattern that originates in the World Cities of the Global North and leads to the repetition, copying or borrowing of gentrification practices elsewhere. Lees suggests ‘a postcolonial perspective’ that ‘might help collapse (or prove?) the myth of the linear development of gentrification as travelling from the Global North to the Global South’ (2012:12).

Lately, the subject choice of case studies has indicated a hesitant widening of the scope of gentrification research which means that some studies have gone beyond the ‘classical examples’ and have started to unmask gentrification in cities all over the
globe. Since the late 1990s, Chinese cities – the business hub Shanghai in particular – have become focal points of gentrification research beyond the Global North (Wu 1997). Alterations shifting the country’s officially still socialist economy towards market orientation have been central research issues. In the context of Shanghai, Wu (2004) critically studied residential relocation as ‘the process of commodifying socialist tenancy, which involves the triangular interaction among the state, market and society [and, seems to resul in a] stronger constraint on residential relocation in (formerly) socialist settings’ (467f), which, as I will show later, is similar for the Damascene case. Meanwhile, much scholarly attention has been paid to large-scale real estate development projects in China (Yang and Chang 2007; He and Wu 2007; He 2007), with a focus on the dominant role of the state. This led He (2007) to define gentrification in Shanghai as ‘state-led’. Other studies based on research in China contributed to recent debates on new build gentrification (He 2010), commercial gentrification (Wang 2011) and linkages between tourism and gentrification (Gu and Ryan 2012). What makes case studies on gentrification in Chinese and other East Asian mega cities most striking is the vast number of individuals affected and the amount of money at stake. Despite India having the world’s second biggest population and numerous mega-cities such as Calcutta, Mumbai or Delhi, the country started to attract the attention of gentrification researchers only recently. Salient in the context of India, however, is the almost exclusionary focus on Mumbai (Whitehead and More 2007; Harris 2008, see above; special issue of City & Community (2009) on Chinese and Indian mega cities). Whitehead and More’s (2007) critical analysis of housing policies investigated how, in an attempt to (re)claim the core city for affluent user groups, the owners of Mumbai’s centrally located textile mills ‘shift[ed] from manufacturing to redevelopment of mill lands’ (2430). Furthermore, the authors pointed to the role of NGOs in the class struggle for privilege and influence (see Anjaria 2009 on middle-class activism in Mumbai).

In recent years, South Africa became another regional – though still under-researched – example of gentrification research in the Global South (e.g. Visser 2002; Lemanski 2007). Based on the redevelopment of central Cape Town, Visser and Kotze (2007) investigated how state intervention – such as, for instance, the introduction of central-
city improvement zones – fuelled gentrification. The authors criticised both a general lack of South African research on state-led urban regeneration policies (Visser and Kotze 2007:2566, 2569) and the fact that, due to a recent shift of focus towards the country’s townships, ‘large areas of post-apartheid cities have in fact become invisible to the scholarly gaze’ (2573). Hence, Visser and Kotze (2007:2589) emphasised the significance of ‘issues surrounding new-build gentrification […] to the South African context’, a finding which gains importance in cities throughout the Global South. Finally, the 2010 FIFA World Cup has been researched in relation to gentrification and its social impact on South African cities (e.g. Newton 2009; Steinbrink et al. 2011), similar to mega sports events elsewhere.9

Meanwhile, much research concerned with gentrification and its implications has been undertaken in Latin America, one of the world’s most urbanized regions. Jones and Varley (1999), who described their study on heritage led gentrification in Puebla, Mexico as ‘one of the first studies evaluating the experience of gentrification in a developing country’ (1547), pointed to various deficits of the then existing gentrification literature in regard to urban change in developing countries, such as in regard to ‘discourses of poverty, race, and heritage implicit in gentrification’ (1549). Furthermore, the authors criticised gentrification literature for focusing too much on ‘residence’.10 ‘We argue, then, that gentrification does not require the occupation of renovated properties by a new residential population, but involves the rehabilitation of deteriorated properties and a change in the social group using the property’ (Jones and Varley 1999:1548). In cities in developing countries, as I argue for the Damascene case, much property suitable for gentrification is located in historic centres. This made Jones and Varley (1999) assume a nexus between the ‘middle-class desires to recuperate “history”’ (1548; also Jager 1986; Shaw 2005) and gentrification.

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9 How the global phenomenon of gentrification related to international sports events has also been researched in other cities, for instance in Beijing (e.g. Zhang and Zhao 2009), London (e.g. Kennelly and Watt 2011) and Rio de Janeiro (e.g. Silvestre and de Oliveira 2012).

10 This was even before Hackworth (2002) and others included the more general notion of ‘use’ in definitions of gentrification.
Also with a focus on a historic neighbourhood in a Latin American city, Bellavista in Chile’s capital Santiago, Inzulza-Contardo (2012) outlined his concept of *latino gentrification*,

the replacement of the existing residential typology (one-, two- or three-storey terraced houses) by a new housing tendency (middle- and high-rise buildings), rather than the displacement of people of low income to the outskirts by people of higher income, or the return to the central areas of a middle class seeking to develop its artistic or cultural activities (Inzulza-Contardo 2012:17).

In Santiago’s gentrification process, which is significantly influenced by globalization,11 gentrifiers are often young professionals, a group Inzulza-Contardo (2011) portrays as ‘light-blue collar workers’ (10) and who ‘are tenants rather than managers’ (14). However, like gentrifiers elsewhere, these actors often conflict with the existing population and ‘may lack any local identity’ (Ward 2004 cited in Inzulza). Scrutinising working-class areas in central Santiago and referring to Smith’s (1979) rent gap theory, Lopez-Morales (2011) examined the increasing discrepancy between capitalized and potential ground rent. He detected the existence of two distinct forms of ground rent, ‘a lower one capitalized by current owner-occupiers and a higher one capitalized by the market agents of renewal’ (330). Furthermore, Inzulza-Contardo (2011:2) documents the coinage of indigenous terms such as ‘aristocratización’, ‘reconquista urbana’ and ‘elitización’, all signifying gentrification-like processes. Against this backdrop, Lopez-Morales (2011), who also investigated the role of the local state in gentrification, argued that in the Chilean capital gentrification ‘should not be related exclusively to social-spatial displacement, but to a form of social dispossession of the ground rent’ (331), that is to neighbourhoods in which no direct displacement could be observed but where local regulations inflicted restrictions on small-scale projects (353).

The fact that gentrification research has mostly steered clear of cities in Africa (see e.g. Visser (2002) and Visser and Kotze (2008) as well as Lemanski (2007) on South

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11 For example, in the form of ‘an urban lifestyle emulating Soho loft living [which] has been badly imitated in these neighbourhoods, with new housing projects based on foreign models of consumption, far from the urban lifestyle of Latin American reality’ (Inzulza-Contardo 2011:4).
Africa) as well as South (e.g. Harris 2008) and Central Asia\(^\text{12}\) does not necessarily mean that gentrification-like processes are less of an issue in these regions. The variety of places now affected by gentrification is considered here as evidence for gentrification having become a global phenomenon. In the following section, I discuss how gentrification evolves in the context of Middle Eastern cities, and how gentrification and related processes are dealt with in the literature on the Arab World.

**Gentrification in the Middle East**

This section aims at assessing the existing literature on gentrification and related phenomena in Middle Eastern cities. As there exists little research on gentrification in Damascus, lessons learnt from other Middle Eastern cities are particularly important in raising awareness of regional particularities and thus facilitating a better understanding of the Damascene case. Therefore, in addition to reviewing case studies from several Arab cities, attention will be paid to Turkey, a country that in recent years continuously extended its cultural, political and economic influence on and links with its Arab neighbours, especially Syria.

Uzun’s (2003) comparative study of gentrifying neighbourhoods in both the Turkish capital city Ankara and the country’s biggest city Istanbul triggered scholarly interest in gentrification in Turkey, particularly in metropolitan Istanbul. Islam (2005) identified three waves of gentrification, each one starting with a distinct dynamic. The first wave was informed by an environmental convenience, namely the proximity to the sea and a stock of historic terraced houses (127). During the second wave, which affected more centrally located quarters, intense cultural and leisure activities shaped the process (128). The third wave was dominated by institutional investment projects induced by neoliberal reform (129-130; see also Islam 2010). According to Islam (2005), gentrification in Istanbul, which originated in former minority neighbourhoods (see also Ergun 2004\(^\text{13}\)), started approximately 30 years later than in London and New

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\(^{12}\) See Koch (2010), who investigates urban development in Kazakhstan’s capital Astana. Even if she does not mention gentrification explicitly, her case study is reminiscent of state-led gentrification projects elsewhere.

\(^{13}\) See Mills (2010) for an in-depth analysis of urban change in Kuzguncuk, one of the first neighbourhoods affected by gentrification in Istanbul.
York, but other than its lower scale and differences in its form and actors involved, there is little difference between gentrification in Istanbul and in the global North (Islam 2005:134).

In one of the first articles on gentrification in the Arab World, Escher et al. (2001) investigated the influx of foreign homebuyers in the *medina* (old town) of Marrakech, which started in the middle of the 20th century and has seen a genuine boom since the late 1990s. The authors focused on the gentrifiers and their lifestyle and embraced gentrification as the saviour of the historic old town, which up to then had been threatened by decay. They identified tensions between the original residents and foreign newcomers in terms of lifestyle and labelled the increasing dominance of Western values as a neo-colonial practice. However, their analysis stops short of identifying these tensions as pressures of displacement and consequently as a causative factor in the displacement of the original residents. Drawing on the case of the Moroccan coastal town Essaouira, Bauer et al. (2006) investigated the transformation of the city’s cultural heritage into a cultural product and ‘stage’ for European second-home buyers, for whom ‘the variables “atmosphere and creativity” and “individual self-realization and social acceptance”’ (25) became the motivation for moving to Essaouira’s old town. Despite the fact that the authors referred to critical gentrification research (26) and recognized Essaouira’s exposure to gentrification (28), the issue of displacement remained unaddressed. Only recently, in an article on state involvement in the Bouregreg project, a large-scale urban development project in the Bouregreg Valley between the Moroccan capital Rabat and Salé, did Bogaert (2012) address the risk of displacement caused by gentrification in a Moroccan context.

Gentrification in the Egyptian capital Cairo takes place simultaneously in different neighbourhoods and in distinct forms. First, the historic old town has been affected by heritage and tourism gentrification (Sutton and Fahmi 2002); second, the former colonial city and its belle époque downtown experience ‘classic’ residential gentrification (Singerman and Amar 2006; Abaza 2011); and, finally, new-build gentrification is spurred by large-scale residential and commercial up-market development projects, many of which are situated on the desert fringes of the
metropolis and, though to a lesser extent, in more central locations (Abaza 2001; Kuppinger 2005). Whereas the new-built development projects ‘seem to be separate and disconnected, not only spatially but also conceptually, from most of the existing urban fabric’ (Kuppinger 2005:349), ‘re’-construction projects in the city’s core may include spontaneously settled areas and thus result in the direct displacement of poor residents (Fahmi and Sutton 2006:810). The above scholarly accounts share awareness of increasing social segregation in the Egyptian capital under neoliberalism (for a critical assessment of neoliberal urban development and state-involvement in the Jordanian capital Amman see Daher 2008 as well as Parker 2009).

Since the mid-1990s, research on urban development in the Lebanese capital Beirut has been shaped by a focus on the city’s post-civil-war reconstruction process and, in particular, on Solidere (Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction du centre-ville de Beyrouth), a private real estate company, which was founded in 1992 and has since been implementing the highly controversial redevelopment of downtown Beirut. The creation of a new upmarket city centre, which was fuelled by the investment of international capital, resulted in the displacement of numerous residents and was critically assessed (Schmid and Gebhardt 1999; Nagel 2000; 2002). However, it is only recently that the processes of neoliberal urban redevelopment in the Lebanese capital were explicitly related to the concepts of gentrification and ‘the right to the city’ (Fawaz 2009). Krijnen and Fawaz (2010) investigated how informal practices and ad hoc decisions had become the rule in decision making related to high-end development projects in neoliberal Beirut. Ross and Jamil (2011) critically assessed the real estate market, gentrification and displacement in the Ras Beirut neighbourhood in the period following the Israeli assault on Lebanon in July 2006. The authors focused on the investors and examined their motivations for capital investment in Beirut’s real estate at a time of political instability (22). They argued that gentrification in Beirut was intertwined with the neoliberalization of the city’s urban policy and that it could be brought to a halt only by removing housing from ‘the clenches of market-based commodication and exchange’ (28). Furthermore, the authors pointed out that ‘[t]he only market factor that has merely dampened rising housing prices in Beirut is the debilitating fear of renewed political violence’ (27). Nagel (2000), who researched
social segregation in Beirut along sectarian fault lines, felt it important to emphasise that ‘[e]thnicity and identity and, at times, ethnic violence are crucial components of urban development’ (229). Recent reports on urban warfare in Syrian cities make the Lebanese experience of the civil war and the years following the conflict a rather suitable lens through which to approach gentrification in the Syrian capital Damascus during and after the Syrian civil war.

In his study comparing the impact of globalization on the historic old cities of Marrakech and Damascus, which were both listed as world heritage sites by the UNESCO, Escher (2001) regarded the 1980s as the starting point of globalization-induced urban change, when a small number of historic buildings in Old Damascus were renovated (28). Renovating Old Damascus soon became a central subject in a number of studies on the Syrian capital. In ‘A New Old Damascus’, Salamandra (2004) investigated, but without directly referring to gentrification, how members of the bourgeoisie used the renovation and commercialization of Old Damascene property as a means of identity creation and social distinction. In the context of ‘revitalizing’ traditional courtyard houses, discourses dealing with the issue of tradition versus modernity play a crucial role (Totah 2006). In the case of the prominent market Suq al-Hamidiyya, incompatible ideas of modernity have resulted in a conflict between long-established traditional merchants and the local state (Totah 2009). The state, both local and central, has also played a dominant role in facilitating several large-scale luxury redevelopment projects in central as well as suburban settings (Vignal 2010; Goulden 2011). Once implemented, these mega-projects will, similarly to state-led new-build gentrification elsewhere, probably result in the displacement of previous poorer populations and will thereby create potential triggers for social conflict. Whereas many redevelopment projects in New Damascus, at the time of data collection in spring 2011, were still in the planning phase, residents of the old city had been facing the effects of gentrification for almost a decade.
1.2. Heritage

The relicts and events of the past are thus raw materials which are commodified for contemporary consumption. The two heritage domains are linked by their shared dependence on the conservation of past artefacts and the meanings with which these are endowed; it is the latter which generally constitute the broad arena of contestation (Graham et al. 2000:22).

This section aims at introducing the concept of heritage, with particular emphasis on the built heritage and its production. Whereas the first sub-section (1.2.1) discusses some abstract characteristics of heritage, a concept usually connected with the term inheritance (Nuryanti 1996:249), the second sub-section outlines its development since the late 1940s (1.2.2). Furthermore, in 1.2.2, overlaps between built heritage and gentrification are discussed as what has been labelled the heritage-gentrification-nexus (Shaw 2005).

1.2.1 Defining Heritage

Graham et al. (2000) characterize heritage as ‘using the past as a resource for the present’ (22) economically in social and political terms as well as in relation to identity formation. Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary defines heritage as ‘valued objects and qualities such as historic buildings and cultural traditions that have been passed down from previous generations’. Built heritage is commonly regarded as one form of cultural heritage (Nuryanti 1996) which, according to the UNESCO (1972), comprises monuments, groups of buildings and sites. In a more general sense, Graham et al. (2000:17) define heritage as the ‘part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, be they economic, political, or social’. The authors continue to explain heritage as

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14For the purposes of this Convention, the following shall be considered as "cultural heritage": monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view’ (UNESCO 1972; Article 1).
an economic resource, one exploited everywhere as a primary component of strategies to promote tourism, economic development and rural and urban regeneration. But heritage also helps define the meanings of culture and power and is a political resource; and thus possesses a crucial socio-political function. Consequently, it is accompanied by an often bewildering array of identifications and potential conflicts, not least when heritage places and objects are involved in issues of legitimization of power structures (Graham et al. 2000:17).

Herzfeld (2010:259), who refers to heritage as a concept which is ‘grounded in culturally specific ideologies of kinship, residence, and property’ adds to the discussion by reasoning that universalizing the nation-state ‘has given those concepts globally hegemonic power’. Consequently, heritage has played a vital role in the creation and solidification of a national identity (259), a generalized process which has been observable, for example, in Syria since the emergence of Arab nationalism in the late 19th century. For the ruling elite, ‘the past validates the present by conveying an idea of timeless values and unbroken lineages and through restoring lost or subverted values’ (Graham et al. 2000:19). In regard to built heritage in cities all over the world, it is evident that – since the advance of international tourism in particular – the boundaries between political and economic interests cannot be kept apart clearly. Later in this chapter, I will illustrate how the built heritage of Old Damascus is used by different private and institutional stakeholders as a resource to attain their political, social and economic goals. In this sense, Graham et al. (2000:22) suggest depicting heritage ‘as a duality – a resource of economic and cultural capital’. Both types of capital are assets which Bourdieu (1984) associates with the quest of the middle classes for social distinction. Regarding heritage conservation, Tunbridge (1984), too, detects a significant class dimension. He stresses that, in western countries, elite groups have played an active role in promoting heritage conservation, and that this has brought about ‘a double bias against the poorer classes’ (Tunbridge 1984:172). Undesired neighbourhoods have been demolished under the label of ‘slum clearance’, whereas more prestigious quarters and quarters meeting the taste of the middle classes have become subject to gentrification. Tunbridge continues that ‘[t]oo often an embarrassing discord exists between heritage (elite-defined) conservation and community conservation’ (172). Likewise, Graham et al. (2000) recall:
Recognition of the relicts of the past as heritage almost invariably began at the instigation of a social elite and commonly designated the grand and spectacular, including the buildings and artefacts most closely identified with that self-same elite. In terms of legitimation, such heritage could be interpreted as one means of perpetuating elitist control and power, if not always with conscious intent (42).

According to Howard (2003:4), it is one of the characteristic qualities of heritage that it ‘benefits someone, and usually disadvantages someone else’. Therefore, he concludes that ‘so long as heritage can be used for profit or to produce group pride or identity, or to subjugate or exclude someone else, then someone is going to use it’ (6). This assertion is something that will be investigated in the context of Old Damascus in chapter 5. I conclude this section by assessing both the motivations of nation-states all over the world for preserving built heritage and the role that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) plays in this process.

1.2.2 A Short History of Heritage and the ‘Heritage-Gentrification-Nexus’

After World War II, which caused an irreversible destruction of cultural heritage worldwide, ‘the cultural heritage of all mankind’ (The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1954) became an ideal recognised by nation-states as well as international institutions:

> The potential of such a common heritage lies primarily in its reinforcement of concepts of human equality, common destiny, shared stewardship of the Earth, optimal use of scares natural resources, and the consequent imperative of peaceful coexistence (Graham et al. 2000:236).

Contributing to worldwide peace and security by advancing cooperation among the member states ‘through education, science and culture’ (UNESCO 1945) is the main purpose of UNESCO, which was founded in 1945. UNESCO’s responsibilities in terms of heritage conservation were determined in 1972, when the General Conference of the organization adopted the Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which specifies, first, the type of heritage sites that qualify to be registered on the World Heritage List; second, the circumstances under which international financial assistance may be provided by the World Heritage Fund; and, finally, the duties of signatory states (UNESCO 1972):
By signing the Convention, each country pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage sites situated on its territory, but also to protect its national heritage. The States Parties are encouraged to [...] set up staff and services at their sites, undertake scientific and technical conservation research and adopt measures which give this heritage a function in the day-to-day life of the community (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1992-2013).

So, which vision(s) of global heritage are protected by UNESCO and the nation-states? Herzfeld (2010:262) rightly warns that in order to steer clear of Eurocentrism, ‘the roots of the concept of heritage in specifically Western notions of inheritance and kinship’ should not be forgotten. The author continues that ‘[t]he universalizing of Western concepts has not ceased simply because some anthropologists and others object to it’ (Herzfeld 2010:262). Similarly, Pendlebury et al. (2010:350) point to conflicting interests between state agencies trying to generate economic profit from heritage and what they term ‘the preservationist ethos of WHS designation’. In respect of these contradictory approaches to heritage, which can also be perceived in the Damascene case, it is important to emphasise that it is ultimately the duty of a nation-state to identify and nominate potential heritage sites on its territory (UNESCO 1972, Art 3; Pendlebury et al. 2009:349). From the perspective of a nation-state, both defining and using a specific heritage offer the opportunity for the state to forge a national identity and to legitimize itself (Graham et al. 2000: 23). As is pointed out earlier in this section regarding the social elite, issues of legitimacy are equally important for the political elites – and particularly so in authoritarian states such as Syria (see also chapters 3 and 6). Gentrification is a case in point: the built heritage of Old Damascus has been claimed, most visibly and in addition to the social and political elite, by different actors from various economic sectors such as tourism and real estate. Keeping this in mind, the following paragraphs explore the social and economic aspects of heritage conservation and their interconnectedness with the current gentrification process.

Herzfeld (2010:259) argues:

The impulse to preserve, the desire to render comfortable, and the sheer need of a place to serve as home are three human trajectories that converge, sometimes with tragic consequences, wherever relatively poor people live
in areas earmarked for "urban improvement"—a euphemism [...] for the disruptive force of gentrification.

The overlap between gentrification and heritage, which Shaw (2005:59) called the ‘heritage-gentrification nexus’, is striking: both gentrification and heritage are, first, mainly consumed by the middle classes; second, shaped by socio-cultural processes that privilege and dispossess; and, third, include notions of nostalgia (Tunbridge 1984:172; Graham et al. 2000:42; Shaw 2005:59). ‘Traditionally controlled by the well-born and the well-off, heritage remains more an elite than a folk domain’ (Lowenthal 2004:14). Furthermore, and this again underscores the importance of the heritage-gentrification nexus in centrally located old-city areas, ‘[p]reserving old houses is a serious threat to working-class or ethnic neighbourhoods that risk being gentrified’ (21).

Until recently, the ruling elites in the West consigned poorer districts to the bulldozer in the name of slum clearance or freeway construction. When the prevailing view subsequently deemed vernacular architecture and values worthy of conservation, the poor suffered dispossession by gentrification from those run-down areas that became fashionable (Tunbridge 1984:172).

Similar processes (e.g. as discussed above for Western cities) could be observed in pre-war Damascus. For this reason, the following chapters will also look at overlaps between gentrification and heritage in terms of practices, actors and motivations and will relate the interconnectedness between the elite and the regime in the domains of heritage and gentrification to the resilience of authoritarianism in Syria.

1.3 Authoritarian Resilience

In 1964, the year in which Glass coined the term gentrification Linz published his much cited systematic analysis of authoritarian regimes, which he defined as:

political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive or intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones (Linz 1964:255, cited in Linz 2000).
During the 1960s and 1970s, prompted by the tragic events of the history of 20th-century Europe, namely the Third Reich and Fascism as well as the Cold War, political science research tended to compare and categorize a variety of political systems. Therefore, non-democratic regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia-Pacific and post-colonial Africa were at the centre of interest. Furthermore, it became clear that numerous political systems could be assigned to neither democratic nor totalitarian systems. In this context, Linz’s (1964/2000) typology of authoritarian regimes distinguished seven types of political regimes from totalitarianism to full democracy. What authoritarian regimes have in common is the fact that they ‘are inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, over-centralization of decision making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms’ (Nathan 2003:6) as they lack the direct participation of and legitimation by the people.

It is not my aim here to review the body of literature on authoritarian regimes. However, it is important to note that, in the years before the end of the Cold War, research on authoritarian regimes experienced a conspicuous temporary stagnation. Around the same time, encouraged by regime changes in Southern Europe and Latin America from the 1970s onwards, research on democratization became dominant in comparative politics. After the end of the Cold War, the trend of democratization was further fuelled by the transition of former communist states to democracies and was described by Huntington (1991:21) as the ‘Third Wave of Democratization’:

‘[t]he movement toward democracy seemed to take on the character of an almost irresistible global tide moving on from one triumph to the next’. The supposed transition of authoritarian regimes to democracy was celebrated by Western officials, politicians and numerous NGOs dedicated to the promotion of democracy, particularly in the US.

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15 Linz (2000:175) distinguishes the following forms of authoritarian regimes: bureaucratic-military authoritarian regimes, organic statism, mobilizational authoritarian regimes in postdemocratic societies; post-independence mobilizational authoritarian regimes; racial and ethnic ‘democracies’; ‘defective’ and ‘pretotalitarian’ political situations and regimes; post-totalitarian authoritarian regimes.

16 Huntington (1991) distinguishes three waves of democratization: ‘The first wave of democratization […] had its roots in the American and French revolutions’ (16). ‘Starting in World War II a second, short wave of democratization occurred. Allied occupation promoted inauguration of democratic institutions in West Germany, Italy, Austria, Japan and South Korea, while Soviet pressure snuffed out incipient democracy in Czechoslovakia and Hungary’ (18). ‘The third wave of democratization […]: In the fifteen years that followed the end of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, democratic regimes replaced authoritarian ones in approximately thirty countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America’ (21).
Nevertheless, some scholars remained sceptical regarding the validity of the ‘transition paradigm’ (Carothers 2002), according to which all authoritarian states were considered to be ‘qualified democracies’ undergoing a transition towards full democracy (e.g. Carothers 2002; Bellin 2004; Pratt 2007; Snyder 2006).

Contrary to expectations, numerous authoritarian regimes across the globe seemed to remain resilient towards democratization. Due to this ‘authoritarian resilience’ (Nathan 2003), or ‘authoritarian persistence’ (Carothers 2002), it was argued that ‘it [was] time to recognize that the transition paradigm [had] outlived its usefulness and to look for a better lens’ (6). During the mid-1990s, research on authoritarianism in the Middle East, a region where authoritarian regimes proved to be particularly robust vis-à-vis democratization (Bellin 2004), had a widespread focus on ‘what did not exist, instead of what was actually going on in the Arab world’ (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004:371). In the following years, however, there was a change of perspective and the result was a veritable ‘renaissance in the study of authoritarianism’ (Bank 2009). Focussing on ‘regime institutionalization’ Nathan (2003) investigated how China’s authoritarian regime bypassed the above-mentioned traditional weaknesses of authoritarian regimes and, instead, remained stable. Geddes (1999: 121) classified different types of authoritarian regimes as ‘personalist, military, single-party, or amalgams of the pure types’ and compared them based on their durability (see also table in Geddes 1999: 133). Hadenius and Teorell (2007), tried to grasp the whole range of authoritarian regimes by differentiating three generic types: monarchies, electoral and military regimes. Differences emerge, for example, regarding the base of power. In monarchies, power is inherited. In contrast, the use of physical violence (or the sheer ability to do so) is the origin of power for military regimes, whereas elections, not necessarily free and fair, constitute legitimacy for electoral regimes (Köllner 2008:356). Finally, Snyder (2006), even though he researched elections himself, observed critically that too much research on

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17 Bellin reminds that ‘[T]he exceptionalism of the Middle East and North Africa lies not so much in absent prerequisites of democracy as in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism and especially a robust and politically tenacious coercive apparatus. Some conditions responsible for the robustness of this authoritarianism are exceptional to the Middle East and North Africa; others are not’ (2004:152).
authoritarianism was devoted to the role of elections. Therefore, he formulated the following set of general ’extra-electoral’ questions for authoritarianism research:

‘(1) Who rules? Party elites, a personal leader, the military, or the clergy? (2) How do rulers rule? By means of patron-client networks, ethnic ties, or a mass-based party? (3) Why do rulers rule? Out of greed, ethnic hatred, or a commitment to a religion or ideology? And (4) How much do rulers rule? That is, does anybody really rule and, if so to what extent?’ (Snyder 2006: 220).

In the face of permanent internal and external contestation, non-democratic regimes worldwide managed to remain resilient by developing diverse coping strategies, and particularly so in the Middle East. Regarding Western demands for democratization, it is argued that ‘U.S. conceptions of Arab authoritarianism and U.S. strategies for promoting democratic reform have remained largely unchanged’ (Heydemann 2007:VII), whereas Arab regimes developed increasing flexibility in order to cope with international and domestic challenges. Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004) observe a downright ‘“pool” of strategies that Arab authoritarian leaders employ for the purpose of regime maintenance […] and] that some of them [strategies] are more important in that they have been selected more often and by more leaders than others’ (375). They investigate five strategies of adaptation\(^{18}\) which consist of ‘alterations to the polities themselves (structures), to the mechanisms according to which they work (procedures), and to the composition of socio-political elites’ (375f). Similarly, Heydemann (2007) establishes a new model of authoritarian governance which he calls ‘authoritarian upgrading’. Authoritarian upgrading is a new model of authoritarian governance with regimes ‘re-organizing strategies of governance to adjust to new global, regional, and domestic circumstances’ (Heydemann 2007:vii), e.g. in the political and economic realm. ‘In doing so, [regimes] minimize political constraints stemming from increased social participation and maximize their relative autonomy from society’s less supportive sectors (Pierret and Selvik 2009:597). Heydemann (2007:5) identifies five defining elements of authoritarian upgrading: ‘1.

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\(^{18}\) Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004:376) distinguish and point to diverse interlinkages between the following policies: ‘1. Structures of legitimacy and strategies of legitimation. 2. Elite change: adapting elites to a changed political and economic environment. 3. “Imitative” institution building: establishing Western-style institutions. 4. Co-optation: restricting populism and widening the regime’s power base. 5. External influences: transforming constraints into opportunities’.
Appropriating and containing civil societies; 2. Managing political contestation; 3. Capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms; 4. Controlling new communications technologies; 5. Diversifying international linkages’. The author adds that ‘all of these elements are evident in varying combinations in major Arab states […] and] elements of these features are ubiquitous throughout the Arab world, although the particular mix differs from case to case’ (Heydemann 2007:5). Domestically, authoritarian regimes could choose from the first four of these upgrading strategies, the first three of which are intertwined with another practice commonly used by authoritarian regimes: the co-optation of new clients. Co-optation functions as a technique to silence potential dissent and preserve system stability. ‘Non-elected outsiders are ‘co-opted’ by being given formal or informal power on the grounds of their élite status, specialist knowledge, or potential ability to threaten essential […] goals’ (Marshall 1998 cited in Sheng 2009:71).

When confronted with external pressures for neoliberal reform, leftist authoritarian regimes such as for example Syria tend to broaden their formerly populist constituency by co-opting businesspeople and other members of the bourgeoisie instead of workers and peasants, who have been crucial for the regimes’ legitimacy (Hinnebusch 1995; 2001; King 2009:24-25). In these formerly populist authoritarian states, regimes choose to co-opt domestic capitalists by creating new opportunities for private investment, including, as will be shown in this thesis, the production of urban spaces for a cosmopolitan capitalist lifestyle. This illustrates that:

what counts is not the attitude of the lower-classes since the point of all capitalist societies has been to exploit them, but rather the ability of the leaders to persuade those in mid-level positions--third-echelon bureaucrats, regional chieftains, and the like--that it is in their interest for the present state of things to continue (Portes 1978:377, on Brazil).

The attempts of authoritarian regimes to develop sophisticated forms of power solidification became central in research on authoritarian regimes (see e.g. the special issue of The Journal of Comparative Politics, Vol. 36, No. 2, Jan., 2004; Pratt 2007;

19 Heydemann (2007:5) mentions the ‘diversification of international linkages’ as a fifth strategy which affects the political economy of a regime internationally.
20 For a discussion of the transition from populist to post-populist authoritarianism in Syria see chapter 2.3.1.
Posusney 2004; King 2009). Until the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in the autumn of 2010, authoritarianism in the Middle East seemed to be ‘stronger, more flexible, and more resilient than ever’ (Heydemann 2007:VII). Since late 2010, authoritarian regimes throughout the Arab World have been confronted by popular uprisings which call into question their legitimacy – and thus their upgrading efforts in recent years. Uncountable titles dealing with the ‘Arab Spring’ have been published and others will certainly follow. Several articles explicitly address the interrelation between the current upheavals and authoritarian resilience, first, analysing the roots of the ‘Arab Spring’, which are widely seen as the direct result of neo-liberal reforms21 (Teti and Gervasio 2011); second, systematically evaluating individual regimes (see e.g. Joya 2011 on Egypt; Hinnebusch 2012 on current challenges to authoritarian rule in Syria; Durac 2012 on Yemen); and, finally, assessing how authoritarian regimes react to the unpredicted threat of popular contestation (Heydemann and Leenders 2011).

1.4 Chapter Summary

By reviewing literature on gentrification, heritage and authoritarian resilience, this chapter has set out the theoretical context of the following analysis. The review reveals a set of theoretical overlaps between the concepts which, for a number of reasons, are worth addressing. First, in both contemporary gentrification and authoritarian resilience, the state plays an important role. Second, gentrification and authoritarian resilience are often shaped by and can be directly linked to the proliferation of neoliberal policy. Third, both processes reveal themselves as exclusive practices and serve the interests of affluent members of the middle or upper classes. As demonstrated above, the same can be said of heritage conservation. Whereas gentrification includes or excludes according to income and lifestyle, authoritarian upgrading does so by granting or denying political and economic privileges. Finally, gentrification and persistent authoritarianism have the potential to threaten the livelihoods of vulnerable

21 ‘Politically, liberalization without democratization simply marginalizes those it avowedly empowers: their increasing frustration cannot come as a surprise. Economically, when liberalization leads to the emergence of monopolistic or oligopolistic market forces, with little regard for a more even wealth distribution, such reforms increase citizens’ sense of alienation from the state, further undermining the regime’s residual legitimacy’ (Teti and Gervasio 2011:322).
individuals and communities, such as, for instance, original residents of a quarter now subject to gentrification or politically unwanted market participants. The overlaps identified will function as starting points for analysing gentrification under authoritarian rule in the Syrian capital Damascus both in terms of agency (who are the profiteers/victims) and the role of the state. It is, therefore, worthwhile to ask: To what extent does the regime use gentrification as a tool for solidifying its power (intentionally or by co-incidence), for instance by granting loyal investors access to gentrification? Furthermore, to what extent does the availability of landscapes of consumption such as a gentrified Old Damascus indirectly lull the willingness of the broader middle classes to question the legitimacy of the regime? This will be addressed in the following chapters (see figures 2 and 3).
Figure 2: Gentrification, Urban Heritage and Authoritarian Resilience: Connections and Potential for Social Conflict
Figure 3: Gentrification, Urban Heritage and Authoritarian Resilience: Production, Consumption and Class Dimensions
During an informal chat in a pub in early 2011, when the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt were just about to fall, one of my initial contacts, a well-connected political consultant, speculated that if the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ reached Syria, the world would see a long and bloody sectarian war with a potential to ignite not only the country, but the entire region, too. I pushed this fatal prophecy to the back of my mind and travelled to Syria, assuming that I would be able to conduct my fieldwork as planned. At the time of planning this PhD project in late 2008 and early 2009, Western states had just ended isolating Syria and, instead, paid court to president Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, the international travel press praised Syria as a virgin territory waiting to be discovered by affluent tourists. This was the context in which gentrification gained momentum and the time when the first signs of the process could be perceived in the Syrian capital Damascus; and it was the context in which this study was planned to be conducted. After a three-week stay in the Syrian capital aiming at conducting a pilot study in May 2010, I arrived in Damascus mid-March 2011, only a few days after the first protests took place in Syria, which was not what I had anticipated. Events on the ground (i.e. demonstrations in Damascus, an increasingly open presence of the security forces and a generally tense atmosphere in the previously buoyant city) made me reconsider the words of my informant. From mid-March 2011 onwards, demonstrations all over Syria were quelled by regime forces using live ammunition, resulting in a growing number of casualties. The news of regime brutality, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s speech on 30th March 2011, in which he blamed ‘foreign conspirators’ for the uprising, as well as travel warnings issued by several Western embassies made me realize that it would be impossible to continue fieldwork as planned. The crisis has had a significant impact not only on conducting

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22 After a period of Western hostility following the US invasion of Syria’s neighbour Iraq in 2003 and the assassination of Lebanon’s Prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, French president Sarkozy broke Syria’s isolation by inviting al-Asad to the launch of the European-Mediterranean union; other Western politicians followed (Hinnebusch 2010:20).

fieldwork in Damascus as I finally had to leave Syria at the end of April 2011, but also on the processes of data analysis and writing up.

In the following section (2.1), I deal with the collection of data through conducting interviews. The first sub-section addresses issues of access to the field, such as gatekeepers and sampling. Furthermore, it includes a brief presentation of the sample (see the list of interviewees, appendix 1). Based on my experience in the field, the second sub-section is dedicated to the interview encounters. It discusses different aspects of interviewing as a research method, as well as the researcher’s positionality. In section 2.2, I discuss both other sources of data and the chosen approach to data analysis. Attention is paid to the decisions made about transcribing, coding and reporting the results. Ethical considerations are discussed in section 2.3, whereas the last section (2.4) scrutinizes how the current crisis determined research on urban change in a city on the brink of war, although the main focus of this thesis is on the years preceding the current events in Syria.

2.1. Data Collection

Interviewing is usually a qualitative exercise aimed at teasing out the deeper well-springs of meaning with which attributes, attitudes and behaviour are endowed (Robson 2011:278).

From the beginning of the research project, it was clear that resources – both in terms of time and money – were limited, which rendered a questionnaire-based survey unfeasible. More importantly, the issues of gentrification and especially of authoritarian rule in Old Damascus seemed to be best approached in a more cautious/informal way, with a focus on people’s personal experiences, assessments and opinions. To do justice to the informants and their stories, and to ‘give an authentic insight into [their] experiences’ (Silverman 1993:91), I chose a non-standardized, flexible approach based on semi-structured interviews. Consequently, 29 interviews, most of them conducted in March and April 2011, represented the primary source of data for my thesis (see appendices 1 and 2 for a coded list of interviewees and the interview guide).

Due to its relatively open framework – an interview can be seen as a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Webb and Webb 1932:130) – semi-structured interviewing enables
‘interviewees to construct their own accounts of their experiences by describing and explaining their lives in their own words’ (Valentine 1997:111). Furthermore, interviews are flexible and facilitate improvisation by both respondent and researcher. ‘Go[ing] back over the same ground, [and] asking the same question in different ways’ (Valentine 197:111.) helps the researcher to investigate particularly interesting or previously unanticipated aspects of the subject under study. An inductive research design that brings new issues or points of view related to a research project to the attention of the researcher is particularly helpful in under-researched fields like gentrification in the Syrian capital or in other contexts dominated by informal policies.

2.1.1 Entering the Field and Sampling Strategies

The aim of qualitative interview research is not to be representative in a statistical sense; instead, the choice of interviewees is intended to create a rather illustrative sample. Consequently, the selection of interviewees entails contacting individuals ‘who are likely to have the desired knowledge, experiences or positionings, and who may be willing to divulge that knowledge to the interviewer’ (Cloke et al. 2008:156). This thesis deals with three key concepts or fields of interest: gentrification, heritage and authoritarianism (its resilience and upgrading in particular). Due to the repressive nature of the authoritarian state in Syria, asking explicit questions about the authoritarian state and its policies was considered unfeasible as discussing regime politics in a critical manner would create unforeseeable risks for both interviewees and researcher. Keeping this in mind, I decided to make gentrification – though the ‘dirty word’ (Smith 1996) itself was not mentioned – the main topic of the interview encounters by addressing the physical and social transformations affecting Old Damascus since the (late) 1990s. Consequently, emphasis was put on identifying individuals who were likely to be willing to share their views on, and experiences of, urban change in Old Damascus and gentrification in particular. With regard to designing research projects dealing with gentrification, Smith (1979:540) recalls that ‘[t]o explain gentrification according to the gentrifier’s actions alone, while ignoring the role of builders, developers, landlords, mortgage lenders, government agencies, real estate agents, and tenants, is excessively narrow’. Bearing this in mind, in the sample I included predominantly producers of gentrification, both Syrian and foreign, such as architects, urban planners,
businesspersons, investors and officials. Most interviewees were chosen because of their professional involvement in the processes of gentrification and (heritage) preservation. However, like every human being, interviewees, too, possess multiple identities. Therefore, individual interviewees could give valuable insights into the life and world of different identity groups. For example, an architect employed by the local administration could – in addition to her identity as a professional – also have an identity as a Damascene, as a Sunni-Muslim and/or as a female member of the country’s rising upper-middle class.

In order to obtain access to potential interviewees, initial contacts were identified by drawing on the help of, first, the Atelier du Vieux Damas, a department of the IfPO (Institute français du Proche Orient) involved, among other things, in the documentation of historic property and renovation projects in (Old) Damascus; second, a well-connected Syrian political consultant who supplied me with valuable contact data; and, finally, my own contacts from a previous research project in Damascus, who proved to be particularly helpful for identifying interviewees in the early stage of my fieldwork. Some of these contacts played the role of gatekeepers to an institution or to a particular neighbourhood, whereas others acted as intermediaries. Caution is particularly necessary when gatekeepers try to control the researcher’s access to potential interviewees by either denying or providing contact data to the researcher of individuals considered particularly important or helpful by the gatekeepers (Cloke et al. 2008; likewise Robson 2011:212). In order to identify further potential interviewees, I resorted to ‘snowballing’, that is to following up contacts recommended by interviewees themselves (Blaikie 2009:179). The strength of this approach is that it facilitates trust among the participants – a circumstance I became aware of when several interviewees wanted to know who had provided me with their contact data. Furthermore, snowball sampling allows for identifying interviewees who share

24 Smith’s (1979) original list also mentioned tenants; however, due limited access resulting from the evolving crisis, I abstained from their inclusion.
25 In spring 2006 I spent two months in the Syrian capital in order to conduct fieldwork for my M.A. dissertation. The research focused on Arabic teaching for foreigners as a vulnerable source of income. It included interviews with Arabic teachers and officials at Syrian educational institutions as well as at the Institut français du Proche Orient (IfPO) and the Goethe Institute.
26 Gatekeepers are ‘those individuals in an organization that have the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purpose of research’ (Burgess 1984:48, cited in Valentine 1997).
27 ‘As the term implies, through this method, recruiting gains momentum or ‘snowballs’ as the researcher builds up layers of contacts’ (Valentine 1997:116).
particular knowledge (Valentine 1997), as for instance architects and entrepreneurs involved in transforming traditional Old Damascene courtyard houses into restaurants or boutique hotels. As interviewees tend to ‘pass the researcher’ to like-minded individuals (Cloke et al. 2008:156), I used several initial contacts as starting points for snowballing. On the one hand, this procedure helped to identify and select interviewees from a variety of backgrounds. On the other hand, the fact that certain individuals were recommended by several respondents as particularly important for my research project enabled me to identify a small number of key players in the Old Damascene gentrification process. For instance, in a number of encounters, I was told to get in touch with the owner of the first eastern-themed restaurant, the manager of the first boutique hotel in the old city as well as with the famous sculptor who was said to have opened the first artist’s workshop in the Jewish quarter. Moreover, time after time the media – both domestic and international – celebrated the same individuals and their projects as pioneers of and models for the ‘revitalisation’ of Old Damascus. It is unlikely that these individuals’ frequent appearances in the media remained unnoticed by the Syrian authorities. Based on several interviews, I would argue that the state chose loyal citizens to act as figureheads of urban development (i.e. gentrification), who were commissioned to speak to the media (and to foreign researchers) and thus spread a specific regime-approved version of urban change (see chapter 6).

This study, as mentioned above, is mainly based on the records of 29 interview encounters and a number of informal conversations with producers of gentrification and other professional actors willing to share their personal insights and experiences of recent transformations of the built environment in Old Damascus. I conducted 11 interviews with architects and urban planners working both in the private and public sectors who – in one way or another – were involved in the transformation of Old Damascus. Owners and managers of boutique hotels and guesthouses in the old city were another important group of respondents (8) willing to share their knowledge of the economic aspect of gentrifying Old Damascus and opening it for international

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28 Most interviewees were in their 40s and 50s, the others older or younger in equal proportion. Little more than a third of the respondents (10 out of 29) were female. Most interviews, 20 out of 29, were conducted in the course of my main stay in Damascus in March and April 2011 (see separate section on the implications of the Syrian crisis for the research process). Most other encounters took place during a pilot study in May 2010 (6). 19 interviews were digitally recorded, whereas written notes kept track of the information gathered in the other encounters. One interview was conducted via a series of emails.
tourism. I also had the chance to meet four artists whose workshops were located in the Jewish quarter, which, since the early 2000s, has been transforming into an artists’ quarter. Smith’s list of producers of gentrification also contains the category ‘officials’ (1979:540). My sample includes eight ‘officials’, most of them architects employed, for instance, by the local administration, the Ministries of Tourism and Antiquities, the joint European-Syrian MAM Programme and the IfPO (see figure 7). Initially, I planned to consult academics from Damascene universities in order to broaden my understanding of gentrification in the Syrian capital. This would certainly have brought me in contact with fellow Syrian students. However, when the uprising began and fights between students supporting the opposition and others loyal to the regime erupted, universities came under even tighter government control. Without a written invitation approved by the security services, passing the armed guards at the campus gates would not have been possible. With the website of Damascus University permanently ‘under construction’, identifying potential respondents among the staff seemed at first unfeasible. However, Syrian professionals often held several positions at different public institutions or in the private sector at the same time. Therefore, even without actively targeting university staff, I was able to include in the sample four faculty members at Damascus University involved in the ‘rehabilitation’ of Old Damascus, among them a professor at the Faculty of Architecture and a lecturer in archaeology.29 Other respondents whom I initially selected based on their professional background turned out to be former or current residents of gentrifying neighbourhoods. Asking these individuals to elaborate on how they experienced physical and social transformations in their quarters resulted in a number of insightful accounts (see chapters 4 and 5).

2.1.2 The Interview Encounters

Knowledge obtained from interview encounters is ‘co-constructed’ (Cloke et al. 2008:129) or ‘created “inter” the point of view of the interviewer and the interviewee [thus, interviews can be understood as] a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest’ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:123). This idea of partnership is

29 All four put me in contact with some of their students. However, due to the changing political situation and my hasty return to Europe, this did not result in further interview encounters.
well captured by the German term for interviewee, Interviewpartner (masc.) or Interviewpartnerin (fem.). Being reflexive and aware of the positionality of both researcher and interviewee is vital throughout the research process, but particularly in interviewing. For the researcher, this means reflecting on who he or she is and how his or her own identity, meaning socio-cultural background, gender, age, etc., may be perceived by the participants and thus impact on the interview encounter and content. My own positionality as a young male German researcher with a middle-class background certainly influenced the way I was perceived by my interviewees and what information they were willing to share with me. Being a German national turned out to be useful as Germany – in contrast to other Western nations – did not have a long colonial history in the Levant. Since the 1990s, GIZ\(^{30}\) (formerly GTZ) and Syrian partners have successfully cooperated in the rehabilitation of the old city of Aleppo,\(^{31}\) and during the late 2000s German assistance was extended to Old Damascus\(^{32}\) – a process many respondents were well aware of or even involved in. Contrary to my expectations because of Syria’s rather traditional (Muslim) society, being a male researcher seemed to be less of an issue. Apart from one encounter with an architect of my own age who made sure that the door of her office remained open throughout our meeting, interviews with female participants did not differ significantly from those with male individuals. Older interviewees in particular felt invited by my younger age to teach me about ‘how things in Syria really are’. Meanwhile, the fact that I am aspiring to get a doctoral degree positioned me on partially common ground with the mostly upper middle-class respondents, most of whom held a university degree, many from a Western university.\(^{33}\)

Both my positionality, which also includes the fact that I have spent most of my life in secular, democratic and capitalist European countries, and my limited knowledge of Arabic made me, at first glance, an outsider (i.e. a foreign geographer interested in urban change in the Syrian capital Damascus). It is often assumed that ‘[i]nsiders, researchers who study a group to whom they belong, have an advantage because they

\(^{30}\) German International Cooperation
\(^{33}\) As I had to leave Syria earlier than planned, only a few interviews were conducted with former residents. Therefore, it was not clear to what extent my own social background would have influenced encounters with respondents from more traditional or working class backgrounds.
are able to use their knowledge of the group to gain more intimate insights into their opinions’ (Mullings 1999:340). This appears to mean that outsiders conducting research in a foreign setting are somehow considered to be disadvantaged when it comes, for instance, to understanding cultural circumstances. For Herod (1999), this argument has two important consequences:

First, in its extreme articulation it may lead us down the path of reserving knowledge for particular people […]. Second, it assumes a positivist notion of knowledge in which the “insider” interviewer is seen to have a closer, more direct, and hence in some way “truer” access to knowledge […]. It assumes that the “insider” naturally will produce an interpretation which is more “correct” in some absolute way than will the “outsider”… (Herod 1999:314).

On the other hand, it is argued that outsiders are considered to be rather ‘neutral’ (Fonow and Cook 1991, cited in Mullings 1999) and ‘to have a greater degree of objectivity and ability to observe behaviors without distorting their meanings’ (Mullings 1999:340). Furthermore, regarding fieldwork on political elites in the Middle East, el-Husseini observes that outsiders ‘[tend] to be received more readily’ (el-Husseini 2003:613). In my experience, gained during several stays in Damascus, respondents tend to condone an outsider addressing issues of politics or religion, both of which were taboo subjects in Syria (see also Zintl 2013). Furthermore, vis-à-vis an outsider, respondents do not feel obliged to do a favour as it might be the case with an insider researcher who is likely to be embedded in local networks of power (el-Husseini 2003:613) – that means they participate in the research or decline to do so because of interest rather than any other reason. The interviewees’ questions about my opinion of the urban transformations under study made me feel as if sharing a professional or academic background had turned me into some kind of an insider. Being treated like a naïve little boy in one situation and like a respected colleague in another illustrates that positionality can change over time and according to situations. In this regard, Herod (1999:314) reminds us that

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34 Between 2000 and 2011 I traveled nine times to Damascus and spent a total of 14 months in the Syrian capital. The purpose of the longer stays was either learning Arabic (a month each in 2000 and 2002 at private a language institute as well as a semester at Damascus University in 2004) or conducting research. In 2006 I stayed two months in Damascus in order to gather data for my master’s dissertation. In the context of my PhD project I conducted a three week pilot study in May 2010 followed by a longer stay in the field in March and April 2011 which had to be suspended after six weeks due to the Syrian uprising.
the research process is a social one in which both interviewer and interviewee participate in knowledge creation and, consequently, although the “outsider” and the “insider” may shape this process in different ways, it makes little sense to assume that one version of this knowledge is necessarily “truer” in some absolute and “objective” sense.

Finally, in terms of language, not being fluent in Arabic highlighted my positionality as an outsider. However, as most interviewees held a Western university degree or had otherwise acquired a good knowledge in English, French or German, all interviews were conducted in one of these languages. Besides the additional costs, this dispensed me from finding a suitable and trustworthy interpreter, an issue of particular importance for social inquiry in an authoritarian context.  

2.1.3 Additional Sources of Data

In order to validate and substantiate knowledge co-constructed during interview encounters and to deepen my understanding of the field, I relied on additional sources of data. Since 2004 when I spent six months in Damascus and, for the first time became aware of the transformations I discuss in this thesis, I had been following the news on Syria with a particular focus on issues related to urban change and tourism in Damascus. In order to make use of journalistic articles in this research project I systematically searched online archives of leading Western newspapers for entries containing, for instance, the keywords “gentrification” or “heritage” and “Damascus” published between 2000 and 2011. Additionally, I identified sources both online articles by daily newspapers or magazines (e.g. The National Geographic) as well as blog entries including additional links (e.g. on Syria Comment) by random web searches.

In 2001 Syrian authorities licensed the publication of private newspapers and magazines (Seifan 2010:19). Two of these new print media – English-language monthly magazines Syria Today and Forward Magazine – turned out to be particularly useful sources of information. Both were comparatively expensive high gloss monthly...

35 If I would have included displaced former residents of the old city as planned initially prior to the crisis, things would have been certainly different.
37 In 2010 Forward Magazine published a special issue on real estate in Syria mirroring the official discourse on the topic; this publication became a valuable point of reference.
magazines and could also be read online. The web page of *Syria Today* provided a search function which allowed for systematically searching articles related to urban issues (e.g. gentrification, heritage or informal settlements). Due to the civil war, however, both magazines stopped publication in late 2012; subsequently their websites went offline and thus became unavailable for further analysis. *Syria Today* was co-founded by Andrew Tabler, an American media adviser working for one of the ‘governmental’ non-governmental organizations founded under the patronage of the first lady Asma al-Asad\(^{38}\) (Tabler 2011:xviii) and financed by Canadian-educated Syrian businessman Abdul Ghani Attar (182; see also Zintl 2013:180). The project aimed at ‘creat[ing] an English-language, privately owned magazine and giv[ing] its writers freedom to write critically on issues in Syria’ (Tabler 2011:44). Another project to improve Syria’s image was the establishment of *Forward Magazine* by historian Sami Moubayed and businessman Abdulsalam Haykal who is said to maintain close links to the regime (167). With their articles on economic, social and cultural issues written by Syrian and foreign journalists, these magazines targeted the country’s polyglot upper-middle class, Syrian émigrés visiting their native country and expatriates working for foreign embassies, international firms or organizations.

These media – and their sometimes critical voices in particular – contributed to the attempts of the regime to improve the country’s image abroad by creating the impression of some form of media pluralism and thus to upgrade authoritarianism in Syria.

The English-language press proved to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it simplified research as data could be easily accessed – at least as long as their webpages were still online; on the other hand, it addressed a polyglot audience and, at the same time, excluded many ordinary Syrians.

\(^{38}\) Outlining his idea ‘for improving Syria’s image [abroad]’ (Tabler 2011:44), the author recalled: ‘The uncertain red lines governing media in Syria would have to be thrown out of the window as well. The only restriction that we [*Syria Today*] would observe would be avoiding harsh criticism of the president and his wife’. Furthermore, he added that ‘each month [*Syria Today*] would print the edition and send it to the Ministry of Information’s censorship office and [that] each month it just came back approved with no comments’ (89).
Promotion material of Old Damascene boutique hotels exclusively published in foreign languages presumably had a similarly exclusionary effect: Vibrant middle-eastern themed restaurants and luxurious boutique hotels in traditional courtyard houses were the most obvious embodiments of gentrification in the urban fabric of Old Damascus. Whereas only a few of the restaurants had printed brochures and a presence on the Internet, all of the boutique hotels offered promotional material. These brochures praised the ‘products’ of gentrification - that is costly renovated historic properties with luxuriously equipped rooms - meeting the needs of an increasingly affluent, international clientele (e.g. appendix 31) – almost exclusively in English. The use of foreign languages gives us important clues regarding the target audiences. Whereas middle-eastern themed restaurants were mostly frequented by members of the domestic upper and upper-middle classes, boutique hotels targeted an affluent, international clientele (chapters 4 and 5; for the numbers of both types of businesses see figure 4).

**Figure 4: Restaurants and Boutique Hotels in Old Damascus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>restaurants and cafes</th>
<th>boutique hotels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>approximately a dozen</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 (estimate)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>more than 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

source: Maktab al-Anbar

As I could easily pass for a western tourist, accessing Old Damascene boutique hotels was a comparatively easy task. As a European ‘tourist’ and a potential future guest, I was warmly received in most boutique hotels. Hotel staff – and in many cases the owners – provided me with their brochures and were eager to answer informal questions about their hotels, the renovation process and the old city in general, often inviting me for a cup of tea. On some of these occasions, I had the opportunity to look around the properties and take pictures, which allowed me to get further insights into this specific manifestation of gentrification in Old Damascus. During my daily visits to the old city, while dining in restaurants or taking a bath in Old Damascene hammams, or while visiting heritage theme parks on the outskirts of Damascus, I became a participant observer of the respective social situations. The experience I had gained during previous
stays in Damascus, which add up to a total of more than a year spent in the Syrian capital, also served as points of reference.

In authoritarian Syria, access to statistical data is problematic and strictly controlled by the state. Indeed, the Central Bureau of Statistics published some basic statistics on population, economy and trade, and some material was even accessible online. However, the quality and up-to-dateness of and the circumstances under which specific data were constructed were difficult to monitor, and access was often restricted, too. Diverse official actors working in Old Damascus published colourful brochures outlining their activities. This included the local authorities and national state agencies as well as joint projects between official Syrian and international actors. Cloke et al. (2008) call for a critical questioning of a government’s intention expressed in published material: ‘The question “What policy concerns or political ideas motivated the construction of the information?” is important even where the answer seems obvious’ (54). Taking a critical stand on the accessibility of official publications may also be desirable. During my pilot study in 2010, at the office of a European aid agency involved in the urban development of Old Damascus, I was shown a copy of the ‘Integrated Conservation and Development Plan for the Old City of Damascus’, which was co-published by the Syrian Ministry of Local Administration, the MAM Programme and the European Union. The publication included a detailed map showing all boutique hotels and restaurants in Old Damascus (see appendix 28). My request to photocopy the map was declined as the data were said to be for internal use only. The next day, however, while visiting one of the institutions involved in the publication, I was given a copy of my own as a welcome present. This and similar experiences show that access to specific information is granted rather informally on an ad hoc basis, and, like access to interview participants, is strongly dependent on gatekeepers.

2.2 Transcription and Data Analysis

After most meetings with participants, I sought a quiet place, often one of the traditional cafés outside the walled old city and – over a cup of Damascene flower tea – recapitulated the encounters by taking notes. Sometimes I thought straight away of

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procedures to analyse particularly salient fragments of knowledge, especially after a couple of interviews had been conducted and when first links between different interviewees’ statements emerged. Bryman and Burgess (2002) argue that in qualitative research ‘sometimes, analysis seems to begin more or less immediately on entering the field’ (218) and that it is not a ‘separate phase’ (217) of the research process. In this sense, research for my thesis evolved, at times, as a parallel process (Gibbs 2007). For instance, while still occupied with transcribing recorded interviews, I already started to code previously transcribed interviews. I also presented preliminary findings from both the pilot study and the main fieldwork at several conferences in order to invite critical feedback from outside my own department. Conferences presented an opportunity not only to gather the opinions of other experts, but also to recruit additional potential interviewees at a time when getting access to the field had already become impossible. It is exactly this ‘constant interplay of data gathering and analysis [that] is at the heart of qualitative research’ (Wiseman 1974:317 cited in Bryman and Burgess 2002:218). In the following paragraphs, I will focus on transcribing, a further aspect that influenced data gathering and analysis, coding and the use of NVivo software.

In physical terms, the result of most interview encounters is a digitally recorded audio file and one or two pages of paper filled with hastily written notes. In order to prepare these materials for analysis, I had to transcribe the recordings, and thus perform on them a ‘change of medium’ (Gibbs 2007:11), transforming them ‘from oral speech to written text’ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:102). Transcribing\(^\text{40}\) was my main activity in the weeks following my stay in Damascus as the memory of the interview encounters was still vivid (i.e. the location, the atmosphere and the circumstances under which the respective conversations took place). As there was no intention to conduct an extensive linguistic analysis, I decided to use a more formal, written style of transcription – despite my awareness of the fact that ‘transcripts only capture the spoken aspects of the interview and miss out the setting, context, body language and general “feel” of the session’ (Gibbs 2007:11). A certain degree of formalization was also necessary as most interviewees were non-native speakers of the language(s) used during the interview encounters. Furthermore, words frequently used by specific interviewees might have

\(^{40}\) Every hour of recorded interview resulted in approximately 20 pages of written transcript.
exposed their identity. Confidentiality was also the reason for the *anonymization* of names of interviewees, institutions and places (where sensible).\(^{41}\)

The authors of several textbooks on research methods offer step-by-step guides on how to analyse qualitative data. For most of them, the process of coding, which Kvale and Brinkmann define as ‘[b]reaking a text [or other data items]\(^{42}\) down into manageable segments and attaching one or more keywords’ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:32), is the ‘key process’ (Bryman and Burgess 2002:218) ‘at the heart’ (Cloke *et al.* 2008:313) of qualitative data analysis (also Robson 2011). Consequently, most approaches to qualitative data analysis include some form of coding in order to handle often huge amounts of data. Let me here establish the connection to the theoretical framework of my thesis.

Working with gentrification theory from the very beginning of the project and engaging with the existing literature in particular determined how I approached the first portion of my data (a small set of interviews with key players) in that I was searching the interview transcripts for references to gentrification. Lees (2000) argues that ‘[g]entrification is in effect being promoted […] as the blueprint for a civilized city life’ (391; likewise Smith 2002; Davidson and Lees 2005; 2010; Harris 2008). In March 2012 I had the opportunity to participate in and present at the seminar ‘Towards an emerging geography of gentrification in the Global South’,\(^{43}\) during which the idea of having one gentrification blueprint was questioned. It was argued that one blueprint would not do justice to the diversity of contexts in which gentrification could now be perceived (see Lees 2012). Participants discussed ways of ‘unlearning’ established models and case studies of gentrification and advocated researchers’ openness vis-à-vis gentrification experiences from ‘off the map’ (Robinson 2002). Likewise, though in a methodological sense, grounded theorists make the case for approaching data without the use of pre-determined coding categories (Robson 2011:490). Well aware that I would bring to the analysis a ‘conceptual baggage’ (that is gentrification theory and the concept of authoritarian resilience), methods from grounded theory seemed to be

\(^{41}\) For issues of research ethics see 2.3.

\(^{42}\) See Gibbs 2007:38.

\(^{43}\) The meeting was organized by Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin, Ernesto López and Hilda Herzer and was held 23-24 March 2012.
appropriate for re-reading the transcripts. *Initial coding* (Robson 2011:490), or *open coding* (Strauss and Corbin 1998), is part of an analytical process ‘through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions […] discovered in data’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998). ‘Through comparing data with data we [social scientists] learn what our research participants view as problematic and begin to treat it analytically’ (Charmaz 2006:47). Therefore, at the start of the analysis, printed copies of the interview transcripts were manually coded line-by-line, a procedure which required assigning codes to every single line of a text and which then allowed for the straightforward development of thematic categories by collating different codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998:119f).

Next, the categories were subsumed under the themes ‘gentrification’ and ‘resilient authoritarian rule’ and were compared to each other, to other sources of data and – where available – to scholarly accounts from the literature. Initially, I treated the issue of *heritage* as a kind of thematic context in that the old city of Damascus possessed the status of a World Heritage Site, and houses underwent a process of *heritage* preservation while being gentrified. In the process of using open coding on interviewees’ accounts of both the physical and social aspects of a transforming Old Damascus, heritage emerged from the data as an independent topic of the same importance for the study as the pre-determined themes of gentrification and authoritarian resilience. Furthermore, the data analysis was facilitated by using *NVivo* and the software became the main tool for data management. Data were stored in one project file together with thematic coding based on the categories developed previously during open coding. Additionally, like other relational data bases, *NVivo* allowed for different kinds of queries and thus for quick identification of relevant quotations during data analysis and writing up.

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44 ‘Broadly speaking, during open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. Events, happenings, objects, and actions/interactions that are found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning are grouped under more abstract concepts termed “categories”’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998:102).
45 For detailed guidelines for line-by-line coding, see e.g. Charmaz 2006:50f.
46 After coding a couple of interview transcripts, themes – and thus codes used while coding previous interviews – re-emerged. This is what grounded theorists call saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2006).
With its focus on transcribing and data analysis, this section has given an overview of the processes linking data gathering in the field to the final written text. Both during fieldwork and analysis, a number of ethical concerns arose, which will be addressed in the following section, which deals with the ethical issues of qualitative research in general and addresses particularities of conducting research in and on an authoritarian state like Syria.

2.3 On Ethical Concerns and Doing Fieldwork in an Authoritarian State

Ethical issues kept emerging throughout the research process – during the preparation stage, interviewing, transcription, analysis and writing up. Ethical concerns have an impact on both the participants and the researcher. In this section, in addition to ethical matters of general interest for interview-based research projects, I discuss particularities of conducting qualitative social research in the authoritarian environment of Syria’s capital Damascus and how I dealt with these challenges in the field and beyond. At the beginning of each interview, in order to facilitate informed consent (e.g. Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:70), I introduced myself and informed the participants about the purpose of the research project and their right to decline to answer or to opt out at any point in time. However, in authoritarian contexts, obtaining written consent is hardly sensible as individuals do not want to sign any document that makes it possible to identify them as participants in a research project. Flick (2007) suggests implementing procedures that guarantee informed consent as a principle and searching for acceptable substitutes (72). As asking for written consent would have caused unease and may have resulted in the premature termination of the interviews, I decided on obtaining oral consent as an acceptable substitute. Silverman emphasises, albeit in the context of China, that ‘agreements are sealed by the “gentleman’s honour”, not a signature on a piece of paper’ (2010: 163). In 2011, all participants in pre-arranged interviews agreed to the use of a digital voice recorder. Only in one case did the interviewee ask for the recording to be interrupted. In spontaneous encounters as well as during the exploratory stay in 2010 written notes – taken during or after the interview encounters – were the only form of documentation.
Guaranteeing confidentiality was also part of obtaining participants’ oral consent, but it was particularly during the process of transcription that ethical concerns about confidentiality arose and made me ask the following questions: How can I ensure the ‘promised’ confidentiality, how can I make sure that interviewees do remain anonymous to readers? How shall I deal with participants who explicitly asked to be named in the final thesis? As I transcribed and coded all interviews by myself, no third person had access to the original data which were password-protected. In any publication, quotations from interviews are referenced either with a vague pointer like ‘author’s interview March 2011’ or, as in this thesis, with an interview number, which precludes any reference to the interviewee’s name and affiliation(s) or to the exact date or location of the interview encounter. Moreover, references to other participants or organizations were removed. These procedures were slightly modified with regard to key actors in the gentrification process, (i.e. persons frequently present in the media). My own interviews with these individuals were processed like every interview I had conducted. However, reference to these actors’ statements published elsewhere (i.e. in the media or in other scholars’ work) was retained. Likewise, when interviewees referred to one of the key actors, the name of the latter remained in the transcript. However, I decided not to name those interviewees who wished to be mentioned in the thesis. Due to the unclear and deteriorating political situation in Syria, the risk of causing harm to the respective participants could not be entirely precluded.

The principles of ethical research outlined so far focus primarily on potential sources of stress or harm to the interview participants and on procedures to address these issues. However, reflexive social research should also be aware of the ethical impact of a research project on the researcher and his or her work during the entire project. Despite having acquired several initial contacts, I had not (yet) been able to conduct interviews with current and former residents of gentrifying neighbourhoods at the time I had to leave Syria. Given this situation, cultural and religious issues did not have such a significant impact on conducting fieldwork as previously anticipated: most of the

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47 Confidentiality in research implies that private data identifying the participants will not be disclosed. If a study will publish information that is potentially recognizable to others, the participants should agree to the release of identifiable information (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:72).

48 However, several statements made by interviewees would have enabled readers familiar with Old Damascus to identify the respective respondent. For that reason, in order to guarantee the respondents’ anonymity, additional interview numbers were introduced for passages in need of additional protection. These numbers start with a “3” and are not listed in the list of interviewees (appendix 1).
interviewees belonged to a secular (upper) middle class. Conducting research in country which is shaped by Islam was, nevertheless, structured by daily prayer times, Friday being the weekly holiday, a halal diet and religion being a common theme in casual conversations.\textsuperscript{49} It was, however, the authoritarian nature of the secular Syrian state that severely influenced numerous aspects of this research project and the decisions made in the process.

Since the Ba’th Party came to power in 1963 (see chapter 3), Syria has seen the emergence of an omnipresent repressive system. The country’s multiple intelligence services (mukhabarat) are ‘feared for the arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and torture’ (Hinnebusch 2001:81) of both political activists and ordinary citizens who have become victims of collective punishment or kin liability (Geros 2008; Dabbagh 2007). George (2003) argues that ‘[d]uring the 1990s the mukhabarat were far less obtrusive than before, but [that] their powers were not reduced’ (159), and in a recent study on human rights in the light of the country’s emergency legislation,\textsuperscript{50} one interviewee recalled that ‘[i]t is true that censorship cannot be total. But, by its irrationality and narrow-mindedness it creates a phobia which paralyses all chance of gaining wide knowledge and all normal intellectual life’ (Hadad 2009:546). What the respondent called ‘phobia’ contributes to a permanent fear in social interactions, which makes building mutual trust and creating the basis for productive interview encounters a rather difficult task. Salamandra (2004:6) points to ‘the general assumption, shared by Syrians of all social and religious groups, that foreign researchers are spies’ and argues that mistrust is ‘a common fieldwork hazard in much of the Arab Middle East’ a fact that made one of her interviewees state, ‘[y]our question is CIA, not academic’. Similarly, in one of my interview encounters with a university lecturer, a student joined us and was somewhat confused when I asked for my respondent’s age, place of birth and current place of residence. Concerning the student’s reaction, and qualitative social inquiry in Syria in general, it is vital to keep in mind that ‘one never knows who might be a government informant’ (Lesch 2012:32).\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} As outlined above, religion also shaped gender relations during interview encounters.
\textsuperscript{50} The Emergency Law was lifted only in spring 2011.
\textsuperscript{51} For instance, when I was studying Arabic at Damascus University in 2004, several British and American students were denied visa extensions or were deported. One fellow student who was given 48 hours to leave the country reported that immigration officers referred to comments he made during lessons, implying that an informant of the mukhabarat had been in the classroom, too.
A certain mistrust of the authoritarian state made me follow the advice of several senior scholars working on Syria to enter the country on a tourist visa. Applying for an official research permit would have meant knowingly exposing the research project to the Syrian authorities and, consequently, being denied interviews by more independently-minded individuals. Geros (2008) recalls that ‘[m]ost of the foreign academics doing research in the country were conducting historical and archival or architectural and archaeological work […]. The regime encouraged, or at least allowed study of these ‘neutral’ areas’ (Geros 2008:93). Similarly, prior to my stay in the field, while I was discussing the feasibility of a study addressing the per se not ‘neutral’ area of gentrification with a political consultant, he argued:

You have to market your project rather on the basis of architecture, of achievement, of praising what is happening in Damascus to be able to go through that subject and meet the appropriate people and make them speak (interview 105).

The advice to emphasise architecture and actors’ ‘achievements’ in the gentrification process and meanwhile covering up some key aspects of the research project is not entirely in line with research ethics, which demand informed consent and the debriefing of interviewees at the end of the encounter. However, and in particular due to a short conversation with a European consultant in 2010 who, when asked for an assessment of gentrification in the old city, gave the testy reply that there existed no gentrification in Old Damascus at all, I opted to avoid the term gentrification. Instead, I made respondents elaborate on social and physical urban changes in Old Damascus – the context in which the issue of heritage emerged from the data.

2.4 Damascus, the Crisis and Me – Researching (in) a City on the Brink of War

As you all know the Syrian revolution started peacefully. The only thing the Syrian people asked for was freedom, justice and reform. The regime of Bashar al-Assad responded with violence, torture, killings, massacres and bombing of our cities. Today nobody is safe anymore, men and women, elderly people and children. (Salim Idriss, former Chief of Staff of the Free Syrian Army52)

My PhD project was planned and designed prior to the current crisis, which began with peaceful protests in March 2011, and which can now be called a full-scale civil war. In order not to let recent events in Syria determine too much of my thesis, I tried to keep reference to the war to the minimum. However, the crisis had a significant impact on both fieldwork and the later stages of the research process. Below, I critically assess doing fieldwork in a city on the brink of war and how the events exerted their influence beyond the field.

I arrived in the Syrian capital two days after seemingly tolerated by the authorities, the first peaceful protesters took to the street in Old Damascus shouting ‘God, Syria, Freedom – that’s it!’ . However, this was also one day before Syria’s authoritarian regime threw down the gauntlet to the newly emerging protest movement and ignited the current crisis. Following the arrest of a group of pupils who scribbled anti-regime graffiti in the Southern Syrian city of Dera’a, relatives peacefully rallied for the children’s immediate release. The day after my arrival in Syria, when security forces proceeded to a shoot-to-kill policy, demonstrations of solidarity erupted in many parts of the country and were quelled with violence. One such incident happened in the Umayyad Mosque in Old Damascus, and there were fears that the same level of violence would soon spread to the whole capital.53 At the following weekends, and particularly before and after Friday Prayers, increasing numbers of white Toyota Coasters were parked at strategic locations, indicating that the regime’s security forces were on the alert. Meanwhile, police armed with AK-47s patrolled the narrow alleys of the old city on motorcycles, and thugs carrying iron bars and baseball bats hang out in parts of the old city. On weekdays, protest in Old Damascus petered out and everyday life continued – but in an atmosphere of fearful tension.

Throughout my stay, Damascus resembled a city put on standby. Uncertainty regarding the political situation was further fuelled by reports of increasing numbers of casualties in other parts of the country, rumours, and the long absence of an official statement. Before the weekends, fearing that new protests and violence might erupt in the capital

53 Protest in the Old Damascene Umayyad Mosque was clamped down on the same day. In this context, it is noteworthy that mosques played a vital role in the protests. This is not because of a per se religious orientation of the opposition, but it can be explained by a restriction on social gatherings in public spaces, with mosques and churches being the sole exceptions.
after Friday Prayers, Damascenes could be seen stocking up on provisions and stayed at home during the weekends. This wait-and-see attitude adopted by many inhabitants of the capital seemed to directly impact on gentrifying Old Damascus, where the author could observe how restaurants remained relatively empty and cultural gatherings were suspended. When Western embassies issued travel warnings and the number of foreign tourists started to decrease, some investors and boutique hotel owners put planned projects on hold (interviews 120 and 206). At the time when, in a long-awaited speech, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad blamed the uprising on foreign conspiracy, terrorists and armed gangs, terms which have since been used by the regime to defame the initially peaceful opposition movement, my private Arabic lessons were suspended, and even old friends stopped inviting me to their homes out of fear of being suspected because of hosting a foreigner. Paradoxically, and contrary to what I had expected, the changing political climate had a rather productive impact on some aspects of the research process, at least as long as I intended to interview producers of gentrification. While awaiting further political developments, potential interviewees – both official and private market actors – seemed to have more time than usual and were willing to share their experiences. For some, taking part in the interview was a convenient excuse for finding distraction from the looming crisis, whereas others used the interview encounter to blame Western media for misrepresenting Syria (interviews 104 and 109). A third group of interviewees, however, withdrew their participation at short notice. Once the uprising intensified, contacting potential interviewees became an increasingly complicated task as both the Internet and the mobile phone network were frequently unavailable or over-stretched. As long as foreign tourist groups kept visiting the city, moving around was not a problem – at least within the walled old city, that means on the sites under scrutiny in this thesis. Meanwhile, open violence between students supporting and opposing the regime and a series of arrests on the campus of the University of Damascus reinforced my decision not to conduct interviews on this campus.

54 Rumours circulated that the regime switched off the networks in order to prevent protesters from organizing demonstrations or uploading videos of police violence.
55 Although the interruptions were rather short, not knowing when the services would be back to normal was time consuming and frightening. Contacts who wanted to cancel or re-schedule appointments were not able to reach me and on two occasions I travelled in vain.
56 An American student was arrested close to protests in the Umayyad Mosque.
One day in late April, I had the impression that I was followed by plain-clothes officers. I was not directly approached; however, this experience and word spreading about increasing levels of violence in many parts of Syria made me return to Europe as requested by my university. On the way to the airport, I passed several newly erected checkpoints – no problem with a European passport. Whereas Europeans could easily leave Damascus as soon as staying there felt uncomfortable, most Syrians stayed behind in their city on the brink of war.

Back at home, like during my stay in Damascus, the civil-war-turned-uprising in Syria continued to impact on the research project. Soon after returning from the field, due to the deteriorating situation in Syria, it became clear that further data gathering in Damascus would not be feasible. This was important for two reasons. On the one hand, external circumstances, (i.e. the uprising and related health and safety issues), took the decision on when to leave the field off my shoulders. On the other hand, they urged me to engage in the immediate and particularly meticulous analysis of the data gathered up to then, for instance, by employing line by line coding and including other available sources of data like novels or accounts in the media (see above). While transcribing the recorded interviews, and in addition to the issues addressed in the previous section, further ethical concerns emerged in relation to the handling of some pro-regime accounts, particularly in the light of the events that have continued to devastate Syria since I left the country.

On several occasions, I was given the opportunity to present my findings at international conferences. However, despite positive feedback and the supporting atmosphere, I felt there was resentment at my talking about gentrification and heritage at a time when people were arrested, tortured or killed at the places under study.

57 For instance, regime forces laid siege on Dera’a and used of armoured vehicles in Banias.
58 As I feared putting interviewees in Syria in danger, I decided not to contact further potential respondents once I left the country.
59 For instance, during one encounter, acquaintances or colleagues of my interviewee popped into the office while my contact answered a phone call in another room. We started a casual conversation in which I explained that I had just re-booked my flight back to the UK for the following Saturday. The interviewee, a well-dressed, unveiled lady in her forties or fifties and probably a member of the upper middle class, responded in accent-free English: ‘Why are you going to leave? Saturday everything will be over!’ However, the Saturday referred to turned out to be the up-to-then bloodiest day of the Syrian uprising and saw the intensifying use of violence by the Syrian regime.
2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter aimed at outlining and justifying the chosen methodological approach and the methods used for data gathering, data processing and data analysis. Furthermore, it discussed ethical issues which arose at different stages of the research process, with a separate section on the impact of the Syrian crisis on the research project. A flexible approach based on semi-structured interviews proved to be most suitable for dealing with an unexpected political situation such as the unfolding uprising in Syria. When mistrust and the potential risk of facing persecution for taking part in or conducting interviews on social issues made interviewing ‘ordinary’ people in gentrifying neighbourhoods unfeasible, a shift of focus outlined above mainly towards official and private producers of gentrification enabled me to continue fieldwork. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that ‘[s]ometimes, […], researchers have to work with the interviews they can get, and [that] it is crucial that the context in which knowledge is being produced is fully acknowledged in these circumstances’ (Cloke et al. 2008:156).

In terms of this ‘take what you can get approach’, obtaining contact details of potential respondents from trusted previous interviewees or gatekeepers turned out to be particularly helpful, first, to increase my own credibility in the eyes of the interviewees, and second, to increase potential participants’ willingness to share their experiences. Similarly, passing as a tourist and holding a German passport were valuable assets for researching Old Damascus, above all when, due to the looming crisis and the regime’s discourse of a foreign conspiracy, the mere presence of a Westerner could cause suspicion in some parts of the city. As outlined above, ethical issues ranked high on the agenda – not only in the field, but with equal importance during transcription and analysis, particularly with regard to confidentiality and procedures to ensure participants’ anonymity. Contrary to what I had anticipated and probably explainable by the almost exclusive selection of professionals from an (upper) middle-class background as research participants, it was not religion or culture, but Syria’s authoritarian system that turned out to be the most influential factor shaping the research process. Regarding the topic of my thesis, this chapter explained how applying procedures originating from grounded theory, such as initial/open coding, facilitated the emergence of heritage as a vital aspect related to gentrification in Old Damascus (chapter 5). With the theoretical and methodological contexts set out, the following
discussion of Damascene urban history since the late Ottoman years (chapter 3) is intended to provide the reader with a historical background to the subsequent analysis of gentrification, heritage and modes of authoritarian resilience (chapters 4 to 6).
Chapter 3: Damascus: An Historical Portrait

To Damascus, years are only moments, decades are only flitting trifles of time. She measures time, not by days and months and years, but by the empires she has seen rise, and prosper and crumble to ruin. (Mark Twain 1869 [2010]:292)

Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and has seen numerous rulers during its millennia-long history: Arameans, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans and the French. For almost a century, Damascus was the capital of the first Islamic empire ruled by the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 AD) and, apart from a few shorter interruptions, it was the vassal of Cairo during the Ayyubid (1176-1260) and Mameluk (1260-1516) periods. Subsequently, Damascus became the capital of the Ottoman province al-Sham (1516-1918, named al-Surriyya in 1864). In 1920, after a two-year-long intermezzo of Arab rule, Damascus came under French mandatory control, and 26 years later it was made the capital of the independent state of Syria (Elisséeff 1970: 159-164; Weber 2009:15-16; see also Burns 2005; Hourani 1946:6-40; Sack 1989:7-43).

This chapter pursues two overarching goals: first, to provide an overview of the social and political-economic history of Damascus; and, second, to trace urban transformations and planning interventions that shaped the preconditions for gentrification in the Syrian capital. Each section in this chapter is devoted to one specific historical period in Damascene history, meaning the late Ottoman period (3.1), the French Mandate (3.2), the years between Syria’s independence and the millennium (3.3) as well as the rule of Bashar al-Asad since 2000 (3.4). While discussing the different epochs of Syrian history attention is paid to social class constitution and the rise and fall of the respective political and economic elites. Furthermore, social issues like rural-urban migration and suburbanization are also addressed. This focus aims at facilitating the later analysis of gentrification (chapter 4), urban heritage (chapter 5) and links between the bourgeoisie and the Syrian regime in the fields of gentrification, heritage and authoritarian resilience (chapter 6).

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60 King Faisal 1918-1920
Several sections of this thesis – and this chapter outlining of Syria’s urban history in particular – make reference to the country’s economic and political elites as well as to changes in the composition of the different elite factions over time as illustrated in figure 5. Therefore, the following paragraphs shortly summarize scholarly attempts to conceptualize elites in theoretical terms as well as in the specific Syrian context.

The term elite originates from the Latin verb *eligere*, meaning to select, but it is only since the late 19th century that it is used for describing the political class: Zuckerman (1977:325f) characterizes the multitude of definitions for political elites as ‘morass’ and complains the use of different labels for the same concept. Characterizing political elites as ‘somewhat elastic formations with unclear boundaries’ (Burton and Higley 2001:182), the authors define political elites as:

> the several thousand persons who hold top positions in large or otherwise powerful organizations and movements and who participate in or directly influence national political decision-making. They [political elites] include not only the familiar ‘power elite’ triumvirate of top business, government, and military leaders, but also top position holders in parties, professional associations, trade unions, media, interest groups, religious, and other powerful and hierarchically structured organizations and sociopolitical movements.

Similarly, Perthes (2004:3), in his comprehensive volume on Arab elites, points to a lack of a reliable ‘general theory of elites and political change’ and uses the term political relevant elites (PRE) to describe individuals ‘who wield political influence and power in that they make strategic decisions or participate in decisionmaking [sic] on a national level, contribute to defining political norms and values […] and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues’ (5).

The focus of research dealing with Middle Eastern elites is, however, not confined to power in the political realm: different cultural and societal groups, including various bourgeoisies and other actors of the private sector, have gained (or lost) elite status, too (e.g. Hottinger 1968; Springborg 1993). Furthermore, as the following sections of this chapter will show, Syria’s different elite groups overlap in terms of members and activities (Ismail 2009; Haddad 2012; Donati 2013). Regarding scholarly attempts to categorize Syrian elites, Haddad (2012:197) states:

61 For a discussion of different definitions of political elites see Zuckerman (1977:326).
Some analysts divide the private sector along categorical lines that are not politically or economically salient in practice (for example, by sector division, commercial versus industrial division, old versus new bourgeoisie, exporters versus everyone else, those integrated into the national market versus those whose business activity bypasses the intricacies of this market). Although each such division carries a grain of practical salience, none are [sic] sufficient to explain the behaviour of actors that are found in these categories.

Though it is not the goal of this thesis to develop another categorization of Syria’s elites, for the sake of clarity and despite the outlined difficulties in confining elites, I use the adjectives ‘political’ and ‘economic’ to label elite factions based on their main fields of activity as well as ‘old’ and ‘new’ for characterization based on time. This approach facilitates the identification of two main elite factions: the old bourgeoisie and the new economic elite. The old bourgeoisie, the traditional landholding, predominantly urban Sunni elite dominated economic and political affairs from the late Ottoman period until the union with Egypt in 1958. ‘With Syria's independence in 1946, this class took over the government and, despite internal struggles, held control until the late 1950s’ (Perthes 1991:31). This traditional bourgeoisie lost much of its influence due to the nationalizations following the Ba’th Revolution of 1963. However, since the 1980s, some members of this group managed to find a modus vivendi with the regime and to hesitantly regain economic influence. By contrast, the new (economic) elite is made up of a “public” element, that is state officials who got involved in business ventures, as well as a private element consisting of businesspersons. This new elite gained influence ‘with the acceleration of statist economic policies during the Hafiz al-Asad era, particularly after the heavy inflow of capital from Arab Gulf countries in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war’ (Haddad 2012:63). Within the new elite Ismail (2009:18) identified the emergence of a new group of actors, a powerful oligarchy known as ‘awlad al-sultah (children of authority)’, which, during the 2000s ‘joined the commercial stratum engineered by the regime in the 1970s.

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62 In case the term elite(s) is not further specified by a foregoing adjective it may also be used synonymous for the country’s upper and upper-middle class acting as consumers and/or producers of a gentrified Old Damascus, i.e. wealthy people who may be, or not be, active in politics or economy.
63 Between 1958 and 1961 Egypt and Syria formed the United Arab Republic (UAR).
64 Interview 105, Haddad 2012:63. See also Perthes’s (1991:33-35) remarks on the state bourgeoisie.
3.1 Damascus during the Late Ottoman Period

Throughout its colourful past, Damascus experienced periods of continuity and also of substantial transformation both socially and in terms of its urban form. Even though the influence of the different rulers mentioned above can still be detected in the city’s old town intra and extra muros, the Ottomans, who conquered Syria in 1516, were most influential in shaping the current appearance of the walled city and nearby (historic) neighbourhoods (Weber 2009:16). Therefore, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the last century of Ottoman rule, in particular the period between 1830 and 1918. At that time, Damascus experienced pervasive socio-political and architectural transformations and underwent its first steps towards modernity. As this chapter will show, some reforms and planning projects put in motion by the late Ottoman administration endured into the period of the French Mandate (1920-1946) and are still important today.
In order to sustain their power, the Ottomans largely depended on the cooperation, networks and knowledge of local actors, most prominently Damascene patrician families (Hourani 1968[1993]; Khoury 1983; Schatkowski Schilcher 1985). Some of these ‘notable families’ managed to dominate the political arena in Syria until the emergence of a populist regime following the Ba’th revolution of 1963. Khoury (1983) pointed out that, prior to 1860, none of the three dominant groups of notables – the ‘ulama (religious establishment), the aghawat (chiefs of the local military garrison), and the secular dignitaries – was politically organized on a formal basis. Instead, ‘they were factionalized along family, kinship and economic lines [sectors]’ (Khoury 1983:11). Building and sustaining alliances and clientele networks which cut across class lines and reduced the potential of class conflict was equally important for all groups of notables. Khoury (1983:95) highlighted that notables ‘rarely took political action in unison and they clearly did not belong to a single social class.’ By the late 19th century, due to the events outlined in the following paragraphs, ‘class formation was well underway in Damascus. Families from different […] social backgrounds (religious scholars, military personnel, merchants) had coalesced into a bureaucratic-landholding class closely allied to the increasingly powerful central government’ (Reilly 1992:9; see also Khoury 1983:26).

The 1830s (Egyptian Protectorate)

In 1832, after invading the country, Egyptian leader Muhammad Ali made Damascus the headquarters of his administration in Syria led by his eldest son Ibrahim Pasha. For many observers, the temporary interruption of Ottoman rule in Syria during the Egyptian quasi-protectorate (1832-1840) represented a turning-point in terms of centralization, conscription and taxation, which led to the destruction of the traditional urban leadership (Hourani 1946:28-29; Ma’oz 1968:19; Weber 2009:30). The reforms initiated under Ibrahim Pasha also ensured legal equality for the Christian and Jewish minorities (Ma’oz 1968:17). As the Muslim majority was displeased with privileges

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65 ‘The political influence of the notables rests on two factors: on the one hand, they must have ‘access’ to authority and still be able to advise, warrant, and in general speak for society or some part of it at the ruler’s court; on the other hand, they must have some social power of their own, whatever its form and origin, which is not dependent on the ruler and gives them a position of accepted and ‘natural’ leadership’ (Hourani 1993:87).

66 Consequently, intra-class dissent was more common a source of conflict; see Khoury (1983:11).

67 On Muhammad Ali Pasha and his reforms see Lawson 1992:1ff; on Ibrahim Pasha, see Ma’oz 1968.
like the Christians’ exemption from military service, the construction of new churches and public processions (Masters 2001:132), sectarian tensions arose. Damascus took advantage of the Egyptians’ affinity for reform in town planning and ‘the nascent new Ottoman zone to the West of the city (Sahat Marj) [Marje Square] was further refashioned’ (Burns 2005:248) when Ibrahim Pasha transformed the area into the headquarters of the Egyptian army in Damascus. The new district included, for instance, large barracks and a military college (Weber 2009:118). The existence of a military headquarters outside the citadel – and thus outside the old city – marks the ‘loss of function of a centrepiece of the traditional city’ (Weber 2009:118). Marje Square and the new quarters in its direct proximity later became the administrative and economic centre of Damascus and thus the opposite pole of the traditional suq of the old town distinguished as characteristic of cities in the Middle East (Seger 1975; 1979). Dettmann (1969:74) identified a westward trend in the city extensions already in the 1830s, which caused a gradual process of ‘functional impoverishment and social decline’ (‘funktionale Verarmung und soziale Wertminderung’, author’s translation from German) to be faced by the old city from then on.

1841-1860

The following two decades soon became known as the Tanzimat (reorganization) period.68 After regaining control over Syria in 1840 and after the appointment of Muhammad Najib Pasha as Governor a year later, the Ottomans introduced – in an attempt to strengthen the central state – a bundle of substantial administrative, fiscal and legal reforms that resembled those previously implemented during the Egyptian occupation of Syria. ‘There were to be guarantees to ensure Ottoman subjects security of life, honour, a regular system of assessing and levying taxes’ (Ma’oz 1968:22), and, for the first time, the Ottoman state granted legal equality for both Muslims and non-Muslims (Hourani 1946:30; on the emancipation of Jews and Christians in the Ottoman Empire see Ye’or 1985:98-110).

During the Tanzimat period, the Ottoman Empire renewed the Capitulations, bilateral treaties, which, from the 16th century onwards, granted European powers cultural,

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68 On the Tanzimat era, see for example Ma’oz 1968; Weber 2009:30f.
economic and legal privileges within its territories (Masters 2001:68-97). Consequently, European influence in the Levant increased substantially (Weber 2009:30). This indirect European penetration found its clear expression in the provision of consular protection for members of the Christian minorities as well as in the expansion of European trade. As a direct consequence of the 16th-century *Capitulations*, Levantine Christians became the protégés of European powers. First, France acted as patron of the Catholic Maronites.\(^69\) In the 18th century, Russia followed by supporting the region’s Orthodox communities (Hourani 1946:146-155). In terms of European commercial activity,\(^70\) both the introduction of steam navigation and the expansion of Beirut’s seaport challenged local producers. Damascene manufacturers were unable to compete with industrially produced textiles or consumer goods made in Europe (Burns 2005:250). Local middlemen, among them ‘a disproportionately high proportion of Christians and Jews’ (Weber 2009:31), were the main beneficiaries of the new trade relations: ‘Minority merchant families in Damascus profited further […] because the Capitulations allowed European consuls to grant the status of protégé to Ottoman subjects.’ As protégés of a European power, this new, mainly Christian bourgeoisie remained outside the Ottoman legal and fiscal systems (Weber 2009:31). The impact of some of the reforms of the Tanzimat on everyday relations between the different religious groups was, as Khoury (1983:16) points out, devastating:

The most objectionable development witnessed by the […] members of the Muslim upper classes in Damascus […] concerned the growth of equality for religious minorities and the opening of their scared and socially conservative city to direct European influences. Christians could now be found on the majlis shura [city council] and they were allowed to trade in grain and livestock. […] Meanwhile, European and especially British commerce with Syria expanded in this period to the benefit of the minorities and at the expense of the Muslim merchant classes.

**The Damascus Incident of 1860**

In July 1860, inter-sectarian riots erupted in Damascus. In the course of the eight-day event that later became known as ‘The Damascus Massacre’, thousands of Christians were killed, injured, abducted or raped by a mostly Muslim mob. Christian and

\(^69\) However, as a reaction to France’s support of Muhammad Ali of Egypt, French privileges were temporarily suspended (Hourani 1946:148, 150; in particular the limitation of Maronites’ privileges).

\(^70\) For a comprehensive overview of the economic system of the Middle East and its integration into the world economy during the 19th/early 20th century, see Owen 1981.
European property was looted, demolished or burnt to the ground (Ma’oz 1968:231-240; Fawaz 1994:78ff.). ‘[T]he target of this anger… was the Bab Tuma quarter where most of the Europeans (missionaries and consuls) and wealthy Christians lived. […] The socially less powerful Christians in al-Midan were not attacked’ (Weber 2009:31; see also Fawaz 1994:100; Masters 2001:167). The Ottoman administration under Governor Ahmad Pasha remained reluctant, and some army units were even said to have joint the rioters (Fawaz 1994:88f). This gives rise to all sorts of speculation. The fact that the Jewish quarter, which was located close to the Christian neighbourhoods under attack, was not targeted at all suggests ‘that the outbreak was not completely spontaneous’ (Ma’oz 1968:238). It could be considered rather as an orchestrated attempt by the Ottoman authorities to punish the Christians of Damascus for their disobedience to the Ottoman authorities. Consequently, the roots of the massacre can be summarized as ‘the culmination of the Muslim-Christian antagonism’ (Ma’oz 1968:231), which resulted from the political and economic reforms introduced during both the Egyptian occupation and the Tanzimat period. ‘Whatever had been the immediate spark, the combustible material was not religious fanaticism…but the growing gap between the rich and the poor’ (Burns 2005:252) – a fact that should also be taken into consideration when dealing with the Syrian civil war that started in 2011.

1860-1918

The Damascus riots left vast parts of the Damascene Christian quarter in ruins and further deepened the trenches between the religious groups in the city. Not only did the events of 1860 trigger the emigration of affluent Christians, most of whom settled in British-ruled Egypt and the Americas (Hourani 1946:34f), but they were also a wake-up call for the Ottoman central government in Istanbul: ‘Even before European reaction built up, the authorities quickly accepted that they had to respond credibly to these events and address its causes’ (Burns 2005:253). Therefore, a punitive campaign was launched which resulted in the execution of 167 individuals involved in the riots, among them, as a consequence of his failure to prevent the massacre, Governor Ahmad Pasha.\footnote{Damascene Christians rejected to pay the badal, a tax due from young men not conscripted. Knowing that the Ottomans did not recruit Christians at t t the time, Christians demanded to be conscripted, speculating that this would result in their exemption from the badal.}

\footnote{The fear of the Ottoman administration of European intervention was not exaggerated as French troops were deployed in Lebanon. Furthermore, based on the suggestions of an international commission,
Furthermore, in order to finance both the redevelopment of the Christian quarter Bab Tuma and compensation payments for its residents, an additional tax was imposed on Damascene Muslims (Burns 2005:253).

In the wake of the Damascus massacre and similar incidents in Aleppo and Lebanon, the Ottoman administration implemented reforms aimed at realigning and centralizing its control over Syria. The reforms weakened the notables’ traditional, long-established power, for example by enlarging the local bureaucracy and offering support to trustworthy notable families ‘not previously a part of the traditional leadership’ (Khoury 1983:93). In the following years ‘[o]rders from Istanbul became more coercive and Damascus conformed to Ottoman models more strictly than before in both administration and architecture’ (Weber 2009:32). Consequently, the administrative reforms of 1864 and subsequent amendments resulted in a more sophisticated, institutionalized state apparatus with a hierarchical organization. The administration aimed at integrating the loyal local elite, for instance by introducing an elected city council,\textsuperscript{73} which soon got involved in the urban development of Damascus (Burns 2005:254; Weber 2009:35-39). During the last decades of Ottoman rule, Damascus experienced the construction of prominent new suqs within the old city, namely Suq Midhat Pasha\textsuperscript{74} on the western edge of Strait Street and Suq al Hamidiyye\textsuperscript{75} south of the citadel. Up to the present day, both markets form the most prestigious sections of the bazaar in Damascus. Furthermore, the Ottomans drove forward the improvement of the Damascene road, rail and telegraph network and the development of the new city centre west of the walled old town.\textsuperscript{76} These city extensions were closely connected with the Ottoman administrative reforms and resulted in the construction of numerous new official buildings (on this expansion of the city influenced by a westward trend, see Dettmann 1969:74; Burns 2005:255-257; Weber 2009:93-226).

Nevertheless, the geographical expansion of Damascus during the second half of the 19th century can by no means be ascribed only to new administrative institutions.

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\textsuperscript{73} On the role of the city council after 1864, see Weber (2009:83-86).

\textsuperscript{74} On Midhat Pasha, Ottoman Governor of Damascus from 1878-1880, see Hudson (2008:26-31).

\textsuperscript{75} Named after Sultan Abdulhamid (1876-1908).

\textsuperscript{76} ‘The decades between 1860 and 1914 marked a new era of prosperity which in retrospect makes a mockery of the common assumption that Turkey along with its provinces stumbled towards decline and disintegration’ (Burns 2005:254).
Damascus experienced a constant growth of its population, which Weber (2009) estimated to have doubled from 120,000 in 1850 to 240,000 in 1918 due to natural population growth and rural-urban migration. From the 1880s onwards, affluent Damascenes were leaving the walled old town in order to settle in one of the newly constructed, modern neighbourhoods emerging in the orchards of the Ghuta (the oasis surrounding Damascus) – a fashion that was to continue during the 20th century (Hudson 2008:41). The most prominent city extensions occurred along the road connecting central Damascus with the formerly independent town of al-Salihiyya, an area which hosted high-ranking officials and European consuls already in the early 19th century (Weber 2009:97). The causes for this suburbanization trend were manifold. After the outbreak of the cholera in 1902, well-off residents in particular regarded living in the overcrowded intra mural quarters as unhealthy. Rather, they preferred the favourable climate of the new neighbourhoods on the slopes of Mount Qasjun, which became easily accessible once the tramway was completed in 1907 (103-113). ‘The movement of residents of the new middle classes and elites of the city toward al-Salihiyya meant a surge in the building of new residences in the garden lands outside the city’ (Hudson 2008:42).

Prominent examples of newly developed residential quarters planned during the late Ottoman years are al-Muhajirin, al-Baramke and al-Qasa, the latter two being extensions of the older neighbourhoods of al-Qanawat and Bab Tuma, respectively. Al-Qasa has since been a preferred neighbourhood among affluent Damascene Christians (Weber 2009:95; 98-103).

From the 1870s onwards, the Syrian Province of the Ottoman Empire, and the Damascene ‘bureaucratic-landholding class’ in particular, benefited from a period of ‘tranquillity and prosperity absent in the first half of the century’ (Khoury 1983:53). In 1908, with the coup of the Young Turks, this came to a sudden end. After initially

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77 On the poor reliability of demographic data, see Weber (2009:94) and Hudson (2008:40f.).
79 New houses increasingly incorporated the distinctive Ottoman style of the late 19th century. Instead of the inward-facing courtyard house that shared walls with its neighbours and presented a modest exterior – a style that characterised the inner cities – new freestanding villas outside the new town centre of Marja and up the road to al-Salihiyya presents the Anatolian konak style weathered gently sloping roof over two-story facade punctuated with rectangular glass windows’ (Hudson 2008:42).
80 The Young Turks were a group of junior (Turkish) army officers that came to power in the summer of 1908.
implementing democratic reforms, they pushed on with the ‘Turkification’ of both administration and education. Consequently, this coup resulted in the decline of the influence of Arabic speaking Damascene notables and, consequently, in an increasing opposition to Ottoman rule. The following years saw the emergence of Arab nationalism (see e.g. Khoury 1983:53-74) and, after the end of World War I, the French Mandate, which embodied the disappointment of Arab longing for an independent state.

3.2 The French Mandate, 1920-1946

Focussing on the French Mandate (1920-1946),\(^\text{81}\) this section discusses how the French governed Syria based on a set of sophisticated divide-and-rule tactics and the Syrian ‘subjects’ reactions to those measures. It will briefly deal with the following aspects of French colonial rule in the Levant: first, the territorial dismemberment of the former Ottoman province of Syria, including the handling of issues concerning the autonomy of ethnic minorities; second, uneven rural-urban relations; and third, the rise of Arab/Syrian nationalism as a source of intra-class struggle and its impact on class formation. The prime objective of this section, however, is to investigate how the policies mentioned translated into visible changes in the urban fabric of Damascus. Before turning to these issues, it is important to point out that the Syrian political arena during the French Mandate saw, in terms of personnel, a stunning degree of continuity. Furthermore, power continued to emanate from the four urban centres of the country: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama (Khoury 1987:14f). Nevertheless, in contrast to Ottoman rule, the French administration was perceived as illegitimate: the resentment of Damascenes was accounted for by the political and military interventions of France in the 19th century on behalf of Christian minorities in the Levant, as was outlined earlier in this chapter.

In 1920, after a short intermezzo of Arab rule under King Faisal (1918-1920), French troops landed in Syria. French control was a consequence of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, a secretly negotiated British-French partition plan for the formerly Ottoman province of Syria, which was internationally ‘legitimized’ in 1920 and 1923.\(^\text{82}\)

\(^\text{81}\) See figure 6, a French map showing Damascus in 1929.
\(^\text{82}\) Treaty of Sèvres, 1920; League of Nations, 1923.
The implementation of the Mandate followed the blueprint of the French protectorate in Morocco. The Lyautey system, a sophisticated system of indirect rule,

had shown its worth during World War I, when with few troops and a tight budget Lyautey [Resident General of the Moroccan protectorate between 1912 and 1925] had been able not merely to maintain the status quo, but to expand the area under French control and stimulate economic development. Lyautey's administration, by its subtle exploitation of the strengths and weaknesses of Moroccan society and its respect for native religion and customs, seemed to hold out considerable promise as a solution of the delicate and difficult task of governing Syria (Burke 1973:176).

The Sykes-Picot Agreement caused only the first of a series of territorial losses resulting from colonial demarcation. In August 1920, immediately after defeating Faisal in the battle of Maysalun, France decided to demarcate ‘several indigenous Governments [sic] instead of one for the whole territory’ (Hourani 1946:172). Officially, this strategy was justified by referring to ‘the separatist feelings of various sections of the population and their different levels of development’ (ibid). However, establishing the States of Damascus and Aleppo (the latter initially included the Sanjaq of Alexandretta), the State of Greater Lebanon (1920), the Alawite State (1922) and the Jebel Druze (1922) points to France’s devide-and-rule approach to ruling her Mandate territories (see e.g. Hourani 1946:172-174; Khoury 1987).

Closely linked to the demarcation of a myriad of independent states on Syrian soil is the French administration’s handling of ethnic and religious minority issues. ‘[T]he various Christian sects, Jews, Armenians and Kurds—were (and still are) widely dispersed and did not enjoy a geographical base which could give rise to political importance’ (Khoury 1987:59). By contrast, both ‘compact minorities’ (Rabinovich 1979), namely the Alawites and the Druze, became an important instrument of French rule, which, as will be shown in the following chapters, had a considerable impact on

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83 ‘These strategies were the exploitation of minority differences through the establishment of autonomously administered zones in Syria; the pitting of rural areas against nationalist centres; and the use of malleable elements from the traditional Syrian elite to help govern’ (Khoury 1987:57).

84 On French politics in the Middle East prior to the Mandate, see Tanenbaum 1978.

85 The Druze and the Alawite communities were described as compact minorities as they shared the following characteristics: ‘both were Arabic speaking, closely-knit communities based on the solidarity of underprivileged and radical Shiite sects. Both inhabited mountainous areas on the fringes of Syria in which the majority of the community was concentrated and in which that community constituted an absolute majority (the smaller Ismalili community played a lesser role in the region’s modern history’ (Rabinovich 1979:694).
the political arena in Syria far beyond the Mandate era. Similarly, the demarcation of new territorial boundaries resulted in the weakening of the formerly powerful economic position of Syrian cities, which found themselves deprived of access to both ports and hinterland (Khoury 1987:104). During the early 1920s, the traditional urban elite, and members of the absentee land-owning class in particular, faced further deterioration of their economic basis when the mandatory power introduced measures of land reform in favour of notables based in the rural periphery and forged tight relations with elite factions willing to collaborate (Khoury 1987: 60-70). Consequently, the urban elite in cities traditionally competing for political and economic power such, most prominently, as Aleppo and Damascus started to oppose the French in growing unison, which facilitated the proliferation of nationalist ideas. Calls for unity and independence grew louder in Damascus and beyond (e.g. Hourani 1946:178f).

Opposition to the French Mandate culminated in the Great Syrian Revolt (1925-1927) which started as a local uprising against French domination in the Druze territories and soon flared up throughout Syria (see Julien 1946; Miller 1977; Khoury 1987; Provence 2005). Despite France’s attempts to keep minority territories separated from the nationalist urban centres, Druze leaders maintained links with nationalist activists in Damascus. In this regard, the Great Revolt laid open a variety of new alliances and connected different elite factions. The Great Revolt was, as Khoury (1987:167) points out, a populist movement ‘insofar as its active participants were drawn from nearly all walks of life in Syria—urban and rural, Muslim and Christian, rich and poor’. The author continues that, interestingly, the uprising ‘did not break out first in Syria’s nationalist towns’ (Khoury 1987:167) but in one of the country’s most deprived rural areas. What was the physical and social impact on the urban fabric of Damascus of the Great Syrian Revolt in particular and the French Mandate in general?

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86 Under and following the French Mandate individuals with a minority background were preferentially recruited into the army and the armed forces developed into a vehicle of upward social mobility.
Figure 6: Damascus in 1929

In September 1925, the revolt reached the suburbs of Damascus and its immediate hinterland. During the following weeks, the rebels made advances into central Damascus and, on 18th October 1925, occupied the al-Azm Palace, at that time the residence of the French High Commissioner in the very heart of the Syrian capital. The French (over-)reacted by attacking the old city, using their artillery and air force. During the three days of bombardment, many Syrians, most of whom were civilians, lost their lives, and vast parts of Old Damascus and nearby neighbourhoods to the West were destroyed. Afterwards, the French authorities fenced Damascus with barbed wire and swiftly constructed a system of bunkers, allowing access only at a few checkpoints. The ‘security plan’ resembled Baron Haussmann’s 19th-century ‘pacification’ of Paris (on the latter see Smith 1996:34-35) and aimed at separating the city from the orchards of the Ghouta—up to then a retreat area for rebel groups (Khoury 1987:190-191; Degeorge 2005:282-283). In January 1926, a contemporary witness reported on the construction works: ‘rapid construction of immense proportions is fully under way: one can see a ring road emerging and large areas cleared to make space for the use of modern combat weapons; a network of barbed wire winded its way relentlessly around the city’ (Pierre Alype cited in: Degeorge 2005:283).90 Meanwhile, unrest continued in the al-Midan quarter and in the villages of the Ghouta, causing civilians to flee the combat zones. Many of these refugees sought shelter in central Damascene quarters, where they encountered, and contributed to, an urban society undergoing a process of deep social transformation, as will be outlined in the following paragraph.

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87 The Damascus Municipality reported 1,416 victims (Khoury 1987:178), the French reported 137, whereas some Damascene observers estimate the loss of up to 5,000 lives (Wright 1926:264).
88 ‘Progressivement reconstruit, le quartier ouest intra-muros portera le nom Hariqa (<incendie>), en souvenir de la mission civilisatrice de la France’ (Degeorge 2005:281).
89 For an assessment of the 1925 incidents in Damascus and their consequences see Wright 1926; Khoury 1987:174-182; Degeorge 2005:280.
90 Author’s translation from the French original: ‘des travaux immenses entrent en pleine et rapide exécution […] : on voit apparaître un boulevard circulaire, et de larges percées favorable à l’action des moyens modern de combat ; un réseau de fils de fer barbelés se tisse autour de la ville’.
91 In February and May 1926, al-Midan became the scene of two further bombardments of a scale comparable to the assault on the old city in October 1925. In the Ghouta, fighting continued until July 1926, when the French launched a massive military operation to crack down on the rebels.
Throughout the early 20th century, old Damascene quarters managed to preserve their uniqueness as ‘important focal points of social and political organization, despite various external pressures which broke through their self-contained and isolated structures’ (Khoury 1984:514). In the context of this study, two processes that threatened ‘[t]he delicate balance of forces in the quarters’ (515) need to be considered: first, changes in the political sphere, and, second, continuing rural-urban migration. In pre-mandate Damascus, most decision-making took place at the level of the quarters and depended largely on personal contacts. During the Mandate, the growing importance of national politics required new networks that reached beyond the quarter. Furthermore, Damascene notable families had difficulties in integrating the increasing number of migrants into their clientele networks. Consequently, acting as brokers and patrons became progressively more complicated and competitive. ‘Feeling increasingly claustrophobic and threatened by the changing character of their quarters, especially their growing facelessness’ (ibid), some formerly influential families left the old city.\[^2\] It was not only actors who collaborated with the mandate power, but also nationalists opposing French rule in Syria that were attracted by the amenities of modern life such as running water and new architectural styles which, since the late Ottoman era, became available in the new garden suburbs of Damascus (see Khoury 1987:295-298 on push- and pull-factors influencing the decisions of privileged Damascenes in the process of suburbanization).

After the Great Syrian Revolt, nationalist politicians avoided direct violence against the Mandate and chose a more ‘cooperative’ form of political activism within the institutional framework imposed by the French. It is not my intention to go into the details of political developments in Syria under the French Mandate as this has been done elsewhere (e.g. Khoury 1984; 1987; Provence 2005; Neep 2012). Instead, I intend to further investigate the impact of French urban planning on the Syrian capital, which continued even after the end of the French Mandate in 1946. During the 1920s, the French administration in the Levant pursued two immediate policy goals: the

\[^2\] Patronage depended strongly on the patron’s physical presence in the quarter and on personal contact with the clients. When the notables left for the suburbs, social networks were first sustained by intermediaries such as old city merchants, but they soon ‘began to take less and less interest in the poor and their individual problems’ (Khoury 1987:307).
penetration of the territory by improving lines of communication and agricultural exploitation (Friès 1994:311). It is worthwhile to note that urban development in Damascus did not rank high on the French policy agenda. The main reason for this prioritisation was the already advanced implementation of Ottoman city planning:

In fact, when the French established themselves in Syria, the new Ottoman regulations had [already] changed the urban landscape of Aleppo and Damascus significantly. They [the Ottoman regulations] were inspired by European models [...] which suited the French. So the latter opted initially for their maintenance... (Friès 1994:312).

In addition to that, the French administration in Syria benefited, as mentioned above, from the experiences of indirect colonial rule gained by Lyautey’s administration in Morocco. For instance, these principles found expression in the proposals of French engineer Lucien Vibert who, regarding the new town, advocated the idea of a ‘separate and controlled development’ (Sabbagh 2005:74; author’s translation from French). The strict separation added to 19th- and early 20th-century Ottoman planning policies, most prominently to the emergence of a new town centre: Marje Square and its surroundings soon became an additional urban core that undermined the position of the old city. The first master plan for Damascus was produced by French planner René Danger in 1936-7 and was influenced by the ‘Moroccan experience’: ‘Its rationale is the segregation of communities by planning, in the zoning plan, neighborhoods exclusively for the indigenous population’ (Friès 1994:315).

According to the author of the master plan, ‘monuments which we admire contribute to our education and will continue to attract the interest of future generations. They force us to respect the past and will also influence [future] planning’ (Danger 1937:150, cited in Sabbagh 2005:75). Indeed, on the one hand, it was this colonial romanticism that caused a stand-still in the development of Old Damascus and even

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93 Author’s translation from the French original: ‘En effet, lorsque les Français s'installent en Syrie, les nouveaux règlements ottomans ont déjà profondément modifié les paysages urbains d'Alep et de Damas. Ils s'inspirent de modèles européens et régissent un nouvel ordre morphologique urbain qui convient aux Français. Ces derniers optent donc au départ pour leur maintien et pour leur gestion’.

94 Author’s translation from the French original: ‘Son principe de base est la ségrégation communautaire par la projection, dans le plan de zonage, de quartiers destinés exclusivement à la population indigène. Ils nous obligent au respect du passé et conditionneront aussi les tracés.’

95 Author’s translation from the French original: ‘des monuments que nous admirons contribuent à notre éducation et continueront à forcer l’intérêt des générations.’
accelerated disinvestment in the neighbourhoods. On the other hand, preventing modernist planning interventions as far as possible contributed to the preservation of a unique cultural heritage literally until the emergence of gentrification in the late 1990s (interview 105).

Following the Great Syrian Revolt, despite growing political tensions and economic hardship, Syria went through a time of relative stability. Nevertheless, this period came to an abrupt end when France, in violation of the Mandate, allowed the Sanjak of Alexandretta’s cession to Turkey in 1939 (see Petran 1972; al-Arsuzi 2003). The sacrifice of Syrian territory provoked intensified nationalist opposition to the Mandate and further undermined French legitimacy by challenging colonial rule. In 1940, Nazi-Germany defeated France, and Syria came briefly under the control of the pro-German Vichy administration. A year later, British troupe supported by Free French units occupied Syria in order to prevent it from becoming a German (air-)base in the Middle East. While the British took responsibility for Syria’s external security, the country’s administration was controlled by Free France. In May 1945, the resumed negotiations on Syrian and Lebanese independence failed because France insisted on a privileged position in the Levant. Most prominently, it refused to transfer control over the Troupes Spéciales to the new states (on the gradual transfer of power to the Syrian and Lebanese authorities and on the French conditions for doing so, see Longrigg 1958:335-344; Petran 1972:76-78; Khoury 1987:616). As a result, anti-French demonstrations erupted in Damascus and other parts of Syria. In May 1945, ‘[i]n an act reminiscent of the Great Revolt, the trigger-happy and paranoid French military command […] shelled and bombed Damascus from the air’ (Khoury 1987:616). This time, modern and affluent quarters housing much of Syria’s nationalist elite were the primary target of French retaliation as the scene of urban political struggle against French occupation had moved from Old Damascus, which had suffered most from the bombardment in 1925, to the new town (see Khoury 1987:616-617). The French bombardment led to the loss of 400 lives (Neep 2012:200)

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96 This would have posed a strategic threat to the oil supplies of the Allies from Iraq (Khoury 1987:591-595 on the occupation; Arielli 2010:340-341; Bou-Nacklie 1994:515-516 on the justification of/ reasons for the invasion).

97 In 1943, British pressure made France restore the constitutions of both Syria and Lebanon, which were suspended in 1939.
and major destruction. Fire ceased only after British intervention, which resulted in the temporary establishment of British military control. From then on, Syria and Lebanon insisted on total French evacuation – a demand that soon won American and Soviet support in the U.N. Security Council. Finally, on 17th April 1946, the last French soldier left Syria (Longrigg 1958: 345-362; Petran 1972:78-79; see also Zamir 2010 and Julien 1946).

3.3 Syria after 1946: From Independence to Authoritarian Rule

When France finally withdrew from Syria, it left behind a destabilized state which – despite promising economic growth (industrialization, agricultural mechanization and expansion of irrigation) – faced severe social and political problems. Deprived from parts of its territory and thus traditional markets and trade routes (Syria’s territory was reduced from 300,000 sqkm to 185,000 sqkm), the young nation had to deal with rapid population growth, increasing rural-urban migration, an internal struggle for political power and renewed foreign interference in the region resulting from the emerging bipolar world order of the Cold war (see Seale 1965). Between 1949 and 1970, Syria was the scene of as many as 12 successful military coups. This period of unrest came to an end only after Hafiz al-Asad (1970-2000) took over in a military coup and installed a personalized authoritarian regime. The frequent changes of government before 1970 convey a sense of Syria’s political instability. It is apparent that urban planning was not one of the top priorities of subsequent rulers, whose primary concern was to consolidate their position in power. The comparatively short periods for which most of these governments stayed in office – sometimes only a few days – did not enable the implementation of major planning projects, nor was planning considered to be a key strategy for consolidating power. Nevertheless, despite the general political instability following independence, the master plan for Damascus introduced by René Danger in 1936-7 served as an important planning guideline. The following paragraphs not only continue to focus on socio-economic and political processes that directly

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98 During a quarter of a century of French rule, Syria’s population grew from 1,74 million to almost 3 million, Damascus accounting for 240,000 (Weber 2009:95) residents in 1918 and for 296,000 (Escher 2000:157) at the end of the French Mandate.

99 Be’eri (1982) lists military coups in the Middle East; for a general analysis of the situation in Syria, see Seale (1965); Petran (1972).
shaped the urban fabric of Old Damascus. This section – while presenting subsequent phases of change in Syria’s post-independence history – also gives an overview of the actors in power, that is influential elites in state and economy respectively.

After independence, while the first Syrian parliaments were dominated by members of the traditional landowning bourgeoisie (Petran 1972:92-94), the political stage in Syria saw the emergence of new influential actors: the Ba’th Party and the army (Seale 1965:37). Their rise went along with a substantial shift of power away from the urban Old Bourgeoisie towards new actors of rural origin. The Ba’th Party100 – whose main political goals are pan-Arab unity, freedom and socialism101 – was founded in 1947 by two teachers from a Damascene merchant background, Sunni Muslim Salah al-Din Bitar and Orthodox Christian Michal ‘Aflaq. After the founding congress of the party, a second current gained influence within the Ba’th movement: deputies from the northern province of Latakia, among them several Alawites influenced by teacher and nationalist Zaki al-Arsuzi, a leader in the struggle against the transfer of the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939. This group blamed the ruling elite for the wretched conditions of many rural Syrians, [so they advocated] the inclusion in the 1947 party constitution of clauses calling for social justice: the limitation of agricultural holdings, worker participation in management, and state ownership of heavy industry, natural resources, and public utilities’ (Devlin 1991:1398).

Consequently, ‘the economic as well as the political power of the notables in Syria, and by extension in other [Arab] states, had to be broken if the Baath's vision of independence was to be achieved’ (ibid). However, despite its populist agenda, the Ba’th only became a mass social movement after merging with the Arab Socialist Party (ASP) in 1953. The latter – due to its anti-feudal campaigning – already had

100 Much has been written on the Syrian Ba’th Party and its ideology. See for instance Perlmutter 1969; Rabinovich 1972; Van Dam 1979; Devlin 1991.
101 ‘The Ba’th trinity of slogans—unity, freedom, and socialism—meant, in effect, a simultaneous assault on “reaction” at home and “imperialism” abroad. In the Arab east, the party was among the pioneers of the idea, which has since passed into Afro-Asian thinking, that freedom from foreign control […] must be accompanied by a thorough overhaul of traditional attitudes and social organization, by a national rebirth or resurrection (ba’th). This cannot be achieved by surface remodelling following western recipes. Genuine reform must spring from the roots of Arab national consciousness and from the faith in the Arab people themselves’ (Seale 1965:157).
widespread support from deprived peasant populations, in particular in the central province of Hama (Petran 1972:87-89).

Similarly to the Ba’th Party, the army became a powerful political player in independent Syria. It came out of the irregular *Troupes Spéciales*, which, during the Mandate, were used as an important tool of indirect colonial rule. In terms of recruitment, the French gave undue preference to members of ethnic and religious minorities from territories far away from Damascus, the centre of Syrian nationalism at the time. In many of Syria’s remote rural areas, a military career was the only opportunity to escape from poverty. Consequently, when Syria became an independent state and assumed control over its own army, members of the minorities were strongly represented (Seale 1965:37f; Perlmutter 1969:830f; Van Dam 1979(1996):26-29). Army colleges were open to all qualified cadets. At the same time, affluent urban families considered, since Ottoman times, army careers ‘beneath the dignity and social position of the Syrian notables’ (Khoury 1991:1382) and the military academy of Homs ‘to them was a place for the lazy, the rebellious, the academically backward, or the socially undistinguished’ (Seale 1965:37). Therefore, paying *badal*\(^{102}\) remained a widespread practice among the traditional urban elite (Batatu 1981:342; Khoury 1991:1382). According to Seale (1965), this was a fatale miscalculation as ‘it was the army, an eager and indoctrinated instrument, which later [in 1963] destroyed the power of the landed families and urban merchants’ (37). Batatu (1981:340) emphasises that prior to the Ba’th revolution of 1963, Alawi officers – in comparison to Sunnis in the officer corps – ‘were not as important numerically’; their influence was based rather on the lower ranks of the army. The (still) dominant role of Sunni Muslims within the officer corps became evident during the military coup of 28th September 1961, when a group of Damascene Sunni officers launched a successful putsch which put an end to the union with Egypt.\(^{103}\) However, during the 1960s, Sunnis lost much of their influence in Syria’s armed forces as a series of coups in March 1962 targeted Damascene influence. Officers from minority and rural backgrounds, most of them

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\(^{102}\) *Badal* is a financial substitute for military service; see also the section on the Ottoman Empire.

\(^{103}\) Between 1958 and 1961, Syria and Egypt formed the United Arab Republic.
Alawites, exploited infighting among Sunni officers and consolidated their own power base (Van Dam 1979 (1996):31; Be’eri 1982:80f).

The Ba’thi takeover following a successful military coup on 8th March 1963 allowed radical efforts to redistribute political and economic power, for instance, by nationalizing the country’s key industries (Rabinovich 1972:141-143). Another approach was the preferential recruitment into the civil services of previously underrepresented parts of the population, often individuals from a rural or minority background – a policy which contributed to the displacement of the traditional urban ruling class from power (Perthes 1991:32; Hinnebusch 2001:48). Financed by considerable oil rents paid by the Gulf States in the years following the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, “[t]his populist authoritarian game was accomplished through a “social pact” between the ruler and the ruled” (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004:382). This pact took the form of public service jobs, free education, health care, as well as food and fuel subsidies and thus guaranteed legitimacy and the support of the masses.

Enhanced upward social mobility following the Ba’th revolution of 1963 had a direct impact on Syrian cities, which had to deal with the consequences of accelerated rural-urban migration in terms of housing, health, education and employment. Some rural newcomers who had links with the regime managed to gain wealth and political influence and, while threatening the privileges of the urban ruling class, went through a process of embourgeoisement in the following decades. The political and economic marginalization of the old elite enabled the Ba’th Party to ‘entrench itself in Syria’s hostile urban environments’ (Hinnebusch 2001: 53 referring to Delvin 1983:23, 121). When the new bourgeoisie consolidated its power and entered the urban stage, ‘[t]hey tried to emulate the lifestyles of the old bourgeoisie, but more ostentatiously’ (Perthes 1991:34). The emergence of this new bourgeoisie will be dealt with below.
3.3.1 Hafiz al-Asad and Syria’s Post-Populist Turn

The rule of radical factions of the Ba’th Party ended in 1970, with another coup: Hafiz al-Asad’s takeover, which later became known as the ‘Corrective Movement’. Al-Asad faced major political challenges. The rivalry with archenemy Israel and opposition from the mainly Sunni urban (business) elite were particularly testing.

To secure its power, the al-Asad regime continued to apply and consolidate ‘control over key levers of power’, including the Ba’th Party, as a means of ‘popular incorporation’ and of ‘crafting [...] an ‘army-party-symbiosis’’ (Rabinovich 1972: 212). Al-Asad created a personalized presidential system in Syria, forging a broad social base to safeguard his power, which he sustained through various security services. A state of emergency put in place in 1963 (Leverett 2005:22-27; for the Syrian state under Hafiz al-Asad see Seale 1988:169-184) was finally lifted in 2011, just to be replaced by anti-terrorism legislation. In contrast to the Ba’thi radicals, who, between 1963 and 1970, incorporated a populist agenda aiming at mobilizing additional constituencies and thereby widely bypassing the traditional urban elite, al-Asad’s approach, which was ‘less ideologically inclined, more pragmatic politically, far more careerist and, most important, fundamentally outward looking’ (Haddad 2009:36), aimed at putting an end to the temporary marginalization of the traditional bourgeoisie and the private economy. When financial resources (i.e. oil rents) decreased, the Syrian regime, like others in the region, altered its co-optation strategies ‘from allocative to inclusionary co-optation’ (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004:382). Thus, the focus shifted towards co-opting individual political and economic actors, a process that resulted in ‘the inclusion of business elites as a new pillar of the regime’ (ibid).

104 The first paragraph of this section will be published with minor alterations in Sudermann 2014, forthcoming.
105 Syrian-Israeli relations escalated in the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 and a series of later incidents of direct and indirect confrontation between the two countries or their Lebanese proxies.
106 The demands of the urban bourgeoisie were addressed by allowing partial economic liberalization and reducing state-control over foreign trade, which, combined with efforts to attract Arab investment and remittances of Syrians working abroad, contributed to the economic recovery of the 1970s and – at least partially – to relaxing state-business relations (Haddad 2009: 36; Hinnebusch 2001: 64f).
107 ‘By “inclusionary,” we mean the co-optation of social groups with the aim of either widening a regime’s power base or directly controlling society’ (ibid).
Similarly to the rulers of other populist republics in the Middle East, in order to facilitate a controlled economic opening (infitah) to the West, al-Asad turned to a post-populist mode of governance. Post-populism can be characterised as alterations in a regime’s constituencies as well as the limitation ‘of core policies on which populist authoritarianism legitimized itself’ (Hinnebusch 2010:211), such as, for instance, state employment and food subsidies:

Post-populism requires the maintenance of authoritarian power, albeit now used to reconstruct and defend rather than break down social inequalities (as in the populist period). Accordingly, the ruler is transformed from a charismatic man of the people into a presidential monarch enjoying indefinite tenure and with vast powers of patronage allowing him to co-opt and rotate elites and sustain clientele networks.

Consequently, since al-Asad’s seizure of power in 1970, the country’s political and economic elite saw conspicuous alterations. Significant parts of the Damascene merchant class managed to rehabilitate their pre-1963 position (Bahout 1994:73; Perthes 1991:32). At the same time, the country saw the rise of what can be called the State Bourgeoisie, a group ‘owing its position to its loyalty to the regime and often its personal connections to President [Hafiz] al-Asad’ (Perthes 1991:34). The success of this group, whose members usually shared a petty-bourgeois or middle class background, had its origin in privileges rather than in legal practices: ‘To put it less politely, this group became rich from theft, bribes and commissions’ (Perthes 1991:34). Consequently, the new class can best be described as an oligarchy ‘composed of high-ranking officials and their offspring’ (Ismail 2009:18). They benefited from ‘a state in which the bureaucracy directly controls essential parts of the national economy, including state planning, yet with no democratic control over those who run the state and little ability to prevent private business from organizing the external relations of the state economy’ (Perthes 1991:36). Co-opting new members of the business elite provided the regime with a strategy to broaden its constituency beyond the populist masses and thus to ensure authoritarian resilience (e.g. by granting

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108 Once PA [populist authoritarianism] was exhausted, most MENA states started to reintegrate into the world capitalist economy (infitah). Their move to reliance on foreign and private capital required a capital-friendly investment climate and export competitiveness, hence driving down wages and labour rights. This required the inclusion of emerging crony capitalists and the exclusion of the old populist constituency in a post-populist version of authoritarianism (Hinnebusch 2010:204).
privileged access to profitable business sectors like tourism and real estate; see following chapters).

The rise of the new class and its struggle for political and economic control continued and even accelerated under Bashar al-Asad, who continued the post-populist transformations initiated by his father. The endeavour of the new upper class to gain ‘visibility’ and market access within Old Damascus is the context for gentrification which will be investigated in the following chapters. The remainder of this chapter, however, focuses on urban change in Damascus following Syria’s independence in 1946.

3.3.2 Urban Developments, 1946-2000

Based on the socio-political changes discussed in the previous section, the following paragraphs investigate changes in the urban fabric of Damascus. The focus, therefore, is on developments and policies which had a direct impact on the old town and its immediate surroundings while contributing to the resilience of the regime.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Damascus experienced a massive population growth, which, as stated above, gained momentum after independence. Escher (2000: 158-159) distinguishes three stages of structural developments that shaped the built environment in post-colonial Damascus: First, during the 1950s, the city experienced the concentration of its area; second, from the 1960s until the mid-1980s, Damascus went through a period of dynamic expansion; and, finally, from the mid-1980s onwards the Syrian capital experienced a massive expansion of its agglomeration. Paradoxically, while during the first 25 years after independence Syria went through a period of political instability, urban development saw a striking continuity. In this regard, it is crucial to recall that urban planning in Syria ‘originated from former colonial initiatives and developed without breaking with the legal and conceptual framework that had been established under the colonial rule’ (Verdeil 2012: 249f; see also Dettmann 1969:221). Thus, the main focus of planning was on tackling urban growth on the fringes of the city, which explains why there were no
interventions in the old city. During the 1950s and 1960s, the expansion of Damascus followed the guidelines set by René Danger’s master plan of 1936-7 (Dettmann 1969:223; see also Escher 2000:159), which sketched out the most important arteries of the French new town and its later extensions in the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile, a lot of emphasis was put on extending upscale neighbourhoods for Syria’s new elites (e.g. Abu Rumane and Malki) and on constructing public buildings like hospitals, the national museum and new university buildings (Escher 2000:160; see Dettmann 1969 for more details).

In 1958, Syria became part of the United Arab Republic (see above), and its administration experienced substantial alterations based on the Egyptian model. When a coup ended the Syrian–Egyptian union three years later, ‘the socialist orientation lasted’ (Verdeil 2012:256). The foundation of an institution for public housing in 1961 represents the first state intervention in the up to then privately controlled construction sector, which, in 1966, was followed by the launch of state-financed housing cooperatives, and, in 1975, by the establishment of Military Housing, which was controlled by the Ministry of Defence (Degeorge 1994:195). However, all these attempts failed to tackle the ‘housing crisis’ (‘crise de logement’, Bianquis 1980:377) especially when, as a result of poor agricultural production, rural-urban migration accelerated and contributed to the rapid extension of informal settlements in the Damascene periphery (Bianquis 1980:377; Degeorge 1994:196; Escher 2000:160; Balanche 2009; Goulden 2011). At the same time, the old city _intra-muros_ experienced a process of increasing degradation. Degeorge (1994:196) characterized this process as the result of a two-direction migration process: ‘The exodus of the traditional bourgeoisie which was attracted to the “European-style” districts by the “modern” and the “comfort”, the arrival of rural migrants without substantial financial means and ready to put up with worse housing conditions’.  

Houses abandoned by wealthy Damascenes were frequently subdivided into separate housing units and rented out to less affluent tenants—an a practice resulting in an

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109 Author’s translation from the French original: ‘L’exode de la bourgeoisie traditionelle, attirée par le « moderne » et le « confort », vers les quartiers à l ‘« européenne », arrivée de ruraux sans grandes ressources financières et prêt à s’accommoder de pires conditions de logement.’

110 In the early 1990s, subdivided tenements accounted for 80% of the residential housing stock within Old Damascus (Degeorge 1994:197).
increasing population density within the old city (see e.g. Dettmann 1969; Pfaffenbach 2004; Totah 2006; interview 105). Due to low revenues, landlords were not able, or not willing, to conduct necessary maintenance work. Consequently, vast sections of the historic urban fabric – both *intra* and *extra muros* – experienced extensive disinvestment or fell into despair (Degeorge 1994:197; appendix 3). The importance of centrally located disinvested real estate in triggering gentrification-like processes in Old Damascus will be discussed below. The following paragraphs, however, are dedicated to urban policies that contributed to both the neglect\(^\text{111}\) and the preservation of Old Damascus in its present form and to economic and legal reforms in Syria’s real estate and tourism sectors that where implemented under Bashar al-Asad.

In 1963, the Ba’ath party came to power, and it pushed on with modernizing the country in compliance with the eastern European model. ‘At the time, the Syrian regime developed links with the socialist countries and Bulgarian and Polish experts were appointed in various administrations, including the planning one’ (Verdeil 2012:256). Consequently, residential quarters constructed at the time bear the hallmarks of socialist planning: big apartment blocks with collective district heating and one commercial centre per block (Balanche 2012:82). Bureaucrats and army cadres, most of whom came ‘from the provinces, particularly the Alawite region (in the country’s north-west), the heartland of the Al-Assad clan’ (Balanche 2012:82),\(^\text{112}\) were the main beneficiaries of these new quarters.\(^\text{113}\) In 1964, when collaboration with Bulgarian planner Morozov failed to result in an acceptable new master plan,\(^\text{114}\) the municipality of Damascus commissioned French architects Écochard and Benshoya to draw a master plan, which came to be strongly influenced by the Charta of Athens and which was officially approved in 1968 (Degeorge 1994:197). The key objectives of Écochard’s plan were, *inter alia*, the protection of the Ghuta by prohibiting

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\(^\text{111}\) See also Petran (1972:85) on suburbanization and disinvestment.

\(^\text{112}\) ‘Venus de province, et particulièrement de la région alaouite (nord-ouest du pays), le fief du clan Al-Assad’.

\(^\text{113}\) The lower ranks of the armed forces, who share their rural origin with their superiors, were settled along the main axes in order to control the capital in the case of an uprising (Balanche 2012:82).

\(^\text{114}\) ‘Le project élaboré en 1957 par le Bulgare Morozov n’ayant pas été retenu car il condamnait la vieille ville…’ (Degeorge 1994:197). [The project developed by the Bulgarian [planner] Morozov in 1957 had not been retained because it condemned the old town … (author’s translation from French).]

\(^\text{115}\) As an assistant in the team of René Danger, Michel Écochard had already worked on the master plan of 1936 for Damascus.
construction and facilitating, instead, the expansion of Damascus outside the oasis, e.g. on the slopes of the Mount Qassiun; the provision of transport infrastructure, with a special focus on the development of a viable road network due to the spread of automobile ownership and usage; and, in contrast to the previous master plan of 1936-7, the upgrading of the old town *intra* and *extra muros* (Degeorge 1994:197; Escher 2000:161; for a detailed assessment of the Plan Écochard, see also Abdulac 1982; Verdeil 2012).

Within the old city, one project was of particularly high priority for the authorities and was started in 1966, even before the official launch of the master plan: a new north-western entrance to the city which cut through the ancient urban fabric of the neighbourhoods outside the walled city. […] The project had a symbolic meaning, since it linked the Ommeyad Square with Hamidiyeh and Hamidiyeh with the modern city of the 1930–1950s where most State administrations were established. It also fitted the modern need for opening wide streets for an increasingly car-equipped middle and upper-class, at a time when the traffic was congested in the narrow street network (Verdeil 2012:257).

However, the Syrian authorities disagreed with direct planning interventions within the old city *intra muros*, namely with Écochard’s suggestion for making the Arab monuments or the Roman ruins more easily accessible to cars - a project that would have resulted in the destruction of much of the urban fabric (Degeorge 1994:198). In this regard, one can argue that the hesitant attitude of the municipality vis-à-vis parts of the Plan Écochard preserved the walled old town of Damascus from further interference until it was declared a world heritage site in 1979. The preservation of Old Damascus is the subject of chapter 5.

Politically, the period starting with Hafiz al-Asad’s seizure of power in 1970 marked the beginning of a period of relative – though challenged – stability (Balanche 2012; Verdeil 2012:258). The new strongman, again financed by technical aid from eastern European countries, attempted to give Damascus the image of a modern capital of a progressive socialist country in development. In order to emphasise the power of the state, a number of hallmark buildings such as the al-Asad Library, the Tischreen Stadium and the presidential palace were built (Balanche 2012:82). Despite Hafiz al-
Asad’s calls for expanding public housing during the early 1970s, the supply of accommodation remained far behind demand and the housing crisis even deteriorated during the political crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s and the ensuing economic crisis since 1986. Consequently, informal settlements, often tolerated by the authorities, have since continued to spread in Damascus and the Ghuta. (Bianquis 1980; Balanche 2009; Goulden 2011; see also appendix 24).

3.4 Between Boom and Crisis – Tourism and Real Estate under Bashar al-Asad

When Hafiz al-Asad died on 10th June 2000, Bashar al-Asad followed in his father’s footsteps. The old ruler worked hard to facilitate a smooth transfer of power. However, as some analysts stated, Hafiz al-Asad left his heir with difficult challenges, most prominently, ‘to bring the economy into the modern world and to satisfy the desires of the younger generation for a better, freer and more peaceful life’ (Hinnebusch 2001: ix; see also Leverett 2005:27-31). It soon became clear that political reform was not on the new ruler’s agenda. Economic reform, however, rapidly became the preferred sphere of activity of the young president and his advisors (Seifan 2010:7), who carried on following the principles of the second infitah and the zeitgeist of investment law no.10 of 1991 in particular (Clerc and Hurault 2010:162). Consequently, much attention was paid to neoliberal reform and to the country’s partial transition to market economy. Progress was made; inter alia, in private investment promotion, the trade sector, monetary policy, the banking and financial sectors and private education (Seifan 2010:13-20). Throughout the Middle East, selective economic reforms became a strategy of ‘authoritarian upgrading’ (Heydemann 2007, see discussion in chapter 2) which enabled regimes to strictly control economic liberalization and thus remain resilient to domestic and external reform pressures. Regarding urban development in Syria and gentrification in Damascus in particular, it is important to note that, ‘[f]our decades after the issuance

116 On the transfer of power and the numerous challenges facing the young president, see e.g. Lesch 2005; Leverett 2005; Zisser 2007
117 Law no. 10 of 1991 aimed at stimulating direct investment by facilitating the generation of growth and employment as well as the transfer of knowhow and technology. For a comprehensive summary see Haddad 2012:131.
of highly protective legislation’ (Seifan 2010:18), the real estate sector developed somewhat hesitantly. Nevertheless, in recent years it has been notably liberalized (19), a strategy by which the regime – intentionally or not – set the stage for gentrification. However, before focussing on legal changes facilitating private investment in Syria’s real estate sector, it is worthwhile to investigate some of the socio-economic parameters in the early 2000s that made some analysts describe the conditions in Damascus as a genuine housing crisis (Balanche 2009; Goulden 2011).

As outlined above, notwithstanding the regime’s attempts to expand formal housing, whose underlying policies date back as far as the early 1970s, supply was far behind demand (Balanche 2009; Goulden 2011). The situation further deteriorated following the economic crisis of 1986 and during the last decade of Hafiz al-Asad’s rule, when huge segments of the population faced a decline in purchasing power. An annual population growth of around 3%, a severe drought in Eastern Syria that accelerated rural-urban migration, the influx, into Damascus alone, of more than one million refugees in the aftermath of the US attack on Iraq and the incapacity of the authorities to tackle the situation resulted in the country’s current housing deficit (OBG 2008:96; Harding 2009). When Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, ‘[t]he production of formal private housing was at the lowest level since 1975. And despite the strong demand, one in five housing units remained unoccupied: vacant, under construction, or partially built, waiting to be sold or finished’ (Clerc and Hurault 2010:167).

In the first half of the 2000s, the metropolitan area of Damascus experienced a shortage of residential, commercial and office real estate, which resulted in rising property prices. As a consequence, the size of the metropolitan region’s population living in informal accommodation continued to rise to between 40 and 50 per cent (OBG 2009:110; Harding 2009; see also Lavinal 2008 cited by MAM 2008). The OBG (2006:86) described spontaneous housing as an occurrence resulting from ‘a regulatory glitch’. Accordingly, owners of informally constructed homes were entitled to keep their property as long as the structure had been built with a solid roof. ‘As a result, Syrians [became] efficient house builders, and informal housing [could] be built "spontaneously" in four days’ (OBG 2006:86). Regarding the lack of office space,
Clerc and Hurault (2010) argue that the opening of the banking and insurance sectors in 2001 and 2005 resulted in increasing demand which could not be satisfied and thus resulted in inflated rents for office space. In their study ‘Office Space across the World’, Cushman and Wakefield (2009:6) ranked office space in Damascus as the fourth most expensive in the Middle East. Others – though referring to Cushman and Wakefield (2009) – mentioned Damascus even as the ‘eighth most expensive city in the world’ (Cummins 2009; Clerc and Hurault 2010:167).

In the previous paragraphs I outlined how, since the 1970s, rural-urban migration, the influx of refugees from neighbouring countries and the inability of the regime to provide enough affordable housing, resulted in the country’s housing crisis. I will now focus on how, under the rule of Bashar al-Asad, the authorities, who committed themselves to the principles of ‘social market economy’ in 2005, reacted to the diverse challenges in the property sector.

After Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, legal interventions linked to real estate focused on improving the investment environment within the real estate and construction sectors, on expanding Syria’s tourism sector and on regulating (controlling) informal housing and providing affordable housing for low-income populations. In an attempt to stimulate both domestic and foreign private investment, the Syrian government implemented substantial changes to the legal framework by issuing Real Estate Development Law No.15 of 2008, which the same commentator described as ‘a giant step towards face-lifting the real estate sector’ (al-Sayyed 2010:28). The new law had a direct impact on numerous aspects of real estate development. First and foremost, it set up the Real Estate Investment and Development Commission (REDIC), an independent administrative body, which, under the supervision of the Ministry of Housing and Construction, aspired both to regulate and reorganize real estate development and to attract foreign investment. Other duties of the REDIC included the provision of land and related services, the

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118 Issues as diverse as the establishment of real estate development firms by national and foreign actors, which was previously prohibited, the corporate form of these firms, taxation (e.g. tax exemptions for building material imported from abroad), or the subdivision of Syria into real estate development districts fall within the scope of Law No.15 of 2008 (see e.g. The Syria Report 2009:8).
establishment of large-scale development projects, including the provision of suitable housing for middle- and low-income families, and, finally, dealing with informal housing, including the payment of compensation for confiscated property (2010:18; al-Sayyed 2010:28; The Syria Report 2009: 8; OBG 2009:106).

In order to deal with the issue of informal housing, a set of additional laws were introduced shortly before and after Law No.15 of 2008. Decree No.9 of 2008 aimed at criminalizing any informal structures constructed after the implementation of the decree. In addition to announcing a set of draconic penalties (including imprisonment of up to ten years), the decree allowed the demolition of then ‘illegal’ structures.\textsuperscript{119} Law No.33 of 2008 allowed residents of informal dwellings built prior to 2008 to register their property if they paid a property tax of an estimated 10 percent of the value of the property. In 2007, a law regulating the activities of housing cooperatives and facilitating access to formal housing for low- and middle-income earners was introduced (Law No.17 of 2007). In the formal housing sector, tenant-friendly legislation dating back to the 1950s ‘kept a cap on rental prices’ (Corporate Syria 2009:22) for decades. Due to the unfavourable conditions for the existence of profit,\textsuperscript{120} not renting out empty property became a common practice among landlords\textsuperscript{121} and resulted in high vacancy rates (Corporate Syria 2009:9, 22; Totah 2006:216; Goulden 2011:22). The new Rent Law No.6 of 2001 liberalized rent prices and re-regulated landlord-tenant relations. For instance, the new legislation enabled landlords to evict even long-term tenants as long as they agreed to pay a compensation of 40 percent of the estimated market value of the property (interview 115; Haidar 2009). But why does legislation related to real estate, most prominently Law No.15 of 2008, link the issue of informal settlements with economic motivation to attract private investment? And

\textsuperscript{119} Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, the ‘illegal’ status of whole neighbourhoods has been used by the Syrian regime as a pretext to justify the sectarian cleansing of predominantly Sunni districts supporting the opposition. Meanwhile, informal settlements like Mezzeh 86, a stronghold of (mainly Alawite) regime supporters, remain untouched.

\textsuperscript{120} ‘Contracts were signed for a period of six months. If tenants stayed on after this, the contract would automatically become long-term, giving tenants the right to remain in the house indefinitely and pay a fixed low rent’ (Haidar 2009).

\textsuperscript{121} In the old city, landlords were often the former owner-occupants from a traditional bourgeois background who left Old Damascus for the Western-style new quarters.
why does responsibility for both real estate and informal settlements lie with the newly founded agency REDIC?

Since the 1960s, Syria has suffered from a chronic housing crisis, and demand for formal housing has consistently exceeded supply. In recent years, centrally-located land was increasingly sought after for the development of office space, shopping malls and luxury housing for members of Syria’s growing upper and middle classes. In Damascus, ‘[s]ome of the most desirable neighbourhoods in the city - including Muhajireen, below Mount Cassioun, and '86, behind Mazzeh, are built illegally - leaving real estate developers thirsty to re-develop’ (OGB 2006:88). This intense race for space\textsuperscript{122} resulted in rising property prices, but ‘[i]n a country where the average monthly salary is between S£5000 ($100) and S£10,000 ($200), much of the residential stock remains out of reach of most people’ (OGB2008:96), and for many people informal housing remains the sole option. In the context of the progressive retreat of the state from welfare provision for the masses (Guazzone and Pioppi 2009) and of the redistribution of its limited revenues to the advantage of a loyal new bourgeoisie and ‘crony capitalists’,\textsuperscript{123} policies like public-private partnerships (PPP) became buzzwords and widespread practices. The Syrian government implemented a series of housing programmes such as the attempt to locate low-income populations in satellite towns.\textsuperscript{124} However, they fell short of tackling the crisis and seem to have been employed as a justification to further outsource social responsibilities to private actors in the field of public housing under the supervision of an investor-friendly REDIC (Goulden 2011:199; OBG 2006:88;).

Since former president Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970, tourism has played an important role in opening up the country. During the \textit{infitah} reforms of the 1970s, the development of a competitive tourism sector as both a source of foreign exchange and a possibility to involve the private sector ranked high on the political agenda (Perthes

\textsuperscript{122} Chapter entitled ‘The Space Race’ in OBG 2008.
\textsuperscript{123} Hertog (2013:1) defined crony capitalism as ‘tight, informal and exclusive networks between leading regime actors and select capitalists’. According to that, in this thesis, the terms crony capitalist and crony are used for businesspersons that are involved in ‘cronyism’.
\textsuperscript{124} For details regarding the functioning of housing cooperatives, literally the only form of formal housing available for low-income populations, see Balanche (2009:9).
1995:51f). Decree 186 of 1985 further promoted private investment in tourism projects (Seifan 2010:5). In the context of economic liberalization and reorganization, the tourism sector continued to enjoy a certain privilege. Aiming at stimulating tourism development in Syria, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) implemented ‘initiatives designed to ease bureaucracy and provide financial incentives’ (OBG 2009:107). For instance, as soon as a minimum of 40% of the surface area and 70% of the investment sum of a real estate development project were dedicated to tourism activities like hotels, apartments or shopping, the project was classified as a tourism project. Furthermore, investors ‘benefited’ from the classification of their projects as tourism projects in terms of a specific labour code, which allowed a ‘hire and fire’ approach that did not conform with the high level of worker protection in other sectors of the country’s economy. The prospect of benefiting from the above-mentioned regulations explains why incorporating a tourism component into mixed-use projects became a common practice (Clerc and Hurault 2010:164).

With huge amounts of attractive state land at their disposal, both centrally located and on the periphery, the authorities were well aware of the value of their property and looked out for ways to use this asset to attract private investment while maintaining control. Consequently, projects on state land were often realized on a build-operate-transfer basis (BOT). Initially, this form of public-private cooperation was introduced exclusively for tourism projects. Starting in 2005, the Ministry of Tourism organized annual Tourism Investment Markets (a trade show aiming at the promotion of Syria as a tourist destination) where investors had the opportunity to bid for BOT licences, with the state providing the land (OBG 2006:76; OBG 2009:106f; OBG 2010:117, 126). Economists criticised BOT projects for their temporary character: ‘Developers want stability to own the land and control it in changing economic environments. […] The difference is if I own the project, I can be there in the long run’ (Kahale cited in OBG 2009:107).

Simply expressed, any crisis with an impact on tourism not only causes operational losses, but also threatens the profitability of the whole project. Crucially, public-private cooperation like implementing a BOT project does not result in a retreat of the
state. In authoritarian contexts such as Syria, it creates new forms of state control, as will be investigated in chapter 6.

Before focussing on the geographic location of hotspots of real estate development in Damascus, attention needs to be paid to the often criticised lack of central urban planning in Damascus. It seems as if the al-Asad administration – following a divide and rule approach – subdivided the province of Damascus in order to gain full control over the capital which resisted the rule of the Ba’th party. Consequently, since 1970, the metropolitan area of Damascus has been separated into two competing administrative entities – the Governorate of Damascus and the Governorate of Rural Damascus. While the former officially still followed above-mentioned master plan drafted by Michel Écochard in 1968, the latter started working on a new (separate) master plan in 2009 (Balanche 2009:8; Clerc and Hurault 2010:163). Competition inhibited the actors’ ability to cooperate in the field of planning, let alone to implement a joint general master plan for the whole region of Damascus. Consequently, both authorities adopted ‘an opportunistic [approach to] development, based on the availability of public land and the initiatives of investors’ (Clerc and Hurault 2010:166-167) and aiming at attracting private investment. ‘The lack of a unified master plan or vision’ (OGB 2009:108) resulted in uncoordinated building activity and the massive expansion of the metropolitan area (Balanche 2009:8). Furthermore, as will be discussed in chapter 6, the approach of the authorities contributed to the informalization of urban policy.

After Bashar al-Asad took office, and particularly after the 10th Five-Year-Plan was passed in 2005, officially introducing the model of ‘social’ market economy, many sectors of Syria’s economy went through a process of partial opening. Meanwhile, attempts to attract both Syrian and foreign private real estate investors – mostly from the Arab Gulf States – proved to be successful. In recent years, due to the new investor-friendly legislation outlined above, many mega-projects were announced. In 2011, some were under construction or already completed. Prior to the uprising, the list of international real estate developers investing in multi-million dollar projects in and around the Syrian capital at the time read like the ‘Who’s Who?’ of the Middle Eastern
real estate elite and included regional players such as the Emaar-Invest Group (The Eighth Gate) and Majid al-Futtaim, both based in Dubai, Qatari Diar, and a number of Syrian investors such as, for instance, Bena Property, Souria Holding and Palmyra Real Estate (for an overview of major development projects in Syria, see The Syria Report 2009:13-20; OBG 2010:119-126). It is important to note that the GCC states and Turkey accounted for most foreign direct investment in Syria (OBG 2010:41; Faek 2012), which, in 2009, added up to $3.5bn or 4.76% of Syria’s GDP.\textsuperscript{125} In contrast, throughout the 2000s, Western investors stayed away from projects in Syria, deterred by circumstances ensuing from the country’s resilient authoritarianism. These included, first, the country’s unfavourable investment climate; second, the Bush administration’s \textit{Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003};\textsuperscript{126} third, the dragging implementation of a Syrian-European Association Agreement (on EU-Syria relations, see Hinnebusch 2003; Zorob 2008; Cavatorta 2011); fourthly, the late opening of Syria’s attractive real estate sector to foreign investors; and, finally, since the outbreak of the uprising-turned-civil-war in the spring of 2011, the implementation of several rounds of sanctions by the EU and its partners targeting Syria’s economy and individuals involved in the crackdown on the country’s opposition.

Harvey (2010:174) characterized urban development projects in the Arab Gulf states as ‘[a]stonishing, spectacular and in some respect absurd’ as they represent an opportunity for ‘mopping up the capital surpluses arising from oil wealth in the most conspicuous way possible’. Elsewhere, although on a more theoretical level, Harvey argued:

\begin{quote}
If there is not enough purchasing power in an existing market, then new markets must be found by expanding foreign trade, promoting new products and lifestyles, creating new credit instruments and dept-financed state expenditures. If, finally the profit rate is too low, then state regulation
\end{quote}

of “ruinous competition,” monopolization (mergers and acquisitions), and capital exports to fresh pastures provide ways out (Harvey 2012:6).

With regard to Arab investment in Syria’s newly emerging real estate sector prior to the uprising, it is the export of capital to a virgin market which gained momentum. After 9/11, Arab investment capital was not welcomed in the US and, consequently, started to flow first to cities in the GCC states themselves and then to the wider region. The influx of GCC billions into cities throughout the Middle East – from Morocco in the West (Bogaert 2012) to the Egyptian metropolis Cairo and Alexandria (Hamarneh 2010), Beirut (Ross and Jamil 2011), Amman (Parker 2009) and Damascus (see analysis above) – facilitated the proliferation of specific principles of development by Gulf-based real-estate firms, a process Elsheshtawy (2004) labelled ‘Dubaization’. He argued that the process further deepened social inequalities by displacing poor populations to invisible locations in the periphery, whereas the city ‘is designed to cater for the rich and powerful’ (Elsheshawy 2008:22).

Following the Dubai model, urban development in the Syrian capital took the form of private investment in mixed-use mega-projects which resulted both in the transformation of central sections of New Damascus – particularly in the corridor along the river Barada (Vignal 2010) – and in the emergence of entirely new cities on previously undeveloped land.127 In terms of location, a remarkable concentration of ‘master planned projects’ (Clerc and Hurault 2010) that combine luxury housing, upscale shopping and commerce can be found in Yarfoor in the Western periphery situated on the highway to Beirut. Before the Syrian crisis which started in the spring of 2011, Yafoor seemed to be turning into the new upmarket centre of Damascus, well connected to Syria’s road network but, at the same time, far away from informal settlements and other realities of growing social inequality.

Referring to post-war suburbanization in the US, Harvey argued that ‘[i]nvestment in rents on land, property, mines and raw materials […] becomes an attractive proposition for all capitalists’ (Harvey 2009:181). He compared the latter to ‘locusts’ which

127 It is important to keep in mind that most construction takes place either in the form of small projects or in the informal housing sector.
descended on land in the periphery of US cities as soon as the rent on that land began to rise. Consequently, in order to siphon off speculative profits, landed interest had to make sure that the state provided all infrastructures necessary for realizing their projects, such as, for instance, access to the energy, water and traffic networks as well as the provision of all other public amenities like hospitals and schools. Harvey (2009:181) pointed out that, in addition to legally lobbying for their interests, developers resorted even to bribes in order to ‘ensure such public investments were made’. To implement their vision of a new Damascene urbanity and to ensure that public investment in the necessary infrastructures is made, which guarantees the highest profits, developers in the Syrian capital resorted to a sophisticated system of corruption, clientelism and patronage - an issue that will be scrutinized later in the context of authoritarian upgrading (chapter 6).

The preceding paragraphs shed light on the legal and institutional frameworks of tourism development on the national scale, particularly in the modern parts of the Syrian capital. The empirical work conducted for this thesis, however, focused on another Damascene hotspot of tourism development: the capital’s historic centre. On the micro level of Old Damascus, tourism development – and thus gentrification and preservation – was not only influenced by private actors but also by a specific set of institutional structures: Besides international organizations (e.g. IfPO, GIZ and JICA), the Ministries of Local Administration, Culture, Tourism, Education, Islamic Waqf as well as Defence were involved in the urban transformations discussed in this thesis – either directly or represented by sub-divisions (see figure 7). In the interviews many informants referred to the General Directorate of Antiquities, a sub-division of the Ministry of Culture, as an official actor involved in what I call the gentrification of Old Damascus. Likewise, the Directorate of the Old City of Damascus, a sub-division of the Ministry of Local Administration, which is locally known as Maktab al-Anbar, was frequently referred to in the interviews. The Ministry of Tourism was the only national ministry that was mentioned as a directly involved official actor, (i.e. without reference to any sub-division). Surprisingly, neither the Ministry of Islamic Waqf nor the Ministry of Defence, the latter of which had been elsewhere described as the largest public property owner in Old Damascus (Rajab 2012:186), had been mentioned in the
interviews. Furthermore, whether or not the ruling Ba’th party played a significant role in the transformations of Old Damascus analysed in this thesis was not addressed in the interviews. In fact, informants referred to those institutional actors presented in figures 7 and 8 as well as the private actors under scrutiny in the following chapters.

3.5 Chapter Summary

The findings of this rather historical chapter can be summarized in two main strands: first, social changes facilitating the development of an authoritarian system with influential, self-perpetuating elites and, second, specific changes of the Damascene urban fabric defining the framework of gentrification-like processes. In terms of Syria’s socio-political development, the emergence of a bureaucratic-landholding class at the end of the 19th century, which managed to dominate the political scene in Syria throughout the French Mandate and the first decades after independence, is essential. Equally important for understanding Syria’s elite composition is the urban notables’ replacement by new actors, often from a rural minority background, who managed to use the Ba’th Party and the army as instruments to rule Syria since 1963. Despite an increase in upward social mobility since independence and the implementation – at least in theory – of a socialist state, Syria faced the formation of different social classes and growing social divisions. Nevertheless, until the beginning of the uprising in 2011, social conflicts in Syria were more often caused by intra-class rather than inter-class struggle. As will be investigated in the following chapters, members of the new upper and middle classes played a significant role in initiating and sustaining gentrification in Old Damascus both as consumers and as producers.

Concerning the built environment in Damascus, investigating the period between 1830 and 2000 revealed a number of developments and processes that shaped today’s urban fabric. Ottoman city extensions like the new centre around Marje Square or the planned residential neighbourhood of al-Salahije as well as the implementation of the master plan drawn by French urbanist René Danger in 1936 contrast sharply with the uncontrolled, but officially tolerated, spread of informal housing into the Ghuta. This massive expansion of the Damascene agglomeration is the direct result of rural-urban
migration and will remain a challenge for future generations of urban planners in Syria. With respect to the old town *intra* and *extra muros*, tendencies of suburbanization and disinvestment – both directly related to gentrification – as well as decay and destruction resulting from large-scale infrastructure projects can be observed from the late 19th century onwards.

Since the 1960s, Syria’s cities – and the capital Damascus in particular – have been suffering from a severe housing crisis. In the last section of this chapter, while focussing on the Damascene housing sector, I demonstrated how the populist authoritarian regime gave up on its popular constituencies and resorted increasingly to post-populist, neo-liberal policies and legislation (also chapter 6), and thus to more affluent constituencies. Prior to the civil war, this found expression, for instance, in the attempts of the regime to attract foreign direct investment or to encourage public-private partnerships in large-scale development projects.

On the basis of the historical foundation laid down in this chapter and empirical data from semi-structured interviews, it is the goal of the following chapters to look into the particularities and timing of gentrification in Old Damascus (chapter 4), the role heritage has played in the process particularly since the walled old town was listed as a World Heritage site in 1979 (chapter 5), and the mutual dependencies of gentrification and authoritarian upgrading (chapter 6).
**Figure 7: Official Producers of Gentrification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Sub-division</th>
<th>Activities/ responsibilities related to Old Damascus</th>
<th>Assets in Old Damascus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National actors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ministry of Local Administration</td>
<td>Directorate of the Old City of Damascus</td>
<td>planning, rehabilitation and infrastructure in the old city; licensing/ supervision of restoration projects</td>
<td>owns historic property, i.e. schools, houses and schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ministry of Culture</td>
<td>General Directorate of Antiquities</td>
<td>monument protection; monitors authenticity of renovation works carried out in the old city</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ministry of Islamic Waqf</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>owns religious buildings, e.g. mosques, schools, as well as residential/commercial property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ministry of Tourism</td>
<td></td>
<td>stakeholder in branding and developing Old Damascus as a tourist destination; facilitates the allocation of tourism development projects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ministry of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Owns approximately 100 buildings, i.e. schools or buildings to be transformed into schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ministry of Defence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Largest public property owner in the old city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International actors (selection)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IfPO</td>
<td>Atelier du Vieux Damas</td>
<td>Focus on the documentation and preservation of historic neighbourhoods outside the city walls.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIZ</td>
<td></td>
<td>capacity building in the fields of urban development; consultancy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JICA</td>
<td></td>
<td>capacity building in the fields of urban development; consultancy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKDN</td>
<td></td>
<td>restoration of three Old Damascene palaces (Beit Nizam, Beit Sibai and Beit Kuwatli) and their transformation into a 5* hotel under the label Serena.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure based on interviews 101, 103, 107, 108, 114, 115, 116, 119; Rajab 2012:185-186.
Figure 8: Producing a Gentrified Old Damascus: Formal and Informal Structures of Decision Making
Chapter 4: Gentrification in One of the Oldest Continuously Inhabited Capitals

Within rough Roman walls, more than 35 restaurants have opened in centuries-old Damascus homes over the past few years. More than 60 others, many of them badly damaged by time and the elements, are being restored for private or commercial use. Artists have opened studios in airy old houses, allowing the public to wander in and watch sculptures take shape (Wilson 2004).

In only a few lines, Wilson gives an apt snapshot of the Old Damascene gentrification process back in 2004. The quotation goes beyond a mere description of the most visible developments (i.e. the opening of restaurants and arts galleries) and links them to the key aspects of gentrification and thus – intentionally or not – to the broader gentrification literature. Besides describing the process as a recent phenomenon, the quotation – by referring to ‘badly damaged’ structures – points to disinvestment, a significant pre-condition for the production of gentrified urban space. Furthermore, the existence of artists’ workshops within the old city can be interpreted as another indicator of gentrification and will be discussed later in this thesis. From 2005 onwards, boutique hotels were opened in Old Damascus (see appendices 16; 17; 18) and the travel sections of leading Western newspapers started advertising the Syrian capital as an insider’s tip for luxury city breaks.128

One of the initial contacts whom I met prior to my stay in the field made me aware of the lack of an Arabic term equivalent to the English term gentrification (interview 105). Totah (2006) argues that the Arabic terms mustāthmir (investor) and ʿstthmār (investment) come closest to gentrifier and gentrification, respectively (Totah 2006:150). In order to receive information on the starting point of gentrification, respondents were asked to elaborate on the beginning of visible changes in the urban

128 ‘Boutique hotels’ are defined as ‘a distinctive, exclusive, well-designed small hotel, or less than 100 rooms, often with each room individually designed. […]. These are hotels offering exceptional service, personally delivered. Uniquely designed interiors and exteriors, particularly in keeping with the nature of surroundings of the location are to be expected…’ (Beaver 2005:69). Following the boutique hotel idea, Beit Mamlouka soon became the blueprint for many of the almost 100 Old Damascene hotels which were either opened or under construction between 2005 and the spring of 2001.
fabric of the old city, such as the transformation of renovated residential property into restaurants and boutique hotels. With the purpose of analysing the geographies of gentrification in Old Damascus, this chapter concentrates on the impact of the process on both the old city’s physical and social structure. I argue that gentrification in Old Damascus had a specific timing, and – at least prior to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in the spring of 2011 – followed a site-specific socio-political logic. Despite sharing striking similarities to gentrification elsewhere (e.g. in terms of the stakeholders), the process depicted in the Syrian capital evolved according to its very own dynamics. In the first section (4.1), I study specific manifestations of the gentrification process in Old Damascus and analyse its triggers and the timing. It is asked to what extent gentrification can be traced back to historic events and if so, why and how these events were influential. Furthermore, I introduce a number of individuals whose actions were said to be shaping the process significantly. It is argued that, notwithstanding positive representations in the Western (print-) media, gentrification in the Syrian capital was the cause of, or at least conducive to, a set of severe social and environmental problems. In the second section (4.2), the focus shifts to the producers of gentrification beyond the self-declared avant-garde. The section analyses these professionals’ actions and impact on the Old Damascene gentrification process. The third section of this chapter (4.3) analyses the social and environmental impact of gentrification in Old Damascus with a particular focus on displacement.

4.1 Triggers and a Timeline of Gentrification in Old Damascus

Around the millennium, only a few visitors, most of whom were cultural tourists, chose the Syrian capital as a holiday destination (for a tourist map of Damascus see appendix 26). At that time visitors could still experience the walled old city as a place spared from mainstream tourism, where – seemingly – time had been at a standstill for decades. Quiet residential quarters contrasted sharply with lively ‘exotic’ market districts; apart from a few stands close to the Umayyad Mosque (just at the entrance to the famous market Suq al-Hamidiyye) as well as near Bab Sharqi (Eastern Gate) in

129 Their attitudes vis-à-vis gentrification and heritage, however, will be analysed in chapter 5. The role of the authoritarian Syrian state and regime channels for directly shaping gentrification in the Syrian capital will be scrutinised in chapter 6.
the Christian Quarter, souvenir shops were surprisingly rare. There were only a handful of restaurants, and not a single hotel offered accommodation within the old town *intra muros*. By the mid-2000s, some formerly purely residential quarters had been transformed into a vibrant nightlife district attracting an increasingly affluent Syrian middle and upper class as well as international tourists.

This section focuses on events that triggered gentrification in Old Damascus and analyses the extent to which these events emerged in a temporal sequence. In order, first, to base the analysis of timing and trigger events in the historic context, and, second, to address the question why the process became visible only since the 2000s, I will now highlight some socio-economic preconditions of gentrification in the Syrian capital. As outlined in chapter 3, many affluent families left the old city between the late days of the Ottoman Empire and the millennium in order to live in one of the modern neighbourhoods (interview 117). Until the late 1990s, when Old Damascus and its built environment started to experience a veritable renaissance,

the attractiveness of the old city as a place to live went downhill very quickly. If they [affluent Damascenes] could afford to move out, they would do so. They often left their properties, perhaps in the hands of a relative who did want to stay or a relative whom they had to house but didn't want to take with them. Or they rented out the property. […] The economic base of the area crumbled. Money was no longer available in order to maintain. […] There has been a reduction of financial resources available in the old city for a long time (interview 114).

By referring to the decline of the old city’s economic base and the lack of financial resources for maintenance work, the interviewee described processes of disinvestment, ‘the relative withdrawal of capital in all its forms from the built environment’ (Smith *et al.* 1989:239), a process which – like the migration of affluent Damascenes from the old town to the new Western-style neighbourhoods – started during the late Ottoman empire, accelerated during the French Mandate and continued until after independence. Until the 1980s, disinvestment, which is a common pre-condition of gentrification (e.g. Smith 1996:191), as well as suburbanization, abandonment, decay and the decline of both property value and social reputation were the order of the day in Old Damascus (appendices 3 and 4). Since the mid-1980s, although limited to a small number of public and private buildings in the beginning, the first signs of the
‘revitalization’ of historic property became a visible phenomenon within the old city (Escher 2001; Pfaffenbach 2004; Salamandra 2004). In the context of ‘revitalization’ and renovation, the historic value of a property seemed to be decisive for whether or not it was gentrified. This phenomenon resembled what Shaw (2005) termed heritage gentrification nexus, which will be further discussed in chapter 5. However, for most Damascenes, the old town continued to be a place of backwardness and thus the antithesis of a modern Damascus (interview 117; see also Salamandra 2004:36). Consequently, those who could afford to do so decided to leave. Others remained trapped in the old city due to poverty and a lack of affordable housing elsewhere in central Damascus.

When I mentioned that I live in an old house, I was considered like lower class. And […] people who lived in the modern quarters considered themselves to be higher class (interview 116).

The respondent reported stigmatization because of living in Old Damascus and emphasised the social discrimination against the old city’s population prior to the start of gentrification in their neighbourhoods. The arrogant attitude of upper and upper-middle class Damascenes vis-à-vis less affluent old-city dwellers can be exemplified with the statement of this foreign educated architect who – although from an elitist point of view and with little sympathy – recalled that they have, up to now, been living a stupid life and the houses are falling apart… You can go and visit this area and […] see how they are living. […] Poor people, what a life, I mean, to live in a room with no roof, no facilities, no bathroom, nothing. So everybody had to make his [business] in the courtyard (interview 115).

Both accounts of the presence of lower class residents within the old city point to the paradox of a comparatively poor population living in potentially expensive, centrally located real estate. This allows of the assumption of a rent gap, meaning a significant difference between the actual ground rent and the potential ground rent once the respective property got gentrified (Smith 1979). In addition, class antagonism was a driving force behind social and urban change after Syria’s economic crisis in the 1980s. At the same time, a significant part of Syria’s middle class was affected by downward social mobility, whereas others managed to catch up with the country’s bourgeoisie. Social cleavages intensified in the early 1990s, when the Syrian regime
adopted post-populist policies and attempted to slightly open up the country’s state-controlled economy (e.g. by introducing investment law no.10 of 1991) (interview 118).

However, socio-economic factors facilitating gentrification – as for instance the end of the economic crisis of the 1980s, the emergence of a new bourgeoisie and the resulting changes in consumer preferences – cannot be seen isolated from the political context, which is particularly important in terms of the timing of gentrification. When the populist and secular Ba’th Party came to power in 1963, it had to consolidate its rule against the opposition of a still powerful traditional urban Sunni merchant class (Donati 2009:60). This struggle for power occasionally escalated into armed confrontations. While Hafiz al-Asad had improved the regime’s links with the Damascene merchants during the mid-1970s, which was a period of relative economic stability, their counterparts in Hama and Aleppo supported the Muslim Brotherhood during an armed revolt against the al-Asad regime between 1978 and 1982 (see e.g. Seale 1988). As influential posts in both the public service and the security apparatus were disproportionately occupied by members of mostly rural ethnic minorities, it seems apparent that, despite the above-mentioned links between the regime and some influential merchants, many Damascenes considered the al-Asad regime, after its rise to power, as a foreign intruder. Conversely, like other external rulers as, for instance, the French, the Ba’th regime considered the old city to be a potential stronghold for insurgents and a threat to the country’s security.

While elaborating on the ‘creation’ of an open space in front of the Umayyad Mosque during the late 1980s, this Damascene supported speculations that the bulldozing of a maze of narrow commercial alleys in the proximity of the mosque might have been related to security concerns.

In the old city, there are very few spots you can't enter in the way you described [using tanks]. But it used to be very difficult. […] When was the project completed? 1990s – and that confirms what you said because it was

130 On the antagonistic relationship between Damascenes and Alawites who migrated to Damascus following the Ba’th Revolution, see Salamandra 2004:85-88.
post-Hama! Nobody wants another Hama in any way. Yes, there could very well have been a security component (interview 113).

The creation of a centrally located open square in Old Damascus has certain similarities with Haussmann’s 19th-century attempts to prevent urban upheaval by the construction of vast boulevards in central Paris and thus with the concept of the revanchist city (Smith 1996; Sabbagh 2007:142).

With regard to the delayed start of gentrification in the old city and referring to the Muslim Brotherhood Revolt (1978-1982), during which ‘people used to stay at home, […] and many cafés [remained] closed’ (interview 118), a political analyst called to mind that

[at a certain time, gentrification was not allowed because it would have meant the rise of the urban Sunnis and… a kind of […] political opposition of the business society against the regime. When this new layer of bureaucrats that came with the revolution still wanted to keep their role and their capability of ruling and really sideling the other social stratum, they were quite keen to prevent any manifestation of gentrification (interview 105, emphasis added).

The respondent’s observation that not economic but political considerations, above all regime maintenance, were of the highest priority in Syria can be interpreted as one plausible explanation for the late start of gentrification. Furthermore, the account classifies gentrification as part of an intra-elite struggle between the traditional Damascene Sunni bourgeoisie on the one hand, and new elite factions close to the regime on the other.\[131\] But how did the process of gentrification actually begin?

At first, it started with people originally from the old town, some people who already had an old house in forgotten Old Damascus. When they started to see that there was a new interest in these houses, they started thinking of investing some money in restoring it [their property]. Sometimes […] people had an old house with I don’t know how many people renting rooms in that house. [The owners] wouldn’t even bother to go and visit their own house. They would just send somebody to collect the money [rent] every now and then. But seeing that there was a new interest, seeing that there was this old town to make some profit from, they were ready again to invest money, time and effort to restore these old

\[131\] This will be addressed in chapter 6, where I analyse the interconnectedness of gentrification and authoritarian upgrading.
Similarly to other respondents, this Syrian architect employed in the local administration refers to the increasing number of renovation projects in historic Damascene neighbourhoods prior to the Syrian civil war. The quotation points to the actors involved: at first, original residents; later, non-Damascenes including foreigners. It also points to ‘a new interest’ in traditional courtyard houses which resulted in the willingness to invest.

Asked when and why the renovation of historic property became a dominant and thus visible urban process, this Damascene academic explained:

I think people noticed an economic opportunity. I mean, this would be one approach to understand it. And […] a new climate post-2000 allowed people to pursue such opportunities […]. I think a political dimension to this is that a lot of Damascenes felt increasingly alienated prior to 2000 and beyond 2000 as well, and I think the return to [Old] Damascus somehow implied a statement (interview 113).

In line with other accounts, the interviewee identified the millennium as the starting point of gentrification in Old Damascus (likewise interviews 109; 111; 116). The account points to Syria’s economic liberalization as a main reason for pre-war gentrification; furthermore, it refers to identity related alienation and a middle-class return to the old city as important aspects of the gentrification process. Other respondents emphasised the role of the government, which (e.g. by granting licences to restaurants, hotels and other tourism-related activities) facilitated the old city’s transformation into a commercial venue (interviews 109 and 116).

Despite not mentioning a concrete date or event as the starting point of gentrification in Old Damascus, the respondents agreed that the process could be dated back to a not further specified date around the millennium. Therefore, they share with other informants and Western travel journalists the assessment that the early 2000s can be seen as the starting point of gentrification in the old city. However, the early 2000s contrast with several scholarly accounts that mention the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s as the
starting points of recent urban changes. Furthermore, all the respondents referred to above attribute a significant role in shaping urban change to the government (i.e. to the local authorities and the Ministry of Tourism, respectively). This owner of a boutique hotel even went a step further:

Before 2000, the country was completely closed. In 2000, the president Bashar al-Asad took over. A young president, a young wife, young blood, and he started to open up the country, slowly, slowly […] for tourism, and this is how it started […]. And there were only three big hotels, you know, not even the Four Seasons. The Sheraton, the Meridien and another two or three hotels, so that was it (interview 111).

This account portrays president Bashar al-Asad, who came to power in 2000, as the driving force behind the country’s opening up. The respondent echoes a widespread discourse of Bashar al-Asad being a reformer and modernizer. Hopes for the political opening of the country, however, were disappointed as early as autumn 2001, when the regime cracked down on the proponents of the Damascus Spring, a civil society movement lobbying for human rights and political reform that emerged during the months following the death of Hafiz al-Asad. In retrospect, the image of Internet enthusiast Bashar al-Asad being a genuine reformer resembles an orchestrated image campaign. This assumption will be followed up in chapter 6, where gentrification is investigated through the analytical lens of authoritarian resilience. For now, it is important to keep in mind that Old Damascus rapidly transformed into a fashionable nightlife district produced for and consumed by Syria’s upper and middle classes and, a little later, into an internationally marketed destination for fashionable city breaks.

So far, in this section I have outlined the preconditions of gentrification in Old Damascus (i.e. disinvestment, the emergence of a rent gap and the country’s exposure to globalization resulting from Syria’s economic and political opening). Furthermore, by portraying the timing of gentrification in Old Damascus, based on evidence from my own interviews as well as from the Western press, I have argued that gentrification

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133 After the death of Hafiz al-Asad, analysts and Western media presented his son and successor Bashar as a timid, young and politically inexperienced UK-trained ophthalmologist who would show his compatriots the way out of the country’s international isolation. See e.g. Sachs (2000).
134 See epilogue in Hinnebusch (2001); likewise Lesch (2005); Zisser (2007) as well as http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/01/damascus-spring/fgcc [20.06.2013].
in Old Damascus occurred for the first time around the millennium. I have also scrutinised potential obstacles to an earlier start of the process: first, the old city’s reputation as a physically and socially decaying neighbourhood; second, a rent gap which was yet to grow in order to attract investment to the old city; and, finally, the secular Ba’th regime’s mistrust of the traditional Sunni population of Old Damascus.

It has become clear that, due to its dominant position of power, the authoritarian state was able to control – if not prevent – manifestations of gentrification. In the following, I will ask why gentrification seems to have appeared only in the late 1990s and which circumstances or events triggered and facilitated the emergence of this process. This assumption calls for a further look into events that eventually triggered gentrification in the Syrian capital.

While the respondents agreed upon the timing of gentrification in Old Damascus, referring to approximately the year 2000 in the above quotations, they hesitated to pinpoint trigger events or reasons for the beginning of gentrification. Answers like ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I can’t tell…’ were sometimes followed by some speculation. A tour guide who grew up in an Old Damascus neighbourhood recalled that boutique hotels had first been introduced in Aleppo. The interviewee referred to the historic competition between Aleppo, Syria’s biggest city and commercial centre, and the capital city Damascus and stated:

So the local government of Aleppo started very fast, Damascus has always rejected that idea [of boutique hotels], but later on, I was somehow surprised that they agreed (interview 116).

This account points to three triggers for upgrading processes: first, the inspiration from and imitation of experiences elsewhere (Aleppo); second, the rising importance of tourism (boutique hotels); and, third, the involvement of different state agents – all of which were similarly mentioned by other interviewees, too.

For instance, this consultant, a Western urban planner working for a bilateral development project, speculated that ‘increasing international tourism, backpackers [and] younger people’ (interview 114) might have been such a trigger for renovation projects in Old Damascus. The informant continued to speculate that ‘[i]f it is
attracting young Europeans, we should find it attractive as well, talking about young Damascenes, particularly wealthier ones’.

Also, with international tourism in mind, the owner of a small guesthouse argued that some actors ‘took the idea from somewhere like from Italy, from Spain’ and experienced tourists’ preference for ‘old style restaurants’: ‘I think they took something from outside, and then they built the idea here’ (interview 106). The interviewee attributed the opening of the first Middle Eastern themed restaurants to tourists and Syrian expatriates – individuals who came in touch with the tourism industry in Southern Europe. Likewise, Ali Mubaiyed, a former director of planning and administration for Old Damascus, assumed that the renovation of historic property in Old Damascus was

mainly a result of having travelled abroad, seeing how other people are attached to their cultural heritage and returning with those feelings […] This idea that they are inheritors of one of the world's oldest cities is striking their imagination (quoted by Wilson 2004).

Like the guesthouse owner quoted above, Mubaiyed connected the Damascene case to gentrification in other cities. Both respondents point to a process of learning from places elsewhere, and, interestingly, reference is not made to the ‘usual suspects’ (McFarlane 2010:728), but to other Mediterranean cities in Spain and Italy. Furthermore, producers of gentrification addressed Damascene gentrifiers’ preference for a specific aesthetic (i.e. for heritage and an ‘old style’). Drawing on Bourdie, Jager (1986:78) argued that ‘[t]he aesthetics of gentrification not only illustrate the class dimension of the process but also express the dynamic constitution of social class of which gentrification is a specific part’. In this sense, consumers of gentrified neighbourhoods worldwide appreciate the display of laid-open ‘historic’ masonry or sand-washed facades, the use of cast iron gates, and the emphasis on all kinds of allegedly authentic architectural features. However, ‘the aesthetic of gentrified buildings varies internationally according to local conditions: from Manhattan brownstones and lofts, to London's Victorian ‘villas', to white painting in Canadian cities and the iron fretwork of Victorian dwellings in Sydney’ (Bridge 2007:39). Renovated buildings in Old Damascus exhibited and overemphasised architectural details from the Ottoman period, such, most prominently, as sand-washed brickwork
featuring stripes of black and white stones. Some Damascene architects critically compared the aesthetic of gentrification in the old city to both an orientalist painting and Disneyland (interviews 103; 115; 119). Furthermore, the respondents blamed the media for producing a somehow one-dimensional image of Old Damascus (chapter 5).  

What are, then, the driving forces behind the global emergence of specific ‘set[s] of “tastes” among the new middle class’ (Lees et al. 2008: 116) which are labelled gentrification aesthetic? For Bridge (1995), education plays a vital role in the shaping of the taste of the middle class: ‘The influence of education might help explain the existence of the gentrification aesthetic in terms of the acquisition of ‘good taste’ through middle-class background and/or a middle-class (higher) education’ (Bridge 1995:243-244; Ley 2003:2531). This seemed to be the case in Syria, too, where during the reign of Hafiz al-Assad upward social mobility based on free education ranked high on the political agenda. Since the early 2000s, parts of this new middle class have joined members of the traditional bourgeoisie and international tourists in consuming a genuine Old Damascene gentrification aesthetic, which is most prominently represented by renovated courtyard houses now used as restaurants, boutique hotels and, although on a small scale, residential property.

Like the diffusion of the gentrification aesthetic, the moving-in of artists can also be interpreted as a trigger for gentrification in Old Damascus, which resulted in the emergence of an additional form of use of historic property. This phenomenon can be observed in particular in the Jewish quarter, where artists purchased and renovated initially inexpensive historic property and transformed it into workshops, galleries or venues for performances and concerts. Once again, external influence seemed to have been vital, as this architect working for an international organization involved in the documentation of the city’s cultural heritage recalled:

135 Similarly, although with regard to middle-class preferences for loft living, Zukin (1982:15) ascribed an important role to the media in promoting gentrification aesthetic: ‘There must have been an “aesthetic conjuncture.” […] artists’ living habits became a cultural model for the middle class […]. A heightened sense of art and history, space and time, was dramatized by the taste setting media’.
It was like other examples I know, like in Vienna, Paris Montmartre, other parts of the world. It started step-by-step. When people go there they ask friends about their experiences whether it is good, so they start [here] (interview 101).

As the respondent argues, and as will be shown later, renovation projects in the Jewish quarter and its transformation into an artistic district paralleled the developments worldwide. Meanwhile, in Old Damascus, restaurants, boutique hotels and art galleries were among the most visible indications of gentrification in the old town. The emergence of each of these new types of business saw a role model function assigned to an avant-garde individual or ‘pioneer(s)’. Interviewees and the media, both domestic and international, singled out the same individuals and credited them with having set the respective trend: Raed Jabri transformed the house of his birth into the first Middle Eastern themed restaurant in a renovated traditional courtyard house (e.g. interviews 107; 118; 119; 120; see also appendices 19 and 31); May Mamarbachi was the owner and manager of the Beit Mamlouka, the first boutique hotel in the old city (interviews 101; 119; 120; see appendix 16); and prominent sculptor Mustapha Ali is said to have opened the first atelier in the Jewish Quarter, which became Damascus’s ‘artists’ quarter’ (interviews 107; 112; 115; 209; see appendix 20).

While the advance of Middle Eastern themed restaurants was a rather spontaneous process mainly driven by private actors, the emergence of boutique hotels was triggered by private actors and happened under the control of the state. Referring to the seemingly unchecked advance of restaurants all over Old Damascus, which was accompanied by a number of specific issues with a severe impact on the old city’s physical and social fabric, this architect working for the local administration recalled:

It was a good way to invest money in the old town again. It was a good way to find a reason to restore old abandoned houses. But these good reasons could be risky sometimes if they go over the limit. When you have too many restaurants in the old town, you should expect what disturbance

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136 Similar statements: also in interview 112 and Aboukhatet 2010.
137 For a critical assessment of the term ‘urban pioneer’ see Smith 1986:16-17.
138 In 2005, there were 65 restaurants within the walled old town, and three years later their number reached 99 (figures from Maktab al-Anbar). See also figure 4.
139 By 2011, almost 40 had opened galleries in the Jewish quarter, attracted by both Mustafa Ali’s role model function and the comparatively low property prices for a central location (interviews 101; 112). Grants awarded by the European Commission were an additional incentive to get involved in artistic community projects in the Jewish quarter (interview 112).
This huge number could cause for the neighbours: the amount of water used in these restaurants, the amount of energy used in these restaurants, the noise caused by the number of people [guests]. The risk caused by having all this huge number of people going in and out in a short time. You should keep in mind that an old house had about 20 inhabitants living in it, and expecting hundreds of people at certain hours is risky (interview 119).

Likewise, and calling for great sensitivity to the urban fabric of the old city in the licensing of new businesses, this Western consultant explained:

Washing up after 100 meals takes a lot more in terms of resources than it does to wash up after eight meals, as it was when a family was living there. So there are pressures on resources, on infrastructure. There are also issues to do with good neighbourliness because a restaurant is a much poorer neighbour for most people than an ordinary house (interview 114).  

Both respondents were well-aware of significant pressures on the old city’s weak infrastructure resulting from the uncontrolled expansion of themed restaurants that caused harm to the residents. Overstraining the networks frequently resulted in the shortage of fresh water and electricity. Meanwhile, the waste water system came close to collapse. Conflicts between local communities and the owners of new businesses became more common. Other respondents emphasised the large number of guests, which on a daily basis caused fierce competition for the limited parking space available in the old city’s narrow alleys (interviews 116; 111). Some interviewees pointed to another potential source of restaurant-related conflict: the social behaviour of the restaurants’ mostly young guests, which did not always meet residents’ traditional values. According to these accounts, residents felt upset by publicly displayed affection between unmarried individuals or the consumption of alcohol in public (interviews 103; 105). At first, as this architect working in the old city admitted, the authorities did not anticipate the potential for conflict emanating from the uncontrolled spread of cafés and restaurants in Old Damascus. Attempts to regulate the process were, therefore, lagging behind:

So the idea of having a restaurant in an old house was something very new and, of course, we did not have any regulations about this. Unfortunately we didn’t have regulations ahead of this. So we had to work on finding regulations after we started to realize that too many restaurants could cause risks, could cause problems (interview 119).

140 Similarly interviews 109 and 116.
This honest account gives an inside in both the authorities’ initial ignorance vis-à-vis potential problems likely to be caused by the rapid spread of restaurants, as well as the lack of efficient policies to control the development. Regarding boutique hotels the local administration intervened at an earlier stage and put in place mechanisms which – at least in theory – aimed at controlling the opening of new businesses.

In 2007, the Governorate launched a master plan for Old Damascus aiming to further expand tourism in the old city and, at the same time, minimize potential conflicts by maintaining the traditional character of the old city (FW 2010:70; Executive 2008; see also appendix 27). However, a glance at the area falling under the master plan reveals a major drawback of the plan: it only applies to neighbourhoods inside the city wall, leaving significant parts of the historic urban fabric of Damascus under less protective legislation (interview 107). Within the old town *intra muros*, the master plan, which deals with many aspects of everyday life, implements a framework of zoning rules based on each area’s current and future commercial and residential use. Furthermore, in addition to this zoning, the master plan designates several types of ‘axes’, meaning that selected streets can have a specific function which might differ substantially from the surrounding neighbourhood. As the director of the Antiquities Directorate (a subdivision of the Ministry of Culture dealing with monument protection) emphasised, the master plan was ‘a guide for the authorities involved in the old city’, and its application was strictly policed. One commentator recalled that the authorities ‘[had] stopped granting business licenses until the new guidelines outlined in the master plan [had been] finalized’ (cited in Executive 2008), and the owner of a boutique hotel briefly commented on the ban on new restaurant projects in most *intra muros* quarters:

\[N\]o more restaurants in town! No more, it’s finish[ed], it’s over! The only place you can open a restaurant – if you find anything […] – is on the Straight Street (interview 111).

Given the shortage of property suitable for being transformed into cafés or restaurants with direct access to one of the tourist axes (x1, x2 or x3 – see appendix 27), investors started to look out for other promising forms of investment in Old Damascus (interview 103) and investment in boutique hotels was soon to become a widespread
practice, due to both the successful blueprint of a hotel called Beit Mamlouka and a less restrictive legal framework than that for restaurants.

4.2 Producers of Gentrification

In terms of revitalizing/ renovating Damascene courtyard houses, respondents highlighted two main motivations: namely, the transformation of residential property into commercial premises and the upgrading of residential property both by owner occupants and, on a rather small scale, by newly incoming affluent residents. Asked about groups of private actors turning towards the old city and investing in old Damascene property, a senior urban planner observed:

Some people come back to live, […] they have an old house, old home in the old city. This is special [typical?] for big families who once lived in Old Damascus. Someone from these families came back to live… and often they have another house in the areas outside [new city]. But they came back to restore that old house […] e.g. to spend the holidays in that house. Or a part of the big house, maybe two rooms for memory [nostalgia], for joy, not for need (interview 107).

According to the same interviewee, who explicitly referred to property used for residential purposes, others just moved to the old city because they ‘liked’ the place. Among those new dwellers were, as a Damascene expatriate who had recently visited her hometown reported, affluent Syrians as well as foreigners (interview 117; also Wilson 2004). An architect working for an involved government agency also confirmed this observation: ‘We even had some Europeans and people with extra money saying, “Damascus is à la mode, so let’s have a flat there”’ (interview 119).

For most respondents, despite some accounts of the residential use of renovated property, investment in Old Damascene real estate was closely related to the commercialization of residential buildings, meaning the transformation of courtyard houses into restaurants and boutique hotels (interview 107). Asked about the origin of the investors, a resident of the old city recalled:

Many of them are from the old city. Some of them are from outside the old city, for example, Damascus, but not from the old city originally. I know some people who owned these houses before they became restaurants […].
And also, by the way, I think there are foreigners investing money in hotels and...restaurants, maybe hotels more (interview 106).

The son of an old Damascene merchant family and owner of two boutique hotels stated: ‘Most of them [other hotel owners] are from Syria, and they are not from Damascus’ (interview 120). Likewise, an artist working in the Jewish Quarter of Damascus assumed that most investors were from Syria but did not live in the old town. The informant added that several wealthy expatriates invested in Old Damascene real estate (interview 112) – an observation that a tour operator and owner of a small boutique hotel confirmed:

And there are foreigners, Syrians... living in America, etc. They have a longing to buy something in Damascus, in the old town, so it is a desire to buy (interview 109; author’s translation from French).

Some interviewees pointed to corporative investors gaining influence in the renovation of Old Damascus. In this regard, one can identify both well-financed national and international holdings (interview 107) (i.e. actors comparable to those involved in the new build development projects in the new town), as well as local private associations, which a former resident of the old town described as follows:

I know some people who owned a house... before it became a restaurant. So they shared with other people, people who had money, of course. [...] For example, the house from me, the money from you, and we make a company (interview 106).

Similarly, an architect employed by an international organization added:

I know several groups of people who work together and invest. They are ordinary people who want to have work. Sometimes they are families trying to create work for their children. It's not always a big investment [investor] (interview 101).

As the above accounts dealing with producers of gentrification show, there seemed to be two main groups of actors: first, long term owner-occupants who renovated their family homes either for residential or business purposes; and, second, new property owners. The latter included individual as well as corporative actors, both Syrian and foreign. In addition to that, respondents mentioned informal real estate agents and artists as further stakeholders in the ‘revitalization’ of Old Damascus.
While most restaurants were investments by Syrians for Syrians (interview 117; Wilson 2004), boutique hotels were financed by Syrian as well as international actors and aimed at attracting foreign users. At first, Syrian actors took the lead in the propagation of boutique hotels in Old Damascus, following the script of Beit Mamlouka. Among the investors were, again, owner occupiers and groups of investors, but due to the state-led development initiatives in Syria’s tourism sector, ‘instead of small businessmen opening small restaurants and cafés, the rich people came and opened hotels’ (interview 118; see also the section above), among them numerous Syrian expatriates.  

Some of them discovered it’s profitable so they tried to purchase a house and to start that business. Some of them are not from the area and not the old city at all; they are just rich people, actually. [...] Some of them are totally from outside Damascus. It’s a kind of fashion now (interview 118).

Often, the investors characterized by the above quotation as outsiders in Damascus were crony capitalists and individuals bound to the Syrian regime by kinship and unquestioning loyalty. Syria’s richest businessman and cousin of president Bashar al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf – is said to be the owner of several Damascene boutique hotels, among them Talisman 1, the second boutique hotel in Old Damascus. Shahbandar Palace Hotel, an 11-room boutique hotel in the vibrant Qaimariyye neighbourhood in the old town, is operated by the Julia Dumna Group, which belongs to another member of the Makhlouf family (interview 208). I will return to the role of regime cronies in the Old Damascene gentrification process later. In the following, however, I continue investigating boutique hotels and other forms of use of ‘upgraded’ historic property, which is followed by the discussion of the sometimes problematic impact of these phenomena on neighbourhoods facing gentrification.

As part of the regime’s attempts to develop Syria’s tourism sector and to realize fast profit, the Ministry of Tourism organized its Tourism Investment Market (see above),

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141 Wealthy expatriates were behind some of the most famous projects such as Beit Rumman [http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=2082] in the Christian quarter Bab Tuma or Beit Farhi in the Jewish Quarter which, in 2011, was still under renovation.

142 Regime-business relations are an important aspect of gentrification in Damascus. For that reason, they will be dealt with in detail in chapter 6, which concentrates on linking gentrification to authoritarian upgrading.
which, between 2005 and the outbreak of the civil war, took place on an annual basis. From its inauguration onwards, the event attracted an increasing number of international investors, especially since new legislation unburdened doing business in Syria. While large-scale new-build projects accounted for most foreign direct investment (FDI) in the tourism sector, some actors singled out Old Damascus as an attractive location for hotel projects, a development encouraged by the Syrian government (Al-Qala’a, Minister of Tourism, in OBG 2010:166). Foreign investors, under the Kempinski label, planned to open a boutique hotel in the historic *Khan Suleyman Pasha* on a BOT basis (interview 107). The project was suspended in late 2010 without any reasons given (interview 119). Likewise, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)\textsuperscript{143} has been carrying out restoration work on three prominent historic buildings which will be opened as a boutique hotel of the Serena Chain, a luxury hotel chain also owned by the Aga Khan.\textsuperscript{144}

Several interviewees indicated that Western investors also intended to enter the Old Damascene hotel market. London-based boutique hotel specialist Campbell Grey was considering Old Damascus for future investment (OBG 2010:167); the Spanish boutique hotel chain Hospes started working on a boutique hotel in the old city; and the IHG Group started construction works for a Holiday Inn Hotel in a historic neighbourhood just outside the city wall (see photo in Sudermann 2012:50), close to the citadel of Damascus, an area described by a number of respondents as sensitive due to its architectural heritage and its social function as a local vegetable market (interviews 101; 107).\textsuperscript{145}

Regarding the direct negative impact of boutique hotels on both the social and physical urban fabric, respondents agreed that hotels were ‘less of an issue’ (interview 114) than restaurants. Apart from structural changes to historic real estate (e.g. adding

\textsuperscript{143}The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) was founded by the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim community and consists of a number of agencies and programmes which operate in the fields of culture as well as economic and social development (www.akdn.org, accessed [30.06.2013]).

\textsuperscript{144}I will return to the involvement of the AKDN in Old Damascus later.

\textsuperscript{145}At the time of writing, all projects with Western involvement were either suspended or put on hold due to the current uprising.
bathrooms, installing air conditioning or using modern building materials), which will be discussed in chapter 5, demand for real estate suitable for being transformed into boutique hotels and, consequently, rising property prices, were significant negative outcomes for tenants and low-income owner occupants. Because of this excess demand for high-end hotels, investors and residents of the old city were again on the look-out for new ventures and opportunities to start a business and to get their share of the profitable transformation of Old Damascus. Outside the hospitality sector, but again targeting an affluent clientele, art galleries and boutiques specializing in all kinds of designer merchandise – fashion and jewellery in particular – were opened, for instance, in the South-Western section of Straight Street. Also on Straight Street, May Mamarbachi, the founder of the first Old Damascene boutique hotel, opened a VIP travel agency in what she calls the city’s first boutique offices in historic property.

4.3 Displacement – The Social Impact of Gentrification

Some of the accounts discussed in this chapter point to the role of ‘the rich’ as investors, new dwellers and customers of boutique hotels and restaurants. Old Damascus is, indeed, facing the production of urban space for more affluent users (Hackworth 2002). But what is the specific impact on the social fabric and the residents of the old town? The spread of restaurants and boutique hotels in many neighbourhoods of the old city embodies the transformation of formerly mostly residential quarters into gentrified landscapes of consumption. This reconfiguration – as was shown in the previous sections – brings in its wake numerous environmental problems like increased levels of noise, traffic and pressures on the electric grid or sewage system. Likewise, there are significant social and economic outcomes. By way of conclusion, I will focus on displacement and related consequences of gentrification for the property market in general and housing in particular. However, before scrutinising displacement as a consequence of gentrification in Old Damascus it seems worthwhile to look into the extent of the process. As no official statistic dealing with displacement has been accessible, the following considerations are an attempt to roughly estimate the number of people who had to leave their homes in the old city prior to 2011. According to informants in the local administration (interviews 103;
by March 2011 approximately 200 Old Damascene buildings had been transformed into restaurants, cafes or boutique hotels or were still in the process of being restored. If one assumes an average of 5 to 10 residents per property before gentrification (informal conversation with residents of the old city), one can speculate that up to 2000 persons had been directly displaced from *intra mural* neighbourhoods since the first restaurants and boutique hotels were renovated.

When trendsetters like hotelier May Mamarbachi or sculptor Mustafa Ali realized the profitability of investment in Old Damascene real estate, ‘[m]ore people started to come and then the rich people discovered that this [was] good business’ (interview 118). The same business consultant recalled the following in regard to a property suitable for being used as a boutique hotel: ‘It is very expensive! I remember the price jumping more than 10 times to 20 times to 30 times’. An architect supervising the transformation of a courtyard house into a boutique hotel pointed to the impact of rising prices on the property market:

> And the prices went up too much. In Old Damascus, you can have an apartment, a good apartment for the same price as in Europe, as in Europe! For an apartment or a house of about 150 m², they have to pay half a million dollars (interview 115).

Who are the homebuyers willing to invest these enormous sums? According to the same interviewee, ‘[o]nly people who want to show off their money’. In this regard, another architect employed in the public sector emphasised that – as a consequence of an increasing demand – property prices reached ‘a level where locals would no more be able to afford to buy and invest’ (interview 119). In former times, several generations lived together in one house. While men traditionally worked outside the house, women of several generations stayed at home and took care of the household. With the disintegration of the traditional family and the increasing employment of women, the labour-intensive maintenance of courtyard houses became unaffordable

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146 Estimate based on informal conversations with former residents of Old Damascus. Likewise, Rajab (2012:180) mentions for 1990 an estimated 6000 buildings in Old Damascus which were inhabited by approximately 42,000 residents. These numbers would set the average number of residents per building at 7.

147 Based on a population of 42,000 in 1990 (Rajab 2012:180) this would mean that up to 4.8% of the population of the old city had been facing direct displacement.
for average income groups. For many, a modern flat in one of the suburbs was seemingly an attractive alternative to living in an old-fashioned, and in some cases under-maintained, old city dwelling (interviews 114; 118). Consequently, rising property prices were considered as an opportunity to leave Old Damascus and start a ‘modern’ life (interview 116). The attractiveness of selling homes in Old Damascus frequently resulted in a struggle among heirs, with some family members pushing for sale and others advocating keeping the property (interview 116). Due to a high demand and speculation, both resulting in increasing real estate prices, there was no way back once the decision to sell had been made. The same applied to low-income individuals wishing to purchase property in the old city. Reflecting on increasing property prices in the old city, an artist working in the Jewish Quarter contemplated the growing demand for gentrifiable property with fear:

Every place, every area becomes like this. In the beginning, there was poverty, poor artists. […] With a little money, you could have a house here, a small place or a big place. But then … Now I think artists can't have a place here anymore (interview 104).

Marcuse (1986) defines the circumstances in which changing external conditions exclude a family from moving into a property as ‘exclusionary displacement’. Since the 1950s, the subdividing and room-wise renting out of courtyard houses evacuated by the formerly bourgeois inhabitants had become a widespread practice. Tenants were often low-income rural migrants as well as Palestinian refugees. Long-term tenants’ rights had been protected by Ba’thist legislation, which made rent increases and eviction, meaning direct last-resident displacement (see Marcuse 1986:156; likewise Slater 2006:303), almost impossible (Totah 2006). In the early 2000s, new legislation enabled the eviction even of long-term tenants. However, as outlined earlier in this chapter, landlords were obliged by law to pay significant compensation. Besides being rented out to multiple tenants, houses previously inhabited by wealthy families were used as cheap workshops or warehouses (interview 115; appendix 30). Nowadays, these rather spacious courtyard houses are the main target of investors intending to

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148 ‘When a particular housing unit is voluntarily vacated by one household and then gentrified (or abandoned), so that another similar household cannot move in, and the total number of units available to such a household has thereby been reduced, we may also speak of displacement: “exclusionary displacement”. […] It occurs when any household is not permitted to move into a dwelling, by a change in conditions which affects that dwelling or its immediate surrounding…’ (Marcuse 1986:156).
open boutique hotels in Old Damascus. Consequently, in their search for affordable housing, low-income populations – both tenants and low-income homebuyers – are forced to move away from central Damascus in order to find acceptably priced housing (also Balanche 2009:3).

The spread of restaurants and boutique hotels in wide sections of the old city embodies the transformation of formerly purely residential neighbourhoods into spaces of commercial activity. These alterations in function (commercial instead of residential) are intertwined with a shift towards a more affluent clientele. Cafés, until recently an institution exclusively for (local) men from all parts of society, are now focussing on cosmopolitan middle-class customers of both sexes (interview 118). Likewise, boutique hotels – at the time of investigation prices per night started at around $100 and some were advertised in English only – targeted affluent foreign tourists. Furthermore, numerous grocers’ shops have been replaced by designer boutiques and souvenir shops. For some traditionally minded residents, the issue of alcohol consumption is problematic. A former resident of the old city and descendant of a long-established Damascene family gave the following intimate account of how local residents experienced the gentrification of their neighbourhoods:

At first people didn't realise what was going on. […]. Commercial shops, houses, even the most tiny shops and most tiny houses even with little space and in need of renovation were worth fortunes. These changes resulted in the fact that people gradually started either to be tempted to sell their properties or to be bothered by the commercial places and their disadvantages. […]. I know many people who didn't like the changes, and that's why they sold their houses, not only because of the temptation of money. Among these changes, for example, is the fact that […] families knew each other very well. So a stranger could immediately be recognised or distinguished as he or she passed in one of the streets, for example. […]. So when the restaurants opened, this was an attraction for completely new people […] that you have never met in your life, with different mentalities […]. So people found themselves living among restaurants that attracted strangers till midnight and even more [later…]. Neighbours don’t feel comfortable any more. They cannot sleep well anymore because the area has become noisy. The possibility of quarrels is a very high (interview 300).
The respondent emphasised the critical stance of many old city dwellers on the transformation of their neighbourhood into a leisure district for the affluent. This criticism reflects the decline of traditional social networks, the influx of strangers and the increase of noise levels in formerly quiet and purely residential neighbourhoods. Social deprivation and alienation are part of what Marcuse (1986) termed ‘pressure of displacement’ or, to use the words of Slater (2009) ‘the dispossession suffered by poor and working-class families during the transformation of the neighbourhoods where they live’ (2009:303).

4.4 Chapter Summary

In the first section (4.1), both the timing of and a set of significant triggers for gentrification were the centre of interest. While discussing frequent preconditions for the process, such as disinvestment, abandonment and suburbanization, it became clear that the political context – the authoritarian state in Syria – was decisive, too. It was not until the political class showed willingness to open the country economically that the first signs of gentrification emerged during the late 1990s (see chapter 6 for a more detailed analysis of the role of the state). When the first Middle Eastern themed restaurants were opened around the millennium, which many respondents considered to be the starting point of gentrification, and five years later, when investors’ attention turned towards boutique hotels and other tourism-related businesses, it became obvious that the residential use of gentrified Old Damascene property played only a secondary role. Furthermore, as argued in the same section, the timing and course of the Old Damascene gentrification process could be attributed to a set of circumstances such as the inter-city competition between Damascus and Aleppo, the implementation of urban policies like the master plan for the old city of Damascus, the expansion of international tourism and, above all, the partial economic liberalization of the country.

149 Appendices 5 to 15 illustrate the mentioned transformations in Old Damascus.
150 ‘When a family sees its neighbourhood changing dramatically, when all their friends are leaving, when stores are going out of business and new stores for other clientele are taking their place (or non at all replacing them), when changes in public transportation patterns, support services, are all clearly making the area less and less liveable, then the pressure of displacement is already severe, and its actuality only a matter of time. Families under such circumstances may even move as soon as they can…’ (Marcuse 1986:157).
Furthermore, I identified several actors who played leading roles in ‘pioneering’ gentrification. Following Smith’s (1979) definition of producers of gentrification and with a focus on actors beyond the self-declared avant-garde, section 4.2 aimed at identifying the main actors in the production of a gentrified Old Damascus (i.e. business owners, architects and urban planners). I scrutinized these actors’ motives for getting involved in the gentrification process – besides heritage related motives (see chapter 5), economic reasons ranked high on the agenda. Furthermore, I started studying the social and regional background of the producers of gentrification - a step in the analysis which will facilitate the investigation of these actors’ relationship with the state in chapter 6, and thus their role in maintaining a resilient authoritarian regime in Syria. Respondents identified among the producers of gentrification, first, Old Damascus property owners (both absent and owner occupant), second, businesspersons from (New) Damascus and elsewhere in the country, as well as, third, predominantly non-Damascene actors with strong kin-based and sectarian links to the politically relevant elite (interviews 106; 113; 118), among them seemingly ‘awlad al-sultah (interviews 105 and 113).

Finally, I argued that different forms of displacement related to gentrification evolved in Old Damascus (4.3). Furthermore, I estimated that prior to 2011 up to 2000 residents had to deal with the consequences of direct displacement. The available data, however, did not allow for rating the number of residents who left Old Damascus due to ‘exclusionary displacement’ and ‘pressures of displacement’. Nevertheless, based on the accounts of several interviewees, I suppose that until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 ‘pressures of displacement’ in particular, brought numerous inhabitants to leave the walled old city. Since ‘pressures of displacement’ are the result of alterations in the functions of the old city which have an impact on residents’ wellbeing, the increasing interest of new user groups in the cultural and architectural heritage of Old Damascus has to be considered as an important aspect of gentrification which affects the everyday life of Old Damascus residents. In chapter 5, I will, therefore, focus on heritage and its links to gentrification.
Chapter 5: ‘We Make it Like the Original, Only Better…’ – Geographies of Heritage in Old Damascus

[Heritage] is not a testable or even reasonably plausible account from the past, but a declaration of faith in that past. Critics castigate heritage as a travesty of history. But heritage is not history, even when it mimics history. It uses historical traces and tells historical tales, but these tales and traces are stitched into fables […]. History seeks to convince by truth and succumbs to falsehood. Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error (Lowenthal 2004:121).

Since the 1990s – and especially during the 2000s – Old Damascus experienced the renaissance of its cultural heritage. So far the question of why the old city – and the neighbourhoods intra muros in particular – has become a hotspot of gentrification has only been dealt with sketchily. Instead, functional particularities regarding the specific features of gentrification in Old Damascus, that is the renovation of courtyard houses and their transformation into cafés, restaurants, boutique hotels, artists’ workshops or office space as well as the actors involved, have been of analytical concern so far. This chapter extends the analysis via attention to the production and consumption of Old Damascene heritage. It will look into the process of defining heritage and will scrutinise the extent to which heritage has been used as a cultural, economic, and political resource (e.g. in the context of authoritarian resilience). In this regard, attention will be given to different stakeholders and their respective interests in the city’s heritage with a particular focus on Damascene elites.

5.1 The Notables’ Heirs Are Back, Are They? Heritage between Authenticity, Nostalgia and Kitsch

In this section, I will scrutinise identity-related and socio-political conditions that both led to and accompanied the rise of Old Damascus as a valued heritage site (the economic dimensions of Damascene heritage will be explored in the following subsection). However, before focussing on the process of laying claim to the increasingly valued historic core of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited capital, I shall
examine the common motives of the traditional bourgeoisie\textsuperscript{151} for leaving the old city. I have referred thus far only to how, since the last decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, affluent Damascenes left the city’s densely populated core due to climatic conditions and health reasons combined with consumer preferences for living in modern (European-style) villas on the fringes of the city (see chapter 3). Another phenomenon which directly impacted on the decision of wealthy families to leave the old city and to abandon their centrally located real estate – a process that, as outlined in the previous chapter, initiated massive disinvestment – was the breakup of the traditional extended family which consisted of several generations living in one property.

5.1.1 Alienation from the City

I must confess that the influx of people from all over Syria into Damascus, the disappearance of orchards and villages surrounding it, had depressed me a great deal. When I left the country, Damascus did not even have one million inhabitants. It was a small, but vibrant city. Mezzeh, for instance, was full of cactus trees, roses, and flowers. There were no high buildings or wide streets. Now it has changed forever. There are too many cars everywhere. People who live in the suburbs and work elsewhere need to drive. There are no parking lots for everyone. Chaos rules supreme! Damascenes are not to be recognized anywhere (interview 117).

A resident of a traditional Old Damascene Sunni neighbourhood in her fifties, recalled her childhood, when the everyday life of several generations took place in and around the courtyard of her family’s home. She emphasised that maintenance was the domain of the family’s women, a ‘full-time job’ (interview 201). Likewise, another interviewee confirmed:

Traditionally, in these old houses with a huge courtyard you could find the grandfather, his sons and their children, three generations, and the grandfather has, let’s say, 5 sons and each son lives in one room with his children. So service [maintenance] was no problem. If you are now just a (small) family, man and wife with three children, and you have a big courtyard, you need two servants. […] O.K. these are old houses, but the cost is very high. You can’t stay there if you are not a rich person (interview 118).

\textsuperscript{151} Most of them are Sunni merchants.
Due to the size of traditional Damascene houses, the old generation was not able to bear the costs of necessary maintenance, so many buildings were threatened by decay as replacing family members by hired servants was unaffordable for many families. Consequently, Old Damascene property was abandoned by the original owner occupiers and rented out (interview 204). Furthermore, tenant-friendly legislation made maintenance unattractive to landlords\(^\text{152}\) and added to the decline of both the old city’s physical appearance and its reputation, which facilitated the widening of the rent gap.

In the previous chapter on gentrification in Damascus, I pointed to the emergence of a specific gentrification aesthetic which can now be perceived globally (Bridge 2001; Shaw 2007). However, as Shaw’s (2007) research on Australia’s biggest city Sydney illustrates, the built heritage of every city points to a particular historical context; Sydney, for instance, celebrated ‘a history of British settlement – and its architectures’ (Shaw 2007:82). These ‘good old times’, Shaw continues, became a form of escape from both the present and undesired past(s), validating Lowenthal’s conclusion that ‘dismay at massive change stokes demands for heritage’ (Lowenthal 2004:6). In the aftermath of the colonial era, traditional Damascene elites saw the continued decline of social networks, the decline of their political power as well as the impact of rapidly accelerating rural-urban migration on the character of “their” city. “The House on Arnous Square”, a novel by Damascus-born literary scholar and writer Samar Attar,\(^\text{153}\) investigates the feelings of a young Damascene woman vis-à-vis the place of her childhood. The protagonist has been living abroad since the late 1960s, and during subsequent visits she experiences physical, cultural and social changes of a city on the way to modernity. Addressing the issue of a growing lower class of rural origin, the central character recalls:

I knew that Bahiya [her sister] did not feel any pity towards the peasants sprawling about the sidewalk till sunset. She wouldn’t consider that their village was unable to provide daily food for them and for their children. According to her, they were a nuisance, causing the square in front of our

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152 See Totah (2006:215-218) on how neither tenants nor landlords feel responsible for property maintenance – the former because they do not own their accommodation, the latter because they do not receive enough rent to cover the costs of maintenance.

153 Attar herself is a descendant of the former Damascene ruling family al-Azm.
house to be a meeting place for the unemployed, and perhaps thieves. ‘If only the municipal truck would collect them and take them back to their villages, we would be rid of them,’ I heard her say… (Attar 1987:11-12).

The views of the main character’s sister bear testimony to a hostile attitude to the city’s increasing migrant population, which was widespread among members of the Damascene upper class. Resentment was directed not only against Damascus’s new rural proletariat, but also against non-Damascene members of the new middle and ruling classes who came to power with the Ba’th revolution of 1963. This interviewee, himself the descendant of a notable family, recalled:

> Did you notice […] how much influx into the city of what would be considered non-Damascenes took place from 1970 to 2000? For the first time, we are talking about entire neighbourhoods which are known to be non-Damascene, for example, Jaramana, 86, parts of Mezzeh […] and places like that. But Damascene Damascenes – whatever that means – started feeling increasingly alienated in “their” city (interview 113).

This view contributes to a discourse which, since the Ba’th revolution, has identified non-Damascene members of the new middle and ruling classes as playing an increasingly influential role in shaping the capital’s urban fabric. Over the last decades, parts of Mezzeh and other modern quarters of Damascus have become attractive neighbourhoods, popular particularly among regime supporters. 86, for instance, is populated by lower rank officers and their families, most of them from a rural background. Jaramana, once a small village in the Ghuta, is now home to a predominantly Druze and Christian non-Damascene population, among them, since 2003, numerous Iraqi refugees. Hostile attitudes, often resulting from prejudices and stereotypes, are mutual, as this quote from Attar’s novel illustrates:

> She [an acquaintance of the main character] is not rich, a simple poor teacher. […]. She was walking one day on al-Salihiya Street. As she stopped by a florist, a couple of young men passed by. One of them with a twirled-up moustache told her: “You’re smelling roses, ha? Now, it’s our turn to smell roses and you should smell shit” (Attar 1987:65).

Incidents like this Damascene teacher’s humiliation by “newcomers”, the creeping demise of the traditional Damascene elite’s political power and other factors such as the decline of traditional values or the destruction of the Ghuta made members of the traditional Damascene bourgeoisie feel increasingly estranged from Damascus.
Since Syria’s independence, relations with the West have been ambivalent and shaped, at the same time, by appreciation of European culture and frustration at the Western support for Israel (e.g. during the wars of 1967 and 1973). After a short period of appeasement following the end of the bi-polar world order of the Cold War, the events of 9/11 resulted, once again, in a cooling-off in Arab-Western relations. The latter have further deteriorated since 2003 as a reaction to the American attack on and subsequent occupation of Syria’s neighbour Iraq. Furthermore, the US imposed sanctions against Syria in 2003 which were still in place at the time of writing. As a consequence, and in defiance of the US discourse of the ‘axis of evil’, many Syrians have started to, first, (re)discover and appreciate their own cultural roots which resulted in their built cultural heritage experiencing a revival; and, second, new forms of consumption (e.g. during the early 2000s, Old Damascus experienced the opening of numerous themed restaurants (chapter 4) as well as the “revitalization” of the famous Suq al-Hamidiyye in 2002).\(^\text{154}\)

### 5.1.2 Laying Claim on the Old City

During the interview encounter with a senior European planner and consultant working in Damascus my counterpart outlined what he considered as the reasons for a widespread lack of maintenance by the owners of historic property in the old city:

> For one reason or another, there was no longer an interest in maintaining the properties that there had been up until maybe 20 or 30 years ago, maybe a bit longer. So there has been […] a reduction of financial resources available in the old city for a long time. The population is also in decline. Now there is a shift perhaps the other way. But it is towards a new market. It's not the people who moved out now suddenly wishing they hadn't and wanting to come back. No, they are still happy in my belief in Malki or Mezzeh or wherever (interview 114).

The interviewee’s last two insights – first, his reasoning that the trend of population decline within the old city has stopped and, second, that affluent Damascenes would rather live in modern quarters like Malki and Mezzeh, both of which are among

\(^{154}\) For Allaf (2008) it is comprehensible ‘that a society so starved of consumerism should dabble in its excesses, unleashing wallets and loosening belts with unsurpassed enthusiasm [and that in]such fertile virgin grounds, producers of self-styled luxury products and services were bound to find their lucrative niche, opposite that of cheap productions for the masses.’
Damascus’s most expensive neighbourhoods – are of particular importance regarding a differentiated understanding of the newly (re-)emerging interest in Old Damascus’s built heritage. Pfaffenbach (2004:67) observes that the ‘back to the old city movement’ [German: Zurück-in-die-Altstadt-Bewegung] in Damascus started in the 1970s; this trend, she argues, started hesitantly with wealthy Christian Damascene families rediscovering their cultural roots as well as the attractiveness of residential property in the old city.

In 1977, two years prior to Damascus being listed as a World Heritage Site, a group of middle and upper class Damascenes, 155 many of them from the old city, established “The Society of the Friends of Damascus”, an NGO devoted to the preservation of Damascus and its cultural heritage. The activities of the society included organizing lectures, exhibitions and gatherings dealing with Old Damascus. These activities addressed both the members of the society and the general public. The organization was also engaged in heritage-related lobby work and cooperation with the competent authorities (The Society of the Friends of Damascus). Salamandra (2004:80) critically analyses how this association has facilitated the re-creation of ‘a sense of Old Damascene community’, which emphasises the ‘distinction between old and new elites’. Officially, there are no restrictions against non-Damascenes in terms of membership, ‘[y]et in practice membership is restricted; a candidate must be nominated by two current members’ (Salamandra 2004:80). Consequently, only 30% of the members are non-Damascenes; therefore, as Graham et al. (2000:37) argue, ‘heritage privileges and empowers an elitist narrative of place’. Furthermore, as the example of the “Friends of Damascus” illustrates, heritage can also be used to maintain distinction between competing factions from within the middle and upper classes (on intra-class struggle, see chapter 6).

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155 The homepage boasts a membership which comprises ‘more than a thousand engineers, doctors, lawyers, university professors, teachers and other intellectuals high status professionals indeed, similar to other heritage claims elsewhere, including a number of ministers and officials in the various regions of the state’ http://damascus-friends.com/friends-of-damascus-32.damas [25.10.2012].
I asked the senior planner quoted above what his views were on the change in the attitude of Damascenes to the old city, which had obviously shifted from being considered a symbol of backwardness to being a highly appreciated location. He considered his answer for a long time, then continued:

I don't know. I would guess, and this is a guess on my part, that most Damascenes are glad that there is the old city, but they wouldn't want to live there themselves (interview 114).

Similarly, a French-trained architect who supervised the restoration of a famous merchant palace and its transformation into a boutique hotel added that people potentially interested in moving to the old city decide otherwise since they regard the conditions in the old city as not as ‘practical’ as in the modern neighbourhoods (interview 114; likewise Salamandra 2004:78-79).

Both views seem to support the findings of Salamandra (2004:77), who describes the curiosity of the bourgeoisie to return to Old Damascus as driven primarily by leisure and entertainment, namely dining:

Restaurants and cafés remain the Damascenes’ only mode of physical return; the Damascene elite has not resettled Old Damascus. Even the most ardent Old Damascus activists and aficionados live in elite districts of New Damascus […] and few express the desire to move back to the Old City.

The widespread temporary acquisition of the old city by middle and upper class individuals living in modern upscale neighbourhoods elsewhere in the city for entertainment (i.e. for going out to cafés and restaurants as well as shopping) supports the assumption that night or weekend gentrification (Rubino 2005:133) is the dominant form of “heritage revitalization” in the old city. However, it is important to note that in the years prior to the current crisis, residential gentrification had been taking place, too (interviews 108; 113). Nonetheless, as this architect says, the number of ‘individuals [who] want to come back to live in Old Damascus […] has, up till now, been very limited’ (interview 115). But what groups of actors were, prior to the current crisis, returning to the old city? A lecturer at the University of Damascus singles out both Damascenes who have restored their family’s property in the historic centre for reasons of nostalgia and non-Damascenes who feel attracted by the city’s heritage (interview 107). Wilson (2004) argues that these renovations have been ‘driven by a
generation whose parents fled the tight quarters, poor public services and uneven alleys of the Old City decades ago for comfortable Western-style suburbs’. A business consultant reminds us that ‘just rich people can afford the cost of an old house with renovation’ (interview 118).

It is not surprising, then, that the member of a long-established Damascene notable family comes to the conclusion that ‘going to the old city is a statement. This is our place! This is our heritage!’ (interview 113). But who is “we”? Who are the actors that lay claim to Old Damascene heritage? In the first place, they are the descendants of formerly influential notable families (interview 107), or, as the respondent from an Old Damascene family quoted above explains,

> Damascenes…We feel somehow that we don't have to prove anything. We are from the city and when we say we don't like this, we have the historical credibility to say [so…]. So, if families that are known to be Old Damascene gather and express their views, which clearly has a chauvinistic touch to it, they do not necessarily regard their views more authentic, but definitely more legitimate. You know, this is our city […]. We feel like we can say these things, we Damascene families, middle-class that is historically known to be Damascene. This is how we see it (interview 113).

The production of legitimacy and “historical credibility” as exercised by Old Damascene elite families, as well as claiming personal ownership of a specific past ‘has always been a vital strand in the ideology of all ruling classes’ (Plumb 1994, cited in Lowenthal 2004:90-91). In Ba’thist Syria, Old Damascene notable families, with only a few exceptions, were a marginalised social class in terms of political power. Combined with, first, the experience of alienation from the city and, second, the liberalization of Syria’s economy particularly during the 2000s, the loss of political power seems to be a credible explanation for Damascene notables’ reclaiming of “their” city.

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156 ‘The families whose history goes back beyond the Ottoman period number 25. If one includes Ottoman Damascus families, one may find 150 to 200. The number of families who have been in Damascus since independence is definitely larger’ (interview 113). On Damascene notable families see e.g. Khoury 1987; Schatowski Schilcher 1985.
For less affluent old city dwellers, recent statements of elite ownership entail the justification of physical and social changes in their quarters. The descendant of another long-established Damascene family who, in contrast to the respondent quoted previously, grew up in the old city gave an intimate account of his experience of better-off Damascenes’ change of attitude. For him, the visits of affluent relatives from a modern neighbourhood during his childhood were an imprinting experience of class stigmatization:

When they came to us, I felt, even as a child that those people were visiting only because they like my mother. But they did not really look at our house as a good place. They came and the expression on their faces was as if they had come to a dirty or low class place or whatsoever. They always looked down on us as if we hadn’t had enough money. When the changes took place, the same people, okay, and other people also who had the same mentality and who lived in the new city, arrogant, they had money, they considered themselves high-class people, for them it became fashionable to prove that they did not only have money but that they also had culture. They showed off, they also wanted to show that they were educated, that they read books and newspapers. Part of [their] showing off is their appreciation of history and historical monuments. So they have changed attitude. They are no longer looking at those places as dirty old-fashioned old houses…but as exotic places… So those people […] who live in the rich part of the city, come with their fancy cars for an evening in the old city which is different (interview 116).

This clearly illustrates that the values of Damascus’s old bourgeoisie have undergone a change, even within the same family. Old Damascus and its heritage, once considered to be a disgraceful representation of the country’s backwardness, were suddenly rediscovered and appreciated as valuable cultural heritage. Members of the middle and upper classes soon laid claim to the old city in order to increase both their status and property. As there were many Syrians of non-Damascene origin among those producing and consuming Old Damascus, one could argue that the pre-uprising consumption of Old Damascus was a ‘to the old city movement’ rather than a ‘back to the old city movement’. Whether “to” or “back to” the old city’s built heritage, the process, be it temporary (leisure) or permanent (residence), turned out to be an exclusionary, middle-class activity, a fashion as well as a tool to demonstrate social status and class distinction.
5.1.3 (Re-) Discovering Old Damascus

In the early 2000s, during subsequent stays in Damascus, I had the opportunity to observe changing attitudes of young middle-class Damascenes towards the historic centre of their city. When going out with Syrian acquaintances in the evenings, the bars in the Sheraton Hotel and a small number of Western-style cafés in New Damascus were the first choice, with al-Mamar, a nightclub in the Christian quarter Bab Tuma, being the only option considered within the walled old town. When I returned to Damascus in 2004, the same individuals suggested a different set of venues: all the cafés and restaurants we visited were in renovated courtyard houses situated in the walled old city. I discussed my observations with some of my interviewees and asked for their views on the increasing attractiveness of Old Damascus and its heritage. The owner of a boutique hotel opined that ‘there was nothing in the old city’ (interview 111). A younger colleague who recently opened another boutique hotel in the same neighbourhood further specified:

Nowadays, I think the old part of Damascus – especially if you’re talking about the Christian quarters Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi and [since] the governorate last year or the year before did many changes – is now very beautiful. So it started to be a fashion. And there are a lot of luxury places to go, restaurants and hotels. So why should we go to Sheraton? No. Now we can go to the old city (interview 120).

Among the cafés in the old city, al-Nawfara, ‘the Old City’s best-known café’ (Salamandra 2004:36) became increasingly popular among Syria’s young secular and bohemian circles or, as this Damascene relates, ‘[i]t started to become an exciting place, and it was seen as the place where you went if you felt different in some way’ (interview 113). In recent years, however, al-Nawfara has been “discovered” by Western tourist groups and, as the author observed, lost much of its original clientele.

In contrast to these lifestyle- or consumption-orientated explanations of the “to-the-old-city movement”, an architect working for the local administration gave a rather personal account, referring to the time prior to his current job:
I never tried to go to a hammam [Turkish bath].\textsuperscript{157} It was something one didn’t even think of. Nobody would think of this even as we saw it on TV and we used to consider it as something back in history which did not exist [anymore]. Maybe we didn’t dare to see how it really is or to try it and see how it is nowadays. Maybe the Sheraton represented the modern life at that time (interview 119).

As these contrasting accounts illustrate, the new attractiveness of the old city as a place for entertainment was attributed by some Damascenes to the availability of landscapes of consumption defined by ‘luxury places’ in historic property, whereas for others appreciation of and personal interest in the city’s past represented the stimulus for exploring the city’s heritage. Some interviewees linked the yearning for a better past to nostalgia,\textsuperscript{158} which Amy Mills – based on findings in traditional neighbourhoods in the Turkish metropolis Istanbul\textsuperscript{159} – defined as ‘an interpretation of history that compensates for a contemporary malaise’ (Mills 2010:15; likewise Legg 2004:100).

As outlined earlier in this chapter, in recent years, a growing number of Damascenes have felt alienated from their city (interviews 102; 105; 117; see also Salamandra 2004) since Syria has been facing growing social divisions and massive rural-urban migration\textsuperscript{160} – both resulting in unrestrained urbanization and the spread of informal neighbourhoods in Damascus and the country’s other urban centres (chapter 3). In an article published in Forward Magazine, Hamidi (2007) argues that social change in Syria has been unevenly distributed and that its speed varied:

\begin{quote}
It is quick for those living inside Syria, although they may not feel it on a daily basis. […] The one who feels the change most, however, is the Syrian who has been away from his country for many years. He feels the change the minute he walks into Damascus International Airport.\textsuperscript{161}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
157 The hammam, the traditional public bath was once a sign of a city’s development and civilization and a social institution that was shared by the poor and the rich alike (Atassi 2012:26).
158 ‘As the longing (Gr. \textit{algia}) for home (Gr. \textit{nostos}), nostalgia is defined as the longing for a home that no longer exists – or never existed’ (Legg 2004:100).
159 In Istanbul, similarly to the Damascene case, feelings of nostalgia resulted from brisk urban changes like social polarization and rural-urban migration (Mills 2010:15).
160 After the wars against Israel, Damascus saw the influx of Palestinian refugees. Alawites and members of other rural minorities followed after the Ba’th Revolution of 1963 via public service and the army, as well as for higher education. Lebanese and Iraqi refugees followed after the US invasion of Iraq and the July War respectively.
\end{footnotes}
Hamidi’s quote points to Syrians living abroad who – like other diasporas – seem to play a major role in ‘sharpening’ nostalgia (Lowenthal 2004:9) and initiating and sustaining yearnings for the heritage of a lost past or as this Damascus born owner of a boutique hotel recalls:

[T]here are foreigners, Syrians who have lived in America etc... They have a longing to buy something in Damascus, in the old town, so it is a desire to buy. It made prices increase (interview 109; own translation from French).

Consequently, the desire of the Syrian diaspora for Old Damascene heritage property (commonly, themed restaurants and boutique hotels, and to a somewhat negligible extent residential property) can be considered an example of how ‘[d]iaspora nostalgia refreshes heritage for those at home’ (Lowenthal 2004:10). As will be shown below, it is not only recently returned migrants and Syrians living abroad visiting their home country who fuel the nostalgic longing for the built heritage of Old Damascus, but also many Syrians with multinational contacts acquired during private as well as business-related visits abroad. In chapter 4, I discuss events and developments that triggered gentrification in Old Damascus. In that context I quote the owner of a guesthouse who mentioned the transnational experience of ‘people who were abroad’ (interview 106) as a possible trigger for gentrification in Old Damascus. At the same time, the statement points to the importance of transnational exchange, meaning the importance of coming in touch with the tourism industry and heritage conservation in Europe (e.g. Italy and Spain). According to this interviewee, learning from heritage tourism destinations elsewhere was instrumental in kindling the growing interest in the built heritage of Damascus and its transformation into cafés, restaurants and boutique hotels.

In the perception of other interviewees, tourists, foreign visitors and expatriates working for international companies, international aid agencies or one of the foreign embassies experience Old Damascus and its (built) heritage from the perspective of an external other. This perception is commonly shaped by admiration for Old Damascus, an attitude which according, for example, to a tour guide and former resident of the old city, is met by many Damascenes with a notion of pride:

Foreign people who […] came all the way from Europe to have a look at old houses are the reason why people [here] have realised the value. Living
all the time in the old city and being born in the old city does not always give you the right to evaluate what you have. But strangers do. When strangers come to you and look at your place with surprise and admiration and tell you that you live in paradise then you start to think differently about those places (interview 116).

The above quotations point to external appreciation of and interest in Old Damascus and its heritage as a catalyst in terms of Damascenes’ rethinking and “re”-evaluating the old city which, since the late Ottoman years, has faced continuous disinvestment, decay and abandonment. However, the hammam has become a victim of urban change and almost disappeared when, during the first half of the 20th century, modern bathrooms became common in affluent private homes.

Levine (2012:194) argues that

[...] in so many instances, modern convenience becomes the enemy of conviviality and the hammam, as an institution[,] has tended to devolve to the poorer sectors of society as the more affluent become less likely to partake of the social, health and spiritual ritual of the bath.

In recent years, however, some of the hammams in the Syrian capital have experienced a veritable renaissance (interviews 111; 119; 101). Again, foreigners taking the role of an external other played an important role in initiating and sustaining the revival of the hammam as this entrepreneur emphasised: ‘I tell you why they are coming back: because of the spa in Europe.’ The interviewee continued that the spa in Europe – though somewhat more sophisticated – follows similar principles as the hammam. Consequently, one can argue that ‘[s]ince it is fashionable in Europe, hammams are back in fashion here as well’ (interview 111). Other interviewees recalled that they had never set foot in a hammam or, as this interviewee admitted, only did so recently in the company of foreign guests:

Let me tell you that the first time it was difficult for me… I had to go there because I was asked to do so by a friend visiting from Europe. And for me it was a big sacrifice I was making because nobody went to a hammam. But after the first time I really liked it. It is something nice and it began to become a habit. [...]. Still, it is an experience, you are treated like a sultan [laughter], well, and we need this sometimes! (interview 119).

Selling this feeling of being “treated like a sultan” is the aim of an entrepreneur who has recently bought one of the most famous hammams in the old town. For him,
uniqueness is a selling point and, therefore, in contrast to other accounts, the distinction between European spa and Arab hammam is an issue of particular importance:

I'm not making a spa; I'm making a Turkish bath! We have different kinds of services in a spa. Here it's not spa. It's an old, a traditional Turkish bath. [...] In Europe, the tourists can find many spas which are very important and have a perfect service. So, here it will be a traditional hammam, using the traditional material, the olive oil and everything which used to be traditional (interview 120).

For most interviewees cleanliness seemed to be an important criterion when choosing to visit a specific hammam. One interviewee, for instance, regularly rented a whole hammam with friends and got it cleaned before, whereas another interviewee stated that the hammam of his choice needed to be ‘something nice and clean’ (interview 119). These two accounts point to a newly emerging demand for clean or – more precisely – modern hammams and a clientele willing to pay a premium. This demand is directly taken up by entrepreneurs like the one quoted above, who is ‘going to make [the hammam] really luxurious and high-class, clean at least, very clean...’ (interview 120). He considered affluent guests of neighbouring boutique hotels as the main customers of his hammam once the renovation was completed. Based on my own observations, I argue that, as is the case with Old Damascene theme restaurants and ‘modern’ cafés, hammams, too, have become an expensive form of entertainment for members of the Syrian upper and middle class as well as for foreign tourists.

As the examples above illustrate, such non-institutional foreign actors as expatriates and foreign guests who wished to experience authentic entertainment have played a significant role in stimulating Damascenes’ interest in the capital’s built heritage. In the case of the hammam, European aid agencies and research institutions have been contributing to the recent renaissance of the steambath, too. For instance, funded by the European Union within the Euromed Heritage IV framework, the Vienna Institute for Urban Sustainability, the IfPO, the University of Liverpool and ADER in Fez (Morocco) have conducted a joint comparative research project, HAMMAMED. The project aimed, first, at studying the current condition of hammams in various cities in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, including the Syrian capital Damascus and, second, at raising awareness among professionals and the wider public (interview
101). As illustrated by the example of the hammam as a social institution, transnational exchange between individuals as well as institutions has played a significant role in how Damascenes rethink and identify with their city, their heritage and how they experience nostalgia.  

5.1.4 (Re-) Imagining Old Damascus and its Heritage

In order to further investigate the role attributed to Western outsiders, this time in regard to architectural style and aesthetics, I asked an architect working for a state agency involved in the ‘revitalization’ of Old Damascus to comment on both style and authenticity of renovation projects in the old city. The respondent pointed to an Old Damascene property under restoration:

I may sometime give you [an] address to visit where you really see yourself in an orientalist painting. Unfortunately, some think […] that Damascus should be this way. You go there and everything is done nicely and with nice material and with nice quality of work. But there is too much – you feel exhausted of too many details, too many colours, too many stars surrounding you. This is not Damascus. It’s an imaginary Damascus (interview 119).

When I asked who would imagine Damascus to be this way, the interviewee emphasised that most often it would be indigenous people rather than Westerners and suggested asking Damascenes randomly about their image of an old house and predicted that one would be told that

an old house should have arches and stripes of colour on the walls. And even when you go to the Sheraton, for example, you will see this! And they try to imitate an old ambience. If you go and see the stage decoration for TV series or the theatre, you will see this - arches and stripes of colour. But the stripes of colour were the style of a certain period of the old town. Maybe it’s more colourful and nicer than other styles, but this should not be the only representation of the old town. So it’s not only the point of

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162 In their Hammam Rehabilitation Reader, which is one of the few recent studies dealing with the condition of the public baths of the region, Dumreicher et al. (2012) provide a comprehensive resource on hammams in Middle Eastern and Northern African cities. Similarly, the French research project “Les bains de l’Orient,” which is implemented by IFPO and the Agence de la Recherche Nationale, also deals with the architectural, technical and social aspects of the hammams of the region.
view of Westerners. It could also be the point of view of anyone who is not an expert (interview 119).

The picture this interviewee drew of an “imaginary Damascus” was shaped by opulence and lavishness regarding architectural detail and décor. He pointed out that in the revitalization process preference was given to the imitation and repetition of an Ottoman style with its characteristic brickwork of alternating black and white rows of stone. Furthermore, he regretted that authenticity was sacrificed for this more colourful style which resembled more or less the setting of a TV drama. Jager (1986:87) reminds us that ‘[t]o the extent that certain objects and combinations of qualities become stylized as signs of architectural and historical significance, they become the basis of a new kitsch’. Other interviewees also compared critically the new Old Damascus aesthetics to ‘Christmas glitter’ (interview 115) or ‘Disneyland’ (interview 105; likewise interviews 101; 119), thereby linking their specific Damascene experience to kitsch. Originally, a term with a negative connotation, kitsch referred to ‘mass-produced, poor-quality imitations of artwork and luxury goods (Atkinson 2007:523) consumed by Munich’s 19th century bourgeoisie, ‘who, like most nouveaux riches, thought they could achieve the status they envied in the traditional class of cultural elites by aping, however clumsily, the most apparent features of their cultural habits’ (Binkley 2000:137). With regard to the built environment, imitation becomes more important than authenticity (Jager 1986:87; Binkley 2000:142), and, due to the nostalgic yearnings of the Syrian upper and middle classes and the availability of investment capital, ‘neoromantic’ (Jager 1986) kitsch has become an aesthetic leitmotif not only for renovation projects in Old Damascus but, as will be shown below, also in the film industry and a number of newly constructed leisure zones on the fringes of the city.

The fasting month of Ramadan, as Salamandra (2004:102) recalls, ‘has become a season of nostalgia for Syrian Muslims, very much like Christmas in some American circles. Families gather, expatriates return, and the days of old are invoked around the iftar – “fast breaking” – table and on the television screen.’ In recent years, Syria’s

163 ‘In that early usage, the main elements of kitsch were fixed: kitsch defined an aesthetically impoverished object of shoddy production meant more to identify the consumer with a newly acquired (and badly managed) class status than to invoke a genuine aesthetic response’ (Binkley 2000:137).
performing arts, including theatre, music and filmmaking, have flourished and, since the 1990s, *musalsalat* (TV series aired during Ramadan) in particular have helped Syria to become the Arab world’s leading producer of fictional television series (Boëx 2011:146; Salamandra 2011:157). In the more recent productions, Salamandra (2011:160) observes a ‘folkloric turn’ expressed in the celebration of the old city’s traditional life and heritage, including the way people used to dress, furniture, etc. (Interview 109). The TV series Bab al-Hara (the Neighbourhood Gate), which is set in early 20th-century Damascus, reacquaints audiences from all over the Arab world with the long-gone everyday life in an Old Damascene neighbourhood. Bab al-Hara romanticizes ‘an era at the cusp of living memory with slice-of-life depictions of bygone customs and traditions, and valiant acts of anti-colonial resistance’ (Salamandra 2011:160). The owner of a boutique hotel explained that ‘these films have pushed people towards nostalgia and have sharpened the desire to go to Damascus to see’ (interview 109, author’s translation from French). He continued to recount how he was once approached by a group of Jordanian guests asking for directions to Bab al-Hara. He smiled and added dreamily in French: ‘Bab al Hara…Jusque le nom…ça fait rêver!’ [Bab al-Hara… the name alone makes you dream!].

Bab al-Hara and similar television series also have critics like the architect who, earlier in this chapter, disapproved of the use of brickwork made of black and white stones. From his point of view, *musalsalat* are useful to give laypersons a rough idea of Old Damascus and its heritage, yet should not be used as a point of reference.164 He exemplified this by recounting difficulties which occurred during the renovation of a courtyard house bought by a foreigner:

> make[ing] the house look as real as possible and … respecting both the rules and the point of view of the “expert architect”, and at the same time serving what the owner of the house would like to see. […] I would never go, for example, to a 19th-century house and paint the stones in different colours because that looks nicer to me as this is what makes me think of the old town according to a film or TV series. This is not right (interview 119).

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164 For a wider discussion of Syria’s media and their relation to broader society, see Wedeen 1999; Cooke 2007; Boëx 2011; for an assessment of *musalsalat* since the mid-1990s, see e.g. Salamandra 2004; 2011.
This statement resonates with the frustration shared by many professional planners and architects (interviews 101; 103; 107; 114; 115) regarding the commodification of the (built) heritage of Old Damascus, which has, in many cases, adopted the principles of kitsch instead of thoroughly authentic restoration. It is, therefore, a lack of authenticity rather than commercialization per se that has become a bone of contention.\footnote{Most experts come out in favour of restoration projects for the sake of heritage preservation and despite being aware of such social implications of their projects as, for instance, neighbourhood change, the alienation of original inhabitants from their quarters and displacement (see chapter 4).}

Commenting on the style of Old Damascene restaurants, this architect recalled:

It is like Disneyland. When you go to any restaurant, you find all the lighting and the decoration. You think this is Christmas time - without respect to the traditional atmosphere, without… it is like Disneyland, really. But this is what I consider as the negative side (interview 115).

Using Disneyland as a negative point of reference was widespread. Like the architect quoted above who rejected the style of much of the entertainment infrastructure (i.e. cafés, restaurants, boutique hotels and shops) of Old Damascus as a violation of ‘the traditional atmosphere’, many interviewees criticised the style of historic property restored into leisure facilities. Others pointed to the phenomenon of heritage theme parks on the outskirts of Damascus (interviews 102; 105; 115; 119). Asked about investors’ motivation to create these artificial worlds of experience on the periphery of the city, an architect recalled:

I’m sure it is much cheaper to build a new building resembling [the original buildings] somewhere on the outskirts of Damascus where the land price is cheaper lower. […]. Some people would like it. I wouldn’t. But I mean if “this” is the principle, it’s better to do it outside [the old city] (interview 119).

In recent years, numerous theme parks seizing upon Old Damascene heritage have mushroomed on the periphery of the capital. A prominent example of this new trend in entertainment is Sham Village. The park hosts the set of Bab al-Hara (i.e. a replica of an intra-mural residential alley imitating the style of the early 20th century, as well as a museum dedicated to traditional handicrafts and everyday life in the suqs of the same period; see appendix 23). There are fun rides, predator enclosures and a mishmash of discarded military vehicles and artillery batteries from the Israeli-Arab wars. In a similar fashion, the Damascus Gate Restaurant, a dining complex combining
six differently designed theme restaurants into the world’s biggest restaurant\textsuperscript{166} also embraces the Old Damascus heritage theme in terms of both design and diet (appendix 22). Professionals involved in the restoration of Old Damascus took a rather critical position vis-à-vis this new Old-Damascene-themed leisure infrastructure in the Ghouta. One analyst described theme parks as ‘aesthetically very bad’ (interview 102), and another interviewee reacted downright annoyed when I addressed the issue:

Oh, please do not ask me about this! It’s not in our culture really to have these huge things. It’s more of [an] American or Dubai thing to be the first, the biggest, the highest... (interview 119).

Prior to the uprising turned civil war, theme parks represented the climax of processes of heritage imitation and duplication which started with the opening of a few cafés and restaurants. Fuelled by nostalgic yearnings of an increasingly affluent middle class and TV series like Bab al-Hara, demand for everything Old Damascene accelerated, and the city’s heritage became a profitable commodity.

Thus far, I have referred primarily to identity-related aspects of Damascene heritage and its promotion. The following section will use this as a stepping stone to focus on the economic side of branding Damascus as the oldest continuously inhabited capital of the world.

5.2 Commodifying Old Damascus – Heritage, Real Estate, and Tourism

In recent years, parts of the Syrian capital have become hot spots of gentrification. In Damascus, the process, which emerged elsewhere as ‘a marginal oddity in the […] housing market—a quaint urban sport of the hipper professional classes unafraid to rub shoulders with the unwashed masses’ (Smith 2002:439), started with a small number of upper and middle class individuals with a dedication to Old Damascus and its cultural heritage (see above on Friends of Old Damascus; Salamandra 2004; Pfaffenbach 2004). Emerging in the late 1990s, this interest in the old city evolved into

a fashion (interviews 104; 116; 118; 119; 120) fuelled, among other things, by a rising rent gap as well as changes in Damascenes’ attitudes vis-à-vis the old city – be it for nostalgic or economic reasons. A descendant of a former notable family emphasised:

Going to the old city is a statement. This is our place! This is our heritage! And the irony is that, for commercial reasons, non-Damascenes would participate in [this]. And you can see this not only [in] the old city (interview 113).

It is apparent that the traditional Damascene bourgeoisie is not the only group of actors laying claim to Old Damascus. Prior to the current crisis, non-Damascenes – mostly regime cronies as well as a small number of foreign actors – requisitioned their share of Damascus’s most profitable hotel sector (see chapter 4 regarding the annual state-led tourism investment fair). A political analyst portrayed Old Damascus as ‘shifting from being a residential to being a business area’ (interview 105), which, prior to the civil war, provided expensive entertainment for an increasingly affluent domestic clientele. As growing numbers of both international arrivals in Syria and hotel beds in Damascus suggested, the local middle and upper classes were increasingly joined by international tourists who, particularly from the mid-2000s onwards, discovered the Syrian capital as an attractive holiday destination.

Below, I will focus on the production side of the Old Damascene heritage business, the actors involved and their motives. In so doing, I will pay attention to the process of how cultural heritage is used to stimulate widespread domestic as well as foreign interest in Old Damascus, a place which, until the late 1990s, seemed to be considered as the embodiment of the country’s backwardness.

\[^{167}\text{Consumers’ motives – namely heritage awareness, nostalgia, and class distinction – have been dealt with in the preceding sections of this chapter as well as in chapter 4.}\]
Table: International Arrivals to Syria, 1995-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Arrivals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>815,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,192,000</td>
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<td>2,661,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2,598,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3,399,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>3,571,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4,231,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4,158,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5,430,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>6,092,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8,546,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>5,070,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
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</tbody>
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In 2006, 73% of the international arrivals were from the Arab Gulf (OBG 2006); in 2009 3,59m were from the Gulf, 1,06m were Syrian expats and 1,4m were non-Arab (OBG 2010:161).


5.2.1 Producing Old Damascus Heritage (1) – Cafés, Restaurants and Boutique Hotels

Heritage—both tangible and intangible—is the most important single resource for international tourism. Although the market is highly segmented and different types of tourist [sic] will consume heritage at different levels, that consumption is generally superficial for culture is rapidly consumed. Tourism is an industry with substantial externalities in that its costs are visited upon those who are not involved in tourism consumption. […]. Thus tourism is largely parasitic upon culture, to which it may contribute nothing. If taken to the extreme, the economic commodification of the past will so trivialise it that, arguably, it can result in the destruction of the heritage resource which is its raison d’être (Graham 2002:1007).

An owner of a boutique hotel in Old Damascus described in detail the processes of finding and purchasing suitable property for ‘use’ as a boutique hotel:

When I was searching for a house for doing my hotel, well, I had 200 houses [to choose from]! For a year and a half, I was just going from [house to house] to find the right one […]. Everyone was showing me a house, one lovelier and better than the other. […]. I knew what I wanted to do with the house. They wouldn't know because I didn't want to give away my idea, you see? And they kept on saying, ‘But, it's a beautiful house.’
‘Yes, yes, yes, but it's too big,’ or ‘It's too small,’ or I had to find something. After 200 houses, I found the one I wanted. […]. But now you don't find 200 houses before you find the one you want. If you find one on the market, you jump on it (interview 111).

The availability of property suitable for being used as a boutique hotel changed from oversupply to scarcity, and the shortage of appropriate real estate found its expression in a general rise in property prices within the old city.

Demand for “gentrifiable” historic property was increasing, but what made investors choose particular buildings? Location was a significant aspect which would considerably enhance economic profit. One owner of a boutique hotel praised the central but quiet location on the axis linking the hallmark Omayyad Mosque and Suq al-Hamidiyye with the Christian quarter Bab Tuma (interview 111). In contrast, an interviewee who had invested in a boutique hotel in Bab Tuma explained his choice by describing the Christian quarter as more open-minded and safer than Muslim neighbourhoods.168 For other boutique hotel owners, the heritage of their respective properties (i.e. architectural features like the iwan, painted boarding or ceilings, an original fountain or old citrus trees in the courtyard) was key in their purchase decision. A Western-educated architect, who supervised the restoration of a courtyard house in the Jewish quarter, developed an intimate relationship with the project. The respondent left Europe in 2004 and returned to the Syrian capital in order to find, buy, and preserve the building, which was previously identified in a 19th-century painting.

I came and looked for this house. […]. And it was completely down, completely in ruins, nothing, and I had considerable difficulty even recognising it. […]. I love this place, and I decided to put it back as it was before. So we bought it, and according to the regulations, we rebuilt it and we carried out the restoration (interview 310).

The incentive for renovating the house, however, was not only the opportunity to preserve the heritage of a famous merchant houses, but, as in many other cases, also the opportunity to profit economically from the legacy of the property by transforming it into a luxury boutique hotel. The economic exploitation or commodification of

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168 This statement was one of the very few statements referring to religious affiliation.
heritage, like gentrification, is by no means limited to Damascus, and for Herzfeld
(2010:262)

[i]t is no coincidence that heritage has also gained great prominence as neoliberal forces […] have seized on the commercial value with which it invests what had hitherto been treated as dilapidated old properties, or, in Thompson's (1979) term, rubbish.

For both interviewees the hotelier and the architect – the former referred to architectural details, the latter to an oriental painting – heritage was a crucial aspect of their decision to buy and renovate the respective property. Interestingly, references to the hotel owners’ personal contributions to the preservation of Old Damascus became a common marketing tool as studying the homepages of different boutique hotels revealed (see below).

Once a house was purchased, investors entered a stage of time-consuming restoration. Besides bureaucratic obstacles and widespread petty corruption as well as numerous technical specifications for restoration projects in Old Damascus, investors faced a lack of qualified craftsmen. As a consequence of the old city's decay, demand for traditional craftsmanship was, until recently, in decline. Consequently, some trades disappeared when the older generation retired (interviews 115; 118). Based on his experience of restoring a 17th-century property into a boutique hotel, the owner cast doubt on the skills of most contemporary artisans:

They don’t know how to do things the way they used to […]. It is no longer an art. In the past, these craftsmen had a reputation, and their work had a certain style and signature; today they just copy and paste. It is rare to find quality (cited in de Châtel 2009).

An architect, however, added that

[n]ow at least […] this kind of specialization is coming back. […]. There is a big demand for this kind of work. It gives the chance to new people, to new generations, to think that this kind of speciality makes money. So the new generation, they start really to engage with such work as carving, stonework, wood work, all these things. Now the new generation starts working with that. And you can find now so many people working in this field because it is good business (interview 114).

The respondent continued that, based on the amount of money an investor was willing to pay, capable craftsmen became increasingly available. He added that nowadays
‘[t]here are people who have very good taste and people who are commercial…, but now you can find people you can rely on’ (interview 114.).

Earlier in this chapter, I addressed widespread frustration among professional planners and architects as well as residents regarding the lack of authenticity in the commodification of Old Damascene houses. Nevertheless, at least when it comes to aesthetics, the above statements on the quality of craftsmanship invite us to assume that not all restoration projects in Old Damascus can be classified in terms of a kitsch-authenticity dichotomy. The accounts rather suggest the coexistence of both principles. Among the boutique hotel owners and architects I interviewed and in a number of press releases, there were some actors who emphasised their intention to preserve every historic detail of their property in order to keep as much of the authenticity of the building as possible both for nostalgic and economic reasons. The latter issue becomes particularly clear in the remarks of this investor, who restored a courtyard house in the Jewish quarter:

They [the tourists] pay for authenticity! Therefore, we make it as authentic as possible. And not many changes need to be made – these houses are already marvellous! (interview 206).

Here, indeed, heritage is regarded as not much more than a commodity, a source of commercial profit. For Harvey, whether the focus is on heritage, history, nature, culture or sexuality, ‘the extraction of monopoly rents from originality, authenticity, and uniqueness (of works of art, for example)—these all amount to putting a price on things that were never actually produced as commodities’ (Harvey 2005:166), such as, for instance, the legacy of an old Damascene courtyard house (also in Graham et al. 2000:142).

Instead of focussing primarily on authenticity, other investors prioritized the functionality of their buildings as boutique hotel or restaurant. For instance, a former resident of the old city recalled how new walls were ‘illegally’ put up in order to provide each hotel room with a bathroom (interview 116). Likewise, the installation of generators and central heating – the latter being officially prohibited – turned out to be a threat to historic buildings which were not constructed to withstand the vibrations...
caused by modern diesel-fuelled boilers (interview 116). Additionally, the use of cheap ‘materials like concrete and cement plaster instead of traditional wood and mud brick in order to speed up conversion work and maximize returns’ (Deknatel 2009) has had a damaging effect on the old city’s built environment. Finally, in their revitalization projects, some investors tended to materialize their own vision of an Old Damascene house as this architect recalled:

Sometimes it is only the owner who has some ideas or fantasies or anything. He wants to do something which is not related to history… I think it is not always successful. […]. I have seen many mistakes. Especially when, for example, a medical doctor who wants to invest has some ideas but this is not his profession. But he has supervised the work. There was no architect involved in the work, so he brought, for example, stones from other parts of Syria and he added these elements… (interview 101).

Some non-specialist investors were proud of both their projects and the fact that they did not “need” the work of professionals as this tour guide, who recently opened a small boutique hotel, recalled: ‘We didn’t employ specialists. No, no, no, it was us. We made it on our own’ (interview 109). Saving money, therefore, seemed not to be the investor’s main motivation - it was rather a desire to realise his own image of an old Damascene house. A member of the former owner’s family agreed to share some personal experiences and feelings related to the sale of their former home:

I and my family felt very sorry and we were filled with nostalgia for the place. And during the process of its renovation, we kept coming back, feeling nostalgia for the place. But when it was completed, and when I came back to the house […] and to the room which was once mine, I didn't feel any nostalgia […]. The renovation, in my opinion, was exaggerated; it was not done in the correct way. I was shocked and surprised that it was done in a bad way although the man who has done the renovation believes himself to be one of the best people in renovating places. He believes that his style is the best style. And we're talking about the best style and the renovation has changed my family house to a degree that I don't know it any more. It is not our house any more. Nothing, nothing, nothing is the same! (interview 301).

This intimate account outlines how an Old Damascene family – despite the fact that they sold their house voluntarily – faced the loss of their sense of belonging to a place called home.
In the process of restoration, for the sake of profit, investors seem to ignore issues of authenticity, and their architectural interventions cause damage to the original structure and aesthetic of properties. Regardless of whether a commercialised property is labelled kitsch or authentic, it can be argued that its new use has a severe impact on its immediate surroundings. Newly produced landscapes of heritage consumption target a rather affluent clientele, which results in significant changes in the original residents’ everyday lives. Private investors were not the only stakeholders in the restoration of Old Damascus’s built heritage. In recent years, the local government has implemented a number of projects, most prominently, as will be seen below, the revitalization of Suq al-Hamidiyye and the Strait Street, which sheds light on the role of the authoritarian state in gentrification and heritage as it seeks to solidify its position of power. The following paragraphs are dedicated to the branding of Old Damascus and the roles different stakeholders, both private and governmental, play in this process.

5.2.2 Producing Old Damascene Heritage (2) – Branding the Cradle of Civilizations and the Selection of a Damascene Heritage

Places all over the world – and cities in particular – have always had an ambition to make a distinction between themselves and others (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). In this competition, Anholt (2004:213) argued, places have, in fact, long been brands. However, it was only during the 1980s and 1990s that place or location branding became a priority for marketing specialists, both practitioners and academics (Hankinson 2001:127; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005:506). Nowadays, place branding is commonly defined as ‘the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to the economic, political and cultural development of cities, regions and countries’ (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005:506). This makes it clear that private sector actors are by no means the only stakeholders involved in place branding: ‘it is no longer merely businesses which recognise the usefulness of marketing’ (Anholt 2004:214). It can be said that both governmental and

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169 Hankinson and Cowking (1993:10) define a brand as ‘a product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values.’
non-governmental organisations, particularly in the fields of urban planning and tourism marketing, start to be aware of the ‘profound truth about human endeavour which marketers always knew: that being in possession of the truth is not enough. The truth must be sold’ (Anholt 2004:214). In the following paragraphs, I will scrutinise how both private and governmental producers of heritage have been playing a visible role in branding and selling the (built) heritage of Old Damascus.

The Internet allows entrepreneurs like the owners of restaurants and boutique hotels to reach global audiences at a comparatively low cost, provided the targeted clientele has access to the Internet (Grodach 2009). With their focus on international tourists from a middle-class background, it is not surprising that all boutique hotels referred to in this study had an English-language or multi-lingual website.\footnote{At the time of writing, as a consequence of the current crisis, some boutique hotels have abandoned their websites.} Opening the website of an Old Damascene boutique hotel often gives the potential guest the impression of entering an exotic microcosm. Photos of lavishly designed rooms and reference to the heritage of the respective building through terms like \textit{authentic}, \textit{traditional}, \textit{ancient}, \textit{unique}, \textit{original} or \textit{real} as well as, in some cases, the sound of traditional lute music, set the stage for an Arab fairy tale à la 1001 nights. On their websites these boutique hotel owners, for instance, praise their properties as ‘a quiet urban hideaway tucked in the historical neighborhood […] with its churches, mosques, souks (old bazaars) and restaurants’\footnote{http://www.beitzafran.com/content/about-beit-zafran-hotel [24.11.2012]} or as places ‘telling stories of the enchanted past, displayed in the spirit of the present’.\footnote{http://antiquekhan-hotel.com/ [24.11.2012]} This ‘spirit of the present’ finds its expression in the visible use of and reference to luxury materials which address the ‘needs’ of an affluent, cosmopolitan clientele willing to pay several hundred dollars per night. In order to attract the attention of their distinction-seeking target audience, the websites of boutique hotels use professional logos and slogans which exude the cultural heritage of the buildings or of the old city as well as the high standard of the services on offer. ‘Tradition at your service!’\footnote{http://alpashahotel.com/ [24.11.2012]} promises the Al Pasha Hotel; ‘Tradition with style!’ is the slogan of Dar al Noor, whereas Beit Rumman invites its guests to ‘Escape the
ordinary… [and to] feel at home!"\textsuperscript{174} With the purpose of persisting in an increasingly competitive market, several boutique hotel owners teamed up and founded Syria Boutique Hotels (SBH). The organization, which uses the slogan ‘Make your stay memorable. Enjoy Syria’s uniqueness,’ both surveys and certifies the standards of all joining boutique hotels and offers its members the use of the country’s only fully automated online hotel reservation system.\textsuperscript{175} The example of boutique hotels and the short analysis of their websites illustrate the increasing importance of capitalist business tools like branding and online marketing for private producers of heritage in Old Damascus. Entrepreneurs, however, were not the only actors involved in the production of heritage. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, attention will be paid to non-private stakeholders, most prominently to local and national government agencies.

During the first decade of this century, the number of international tourist arrivals in Syria increased significantly from 1.68 million in 2000 to 8.9 million in 2010.\textsuperscript{176} In an interview for the Oxford Business Group Syria Report 2010, Saadullah Agha Al Qala’a, the then Minister of Tourism, emphasised that ‘[a]round 60% of our tourists arrive from Arab countries seeking leisure and summer holidays; 17% are Syrians living abroad; and 22% are non-Arabs, mostly from the European markets […] who are seeking cultural and religious tourism’ (OBG 2010:166). The country’s heritage – particularly the old cities of Damascus and Aleppo, both of which are listed as World Heritage Sites – played a vital role in attracting Syrians living abroad as well as Western tourists, and, together with Syria’s coast, accounted for around 90% of the country’s tourism investment (OBG 2010:166). In this context, Shackley (1998: Preface) argued:

\begin{quote}
[T]he term “World Heritage Site” is instantly recognised as designating something very special, in tourism terms a definite “must see”. Needless to say, such sites are magnets for visitors and the enrolment of a new property on the World Heritage list, with the concomitant publicity, is virtually a guarantee that visitor numbers will increase.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{174} \url{http://bietrumman.com/[24.11.2012]}
\textsuperscript{175} \url{www.syriaboutiquehotels.com/node/9 [24.11.2012]}
However, the classification of historic sites in Syria as World Heritage\textsuperscript{177} seemed not to be the only reason for the rising numbers of international tourists. In 2006, the Syrian government implemented a new strategy intended to develop tourism as one of the country’s leading industries. Following a market-orientated approach, the new strategy included such policies as the structural reorganization of the MoT and the promotion of public – private partnership as well as efforts to place the country on the international tourism map (al-Qala’a 2008:7f;\textsuperscript{178} see also OBG 2008; 2009; 2010). Tourism was expected to contribute to both the preservation of Syria’s national heritage and the showcasing of the country’s ‘cultural and civilized image’ (TIF 2008:23). In order to achieve these ambitious goals, the budget of the MoT was increased from US$ 1.5 million in 2006 to US$ 5.5 million, or by 350% a year later (al-Qala’a 2008:72), and a portion of the annual budget of the MoT has since been used to organise promotional tours.\textsuperscript{179} As a result, Syria’s representation in the leading Western media increased significantly: in 2008, eight articles on Damascus as a tourist destination were published in \textit{The Guardian} alone, and other English-language dailies followed. ‘Today you can see posters promoting Syria in the London Underground and advertisements on international TV channels […and] nine leading international travel magazines put Syria in their top ten destinations to visit’ (Qala’a in OBG 2010:166). Most of these articles uncritically followed the regime’s discourse of presenting Syria as a modern, though exotic, tourist destination which aimed at shedding the persistent image of the country county as a rogue state.

Worldwide, countries as well as cities intend not only to create a distinct image (brand awareness) ‘but also to raise associations between the place and attributes regarded as being beneficial to its economic or social development (thus brand utility)’ (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005:513). In the case of Syria, the above-mentioned ‘cultural and civilized image’ can be seen as such an attempt to promote the country as a competitive

\textsuperscript{177}The UNESCO listed the following historic sites in Syria as World Heritage: ‘Ancient City of Aleppo, Ancient City of Bosra, Ancient City of Damascus, Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, Crac des Chevaliers and Qal’at Salah El-Din, and Site of Palmyra’, http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/SY/ [24.11.2012].

\textsuperscript{178}I want to thank Shin Yasuda for bringing the text to my attention.

\textsuperscript{179}In 2008 and 2009, the MoT invited more than 1,000 foreign journalists and travel agents to participate in these road tours.
tourist destination. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005:513) identify three policies that have become popular among urban planners, namely ‘“Personality branding” (or “The Gaudi gambit” after the success of its application in Barcelona), “Flagship construction” […] and “Events branding”. In Damascus, the latter two approaches became particularly important: first, ‘flagship construction’ when the Syria Trust of Development announced an international architectural competition for the redevelopment of the city’s centrally located former fairground on the banks of the river Barada; second, ‘event branding’ when, in 2008, Damascus became the Arab Capital of Culture.

Notwithstanding Syria’s increasing popularity as a tourist destination, ‘it remains one of the few countries without a tourism brand: neither a universal logo nor a slogan’ (Birke 2009). In addition to the high costs of creating a brand, Ali Mahmoud, creative director of the Damascus-based Keybrand advertising agency, explained that branding was an entirely new concept in the Syrian context: ‘It was not part of the social system mentality. It is a free market idea and it is taking time to catch on’ (Mahmoud cited in Birke 2009). Despite measures to put Syria on the international tourism map implemented by the MoT (TIF 2008; OBG 2010), Birke criticises the narrow focus on tourism fairs and marketing campaigns in a few selected countries instead of a coherent national branding initiative. Also, Damascus, the capital, failed to develop a brand.

I discussed the issue of finding an appropriate logo for the brand Damascus with a Damascene political analyst, who added:

Would you use a religious symbol? If you do, this in itself is a statement. […] If you identify one specific image, it may be that there are concerns on who gets marginalised in the process. I’m just guessing with you, I don’t know. I just think of the [Umayyad] Mosque. How would Damascene Christians feel about that image being the official brand of Damascus? […] I think the identification of a specific brand probably involves debate on, you know, if once you select a specific image, you may, in the process, marginalise important segments which identify with the old city as well. You know, the Big Apple is something everyone can identify with. But

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what would be something in Damascus that everyone can identify with? You see, everything is loaded, everything is charged [with meaning] (interview 113).

Each potential logo seemed to have a specific meaning depending on the audience addressed. If selected as a logo, the Umayyad Mosque, the most distinctive building within the old city, would point to a religious dimension of defining both a brand and, more generally, ‘the’ official heritage of (old) Damascus. The respondent is alluding to the existence of underlying conflict lines separating the Christian minorities and the Sunni majority in terms of heritage as both groups have, for centuries, claimed ownership of the walled old city both as a place of worship and residence. These sectarian fault lines might be an explanation for why the attempts of the Syrian government to define and promote the national heritage and to create the Damascus brand were rather hesitant and – in retrospective – unsuccessful.

Jacobs (1996) argues that in the highly selective process of heritage production ‘[c]ertain places may be incorporated into sanctioned views of the national heritage while others may be seen as a threat to the national imaginary and are suppressed or obliterated’ (Jacobs 1996 in Shaw 2007:85). Including selected events in the official version of national heritage while, at the same time, ignoring others is not a new phenomenon (e.g. Hagen 2009a; 2009b), and authoritarian regimes like the regime in Syria resort to defining national heritage in order to gain legitimacy and thus upgrade authority.

In 1974, after the ratification of the UN-brokered disengagement agreement following the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) retreated from the Syrian province town of Quneitra, but not before destroying the city entirely. Since then, Quneitra has not been rebuilt and has served the Syrian government as a site of remembrance and thus as a tool to produce and reproduce an important part of the country’s post-independence heritage (i.e. the resistance against Israel). Eight years later, in order to crack down on an uprising of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) laid siege to the central Syrian merchant town of Hama and carried out a massacre which resulted in the loss of at least 10,000 lives and the
destruction of most of the city’s historic old town. In Hama, unlike in Quneitra, the government was keen to remove all traces of the atrocities and the site of the former historic centre was transformed into a park with a modern hotel complex belonging to the state-owned Sham Hotels Group. Furthermore, until the outbreak of the current crisis, the events of the Hama uprising remained a taboo subject. Ironically, 30 years after the massacre, the city was again under siege of the Syrian army – this time following the orders of Hafiz’s son Bashar al-Asad. In Shaw’s words, ‘[t]he reality of invasion and bloody resistance has been successfully buried beneath the re-written layers’ (2007:89). The case of Hama illustrates how Syria’s rulers played a most powerful role in deciding which historical narratives were to be included in or excluded from the nation’s heritage. In doing so, heritage designation became a tool for regime maintenance and thus of authoritarian resilience. Likewise, but in a less dramatic way, state agencies were involved in privileging specific architectural styles and histories in the ‘revitalization’ of Old Damascus. In 2002, the Syrian government enforced a large-scale restoration of the late-Ottoman Suq al-Hamidiyya. According to Totah (2009:58) the project included the ‘removal of store signs and extensions that were considered blights on its historical value’ and government officials celebrated its implementation as ‘tarji’ ila al-‘asl [return to the origin]’. The study further outlines how the French cadastral map of 1930 and colonial photographs became historical points of reference for the project as, due to their age, both ‘had achieved a heritage status in their own right and an authenticity’ (Totah 2009:69). While the built heritage of the late Ottoman era has, in recent years, experienced a veritable renaissance, buildings constructed during the French Mandate period have gone to rack and ruin in many quarters adjacent to the old city (interviews 111; 115; 203). Like the examples of Quneitra and Hama, juxtaposing the late-Ottoman Suq al-Hamidiyya and French colonial buildings shows that the Syrian state played a decisive role in defining heritage. However, before turning to the motives for state interventions in the production of both heritage and gentrification (chapter 6) and to the particularities resulting from the Syrian regime’s authoritarian character, I will close this chapter by drawing some interim conclusions.

181 Hafiz al-Asad’s biographer Patrick Seale (1988:334) puts the number of casualties at 5,000 to 10,000.
5.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter argued that due to rural-urban migration, rapid urbanization and the loss of political and economic power following the Ba’th revolution, descendants of traditional Damascene elite families have felt increasingly alienated from ‘their’ city. As a reaction to this estrangement, the old city, the very heart of the Syrian capital, has only recently been re-discovered, re-imagined and re-claimed as a focal point of Damascene identity, which has resulted in a mostly temporary return to the old city. In this process, historical continuity functioned as a resource of legitimacy and as a tool for class distinction. Deprived of power, the Damascene elite aimed at distinguishing themselves from both the less affluent strata of society, and, more importantly, from the mostly non-Damascene and ever more influential new bourgeoisie.\footnote{The political dimensions of this intra-elite struggle will be further scrutinised in the following chapter.} The latter not only claimed their share of the old city’s cultural and economic credentials, but they increasingly controlled both access to and the interpretation of Old Damascene heritage. Syrians living abroad but coming back on holiday and Westerners (i.e. expatriates working in the capital as well as international heritage) functioned as external catalysts, reinforcing domestic attention to Old Damascene heritage in terms of identity and business. Prior to the current crisis, affluent tourists and weekend gentrifiers appeared to be an endless source of income. Consequently, investors – both Damascene and non-Damascene – got involved in the restoration and commodification of the old town (i.e. in its use as restaurants or boutique hotels, and thus in gentrification). Based on the analysis of geographies of heritage in this chapter I argue that there exists a clear heritage-gentrification nexus in terms of location, aesthetics and actors involved: gentrification and heritage are exclusionary middle- and upper-class activities with similar negative impact on affected neighbourhoods (Shaw 2007). Private actors, however, were not the only stakeholders competing for control over the old city’s heritage. In recent years, both the local and the national state got involved in defining and marketing Syrian and Damascene heritage. By doing so, government agencies such as the MoT and the Ministry of Culture (MoC) employed selected heritage interpretations, first, to enhance the reputation of the country abroad and, second, to consolidate the legitimacy of the
authoritarian regime domestically. Defining an official version of Syrian national heritage while disregarding other versions turned out to be a successful regime strategy that contributed to authoritarian resilience, which will be the focus of attention in the following chapter.
Chapter 6: Authoritarian Resilience and the City: The Politics of Gentrification and Heritage in the Syrian Capital Damascus

Syria is ‘a socialist popular democratic state’ (article 1, clause 1), and ‘the economy of the state is a planned socialist economy aiming at eliminating all forms of exploitation’ (article 13, clause 1 of the old Syrian constitution 1973-2012; cited in Seifan 2010:10).

In the context of economic liberalization in Syria, scholarly reference was frequently made to real estate and construction (e.g. Seifan 2010, Donati 2013), two emblematic sectors in terms of the economic opening (see OBG 2006, 2008, 2009). Social issues resulting from the country’s neo-liberal transition, for instance, the housing crisis, unemployment as well as poverty or public health (Clerq and Hureault 2010; Goulden 2011; Ahmad 2012) were also raised. However, efforts to scrutinize authoritarian resilience directly with regard to its impact on the built environment were absent, as were attempts to explore urban phenomena like gentrification and heritage preservation through the analytical lens of authoritarian resilience. Addressing this research gap (i.e. the impact of authoritarian upgrading on the urban sphere) is the aim of this chapter, which concentrates on the relationship between urban transformations on the one hand and authoritarian resilience on the other. I begin this chapter with an overview of socio-economic and political developments in Syria under the reign of Bashar al-Asad, thereby expanding the historical outline presented in chapter 3. Then I establish connections between the three bodies of literature that form the theoretical framework of this thesis (i.e. gentrification, heritage and authoritarian resilience). I then apply this conceptual framework to a number of urban processes and policies observed in the Syrian capital prior to the outbreak of the civil war in spring 2011.

183 An exception is Heydemann (2007), who, by describing Abu Roumane as a landscape of conspicuous consumption for affluent Damascenes, touched upon the link between authoritarian upgrading and the gentrification of downtown Damascus. See also Pierret’s (2012) analysis of the state-led Shi’ite pilgrimage to Damascus and other Syrian cities.
6.1 Syria under Bashar al-Assad – (Neo-)Liberalization without Democratization

When Hafiz al-Asad, ruler of Syria for three decades, died in June 2000, his son Bashar assumed power, and Syria – despite being a republic – saw ‘a quasi-monarchical change of leadership’ (Perthes 2004:87). In order to prevent the emergence of a power vacuum which might have had the potential to threaten the regime’s stability and three decades of rule by the al-Asad clan, the transition of power from father to son had been planned well in advance. In the days following the passing away of Hafiz al-Asad, the People’s Assembly voted in favour of lowering the constitutional minimum age for the presidential office from 40 to 34 (Bashar’s age at the time). Bashar was appointed General Secretary of the Ba’th Party and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Furthermore, he was nominated as the only candidate for the presidential referendum, which he won with more than 97% of the votes (Leverett 2005:65-68; Zisser 2007:39-43; Ziadeh 2011:45-48). When he took office, the young president – a UK-trained ophthalmologist – presented himself as ‘the person who would lead Syria into the twenty-first century’ (Zisser 2007:53) and as a modernizer ready ‘to open the economy to the world market and adapt the country to the age of globalization’ (Hinnebusch 2012:98). He was committed to ‘following in his father’s footsteps’ (Zisser 2007:52), a discourse that emphasised the new leader’s aspirations in terms of legitimacy and continuity. Therefore, despite the fact that economic reform ranked high on Bashar’s agenda, it soon became clear that political reform fell short of the expectations of the international community and Syria’s (Western) donors in particular (Perthes 2004:87; Leverett 2005:69).

Due to his young age, Bashar al-Asad was perceived as the representative of a new generation - an image that was further accentuated by popular policies like the introduction of the Internet and the mobile phone as well as a reduction in import taxes on new cars and other luxury consumer goods. This leads to the question: what groups of actors formed the power base of the new ruler? How did these actors rule the country, and how did they benefit from their support for Bashar prior to the uprising-turned-civil-war, which started in the spring of 2011? An what role did gentrification play in this? After taking office in July 2000, the young president appointed a new generation of loyal technocrats to influential positions, among them fellow members.
of the Syrian Computer Society (SCS),\textsuperscript{184} foreign educated regime supporters as well as former functionaries of international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank (Hinnebusch 2012:104; Perthes 2004:91-92; Zisser 2007:60-61). According to Perthes (2004:88), ‘the old and new elements of the Syrian leadership shared an interest in pursuing change in a gradual and controlled manner and also in maintaining control over transitions within elite circles’, a strategy which made Bashar the most important decision maker, but ‘not the source of all power’ (89). During Bashar’s early years in office, in addition to his newly recruited confidants from the SCS, the ranks of the regime included individuals from his family, clan and tribe, members of his father’s trusted inner circle as well as elements from the wider Alawite officer class (Leverett 2005:70-79; Zisser 2007:60-66) – a group of powerful regime figures which served Bashar as an extra-governmental team of advisers and which observers described as the ‘kitchen cabinet’ (Leverett 2005:72). Nevertheless, regarding the composition of Bashar’s first cabinet, Perthes (2004:92) identified the security apparatus, the state and public sector bureaucracy as well as the Ba’th Party as continuously significant ‘more established recruitment pools’.

The influential role played by the members of the kitchen cabinet and individuals close to the president point to the widespread ‘informalization’ of policy making. In Bashar’s Syria, like in other authoritarian states, personal trust, kinship, mutual (business) interests, patronage and clientelism seemed to rank higher than transparency, the rule of law and pluralism. This proverbially affected all aspects of everyday-life in Syria including gentrification and heritage preservation in Old Damascus. Informalized policy making is emblematic of ‘patrimonial capitalism’, which Schlumberger defines as:

\begin{quote}
a specific type of non-market capitalism [that] has emerged out of structural adjustment in this region where political control over the economy is highly concentrated and where informal modes of interaction between state and business dominate over formal rules and laws (Schlumberger 2008:622-623).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{184} Before his rise to power, Bashar was president of the Syrian Computer Society, an NGO founded by his elder brother Basil, who was originally chosen as Hafiz’s successor but died in a car crash in 1994.
Haddad (2009:31) describes state-business relations in Syria by pointing out that the most influential members of the new bourgeoisie were satisfied with the status quo, which granted them ‘proximity to the state and membership in the networks where rents are distributed and laws openly transgressed’. By contrast, the author continues that businesspeople with little *wasta*¹⁸⁵ ‘had to play by the rules’ (Haddad 2009:31) a circumstance that resulted in reduced competitiveness, for instance in the lucrative tourism and real estate sectors of gentrifying Old Damascus (interviews 118 and 120). For the sake of regime maintenance, a selective approach was adopted, which protected the privileges of the most loyal actors rather than the business community as a whole and which had been discussed elsewhere as the main obstacle to economic liberalization (Hinnebusch 2012; Haddad 2012):

The regime coopted a new alliance of reforming technocrats and the business class, a powerful social force which, dependent as it was on the state for opportunities (contracts, licences) and for disciplining the working class and rolling back populism, had no interest in a democratization which could empower the masses to block economic liberalization (Hinnebusch 2012:103-104).

However, reforms addressing the country’s social and economic problems became increasingly urgent for instance with regards to growing social inequality in the Damascene housing market (Goulden 2011).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Syria had one of the world’s highest rates of natural population growth, and the country continued to face a gradually increasing demographic crisis and rural areas were particularly affected by a growing population, and chronic unemployment became chronic (e.g Perthes 2004:99). As a consequence, throughout the reign of Bashar al-Asad, rural-urban migration continued to accelerate.¹⁸⁶ The process contributed to unanticipated levels of urbanization, which, from the mid-2000s onwards, was further fuelled by severe droughts in Syria’s northeast and, in the aftermath of the US invasion, a massive influx of Iraqi refugees (Aita

¹⁸⁵ ‘*Wasta* (‘going in between’) is reported to be a widespread practice in many Arab nations […] and] is defined as a process whereby one may achieve goals through links with key persons. These links are personalistic, and most often derive from family relationships or close friendships…’ (Smith 2012:335).

¹⁸⁶ In 2010, Syria had an urban population of 56%, and the estimated rate of urbanization is 2.5% for the years 2010-2015; http://www.indexmundi.com/syria/demographics_profile.html [20.09.2013].
During the early 2000s, the investment climate in Syria remained poor, and the country continued to depend largely on exploiting its shrinking oil resources, which accounted for ‘70% of Syria’s export revenue, 20% of its GDP and half of total government revenues’ (OBG 2006:25). Consequently, Syrian policy makers agreed that ‘without a return to economic growth, Syria would not be capable to tackle neither the problem of unemployment’ (Perthes 2004:100) nor its economic and demographic crises. The first hesitant attempts of economic liberalization undertaken by Bashar’s administration were slowed after the US invasion of Iraq, which put an end to lucrative Syrian-Iraqi trade relations (Aita 2008:4; Seifan 2010:8). After 2005, the country faced further international isolation when, after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) enforced Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon (e.g. Aita 2008:3). Furthermore, the US and other Western states imposed economic sanctions on Syria.  

Western interference in Syria’s sphere of interest decisively affected the country’s economic development on two counts. First, in order to escape from its economic isolation, the regime successfully diversified its economic relations by opening the country for non-western investors and Syrian expatriates (Zisser 2007:119-121). Much of this investment was directed towards the country’s booming real estate and tourism sectors (e.g. OBG 2008; OBG 2009; OBG 2010) and fuelled, for instance, gentrification in Old Damascus (interviews 105; 118). In this regard, it appears that Western efforts to isolate Syria such as suspending negotiations on Syria’s joining the Euro-Mediterranean-Partnership or US sanctions resulted, paradoxically, in the country’s economic opening.  

Second, Syria returned ‘to old rules of planning from above’ (Seifan 2010:8). In early 2005, under the leadership of its newly appointed director Abdallah al-Dardari, ‘the mastermind behind a decade of “economic reform”’ in Syria and a confidant of Bashar al-Asad (Francis 2011), the State Planning Commission presented a comprehensive study on the country’s economy, which, according to Aita (2008:4), was  

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187 The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 (SALSRA) was the most important one; http://www.congress.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d108:H.R.1828; [15.05.2013].  
188 For a detailed outline of the reform strategy of the Syrian government, see Seifan (2010:12-20).
the first realistic look at the economy in decades [as it] pointed to the critical situation of growing unemployment – (24% of the workforce), poverty, low private investment, collapsing added value of the public manufacturing sector, deteriorating productivity, inadequate financial, monetary and fiscal policies, and an imminent rapid shift in the oil trade balance from surplus to deficit. The report […] qualifies the policies of Bashar Assad in the period 2000-2004 as “having discouraged growth and optimal investment of resources as well as the development of human resources, while neglecting to focus on increasing social justice despite heavy subsidies delivered by the government.

In June 2005, the Ba’th party adopted the model of ‘social market economy’ which was applied in the 10th Five Year Plan (FYP)\(^{189}\) and was presented later that year (Francis 2011; Donati 2009:225; Seifan 2010:8, 32). Based on the Chinese model of liberalization without democratization, ‘the [Syrian] model of social market economy would [according to the regime’s calculation] reconcile the logic of capitalism with a social role of the state’ (Donati 2009:225, original in French, author’s translation\(^{190}\)). However, Seifan argues that the party failed to specify its version of social market economy and that the country entered ‘transition from a state-run economy to a market economy without any methodology or guidelines measuring success or failure, nor mechanisms to take corrective actions’ (Seifan 2010:32). This situation, due to the lack of transparency, facilitated both the preservation of the status quo (Donati 2009:225) and the informalization of governance.\(^{191}\) For Hinnebusch (2012:101), the policy implemented

by Bashar’s reforming technocrats […] was hardly distinguishable from neo-liberalism, with its priority on capital accumulation and growth to the neglect of equality and distribution. Responsibility for investment and employment was transferred to the private sector, which, however, could not fill the gap left by public sector decline.

Indeed, these policies resembled the neoliberal projects of the 1980s ‘when state power was mobilized behind marketization and deregulation projects’ (Hinnebusch 2012:101). Consequently, as in other developing countries facing neoliberal reform,

\(^{189}\) Seifan criticized the 10th FYP for having ‘no practical value for the implementation of reform’ (2010:8); also Aita (2008:4).

\(^{190}\) ‘Emprunté aux économistes chinois, le modèle de l’économie sociale de marché voudrait concilier une logique capitaliste avec un rôle social de l’État’ (Donati 2009 :225).

\(^{191}\) ‘La liberation est non seulement graduelle, mais selective. Elle dépend des autorisations délivrées et donc d’un choix délibéré des acteurs amenés à jouer ce rôle’ (Aita 2007:562).
spending cuts and the suspension of state subsidies resulted in increasingly uneven development and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Syrian society started to splinter, on the one hand, into a deprived majority that depended on overstretched and underfinanced public services and, on the other hand, into a class ‘with access to better private education and healthcare, and better social welfare’ (Seifan 2010:23). By addressing the county’s severe socio-economic problems, the regime used al-Dardari and his rhetoric of ‘social market economy’ as a ‘Trojan horse’ (Francis 2011) in order to introduce neoliberal reform, which resulted in the emergence of what Aita calls an ‘antisocial socialism’ (2007:574), while state capitalism transformed into ‘crony capitalism’ [in French original: capitalisme des copains] (563).

What were the consequences for the urban realm when Middle Eastern regimes turned from populist authoritarianism towards neoliberal authoritarianism? In order to address the apparent lack of urban focus in studies on authoritarian resilience, this chapter scrutinizes how gentrification and heritage preservation in Old Damascus became regime policies that contributed to remaining in power and thus became tools for authoritarian upgrading. Earlier in this thesis I focused on gentrification and the preservation of Damascene (built) heritage. Both processes overlap, most significantly in the fields of heritage tourism and real estate – two sectors which have striking social impact on the neighbourhoods where they develop. As this chapter demonstrates, authoritarian resilience, gentrification and heritage conservation have the potential to be fruitfully combined in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of recent urban transformations in cities under authoritarian rule. In the following, I will employ Heydemann’s concept of authoritarian upgrading in order to enrich the previous analysis of gentrification and heritage conservation with aspects of authoritarian resilience. All the three processes discussed here are heavily informed by uneven inter-class/ power relations. Furthermore, they can be considered to be driven by neoliberal agendas of both public and private actors.

As I demonstrated earlier, there existed a certain heritage-gentrification nexus in the old city of Damascus. In addition, and given the characteristics of gentrification and heritage preservation, one can assume common ground with aspects of authoritarian
resilience. As both the production of space and the emergence of new wealthy consumer groups are directly linked with the economic field, both processes will be in the centre of the following analysis. Authoritarian upgrading entails a focus on expanding international linkages (e.g. in the fields of politics, economics, and culture) and it is worthwhile to analyse potential intersections between the three concepts, especially since gentrification and heritage preservation – the latter particularly in regard to heritage tourism – are now global phenomena with an international dimension. In the context of heritage preservation in Old Damascus, it seems as if civil society actors like artists and NGOs have a stake in shaping urban space, at least when it comes to agenda setting. Consequently, the issue of regime attempts to contain civil society actors will be addressed in the following analysis, too. Finally, it can be argued that regime control over new technologies and new techniques for managing political contestation on the national level only have a minor impact on gentrification and heritage preservation.192

6.2 The Authoritarian State and the City

Changing the constituency from a formerly broad populist base towards a smaller network of affluent crony capitalist and their clients seems to be emblematic of Syria under Bashar al-Asad although the process was initiated under his late father. Prior to the civil war, which started in March 2011, significant factions of Syria’s upper and upper-middle class – including the new as well as parts of the old bourgeoisie – had been bound to the regime by the creation of attractive state-sponsored business opportunities (Haddad 2012). What brings these proponents of Syria’s capitalist class together is their permanent search for new opportunities to invest such as the real estate and construction sectors. As outlined above, throughout the 20th century, bourgeois families – and thus capital – left Old Damascus towards the modern quarters, a process that resulted in the neglect and abandonment of many neighbourhoods in the old city193

and in the emergence of what Smith (1979) calls rent gap. From the 2000s onwards,

192 At least until the time of data collection in the spring of 2011.
193 Despite being well aware of both the socio-cultural and historic particularities of gentrification and heritage conservation in Damascus and the risk of applying a generalizing western gentrification blueprint to a unique non-western context, I argue that reference to the rent gap and other aspects of gentrification are necessary and invaluable tools for analyzing gentrification in Damascus.
investors – be they local merchants, Syrian entrepreneurs or international investors – considered suitable historic property in Old Damascus as a promising opportunity in which to invest their surplus capital and ‘a back to the city movement by capital, not people’ (Smith 1979:538) could be seen in the growing number of up-market hotels and restaurants in formerly abandoned neighbourhoods. Harvey (2009:181) insists that ‘landed developer interest takes an active role in making and remaking capitalism’s geography as a means to enhance its income and its power’. His remarks on capitalists’ attempts to increase their influence by both legal and illicit means give an idea of how observing urban transformations can inform a study of authoritarian resilience. This section concentrates first, on selective economic reforms; second, on efforts to diversify international linkages; and, finally, on policies that aim at bringing on board or containing civil society actors. The three features of authoritarian upgrading under scrutiny here seem to share a high degree of informality, at all levels of decision making.

On the urban scale, informal decision making seemed at stake when holding companies al-Cham and al-Sourya – the former was controlled by Rami Makhlouf while the latter was grouped around Issam Joud, a crony capitalist from the coastal city of Lattakia (Donati 2013:41) – facilitated and co-financed several joint Syrian-Arab development projects in New Damascus (Vignal 2010). Regarding these holding companies, Donati (2013:42) argues that

> the members of al-Cham and al-Sourya procure capital, networks and political support for the regime [...] Furthermore, [b]usinesses that are members of the two holding companies take the most profitable projects, benefiting from regulations that are tailor made for their interests. Joining al-Cham or al-Sourya opens the door to ministries and contracts.

The author continues by outlining the two holdings’ privileged treatment with regards to development projects on the premises of Baramke bus station and historic Hijaz rail station, the former including al-Asad’s direct involvement. Remarks like Donati’s (see also Schmidt 2009:30-38 for examples of favoured access to other business sectors) and statements by respondents pointing to loyal entrepreneurs being privileged in terms of getting permissions to renovate property (interviews 106; 113; 116), bring me to assume similar practices when it comes to producing a gentrified Old Damascus.
6.2.1 Remaining Resilient in the Urban Sphere: Selective Economic Opening and the Informalization of Urban Policy

The selective economic opening in Arab states visibly impacts on the everyday lives of the upper and upper middle classes of the region, meaning ‘those with the resources to take advantage of economic openness’ (Heydemann 2007:13). He points to large scale construction in Cairo and Damascus, where the increasing integration of the region into to global markets was made visible by the transformation of public space into landscapes of consumption. Whereas Heydemann refers to changes in New Damascus (likewise Vignal 2010), the focus here is on the historic quarters of the Syrian capital.

During the 2000s, historic property in Old Damascus saw a rise in value on an unprecedented scale, and many Damascene courtyard houses changed hands. Contrary to historic cities facing high demand for their built heritage elsewhere, potential homebuyers in Old Damascus searched in vain for the shop windows of estate agents. Asked for directions to the closest estate agent in their neighbourhood, residents of the old city declared that they did not know any such establishment. A former old-city dweller clarified that there were estate agents, although ‘not official ones’ (interview 116). The interviewee continued that Old Damascene grocers acted as brokers:

So the man who sells milk and coffee and whatsoever in the neighbourhood usually is the one who tells you about houses and prices.
So they are the people, mediators, who usually promote houses to be sold.

The respondent added, with an undertone of frustration, that many of these mediators – unmindful of the needs of the local communities – had their own agendas, made common cause with investors and were corruptible.

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194 Interviewees stated that between 2000 and 2010 prices for “gentrifiable” property multiplied by 40 (interviews 104; 115; 118).
196 The respondent’s parental home had recently been sold in unfair circumstances.
They know the fact that the owner [investor], for example, is looking for a house which is suitable for a boutique hotel or restaurant. So the deal is that I go to a mediator and tell him: “please don't tell the people that I have a commercial project in mind, otherwise they would raise the price. So please tell them that I have a wife, that I have nostalgia for the place, I used to be from that place, I want to live in that place”. And the deal is made like this, and then the mediator usually takes a big commission, bigger than usual (interview 116).

In order to increase their personal profits, these ‘unofficial agents’ often encourage homeowners to sell their houses. As this owner of a boutique hotel recalled, the investor’s intentions remained hidden in the process: ‘I knew what I wanted to do with the house. They [the current owners] wouldn't know because I didn't want to reveal my idea, you see?’ (interview 111). In addition to studiously vague statements regarding the future use of property and purposeful misinformation, this interviewee recalled that in some cases even the identity of the buyers, often regime loyalists, remained a secret: ‘[Homeowners did] not know that they were selling […] to businessmen, sometimes to important businessmen, famous ones, who try to buy these places as cheaply as possible’ (interview 116).

Powerful business figures close to the regime were indeed among the famous entrepreneurs who invested in Old Damascene restaurants and boutique hotels: For instance, widely hated oligarch Rami Makhlouf – one of the president’s maternal cousins – built up an extensive economic empire. His business activities include Syriatel, the country’s leading mobile phone provider, trade interests, construction and real estate as well as diverse kinds of sophisticated services (e.g. Ismail 2009:19-21; Tabler 2011:117; Haddad 2012:106). Talisman Group, a tourism services provider which had been mentioned by some Syrian interviewees as part of Makhlouf’s portfolio, operated three boutique hotels of the same name, two of which were situated in Old Damascus, with a third one under construction in the old town of Aleppo (interviews 107 and 113). Other members of the Makhlouf family invested in the tourism sector, too. Khaldoun Makhlouf’s Julia Dumna Group was in possession of an exclusive license to operate cabs between Damascus International Airport and the city centre. Furthermore, it owned the centrally located Shahbandar Palace Hotel in the historic quarter of al-Qaimariyye, one of the gentrification hotspots in Old Damascus.
Other regime cronies found favour with the regime through friendship and comradeship dating back to the wars against Israel, and privileges seemed to translate into inheritable assets: Prior to the civil war, ‘awlad al-sultah, as for example the sons of long standing Minister of Defence Mustafa Tlas, had real-estate interests and invested in boutique hotels and restaurants, too (interviews 105 and 113; Ismail 2009: 19; Schmidt 2009: 29-32).

In order to transform historic property into venues of conspicuous consumption – that is cafés, restaurants and boutique hotels, well-connected investors took advantage of their privileges and acted from a position of power (e.g. interviews 105; 107; 113). In terms of pricing in general and regarding the sums offered to the original homeowners in particular, a former old city dweller complained that there were no rules for assessing the real value of a property: ‘Nobody evaluates the house in a correct way. Nobody knows the real value. And sometimes houses are sold for very low prices’ (interview 116). Low property prices and the sometimes precarious financial situations of old-city dwellers enabled well-informed investors to exploit the rent gap by capitalizing on the difference between the price received by the original owners (capitalized ground rent) and the sales price expected to be realized after renovation (potential ground rent). The interviewee quoted above continued by describing investors and their local middlemen who, like ‘a little mafia’, ‘know the houses [and which family] is in need of cash’ and would, therefore, sell their property below market value. As the following paragraphs will demonstrate, informal or murky practices related to gentrification and heritage preservation were by no means limited to the process of purchase.

During the 1980s and early 1990s the renovation of historic property was banned (interviews 105; 118). In the 2000s the authorities recognized the need to preserve the old city’s historic housing stock and the ban was lifted, however according to strict rules (interviews 105; 109; 115).

In order to get permission for any renovation project in the old city, homeowners (i.e. those with little or no wasṭa) were obliged to make an application to Maktab al-Anbar
and to provide the municipality with a detailed plan and an outline of the intended measures.

Before you start, they [Maktab al-Anbar] send a committee to the house. They see the house, they review what you are going to do, and [...] they ask you to change things that are not allowed [...] After you have finished [...] they come again and see if you worked according to the permission, the plan or not. It’s very tough! (interview 118).

Similarly, this hotel owner emphasised the rigour exercised by the municipality when it came to changing the original features of a property. However, he shows, at least partly, sympathy for the strict official approach:

There were people who took advantage in the past. That’s why they [the authorities] are right. For example, they [investors] put a toilet in a big room or they divide the rooms as they wish (interview 109).

The last part of the statement points to different manifestations of informalization in the planning process (Roy 2009). In the Old Damascene context, where restaurants and boutique hotels became a fashion during the early 2000s, merging a number of smaller dwellings into one bigger project became common but illicit practice (interviews 101; 109; 115), as an architect working for the local administration emphasised: ‘You cannot merge them [different parcels of land] into one just as you like’ (interview 103). The respondent continued by stressing that uncontrolled merging would allow private investors to develop and thus control vast connected sections of the old city. To illustrate the importance of the issue, I was shown, on a cadastral map of Old Damascus, how even buildings with a comparatively small façade could open into vast premises and thus – once merged – enable investors to gain control over whole sections of a neighbourhood. Despite architects’ claims that buying several properties on a stretch did not necessarily result in permission to develop the premises as one business (interviews 101; 119; 103), the practice of merging property had already become a reality, in some cases punished in other cases tolerated by the authorities. For instance, the owners of a boutique hotel demonstrated in the following statement on their webpage: ‘Al Pasha Hotel itself is one treasure of the Old City of Damascus. It is the result of adjoining three separate 18th Century old Damascene

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197 Author’s translation from the French original: ‘[I]l y avait des gens qui ont abusé autrefois. C’est pourquoi ils ont raison. Par exemples à l’intérieur d’une grande salle ils mettaient une toilette ou ils divisaient les chambres pour nécessités etc.’
homes'.  

Other hotels or boutique hotels did not have permissions at the time of opening. They were, if at all, granted subsequent permissions, an issue raised by this former resident of the old city in the context of restaurants in his neighbourhood:

Many of these restaurants, in fact, had not even finished the official papers [...] before opening. They only applied for starting the project. While waiting for the answer, they had already started and established a name and clients. Many of their clients are famous people, sometimes even powerful people, let's say decision-makers, let's say in the governorate of Damascus, who usually grant the license. Even before their licenses were granted these restaurants had become well-known, mentioned in guidebooks and so on. So the [local] government found itself eventually forced – more or less – to license those places. It was a reality. Their existence became a reality (interview 116).

Granting permissions subsequently to restaurants and boutique hotels which were illegally renovated (e.g. by merging different properties or the use of banned materials) can be seen as an example of ad hoc decision making. The forms of informal policy making discussed above resemble the phenomena observed by Fawaz and Krijnen (2010), who, in their comprehensive study of the informalization of public decision-making in the field of large-scale construction in Lebanon’s capital Beirut, pointed to a multiplicity of informal practices such as delegating major development projects to non-state actors (251), the advance of informal decision making on a case-to-case basis, and, the creation of ‘space[s] of exception allowed by the Law’ (252), often in combination with bribes (254). As stated by several interviewees, loyal entrepreneurs were frequently privileged in that they did not have to use proper channels while renovating in the old city. By contrast, businesspeople with limited wassta had to go by the rules, which was described as time-consuming (interview 120) or, due to bureaucratic obstacles, impossible (interviews 113; 119). Consequently, like in Beirut and elsewhere in the region, ‘[i]nformality appears to be a deliberate planning strategy […] of those decision-makers who find in the flexibility it provides the leeway needed to regulate and organize the development of the city to their own interests’ (Krijnen and Fawas 2010:255), and that is usually in the interest of the most affluent

199 Based on the example of the Lebanese Building Law of 2004, the authors demonstrated how vague statements in the law allow for different interpretations. They argue that ‘developers and regulators choose the interpretation that best suits their interests and sometimes negotiate the desirable interpretation for a price’ (Fawaz and Krijnen 2010:254), i.e. for a bribe.
parts of society. In Old Damascus, the practice of case-to-case decision found application not only with regard to renovating property, but also whenever it came to applying for official permissions or licences. A respondent recounted how a friend, a craftsperson who owned a centrally located plot with several sheds and a fountain close to the Umayyad Mosque, transformed the property into a huge restaurant. When this actor changed the position and shape of the original fountain ‘they [the ‘authorities’] destroyed the new fountain and obliged the owner to restore the original situation in order to get permission to open the restaurant’ (interview 109).

In order to speed up and influence decision making in their favour, actors often resorted to a sophisticated system of corruption and bribery. This former owner of a small café in Suq Sarouja, for instance, recalled:

   It’s corrupt a little bit; even the hotels don't really have a permission [he referred to a cluster of backpacker hostels in his neighbourhood]. They have an old permission but they haven’t renewed it for a long time. And they are still working in a kind of illegal way. But it's corrupt, you know? They pay some money each time they close and open. It’s the same with cafés: It was the same story when we had the café… (interview 110).

In 2011, the same interviewee rented out rooms to foreign students, most of whom were enrolled in Arabic courses at the University of Damascus. Since the 1990s, renting out student rooms developed into a lucrative source of income and a form of what Darren Smith (2005) calls ‘studentification’. In the beginning, accommodation for foreign students was limited to the Christian quarter Bab Tuma. During the early 2000s, however, families throughout the old city and beyond started to offer rooms to mostly Western students. At the same time, small guesthouses and shared flats for international students became available. During most of my stays in the Syrian capital, I made use of these types of affordable accommodation. What I did not know in the beginning was that most of my hosts were not officially licensed. Considering the quantity of informal accommodation, it seemed unlikely that the authorities were not aware of these activities. On the contrary, letting rooms to foreigners soon became an

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200 ‘[P]rocesses of studentification connote urban changes which are tied to the recommodification of ‘single-family’ or the repackaging of existing private rented housing, by small-scale institutional actors (e.g. property owners, investors and developers) to produce and supply houses in multiple occupation for HE [higher education] students’ (Smith, D. 2005:73).
opportunity of rent seeking for members of the *muhabarat*, Syria’s feared security services. For a certain share in the business, hosts could ensure that the authorities would not interfere with their affairs.\(^{201}\) In some cases, this *protection* also covered illegal extensions to historic houses or ensured that illegal construction activities (e.g. the use of concrete, a material that was prohibited in the old city) did not result in persecution (Escher 2000; Sudermann 2007).

Until the late 2000s, due to the unfavourable investment climate in Syria, (i.e. widespread corruption, a lack of the rule of law as well as US sanctions targeting companies investing in the country\(^{202}\)), only a few Western actors showed interest in investing in Old Damascene boutique hotels (OBG 2010:162-168). Syrian entrepreneurs, by contrast, knew how to deal with the country’s contradictory legal environment (Haddad 2012) and developed diverse informal coping strategies such as, for instance, a certain openness to bribery and the maintenance of or engagement in clientelist networks. Many businesses profited substantially from their links to the state and could make fortunes; however, these practices resulted in dependency on the regime’s benevolence. Furthermore, ‘[o]nce a business [became] profitable, the Assad government either [demanded] its share of the profit or simply [did] not allow it to operate’ (Borshevskaya 2010:46; likewise Aita 2007:565 and Hinnebusch 2012:101) if, for instance, a project interfered with the business interests of influential regime figures or of their protégés. According to Aita, ‘opening a restaurant in a lucrative location is reserved to the *happy few*, often the offspring of regime figures’ (Aita 2007:565; author’s translation from French).\(^{203}\)

It is clear that producing landscapes of consumption in Old Damascus – and that means gentrification in the historic neighbourhoods of the capital – is an example of the regime’s endeavour to gain and control access to the most profitable business ventures as this interviewee further specified:

\(^{201}\) For several of my guest families, the visit of the secret service officers who openly collected money was a weekly ritual.

\(^{202}\) See remarks on SALSR in section 6.1

\(^{203}\) L’ouverture d’un restaurant dans les lieux rentables est réservée à des *happy few*, souvent fils de dignitaires du régime.’
What you hear is that Rami Makhlouf must be a partner in any significant development. At the very least, nothing commercially significant can actually take place without him. [...] And if he feels that there is something attractive going on, then he will go in with full force. Once he noted that the whole boutique thing in Damascus was working, he went in like a bulldozer! And they have everything on their side, they have the law, and they have connections. They go in and they make things happen (interview 113).

While implementing their business projects, crony capitalists and their partners did not refrain even from putting pressure on officials, as this architect employed in the public sector recalled:

Now, we have a big problem with this class or kind of people; because they don’t need to learn. And you cannot teach them anything because at the same time they have money [pause]. Big money! And they sometimes have [links with the] authorities, have a [...] big company working here in Syria or abroad. What counts is “I can pay!” [...] You know, money is sometimes blind’ (interview 107).

In another case, a law that banned bars and restaurants from serving alcohol in the vicinity of mosques and religious or educational institutions stood in the way of the opening of a discotheque in an Old Damascene neighbourhood. Instead of searching for an alternative location, the investor, backed by patrons close to the regime, opted for a rather provocative approach:

The irony in all this is [...] there is a law that says you cannot have a bar next to a mosque. So what do we do? We close the mosque! [laughs]. You know, it is absurd! It is reverse logic. [...] And that’s what they did. They closed the mosque (interview 302).

Asked about the actors involved in the issue, after some hesitation the interviewee continued that ‘it was clear that no one has a capacity to close a mosque unless he's very connected. The average Damascene merchants cannot do that. It's something bigger than that’. Bypassing local regulations seemed to be a widespread practice, and the case of the mosque was obviously not an individual phenomenon.

The success stories of entrepreneurs like Raed Jabri or May Mamarbachi, who – with the first boutique hotel Beit Mamlouka in the old city – ‘put Syria on the map for those in search of an exotic long weekend’ (Foster 2005), attracted the attention not only of affluent tourists but also of investors on the lookout for attractive new investment
outlets. In order to reduce entrepreneurial risks, less influential actors tended to team up with partners, as an architect emphasised:

I know several cases in which groups of people work together and invest. They are ordinary people [from an upper middle-class background] who want to have work. Sometimes they are families trying to create work for their children. It’s not always a big investment [investor] (interview 101).

When scrutinizing these companies, it is important to bear in mind that under Bashar al-Asad, ‘no significant business venture was possible without regime insiders taking a percentage’ (Hinnebusch 2012:101). Every business needed the protection of somebody from within the security establishment (Cahen 2002). This was, as a Damascene political consultant recalled, facilitated by including officers or security agents in joint business activities:

Usually, you have somebody working behind the owner, behind the direct owner. […]. So sometimes it’s a group of people, sometimes an officer with some businessmen. If you are an officer and you would like to embark on a project like that, you would be quite keen to involve a businessman… so that you would be responsible and you would have an interest in making it [the business] a success (interview 105).

Joint business ventures (e.g. restaurants or boutique hotels) offered mutual benefits to all stakeholders involved and thus became an opportunity to reinforce the ‘military-commercial coalition’ (Picard 2008, quoted in Donati 2013:40), ‘which unite[d] high-ranking officers and private-sector entrepreneurs’ (Donati 2013:40). To sum up, neither party was interested in changing the new status quo, for instance by introducing the rule of law or a more transparent economic climate, as this would have certainly resulted in the loss of privileges. Consequently, it can be argued that selective access to the production of a gentrified Old Damascus functioned as a tool to bind new constituencies, namely producers of gentrification, to the regime.

When Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, Syria’s upper and upper-middle classes – after decades of economic isolation – were longing for upmarket consumer goods and services as well as other status symbols (e.g. Vignal 2006). Increasing class distinction (Bourdieu 1984) – in itself a highly selective process – enabled the regime to reach out to additional potential constituencies by proxy (i.e. by allowing selected entrepreneurs to provide affluent consumers with the goods and services they
demanded). Taking the example of Rami Makhlouf’s diverse business activities in the service sector, which, for most Syrians, were *the* embodiments of a parasitic form of capitalism, this member of a Damascene notable family recalled:

> For a long time, Damascene families felt that okay, he's doing this, he's corrupt, but he's delivering something of quality. For example, whether it is the mobile network… That's something! We didn't have that before. We didn't have ATM machines before. […]. So this guy, he's doing something, he's corrupt, okay, he has privileges, he has connections, he can get away with things no one else can. But he creates something fancy. The Talisman, for example, […] was regarded to be something fancy. […] You might criticise it from a different perspective, but it's clearly a luxurious statement. So some people who like things like that, duty-free, or Syriatel, or the Talisman, they felt at least he was providing something people could enjoy and access if they had the money, of course (interview 113).

It was exactly this stratum of affluent Syrians which the regime tended to co-opt or at least appease by granting it access to every imaginable form of consumption. ‘At the same time, the regime jettisoned its former popular constituency’ (Hinnebusch 2012:102) by abandoning fuel subsidies and by welfare cuts. Therefore, growing desperation fuelled by uneven development and state repression finally escalated in the crisis which started in 2011.

To sum up, this section focused on the opening of Syria’s economy to selected loyal actors or groups of actors. The outlined examples showed that on the urban scale, too, regime strategies reflect an explicitly political logic, and take a common form, one not limited to the Middle East. Across the region selective processes of economic liberalization provide enhanced economic opportunities for regime supporters, reinforce the social base of authoritarian regimes, and mitigate pressures for comprehensive economic and social reforms (Heydemann 2007:14).

Under the guise of economic liberalization, the transformation of Old Damascus into a landscape of consumption seems to have brought along the emergence of informal practices (see previous sections as well as chapters 4 and 5). Creating new business opportunities for loyal actors is emblematic of authoritarian states and is seemingly in the interest of the regime (Schmidt 2009; Ismail 2009; Haddad 2012) as it allowed for co-opting loyalists in privileged positions. In addition, the lack of formal rules eventually made it possible for the regime to prohibit or to take over specific business
activities on a case by case basis (Schmidt 2009). Thus, informality became an *ad hoc* tool for maintaining authoritarian resilience in the urban sphere, as the examples from Old Damascus discussed in this section illustrated.

6.2.2 Getting Global - Upgrading Authoritarianism through International Diversification?

Heydemann (2007) identified the diversification of international linkages as a strategy employed by authoritarian regimes in order to wriggle out of external – predominantly Western – pressure for political and economic reform. Regimes in North Africa and the Levant attempted to establish links ‘with states in Asia, the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere that are largely indifferent to issues of governance and political reform’ (Heydemann 2007:23). Syria, for instance, successfully diversified its international connections by reaching out to new partners such as Turkey, Iran, India or China (also Hinnebusch 2012:100). Between 2000 and 2006, for instance, Sino-Syrian trade increased significantly ‘from about $100 million to $1.5 billion’ (Heydemann 2007:23). Furthermore, in 2006, India was in fact ‘the second largest non-Arab investor in Syria after Iran’. In addition, Gulf Arab investment, much of which was directed to Syria’s real estate and tourism sectors, was ‘interpreted locally not simply as evidence of progress on economic reform, but as an important indicator that Western pressure had not succeeded in constraining Syria’s ability to conduct business as usual’ (Heydemann 2007:23). The shift of focus to cooperation with regional and Eastern rather than Western partners had an impact on urban transformations in the Syrian capital, too.204 Foreign direct investment was not directed to manufacturing (Haddad 2009; Ismail 2009; OBG 2008 for exceptions) but rather to Syria’s booming real estate sector, with Damascus being a focal point of investment. Here, the influx of foreign investment capital fuelled the production of a gentrified urban environment, and numerous large-scale development projects were implemented or were in the planning stage throughout the capital’s metropolitan region (Schmidt 2009; OBG 2008; 2009; 2010).

204 This, however, does not mean that cooperation with Western state agencies/investors was suspended.
Non-Western actors were at the forefront of real estate development. Many large-scale real estate projects, as for example the hallmark Four Seasons Hotel, were developed by Gulf Arab investment firms or joint Syrian-Arab ventures. These investors’ portfolios also included the branches of Western hotel chains, which were often run as franchises, and businessmen with connections with the Syrian regime or their companies were frequently involved as middlepersons. For instance, two new projects under the luxury label Kempinski were implemented by the Wahoud Group while Bena Property planned projects for the brands Accor and Rotana. At the time of data collection in the spring of 2011, several Western hotel chains were in negotiation with the authorities in order to enter the Syrian market (OBG 2010:167). However, in early 2011, no major international or Western hotel brand worked within Old Damascus, and the renovation and operation of historic Khan Suleiman Pasha as a luxury hotel under the hospitality label Kempinski was put on hold (OBG 2010:163). A rare exception, however, was the restoration of the famous late-Ottoman era palaces Beit Nizam, Beit Sibai, and Beit Kuwatli and their transformation into boutique hotels belonging to the Serena Group, a luxury hotel brand linked to the Aga Khan Development Network (OBG 2010:167-170).

Different forms of tourism had an impact on the Damascene urban landscape, too. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, cultural group tours organized by Western tour operators and their Syrian partners accounted for a very visible form of foreign tourism in Old Damascus (interviews 116; 118; 120; 111). While many tourist attractions were situated within the walled old city, during most of this time tourist accommodation could be found only outside the city walls, the above-mentioned private rooms let to international students being an exception. Only with the introduction of the first Damascene boutique hotels in 2005 was luxury accommodation for a new clientele of affluent independent tourists made available and advertised internationally. Consequently, not only Westerners, but also members of the growing upper and upper-

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205 In the meantime, the Syria ventures of French hotel chain Le Méridien were taken over by Turkish hotel management firm Dedeman, another regional actor.
207 Bena Property is a venture of Cham Holding, a holding company controlled by Rami Makhloul.
208 For instance, in Suq Sarouja, a cluster of backpacker hostels offered accommodation for travellers on a low budget.
middle classes of the region stayed at Old Damascene boutique hotels (interview 109). While Western tourists travelling to the Middle East were a risk-averse clientele (Steiner and Richter 2008), attracting regional guests provided actors in the tourism sector with an opportunity to diversify their sources of income and thus reduce the vulnerability of their businesses. On the national scale, the Ministry of Tourism managed to open up new markets successfully by cooperating with non-Western partners such as, for instance, China, Turkey or Iran. 209

Especially in the northern parts of Old Damascus, Shiite worshipers, mostly of Iranian origin, had a noticeable impact on the social urban fabric in that their increasing numbers were perceived as disturbance by the majority Sunni population of the old city (see also Pinto 2011). Most of these ‘religious tourists’ made a pilgrimage to the mosques Saida Zainab, on the southern outskirts of the Syrian capital, and Saida Ruqaia, located within the walled old city. Both places of worship were renovated and extended by the Iranian government which can be interpreted as an expression of the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran in the religious realm (Pinto 2007:113-114). During the late 1990s and early 2000s, some sections of the suqs between Saida Ruqaia and Bab Faradis started to specialize in the pilgrims’ needs. In terms of accommodation, this interviewee clarified:

Iranian so-called tourists or pilgrims […] have their own hotels and stuff… They have their own places. They will not stay in a boutique hotel in the old city, that’s for sure (interview 303).

This statement points to the existence of a parallel tourist infrastructure beyond the renovated courtyard houses of the walled old city. Most accommodation for the Iranian pilgrims was located either close to Saida Zainab or in the historic quarters north of the city wall, and often the Iranian government purchased property in order to provide accommodation for Shiite pilgrims (interviews 110; 304). Shiite pilgrims became a source of resentment for many of the mostly Sunni old city dwellers. Some respondents complained about traffic congestion caused by coaches from Iran parked on Malik Faisal Street next to Bab Faradis (interview 110). For Sunni Damascenes, being

confronted with an increasing influx of Shiite pilgrims was an alienating experience, as this member of a Damascene notable family recalled:

[Y]ou can show us a poster of this Alawite president which is 50 metres tall, we can digest that. But nothing alienates us more than entering the Grand Mosque and finding 200 or more Iranian pilgrims sitting in the place with someone holding a microphone and speaking against the very heritage of Damascus by attacking the people who created the Umayyad dynasty. They are sitting there, clearly speaking about Hussain [grandson of the Prophet, important figure in Shia Islam], but also attacking everything Umayyad, everything Sunni, everything Damascene. To see this in the Grand Mosque - it is a much politicised subject (interview 305).

Attempts by the regime to extend its ties with Iran through cooperation in the field of religious tourism were rejected by many Damascenes. Not only had the ‘Shiitization’ (Pierret 2012) of Syria contributed to sectarian tensions but also to changes of the old city’s urban fabric.

Indeed, the takeover and rebuilding of the shrines by Shiite actors generally occurred at the expense of local Sunni inhabitants. In the late 1980s, for instance, the Iranian-funded rebuilding of the tomb of Sayyida Ruqqaya entailed the destruction of a block in the old Sunni quarter al-‘Amara as well as the replacement of the local imam with Shiite staff. (Pierret 2012:106)

The author then gives several examples for the expansion of Shiite infrastructure throughout Syria and points to the construction of a Shiite mausoleum in a region predominantly inhabited by Sunnis, which can be read as ‘part of a strategy of progressive encroachment: a shrine attracts pilgrims, the presence of pilgrims entails the creation of shops selling religious literature and souvenirs, and Shiite influence inevitably spreads among the local population’ (Pierret 2012:107). Here, authoritarian upgrading and gentrification again reach common grounds. Marcuse (1985:207) argues that displacement not only influences those individuals actually facing ‘displaced at any given moment’:

When a family sees the neighborhood around it changing dramatically, when their friends are leaving the neighborhood, when the stores they patronize are liquidating and new stores for other clientele are taking their places, […], then the pressure of displacement already is severe. […]. Families living under these circumstances may move as soon as they can, rather than wait for the inevitable; nonetheless they are displaced.
Marcuse’s remarks on pressures of displacement offer an additional lens to analyse both the interview quotes cited in the previous paragraphs as well as the literature on the regime-sponsored Shiite pilgrimage to Damascus and its impact on the local residents. It becomes clear that the links between gentrification, heritage and authoritarian resilience in Old Damascus are not limited to the business driven tourism gentrification. Shiite religious tourists’ influence affecting local residents (e.g. in the old city of Damascus) shows clear signs of pressures of displacement in that it creates significant changes of the physical and social urban fabric of the respective neighbourhoods. In contrast to the creation of themed restaurants and boutique hotels where the conflicts are the result of class-based uneven development, the ‘Shiitization’ has been happening along sectarian lines.

6.2.3 Containing Civil Society

The hallmark of authoritarian upgrading is the ability of Arab regimes to exploit rather than resist broad social, political, and economic trends both to blunt the challenges they might contain and to generate political resources that bolster regimes’ hold on power. In few domains has this practice been as visible, widespread, successful—and for Western promoters of democracy less welcome—than in the effectiveness with which Arab regimes have appropriated and contained civil societies (Heydemann 2007:5).

Since Aristotelian times, on and off, scholarly attention has been paid to the concept of civil society. It was only in the 19th century that Hegel defined civil society as distinct from the state and the family (Hegel 1896, cited in: Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:3). It is not the aim of this thesis to engage in depth with the history and origins of the term (for a comprehensive discussion see, for instance, Diamond 1994, Kaldor 2003 and Sadowski 2009). In this thesis, for the sake of clarity, civil society is understood as

the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from "society" in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable (Diamond 1994:5).
The World Bank (2010) further defines civil society by describing it as ‘the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations’.\footnote{210 ‘The increasingly accepted understanding of the term civil society organizations (CSOs) is that of non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary organizations formed by people in that social sphere. This term is used to describe a wide range of organizations, networks, associations, groups and movements that are independent from government and that sometimes come together to advance their common interests through collective action’ (WHO 2013).}

In their attempts to contain civil society, Middle Eastern regimes have ‘blended repression, regulation, cooption and the appropriation of NGO functions by the state to contain the deepening of civil societies and to erode their capacity to challenge political authority’ (Heydemann 2007:6).

In recent years, authoritarian states have experienced the emergence of state-sponsored or semi-official NGOs which have compensated for the incapacity of the states to provide services in fields that are considered, from the perspective of the regime, ‘apolitical and therefore non-threatening’ (Heydemann 2007:8) as, for example, rural development, education, sports and culture. These GONGO\textemdash government-organized non-governmental organizations\textemdash are in fact ‘under strict government control, [and] created as the state’s outposts in society’ (Ho 2002:898). They are often visibly sponsored by members of the elite loyal to the regime and ‘enjoy protected status, benefit from privileged relations with powerful political actors, but lack meaningful autonomy’ (Heydemann 2007:8). The different manifestations and degrees of connectedness between state and civil society actors have resulted in a plethora of sub-concepts of the term NGO, many of which emphasise the not so independent character of these organizations.\footnote{211 ‘Similar in content to the GONGO are the GINGO, the government-inspired NGO, and the GRINGO, the government regulated/run and initiated NGO. To a somewhat lesser degree, sub-concepts such as QUANGO (quasi NGO), PANGO (party-affiliated NGO), RONGO (retired officials NGO), DONGO (donor-organized NGO), DINGO (donor international NGO), and CONGO (co-opted NGO) are also closely tied to the sphere of government. However, the acronym CONGO is also used to denote both the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations and commercially oriented NGOs, which brings us to the field of BINGOs (business interest NGOs), BONGOs (business-organized NGOs) and the MONGO (my own NGO), terms used to pin down for-profit or individual private interest NGOs. Both MONGO and MANGO can be used to denominate mafia (-organized) NGOs […]’ (Götz 2008:232; similarly Glasius 2010).}

In numerous Middle Eastern countries, first ladies have
implemented what Glasius (2010) understands by the term ‘first lady organizations’ or FLANGOs. Boerwinkel (2011:3), whose research focusses on Queen Rania of Jordan, argues that ‘the term ‘NGO’ [is] somewhat controversial here [as to] the outside world, these ladies pretend their organizations belong to the realm of NGOs but in fact they can be regarded as GONGO’s’.

In Syria, framed by the presidential couple’s reform discourse (Donati 2009), the regime under Bashar al-Asad implemented a ‘“model” civil society’ (Zintl 2012:35) dominated by the Syrian Trust for Development (STD) headed by first lady Asma al-Asad. STD was a merger of several GONGOs, which included, *inter alia*, the Rural Fund for Development of Syria (FIRDOS, which means ‘paradise’ in Arabic), the youth organizations SHABAB (‘youth’) and MASSAR (‘path’) (Heydemann 2007:8; Zintl 2012:36-37; OBG 2010:190). Prior to 2007, the power of the first lady’s GONGOs remained ‘embryonic’ as compared to the mass-organizations of the Ba’th Party. Still, and particularly since the creation of the STD in 2007, Asma al-Asad’s approach to dominating the field of development by setting up state-sponsored NGOs provided the regime with an additional instrument both for co-opting parts of the country’s civil society and for ‘blocking the emergence of a competing or opposing civil society’ (Donati 2009:255, authors translation from French) by, for example, monopolizing foreign aid in addition to donations by businesses close to the regime. Furthermore, extending the state-sponsored NGO sector to international development agencies not only represented a field for the reproduction of the Anglophone elite (Terc 2011; Zintl 2012), but also helped both to increase the country’s international visibility and to promote the image of a modern Syria.

213 See Donati 2009:255-256). The list of partners on the STD website includes many international donor organizations as well as famous Syrian business actors.
214 After Bashar al-Asad’s inauguration, Syria saw a short period of reduced repression and hesitant civil society activity (Damascus Spring), which ended precipitously with new repression (George 2003) followed by harsh international criticism. Favourable publicity in the development sector was, therefore, in the regime’s interest.
On the urban scale, the regime’s image-forging found expression, for example, in the activities of MASSAR\textsuperscript{215} which implemented a large-scale redevelopment project and thus had a direct impact on urban development in central Damascus. On the site of the city’s former international fairground in central New Damascus, in close proximity to the prestigious Four Seasons hotel, MASSAR was developing its ‘Children’s Discovery Centre’. The futuristic hallmark building in the shape of a gigantic Damascene rose, which is faintly reminiscent of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, was designed by internationally renowned Henning Larsen Architects (Denmark). For the first time in Syria, MASSAR brought together ‘a high-profile firm and progressive design… [It] is one of Syria’s first bids at “starchitecture,” or in other words, the type of architecture that puts a premium on radical design from a big-name firm with a price tag to match’ (Cladwell 2011). Once completed, the building was to provide space for exhibitions, education (i.e. a library and laboratories) and administration.\textsuperscript{216} Financed ‘by a mixture of private donations, corporate sponsorship and grants from the trusts’ (OBG 2010:190), the project was implemented by Military Housing, one of Syria’s biggest real estate firms directly linked to the Ministry of Defence and one of the first entities to be threatened by international sanctions due to its involvement in the crackdown on the country’s opposition movement in 2011. Asked about the project, which some Syrians considered to be ‘a regime vanity project with an uncertain future’ (Cladwell 2011), a Damascene architect recalled that MASSAR’s Children’s Discovery Centre was ‘intended to make the regime’s image to the international community more humane’ (quoted in ibid.). The intention to give a facelift to Syria’s reputation through modern architecture perfectly fitted in with the regime’s discourse of good governance (Donati 2009:245-246), which was benignly perceived by the international community. However, with the outbreak of the current civil war,
development cooperation between the Syrian regime and both regional and Western states came to a halt. Given the present political circumstances, it is highly unlikely that either the scheduled opening date in late 2013 (Cladwell 2011) or the promise of ‘another Guggenhein Effect’ (Vicario and Monje 2003) will be met.

Among the developmental NGOs licensed to operate in Syria prior to the civil war, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) – an umbrella organization of developmental agencies linked to the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili community – assumed a privileged position. The AKDN’s projects covered six provinces217 and focused, in particular, on rural development, the improvement of services, sustainable tourism and heritage preservation.218 In 2008, the Aga Khan Historic City Programme (AKHCP), Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the Tourism Promotion Services of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) – all part of the AKDN – got involved in the restoration and transformation of three prestigious Ottoman courtyard houses into a boutique hotel under the label Serena (OBG 2008:167). The project was celebrated as ‘a benchmark […] for the adaptive use of landmark buildings in the historic city of Damascus’.219 The approach applied aimed at conserving the authenticity of the fabric and at ensuring long-term conservation and a for-profit activity of hospitality, providing economic opportunities and social development in the area […]. Conversion into a hotel facility, therefore, not only continues the previous use of the palaces as private residences but also guarantees to the authorities that the asset will be managed and maintained (Jodidio 2011:244-245, emphasis added).

This quotation is particularly insightful as it not only emphasises the ‘for-profit’ character of the project explicitly, but it also points to intense cooperation between the AKDN on the one hand and the Syrian regime on the other. Projects implemented as public private partnership (PPP) aim at creating a mutual win-win situation. Whereas the investor can realize profits from the investment, the state benefits from an outlet for outsourcing social responsibility (see Donati 2009:257-259). In the case of the

217 Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Lattakia, Sweida and Tartous.
218 http://www.akdn.org/Syria [24.11.2012]. Note the similarity to the above mentioned fields of NGO activity described by (Heydemann 2007).
AKDN’s renovation project, the Syrian regime gave up accountability for costly maintenance work on three important heritage sites and, at the same time, improved its image. As the project was implemented on a BOT\textsuperscript{220} basis (OBG 2010:168), the regime did not even lose control over ‘its property’. Given the special relationship between the AKDN and the regime,\textsuperscript{221} it is little surprising that, in early 2012, work on the construction sites of the Old Damascene Serena boutique hotels was still continuing despite the fact that the Syrian regime was facing international sanctions due to its violent crackdown on the initially peaceful uprising. Because of its ventures in war zones, the AKDN’s luxury hotel label Serena was recently labelled ‘the Ritz-Carlton of Failed States’ (Wise 2012).

6.2.4 Contested Heritage and an Artist Quarter in Old Damascus

The Al-Amin neighbourhood [Jewish quarter] of Damascus has an innocuous, sleepy feel. There are none of the cafés and bazaars found elsewhere in the Old City of Syria’s capital (England 2010).

Until the early 1990s, the Jewish quarter, which is situated in the south-east of the walled old city and which was transformed into an artist quarter during the 2000s, was the centre of Jewish life in Damascus. In 1943, prior to Syria’s independence, the country’s Jewish community counted 30,000 members, 11,000 of whom were living in the capital (Aharoni 2003:58). ‘Anti-Jewish riots, which broke out as early as 1945 and 1947, prompted the denial of basic rights to Jews’ and, by 1948, half of Syria’s Jewish population had emigrated (ibid). Jewish property was confiscated and used as accommodation for Palestinian refugees. Meanwhile, those Jews who stayed in the country were subjected to restrictions,\textsuperscript{222} harassment, and permanent suspicion of collaborating with Israel (Svetlona 2010; England 2010). Only in the early 1990s – in 1992, and then in a goodwill gesture prior to a meeting between US President Clinton and Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad in Geneve in spring 1994 – did Syria allow the

\textsuperscript{220} Build-operate-transfer; no information on the duration of the project found.
\textsuperscript{221} Donati (2009:258) stated that the head of the agency had links with the security services.
\textsuperscript{222} In 1945, the government restricted emigration to Israel, and Jewish property was burned and looted. In 1949, banks were instructed to freeze the accounts of Jews and all their assets were expropriated.
remaining members of the Jewish community to leave (Fineman 1994). Between 1992 and 1994,

nearly 3,000 of the estimated 4,000 Jews that remained in Syria in 1992 have chosen to seek a new life in America or Europe. They are leaving behind a remnant that may soon number fewer than 400, most of whom are either elderly people who believe they are too old to start over again, or well-placed business people who feel they cannot afford to leave (Schmidt 1994).

Emigrating Damascene Jews left behind not only friends and family members, but also their cultural heritage including the former Jewish quarter. According to Fineman (2010), these emigrants are leaving their houses and most of their possessions behind, less as a hedge against the future than a matter of the law. There are few Arab buyers for the ramshackle homes in a neighborhood where state law prohibits development or improvements. Even if they could sell, few families would: It is illegal for any citizen to leave the republic with more than $2,500.

Due to the lack of interest from potential buyers as well as due to official policies, many Jewish-owned houses were sealed-up and much of the historic urban fabric of the Jewish quarter remained uninhabited and fell into disrepair. Consequently, as in neighbourhoods facing disinvestment elsewhere, property prices in the Jewish quarter decreased.

A decade later, famous Syrian sculptor Mustafa Ali ‘re-discovered’ the Jewish Quarter and its unique built heritage and brought it back to the attention of both Damascenes and non-Damascenes. In 2003, he purchased a historic courtyard house in the Jewish quarter which once was owned by ‘the Bukhais family, Jewish silk traders who left Syria 15 years [earlier]’ (Perelman 2007), renovated the property and made it the location of his workshop as well as the seat of the Mustafa Ali Foundation (MAF).223 When asked why he chose this place as his workshop, the artist recalled:

I wanted a place in the old city; I needed space for my sculptures […]. People advised me not to take this place, because it was in ruins, but I

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223 The Bukhais family ‘sold it [the house] to an Iraqi man, from whom Ali purchased it in 2003’ (Perelman 2007).
thought this was precisely the reason to make it an artistic neighborhood. It was cheap and empty (quoted in Perelman 2007).

Ali started lobbying for the Jewish quarter and its use as an artists’ quarter by encouraging other artists to follow his example. Another artist who purchased a workshop in the Jewish quarter remembered how Ali encouraged his ‘artist friends’ to move to the area, too: ‘[H]e began to bring artists who searched for places like this’ (interview 112). Likewise, an architect involved in the implementation of the Damascene artist quarter, emphasised Mustafa Ali’s leading role in creating an artists’ quarter in the Jewish quarter and in encouraging other artists to get involved in the Jewish quarter.

At first, Mustafa Ali came up with this idea, really. He asked the authorities in Old Damascus for permission to start a small gallery. We agreed. But we didn't have good ideas what we could do in the future. Suddenly, someone else asked to do something similar to Mustafa Ali. Suddenly, other artists came and tourists asked about Mustafa Ali’s gallery and others. Now we have small projects to create new areas for these artists (interview 108).

Mustafa Ali who had been called ‘one of the major civil society lobbyists inside the walls of Old Damascus’ (OBG 2010:79) seemed to be the driving force behind a number of cultural projects in the Syrian capital. It is surprising that a single actor was capable of having such an impact on the development of a historically important part of Old Damascus, and one wonders how Mustafa Ali managed to circumvent the usual bureaucratic obstacles to activities in Old Damascus. The question of his role in the transformation of the Jewish quarter is, as will be shown in the remainder of this section, directly connected with aspects of authoritarian rule - its resilience and upgrading. ‘I'm sure, now [in early 2011] he is very supported,’ explained an architect who supervised several renovation projects in the Jewish quarter and who admired Ali for his efforts ‘to upgrade the area’ (interview 115). The interviewee’s assumption about Ali’s connectedness to the regime seemed plausible, given that the plan to create an artists’ quarter ‘has won the attention of Bashar al-Assad [and that] Mr Ali met Mr Assad’ (England 2010). In this light,\textsuperscript{224} it is less of a surprise that several cultural

\textsuperscript{224}Photographs displayed on the premises of the MAF documented that first lady Asma al-Asad and the presidential couples’ children participated, on several occasions, in cultural activities organized by the MAF. Furthermore, at least one reception room in the presidential palace was decorated with sculptures
projects initiated by the Mustafa Ali Foundation (MAF) attracted both official support for the artists’ quarter from the local authorities and funding from European institutional donors (see also Aboukhater et al. 2010:6f). While it is questionable whether Mustafa Ali’s Alawite background (Cooke 2007:69) was vital for his success as an artist and cultural activist, other explanations seem to be more appropriate. First of all, Ali and his oeuvre are widely known, which made him a symbol of Syrian culture both within Syria and abroad (interviews with artist, officials and international actors). His international reputation, especially during the late 2000s, can be interpreted as indirect support for the outlawed regime to increase its visibility and to forge a positive image abroad. Moreover, ‘increasing exchanges between Syrian and Western artists have also emboldened some to play more actively with official limits’ (Wedeen 1999:91-92). For instance, Mustafa Ali, some of whose sculptures deal with death and decay related to regime repression, thereby representing an act of ‘commissioned criticism’ (Cooke 2007:69-70). In contrast to licensed or permitted criticism (Wedeen 1999),225 which aims at the regime without targeting the leader (Cooke 2007:72), commissioned criticism is not merely the toleration of transgressive practices […]. Rather, it is the regime’s Machiavellian manipulation of dissidence. The state pressures dissidents to continue their dissident practice. It is precisely because they are dissident that they matter. The state then tries to coopt the criticism. Commissioned criticism is a state-sponsored practice that performs official accountability for the rosy rhetoric of slogans while attempting to convert real dissident practice into state ideology (73).

Commissioned criticism – for instance, the licensed production of critical pieces of art or the tolerated and even state-sponsored creation of the Old Damascene artists’ quarter – shows significant similarities to Heydemann’s (2007) concept of authoritarian upgrading. This is particularly true when it comes to containing and appropriating civil society actors and their activities in not security-relevant fields like

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225 ‘[P]ermitted critiques signal to both the regime and to citizens the shifting levels of commitment, obedience, and disobedience, which are otherwise driven underground. Permitted critiques may even help to identify and ferret out disobedient Syrians. For an authoritarian regime that relies primarily on public dissimulation, the existence of alternative yet carefully circumscribed visions of political life operates as a mechanism of surveillance…’ (Wedeen 1999:91).
sports or culture. The lobbying by Damascene artists for an artists’ quarter in the heart of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited capital city can be interpreted in this sense.

In conversations with Damascene artists economic reasons were identified and can be interpreted as an additional explanation for the regime’s benevolent attitude towards artistic activities in the Jewish quarter (interviews 104; 112; 209). It seemed as if an artistic avant-garde tolerated by the regime was ‘used’ by pro-regime entrepreneurs as an indicator to identify potential rent gaps, meaning affordable, authentic quarters ‘ripe’ to become hip or trendy places (see Lees et al. 2008:118). A Damascene artist remembered that once the first artists opened galleries in the Jewish quarter, ‘[t]he rich follow[ed], [and] everyone follow[ed] the rich’ (112). This mirrors Ley’s (2003:2540) argument that ‘the aesthetic disposition of the artist that rejects commercialisation, values the commonplace and redemptively transforms junk to art maybe, indeed is, converted into economic capital by varied actors who may include artists themselves…’. Regarding ‘historic context[s] where cultural capital has enjoyed high symbolic value,’ Ley continues that ‘an economic valorisation of the aesthetic disposition has frequently led to an increase in property prices’ (ibid), as was also the case for Old Damascus. Consequently, the prospect of profiting from increased income opportunities related to gentrification possibly represented an additional incentive for tolerating artistic/cultural civil society activities, for example, in the former Jewish quarter.

It is evident that the urban transformations in the Jewish quarter are by no means a unique Damascene phenomenon. Perelman (2007), for instance, observed that ‘from New York City’s Lower East Side to Paris’s Marais District to Krakow’s Kazimierz neighborhood, once-thriving iconic Jewish enclaves have re-emerged in recent years as trendy magnets for artists and urban hipsters’. In all these cases gentrification evolved following a similar stage model: ‘Artists looking for cheap space move in, trendy coffee shops follow and then comes gentrification; moneyed locals buy old properties to restore them for themselves or to create high-end boutique hotels’ (ibid). What makes the case of pre-war Damascus different is the political context in which
an authoritarian state sponsored gentrification and heritage promotion. Based on interviews and informal conversations with actors involved in the Old Damascene gentrification process I would argue that the aim was not only to generate income for the regime and crony capitalists, but also to give outside observers the impression that Damascus was just an ordinary city that faced common transformations such as tourism gentrification in its Jewish quarter.

My own observations in the Jewish quarter and critical accounts in the media seem to show a certain link between heritage and authoritarian resilience. On a theoretical level, it has been argued that heritage is an economic resource, one exploited everywhere as a primary component of strategies to promote tourism, economic development and rural and urban imagination. But heritage also helps to define the meanings of culture and power and is a political resource. Consequently, it is accompanied by [...] potential conflicts, not least when heritage places and objects are involved in issues of legitimization of power structures (Graham et al. 2000:17).

A closer look at the gentrification of the Jewish quarter and the role played by the regime and crony capitalists reveals important details of the regime’s approach to the heritage of the neighbourhood. In an article in The Jerusalem Post, Svetlova (2007) pointed to the website of the Talisman Hotel and the surprising openness about the fact that the premises once were Jewish property. After years of denial of the Jewish heritage of the city, the new ‘openness and turn to multiculturalism’ were unexpected:

[N]ot so long ago the last Jewish inhabitants of this quarter had their phones cut off, were banned from traveling abroad and forbidden to talk to foreigners. But visitors to this trendy boutique hotel will never hear a word about it. Also, they might never know how exactly the Jewish Quarter and its houses were stolen from their legal owners. [...] Naturally, the elegant tourist brochure of the Talisman doesn’t say a word about this black page in Syrian history (Svetlova 2007).

The selective approach to the quarter’s Jewish heritage by the Talisman chain, which was repeatedly mentioned in connection with oligarch Rami Makhlouf, is not an isolated case. For instance, the Visitor Routes in Old City of Damascus [sic], a project

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[226] I referred mainly to critical Israeli accounts as much of the Western press between 2005 and early 2011 reported benevolently on the “revitalization” of Old Damascus
implemented by the Municipal Administration Modernisation Programme (MAM),

sign-posted themed tourist trails within Old Damascus. At purpose-built kiosks, individual tourists – the main target group of the old city’s boutique hotels – could pick up a box (available in English and French) containing six high gloss brochures including maps and background information, each describing one tourist route. Out of these six walks, only one – a tour called ‘Old Damascus Highlights’ – leads through the Jewish quarter. Out of the 49 historic sites situated along the way, four are located in the Jewish quarter, among them famous courtyard houses Beit al-Dahdah, Beit Farhi and Beit Lisbouna. However, the brochure makes no reference to the Jewish past of the houses (see appendix 29). Instead, a marker is placed at the location of the MAF and the related text in the brochure states:

Artists’ Quarter: One of the important neighbourhoods of the Old City that is characterised with a cultural touch. Numerous ateliers of painters and sculptors are dispersed around the quarter’ (MAM).

This example illustrates that Damascene Jewish heritage was excluded from and not considered to be part of the ‘official’ Syrian national or Damascene heritage. Nevertheless, the regime and its cronies embraced a gentrified Jewish quarter as it provided the regime with a tool for forging a multicultural image both domestically and abroad, and for containing elements of Syria’s cultural civil society in a geographically confined location. A gentrified Old Damascus represented a field of economic activity for selected businesses and entrepreneurs close to the regime.

6.3 Chapter Summary

Based on case studies from central Damascus both intra and extra muros, this chapter focused on correlations between gentrification, heritage and authoritarian resilience. All three processes are taking place in the context of neo-liberal globalization. In certain contexts, the role of the neo-liberal state is limited to the creation of an institutional framework which guarantees free market economy, that is economic liberalization and privatization (Harvey 2007:2; Guazzzone and Pioppi 2012:4).

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227 MAM was a joint programme of the Ministries of Local Administration and Tourism and the Governorate of Damascus funded by the European Union.
Guazzzone and Pioppi, however, argue that in Arab states ‘neo-liberal political and economic reforms do not necessarily result in a loosening of the state’s control over society…’ (2012:5). The authors explain that in many Middle Eastern states privatization processes have represented a chance for ruling elites to reorganize or, better, shift patronage networks towards the private sector without undermining the power of the state as the ultimate source of rent. On the contrary, they have provided the state with new sources of wealth and new opportunities for accumulation and distribution (Guazzzone and Pioppi 2012:5).

They point to new forms of income generation for the state and the respective supportive elite. Their observation echoes, in particular, what Heydemann (2007:5) characterized as the ‘capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms’. In order to connect gentrification and authoritarian upgrading, I argued in this chapter that gentrification in Old Damascus was such a new process for the accumulation and (re)distribution of capital. Transformative urban processes such as, for instance, the production of a gentrified Old Damascus provided the regime with numerous policies with which to extend its grip on power. The implementation of selective economic reforms and the informalisation of urban policy put regime cronies in a position to benefit from gentrification in Old Damascus as, for example, owners and clients of cafés, restaurants or boutique hotels. Meanwhile, uneven urban development – the emergence of landscapes of luxurious consumption within the old city and other central locations on the one hand, and the growing belt of informal housing on the fringes of the city on the other – highlighted the post-populist character of the urban phenomena and policies analysed in this chapter. In terms of authoritarian upgrading through international diversification, cooperating with non-western partners in the tourism sector enabled the regime to reduce Syria’s dependency on the West. Furthermore, the extension of new forms of tourism, such as, for instance, religious tourism for an Iranian Shiite audience, allowed new actors loyal to the regime to get involved. Authoritarian upgrading, gentrification and heritage also seemed to be interlinked in the area of managing and containing civil society activities, as the creation of the artists’ quarter in the formerly Jewish quarter exemplified. GONGOs, and the FLANGOs forming the Syria Trust for Development in particular, facilitated, *inter alia*, a monopolization of cultural and educational civil society activities.
Through its hallmark ‘discovery centre’, MASSAR was planned to shape the future fabric of the Syrian capital.

By focussing on gentrification through the lens of authoritarian upgrading, in this chapter I demonstrated that in order to get a better understanding of gentrification in authoritarian states, leaving the beaten tracks of gentrification research is very beneficial. By linking gentrification and authoritarian upgrading, this chapter unmasked the common lack of urban scope in much of the research on authoritarian states, an issue which will be further discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 7: Conclusions – Gentrification, Heritage, Authoritarian Rule

and the Syrian Civil War

Old Damascus — as recently as 2010 a vibrant destination featured in international travel magazines — has all but shriveled into a panicky garrison town. The district's once-dynamic art milieu has contracted dramatically, and its trendy hotels have hit hard times as people displaced by war have supplanted tourists as the major clientele (Elass 2013).

In order to recapitulate and discuss the key findings of my thesis, this concluding chapter reviews the theoretical overlaps between the three processes under scrutiny in this study (i.e. gentrification, heritage and authoritarian upgrading and how they are particularly interdependent in the Damascene case). I will discuss how my findings connect with and extend the different bodies of literature referred to in the thesis, and I will make suggestions for future research. Finally, I will assess the impact of the civil war which, since I left Syria in 2011, has been posing a major threat to both the population and the urban fabric of the Syrian capital and has also generated significant alterations to the processes analysed in this study.

Prior to the uprising-turned-civil-war, the Syrian capital experienced the destructive power of urban warfare more than once, for instance, in 1925/6 and 1945, when the French shelled densely-populated areas in central Damascus and conducted counter insurgency operations in the Ghuta. The French Mandate shaped the Syrian capital not only by destruction, but also by urban planning (boulevards, etc), the latter influenced to some extent by Haussmannian planning principles like the creation of thoroughfares to allow the quick circulation of troops and heavy weaponry. Furthermore, introducing a consumption-based, Western way of life represented a desirable alternative for cosmopolitan sections of Syria’s upper- and upper-middle classes. As a consequence of these new consumer preferences, from the 1960s onwards, affluent Damascenes left the old city and moved to the new, European-style neighbourhoods which – at that time – were located on the fringes of the city. At the same time, the old city saw the influx of poor rural migrants, disinvestment and abandonment. The latter two processes are main preconditions of gentrification.
Gentrification in Old Damascus, however, did not start before the late 1990s due to the regime's long-lasting hostile attitude to the old city. Once the rulers took a favourable stance on ‘revitalization’ and tourism in the heart of Damascus, gentrification developed in stages. During the late 1990s, approximately a dozen cafés and restaurants opened in commercial buildings in the Christian quarter Bab Tuma (a development which was accompanied by a limited increase in the interest of a few intellectuals and members of the traditional bourgeoisie in heritage). From 2000 onwards, many restaurants followed, inspired by the successful example of Beit Jabri. At that stage, investors were exclusively Syrian, thus gentrification was a process by Syrians for Syrians or, more precisely, by Damascenes for Damascenes. Furthermore, the process happened almost unconstrained by the local authorities and resulted in severe environmental problems and opposition from the original population (see below). After 2006, by limiting the number of licenses and restricting the locations for restaurants in Old Damascus, the local authorities put an end to the uncontrolled spread of restaurants. From 2004 onwards and following the example of Mamarbachi’s Beit Mamlouka, investors opened boutique hotels as an alternative business model which soon became the leitmotif of the third stage of the Damascene gentrification process. Old Damascene property saw the increasing interest of both domestic and foreign non-Damascene investors, and property prices reached unexpected levels. As far as the opening of boutique hotels was concerned, the authorities, in cooperation with foreign partner organizations, seemed to have policies in place to guide, at least on paper, this wave of ‘revitalization’. Nevertheless, these gentrification processes put pressure on the physical and social fabric of the old city. The infrastructure, meaning electricity, water and sewage networks as well as the limited parking space, was overstretched, and original residents became the victims of displacement. At the same time, lobbied for by sculptor Mustapha Ali, the Jewish quarter, a backward no-go area before the millennium, was transformed into the ‘artists’ quarter’ of the old city (i.e. into a new site of consumption for affluent Damascenes and international guests).

Heritage played a vital role in the production and consumption of a gentrified Old Damascus. In terms of tourism, it became a marketable economic asset. For members of the traditional bourgeoisie, by contrast, Old Damascus and its heritage turned out to
be a focal point of Damascene identity which they felt needed to be re-discovered, re-imagined and re-claimed. Therefore, as outlined in chapter 5, ‘historic continuity’ acted as a source of legitimacy. Additionally, the state emerged as a stakeholder involved in defining and marketing Syrian and Damascene heritage: Statements by Syrian officials including the Syrian Minister of Tourism suggest that, in order to give a facelift to the country’s image abroad and to consolidate the regime’s legitimacy domestically, local and national government agencies privileged heritage interpretations they considered to be favourable in terms of their political and economic agendas such as the emphasis of Damascene Christian and Shiite heritage (Pinto 2007, OBG 2008:81, OBG 2009:102).

7.1 Gentrification, Heritage and Authoritarian Rule under Neo-liberal Globalization

I analysed how, in the context of an authoritarian state facing neoliberal globalization, urban changes and attempts by the ruling elite to sustain their grip on power overlap. In order to address urban transformations in the historic quarters of the Syrian capital, I fused the theoretical concepts of gentrification, heritage and authoritarian resilience, which, at first sight, do not share common ground apart from frequent references to neoliberalism and globalization in the respective bodies of literature.

The analysis showed clear indications of the old city undergoing gentrification processes. Like elsewhere, a set of common preconditions paved the way for gentrification in Old Damascus. Suburbanization, disinvestment and abandonment created a rent gap. Meanwhile, the authoritarian state produced a new middle class and, from the late 1990s onwards, hesitantly ‘allowed’ new forms of business activities in the old city, facilitating the exploitation of the rent gap and thus gentrification. The production of an urban landscape that mirrors first and foremost the interests of the upper and upper middle classes echoed the revitalization discourse heard in other historic cities around the Mediterranean. The fact that gentrification even emerged in unexpected places like the capital of authoritarian Syria supports the argument that the process now is indeed a global phenomenon. Thus, the issues summarized here give
the impression of Old Damascus being just another interchangeable example of
gentrification following some kind of a gentrification blueprint.

Nevertheless, despite gentrification now being a global phenomenon, it is only at first
sight that the process follows some kind of a ready-made script. Lees et al. (2008:166)
argue that ‘[t]oday’s neoliberal policies are layered atop previous generations of
political and economic rules, traditions, norms, and institutions’. Applying such
sensitivity to the historical context of gentrification to the Old Damascene case takes
into account that Syria has never been a democratic free-market economy. Instead, the
ruling elite controlled political and economic life and never ceased acting as a powerful
stakeholder. Therefore, I would even go so far as to argue that, in order to arrive at a
broader understanding of gentrification in any urban setting, it is not only the historical
context and the neoliberal policies per se, but also, the political system on both a
national and a local level that must be part of the analysis. Given the particularities of
Syria’s history mentioned above, gentrification in Old Damascus developed into a site-
specific process of authoritarian upgrading triggered and sustained by neoliberal
globalization. In this regard, Brenner and Theodore (2002:350) remind us that, in
theory, ‘the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets liberated from all
forms of state interference’ is the centrepiece of neoliberal ideology. The authors point
to ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (351), in which ‘the contextual embeddedness of
neoliberal restructuring projects gains centrality, insofar as they have been produced
within national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited
institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles’
(ibid; emphasis in original). In this sense, one can set up the equation ‘economic
globalization ≠ death of the national state’ (Peck 2004:394). This summarises the
broadly accepted insight that under neoliberalism the national state does not become
irrelevant as an actor. Rather, to use the words of Smith (2002:427), ‘the neoliberal
state becomes a consummate agent of – rather than a regulator of – the market’, a
phenomenon which can also be seen in the Middle East. ‘In fact, the emerging private
sector in Arab countries remains dependent upon state connections for its own survival
and can thus be easily coopted by the regime’ (Guazzzone and Pioppi 2010:5), for
instance for the purpose of authoritarian upgrading, as the case of gentrification in Old Damascus scrutinised in this study shows.

At the beginning of my thesis, I asked to what extent gentrification can be referred to as a tool of authoritarian power solidification. This ‘extent’ turned out to be immeasurable, but by critically engaging with the literature on gentrification and authoritarian upgrading, I was able to establish similarities and connections between the two concepts. In the process of analysing interview data I became aware that heritage needed to be dealt with as one of the most significant overlaps between gentrification and authoritarian upgrading, so it became a third main theoretical category to be referred to in this thesis. Concerning gentrification and heritage, Shaw (2005:59) argues that ‘[a]t the heritage-gentrification nexus there are socio-cultural processes at work that privilege, and dispossess, and there are also nostalgic yearnings that are part of these processes.’ For instance, the author observes that ‘[s]pecific codes of desirability, tastes and specific nostalgias determine what does and what does not constitute ‘heritage’’ (Shaw 2005:59). Applied to the Old Damascene context, this means that selected tastes influenced the way how, prior to the civil war, members of the Damascene upper and upper-middle classes read, consumed and identified with a gentrified Old Damascus. As a consequence, they did not only shape gentrification in terms of consumption, but also when it came to defining heritage by privileging particular versions of the past (e.g. merchant houses within the city wall considered worth being restored) while marginalizing others (e.g. similar property in extra-mural Suq Sarouja or the art décor housing stock of the capital dating back to the French Mandate). The latter observation points to the nexus between heritage and authoritarian rule as defining heritage was demonstrably first and foremost the domain of the state and a tool for claiming legacy and thus legitimacy.

7.2 It's All About Class, Isn't It?

In addition to their emergence in the context of neoliberal globalization, the concepts of gentrification, heritage and authoritarian upgrading share, but are not limited to, a noticeable class dimension in that they privilege similar factions of the upper and
upper-middle classes while they discriminate against less affluent parts of the population. First of all, the etymology of the term ‘gentry-fication’ comprises its very own class dimension. Furthermore, gentrification points to an urban process on which Hamnett (2003:2401) elaborates:

Rooted in the intricacies of traditional English rural class structures, the term was designed to point to the emergence of a new “urban gentry”, paralleling the 18th- and 19th-century rural gentry familiar to readers of Jane Austen.

In contrast to this rather romanticised description, Slater (2011:572f) emphasises ‘the class inequalities and injustices created by capitalist urban land markets and policies’ related to gentrification. In addition to the rising cost of housing, Slater points to ‘displacement, eviction, and homelessness’, which he ascribes to

a set of institutional arrangements (private property rights and a free market) that favor the creation of urban environments to serve the needs of capital accumulation at the expense of the social needs of home, community, family (Slater 2011:572f).

Prior to the Syrian civil war, it was a set of both institutional228 and informal arrangements that shaped the emergence of a gentrified Old Damascus and its exploitation as an economic asset. This trend, while putting members of the upper and upper-middle classes loyal to the regime in a position to successfully (re)claim ownership of parts of the old city, confronted less affluent residents with increasing exclusion and displacement. So gentrification in Old Damascus constituted a transition from populism to post-populism in the urban sphere because, instead of privileged members of the loyal elite, it targeted the long-time popular constituency of the authoritarian regime by exposing it to social inequalities.229 The regime, however, not only approved gentrification, but also steered the process by suppressing its early manifestations.

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228 This means a legal framework that continued the developments initiated by Investment Law no.10 of 1991, which commenced the liberalization of Syria’s previously closed economy.
229 After the post-populist turn, when the importance of the masses as constituency started to fade, authoritarian regimes based their power on members of the loyal elite. In the Syrian case this included the new classes as well as selected members of the traditional bourgeoisie.
The regime controlled both access to and the interpretation of Old Damascene heritage. As part of Syria’s National Heritage, historic sites in the old city – most prominently the Umayyad Mosque, which was marketed as a symbol of the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups in Syria prior to the civil war – were used to mobilize and unite the masses by constructing a great national past. By arguing that “[p]opulism notwithstanding, heritage normally goes with privilege: elites usually own it, control access to it, and ordain its public image’ (Lowenthal 2004:89), Lowenthal, who elsewhere defines heritage as ‘elite domain’ (14), underscores the class character of heritage.

Likewise, in the context of authoritarian upgrading, especially when it comes to the implementation of selective economic reforms, it is a certain section of the elite that benefits most from policies such as, for instance, privileged access to business opportunities in Old Damascus. Giving preference to specific elite groups politically, economically or in terms of consumption is emblematic of neoliberal authoritarian states. Gentrification in Old Damascus can thus be seen as in line with everyday life in the affluent modern downtown districts of Damascus and other Middle Eastern capitals, where, since the 1990s, new forms of consumption (‘nouvelle consommation’, see Vignal 2012) have emerged in the form of shopping malls, international fast-food chains and outlets of international fashion labels (e.g. Abaza 2001; Yacobi and Shechter 2005; Heydemann 2007; Vignal 2012). In Old Damascus, these new consumption practices took the form of a gentrified urban fabric shaped by themed restaurants and boutique hotels for the affluent.

7.3 Informality and Its Impact on Urban Policy in Old Damascus

As the analysis of the Old Damascene case showed, it is not only the focus on class that connects heritage, gentrification and authoritarian upgrading. Various informal policies and practices evolved in the context of the three theoretical concepts, some of which were directly linked to the urban sphere. For instance, prior to the civil war,\footnote{Research focusing on real estate under the conditions of a war economy is a possible field of future investigation related to this thesis.}

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some real estate projects in the most sought-after quarters of the Syrian capital were developed illegally (OBG 2006:88). This supports the argument that in many cities of the Global South, as well as on its metropolitan fringes, ‘informal housing and land markets are not just the domain of the poor but that they are also important for the middle class, even the elite’ (Roy 2005:148). Furthermore, the state is in a powerful position ‘to determine what is informal and what is not, and […] which forms of informality will thrive and which will disappear’ (149).

In terms of informality, however, the main focus of this thesis was not on informal housing but rather on informal practices in urban policy-making related to gentrification and heritage conservation under authoritarian rule. In Syria, like elsewhere in the Middle East, authoritarian regimes have been drawing, *inter alia*, on practices like clientelism, patronage and co-option, *wasta*, or even corruption, all of which serve the goal of gaining legitimacy and thus of regime maintenance. Regime cronies and loyal investors benefited most from these relation-based modes of governance, which, in the context of investing in the built environment, enabled them to speed up licensing procedures through unofficial channels (see figures 7 and 8). With regard to gentrification in Old Damascus, the local authorities tolerated, for instance, loyal actors’ opening of boutique hotels and restaurants despite obvious violations of legal norms. At the same time, others were denied access to the old city’s promising business opportunities. The opaque investment climate, which, despite alteration to the legal framework, was shaped by the lack of legal certainty and widespread informality, kept international investors off the old city. These are just a few examples of the regime ‘strategically using a state of exception’ (Roy 2005:153) in the confined context of Old Damascus. However, they fit in seamlessly with the *ad hoc* decision making that has dominated urban governance in the Lebanese capital Beirut, which Krijnen and Fawaz (2010:117) regard as ‘exception as the rule’.

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231 Roy (2005:149) further specifies that ‘[s]uch trends point to a complex continuum of legality and illegality, where squatter settlements formed through land invasion and self-help housing can exist alongside upscale informal subdivisions formed through legal ownership and market transaction but in violation of land use regulations. Both forms of housing are informal but embody very different concretizations of legitimacy. The divide here is not between formality and informality but rather a differentiation within informality’.

232 E.g. distance to mosques or schools or the use of concrete and other officially banned construction materials.
As the previous paragraphs showed, gentrification, heritage and authoritarian upgrading are shaped by the overarching theme of neoliberal globalization. Furthermore, they share conspicuous communalities in terms of a class dimension and informality. In the following, I will concentrate on the mobility of policy, an additional trend that emerged at different stages of the analysis, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the phenomena under study.

### 7.4 The Diffusion of Gentrification, Heritage and Authoritarian Upgrading

Similarly to the field of economic development, gentrification can be related to different forms of diffusion, *inter alia*, of policies, practices and tastes. According to Atkinson and Bridge (2005), gentrification travelled in one direction, (i.e. from the Global North to the Global South) and thus reached cities not linked to gentrification in the past, such, for example, as the Syrian capital. Like elsewhere in the Global South, gentrification in Damascus emerged simultaneously with economic and political changes which were the result of neoliberal globalization.\(^{233}\) Interviewees pointed out that gentrification processes in Old Damascus were shaped by different forms of transnational knowledge exchange. Accordingly, and in addition to a general trend towards a consumption-orientated lifestyle, Syrian expatriates living in the West developed a preference for a specific gentrification aesthetic which, from the late 1990s onwards, found expression in the spread of Middle Eastern themed restaurants and boutique hotels in Old Damascus. Meanwhile, Syrian artists attracted international attention, and exchanges with fellow artists in other parts of the world gained momentum. Against this background, interviewees linked the state-sponsored emergence of the Old Damascus artists’ quarter directly to similar neighbourhoods in Western capitals.

In the short term, the authoritarian regime benefited from facilitating gentrification in Old Damascus in several aspects. Domestically, gentrification helped the rulers to

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\(^{233}\) See, for example, Escher’s (2000) comparative study on globalization tendencies (*Globalisierungstendenzen*) in the historic centres of Marrakech and Damascus.
secure the support of new constituencies consisting of both upper- and upper-middle-class investors and consumers, which proved beneficial in terms of supporting the country’s weak economy. Meanwhile, international tourists were led to believe that they were visiting an exotic but modern city with a unique but at the same time familiar tourist infrastructure, recognizable in particular by its numerous upscale boutique hotels, restaurants and art galleries. Numerous articles in the travel columns of prominent Western newspapers bore testimony to the success of this image campaign prior to the civil war. Similarly, by adapting to a discourse of urban ‘renaissance’ and revitalization, the authoritarian state was able to pretend an intention to implement genuine economic and political reform and thus managed to gain both the trust and financial support of foreign donors. On closer examination, it became evident that the process in the Syrian capital did not follow a universal gentrification blueprint. In terms of aesthetics, the transformations in Old Damascus resembled gentrification in Moroccan medinas. However, in the old city of Damascus, the influx of more affluent users was permanent only in some cases. For most members of the upper and upper-middle classes, the return to the old city was temporary (i.e. for dining, shopping or visiting cultural venues like the artists’ district in the former Jewish quarter). This phenomenon in Damascus resembled ‘weekend and evening gentrification’ (Rubino 2005:233) as observed in Brazilian cities.

Whereas the existence of one universal gentrification blueprint is rightly questioned (Lees 2012), the designation of heritage sites and their conservation follows more or less the same set of practices globally. Graham et al. (2000:237) observe that ‘encouraged by the interchange of techniques, philosophies and “best practice” examples,’ conservationists in cities worldwide apply some kind of heritage blueprint. They add that international actors involved in heritage conservation frequently employ internationally trained personnel who interact through global networks. This reduces investment risks by reusing ideas and programmes that have proved successful elsewhere, and encourages the selection of the same design details [...], processes which both reflect an existing

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234 The strategy of pretending a willingness to cooperate was by no means limited to the urban sphere but included, for instance, economic cooperation, projects to empower (selected) civil society actors and rural development.
internationalism and also stimulate it further by producing [...] a recognizable heritage style (ibid).

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, the diffusion of practices addressed in the above quotation emerged in the Old Damascene case, too. According to some of the interviewees, Syria’s biggest city Aleppo acted as a model for the conservation of Old Damascus. While being involved in the preservation of several medieval castles in Northern Syria, inter alia the Citadel of Aleppo, the Aga Khan Development Network followed a code of practice which had been previously implemented and thus tested elsewhere. Furthermore, foreign nationals and foreign-educated Syrian professionals (see Zintl 2013) were well represented among the workforce employed in the historic preservation in Old Damascus.

While discussing authoritarian upgrading, Heydemann (2007:2) introduces the concept of authoritarian learning, a process that entails the mobility of policies, their modification and the learning from like-minded states – in the Syrian case from the MENA region and beyond. Prior to the recent wave of uprisings that have been shaking the Middle East since the autumn of 2010, Arab regimes studied the Chinese model of economic reform without conceding full political control. Syrian officials were, for instance, on the lookout for strategies suitable for avoiding regime collapse as experienced by Syria’s ex-allies in the USSR and Eastern Europe (Lust-Okar 2006:7). Based on this reading of failed authoritarian regimes, Bashar al-Asad backed away from political reform and opted rather for “Chinese style” reforms, which he define[d] as slow, gradual economic change implemented while maintaining political stability’ (Lust-Okar 2006:3). Quite often, these gradual economic reforms privileged a small group of crony capitalists and businessmen close to the regime, as I demonstrated in the realm of gentrification in Old Damascus. A major field of learning and international regime cooperation is the diffusion of the Internet and new media. Authoritarian regimes proceeded to accept the political and socio-economic advantages of these information technologies and began to incorporate them “into authoritarian strategies of governance, using them to enhance and upgrade their own

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235 Newspaper articles from the early 2000s focused on the preservation of the old city as well as on boutique hotels in Aleppo.
capacity to keep tabs on their citizens, and to surround them with a “multi-layered architecture of control” (Heydemann 2007:23). Throughout the Middle East this happened under the pretext of fighting Islamist terrorism and, at least since the first days of the Syrian uprising, foreign conspiracy. In Syria, the regime of Bashar al-Asad enhanced this discourse since the outbreak of the civil war in order to justify its disproportionate use of violence. In the summer of 2013, with the intention of demonizing and repressing their opponents, both Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Egypt’s new strongman General Sisi resorted to a similar rhetoric of subsuming open opposition under categories like traitors, saboteurs and terrorists. It is, therefore, clear that the circulation of knowledge between international actors, and authoritarian regimes in particular, has played an important role not only in regard to gentrification and heritage, but also in the context of authoritarian upgrading.

7.5 Gentrification, Heritage and Authoritarian Resilience during the Syrian Crisis – Theory and Empirical Findings Reconsidered

Based on empirical evidence from Damascus, the previous sections demonstrated that gentrification, heritage and authoritarian upgrading, show striking overlaps in terms of class, informality and in that they ‘travel’ between different geographical contexts. Furthermore, the three processes occur in parallel with neoliberal globalization. Nevertheless, the respective bodies of literature pay little attention to each other. Gentrification researchers should, therefore, widen their scope, for instance, by paying closer attention to cognate disciplines such, for example, as history and comparative politics. As demonstrated in this thesis for the Damascene case, reference to a city’s urban history definitely contributes to a better understanding of gentrification in that specific context. Similarly, being familiar with the mode of governance – in the case of Syria, a post-populist form of authoritarianism – allows for an informed approach to political practices linked with gentrification and heritage. At the same time, a lot of recent research puts emphasis on state-led new-built gentrification (e.g. He (2007) on China; Islam (2010) on Turkey). However, when focussing on gentrification in historic city centres, more attention needs to be paid to the heritage-gentrification nexus (Shaw 2005), especially when heritage becomes a contested commodity, as Old Damascene property did prior to the civil war.
Research on heritage entails examining the nexus between political ideology and heritage and taking into account manifold forms of power relations which emerge in the context of heritage designation, preservation and disinheritance (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990:28; Graham et al. 2000:40; Lowenthal 2004). So far, despite a high level of awareness of the class-based, (post-)colonial or national dimensions of heritage, little attention has been paid explicitly to the interplay of 21st-century authoritarianism and heritage. Similarly, the literature on authoritarianism, despite some exceptions, has turned a blind eye to both heritage and the urban sphere. Having the power to decide which aspects of the past constitute a city’s or a nation’s heritage means having the power to shape both present and future. Consequently, authoritarian regimes have the power to select those aspects of heritage which fit their respective political or economic agendas best, gentrification thus becoming a tool of authoritarian upgrading in the urban realm. With regard to historic quarters such as the neighbourhoods in the old city of Damascus, this means that the regime and those close to it are in a position to decide which parts of the historic urban fabric are worthy of being preserved and which are not. Hertzfeld emphasises the connections between heritage and gentrification when he rightly recalls that ‘both state-sponsored historic conservation and—perhaps especially—capital-driven gentrification almost always bring the tragedy of eviction in their train’ (Hertzfeld 2010:259f). He adds that only owner occupiers are able to ‘avoid being cast on the rubbish heap of history’ (ibid) as they have the necessary capital to withstand the pressures of displacement.

As this thesis showed, in the state-sponsored process of transforming Old Damascus from a dilapidated residential area into a landscape of consumption for the better off, tenants and less affluent owner occupiers – until recently the regime’s popular constituency – more and more often became the victims of ‘planned displacement’ (Lees 2012:6). Given the informal character of decision making in authoritarian Syria, it can be assumed that, at least in some cases, having or not having wasta was decisive in terms of whether or not a displaced individual was compensated and what this compensation looked like. What both tenants facing displacement and homeowners

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236 On heritage in Nazi-Germany, see Hagen 2009a; 2009b. Regarding Syria, see Wedeen 1999.
forced to sell their property below market value had in common was the fact that most of them could afford to move only to faceless ‘peri-urban areas far away from their places of work […] and social networks’ (10). In these fast growing, often informally constructed neighbourhoods, former old-city dwellers had to compete with incoming populations both from other Damascene neighbourhoods and from other mostly rural parts of the country (e.g. from the north-eastern provinces affected by persistent drought and desertification). Living conditions for ordinary Syrians deteriorated with the decision of the Syrian government to implement post-populist neoliberal reform. Cutting back on food and fuel subsidies and the streamlining of other elements of the welfare state resulted in increasing levels of poverty and desperation on the peripheries of Damascus and other major cities in Syria. It is in these areas that, in the spring of 2011, the discontentment of large sections of the population escalated into initially peaceful opposition to the regime; and it is these neighbourhoods where the regime has since been hitting back most brutally.

While the present political turmoil has already had a significant impact on this study, future research on Syria’s cities will be influenced, to an even larger extent, by the civil war. First and foremost, attention needs to be paid to the massive destruction of much of the country’s housing stock in metropolitan areas like Aleppo, Homs and the Damascene periphery, where little seems to remain. Reconstruction and tackling the humanitarian crisis will certainly dominate research in and on Syria once the fighting comes to an end. Furthermore, observers in Syria report significant damage to historic sites, with the burnt old market district of Aleppo – a World Heritage Site since 1985 – being the best-known example. Therefore, documenting and preserving the country’s remaining cultural heritage will need scholarly attention. Syria has been experiencing the emergence of what can be best described as wartime economy. It seems that, just as it happened in the case of gentrification, the regime is trying to continue to upgrade

237 It appears, however, obvious that poverty is only one aspect of the Syrian crisis. The repression of activists who called for civil rights and protested against widespread corruption and creeping sectarianism are other factors that initially led to the uprising-turned-civil-war, which is now further fuelled by external actors and their agendas.

238 For instance, due to my earlier return from the field, contacts in the ministries of tourism and waqf could not be followed up. Similarly, because of violent protests in some of the less affluent quarters of the Damascene periphery, I decided not to track down the whereabouts of displaced old city dwellers.
its base of support by granting loyal actors privileged access to profitable business sectors (informal conversation with well-informed Syrian expatriate now living in Europe). Meanwhile, in the winter of 2012-2013, Damascene informants reported how the regime bulldozed previously tolerated informal settlements because the residents had taken part in anti-regime demonstrations.

In order to build on the findings of this thesis, one could investigate the impact of war on heritage and real estate and how gentrification develops in times of war.239 While many quarters of Damascus are under siege, the Damascene elite still follows its consumption-orientated lifestyle and continues, for instance, to visit the (remaining) themed restaurants in the old city and in other ‘safe’ neighbourhoods under regime control (Solomon 2012; Ketz 2013). What path will gentrification follow if the war continues? Will prolonged conflict result in slower gentrification or even de-gentrification, as Ross and Jamil (2011) argue regarding the context of Lebanon’s capital Beirut? Or is it likely that powerful actors will increasingly use gentrification as punitive revanchist practice? Capital, loyalties and sectarian affiliation – the latter being particularly important in any future attempt to scrutinize political and urban developments after 2011 – are creating new divisions within Syrian cities and between former neighbours. Unmasking these new borders and the inequalities they produce will be a challenging task for urban research in post-conflict Syria.

239 On the interplay of authoritarianism and the Syrian civil war see Heydemann and Leenders (2013).
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**Webpages:**

Appendices

Appendix 1 List of Interviewees

101 architect working for an international organization
102 urban planner, academia
103 architect employed by a government agency
104 artist
105 political analyst
106 owner of a guesthouse
107 urban planner employed by a government agency
108 urban planner employed by a government agency
109 hotel owner
110 owner of a guesthouse
111 hotel owner
112 artist
113 political analyst
114 Western urban planner working for an international organization
115 architect
116 owner of a guesthouse
117 author
118 business consultant
119 architect employed by a government agency
120 hotel owner
201 owner of a guesthouse
203 Western urban planner working for an international organization
204 urban planner employed by a government agency
205 urban planner employed by a government agency
206 owner of a guesthouse
207 neighbour of several boutique hotels
208 hotel manager
209 artist
## Appendix 2 Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Own role; location of rehabilitation; Why? How communicated? (media)</td>
<td>How do people benefit from these changes? WHO? Yourself? How? [see below] [If critique regarding “rehabilitation” process is stated: What do you think could be done to: improve XY? let XY participate? to solve the problem?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why now? Why not earlier?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Who? Where? Origin? [class; region] Contacts How? Why?</th>
<th>Which professional groups are involved in the process you described? Tell me about the role these actors play in the process of “rehabilitation”. … and how are you involved as … [profession]? Above you mentioned XY [names of neighbourhoods]. What are the reasons for actors’ interest in these neighbourhoods? Are those who benefit mostly from the neighbourhood(s)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Administration’s involvement in rehabilitation | Legislation Financing Advise Direct involvement Style and location | Tell me about the new tenancy law/ zoning rules/ renovation guidelines. What is new about it/ them?* Who issued them? Are they effective? (or informally broken) What were - in your opinion - the reasons for these changes? Which actors were involved in the adoption? How? Why XY and not Z? |

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*XY is a placeholder for any particular entity or party mentioned in the interview context.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why are there only/ no 5* hotels in quarter XY? Why are no restaurants in this area?</td>
<td>[Does this have religious reasons? = order a beer…]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who invests in the renovation of Old Damascus? [private, institutional (local/ national)]</td>
<td>To what extent does the administration encourage private investment? How? Subsidies? I heard about XYZ [international organizations]. How are they involved? Do you know something about the criteria to obtain official support for realizing a renovation project in Old Damascus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damascus is famous for the coexistence of different architectural styles. What is the reason for the recent trend to focus mainly on the Ottoman style? [This leads to next question.]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does this take place in neighbourhoods XY and not in neighbourhood Z? Who is interested in this?/ Who benefits from this? For who was the rehabilitation implemented? [For the people of Damascus? The Syrian nation? Expatriates? Tourists?] How do you know?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damascus is famous for the coexistence of different architectural styles. What is the reason for the recent trend to focus mainly on the Ottoman style?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does this take place in neighbourhoods XY and not in neighbourhood Z? Who is interested in this?/ Who benefits from this? For who was the rehabilitation implemented? [For the people of Damascus? The Syrian nation? Expatriates? Tourists?] How do you know?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottoman Style</td>
<td>Beneficiaries? Decision maker? Reasons for choice of that style? [Role of TV series Bab al-Hara?] [Link to world heritage?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences Old Users</td>
<td>Change:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How? (above) What is better?</td>
<td>Tell me how you experienced the change of the neighbourhood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is worse? What got lost?</td>
<td>What makes you feel / think like this? [Specify!]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own concernment</td>
<td>What is better now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is worse now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What got lost?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before you mentioned gain/ loss of XY. Tell me, to what extent are you personally affected by these developments? How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing:</td>
<td>Timing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since when?</td>
<td>Tell me why are these changes happening now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why now?</td>
<td>Since when are you aware of this process? When did it start?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Location:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why neighbourhood XY and not Z?</td>
<td>What are the reasons for the process taking place in neighbourhood XY and not Z?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity:</td>
<td>Identity:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would you show a foreign guest/ visitor? Why?</td>
<td>What would you show a foreign guest/ visitor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does this site mean for you?</td>
<td>What is the reason for your choice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do these places differ from the places you go to with family or local friends?</td>
<td>Tell me, why is this site important for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do you go out/ dine?</td>
<td>Do these places differ from the places you go to with family or local friends?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why is this site important for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where do you go out/ dine?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the reason for your choice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the reason for choosing different places for different company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would you like to see happening with regard to urban change in Damascus/ your neighbourhood?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiences Producers of gentrification
[also “New Users”]

| Change: | Change: |
| How? (above) What is better? | Tell me how you experienced the change of the neighbourhood. |
| What is worse? What got lost? | What makes you feel like/ think like this? [Specify!] |
| **Location:** Why neighbourhood XY and not Z? | What is better now?  
What is worse?  
What got lost?  
Location: What are the reasons for the process taking place in neighbourhood XY and not Z? |
| **Identity:** What would you show a foreign guest/visitor? Why?  
What does this site mean for you?  
What is the reason for your choice? Tell me, why is this site important for you?   
Do these places differ from the places you go to with family or local friends?  
Why is this site important for you?  
Where do you go out/dine?  
What is the reason for your choice?  
What is the reason for choosing different places for different company?  
What would you like to see happening with regard to urban change in Damascus/your neighbourhood?  
Former residents:  
Tell me about the former residents of the revitalised buildings/neighbourhood/hotel/restaurant: What happened to them?  
Where do they live now?  
Do you know any of them?  
What do you think they think about the changes? |
| **Do these places differ from the places you go to with family or local friends?** |
| **Where do you go out/dine?**  
What is the reason for your choice?  
What is the reason for choosing different places for different company? |
| **What happened to former residents of the gentrified buildings? Voluntarily? Where? Do you know?** |
| **How do the others [group of actors X, Y, Z] see the rehabilitation of Damascus?**  
How do you think the other actors see the rehabilitation of Damascus?  
What is different in their position [compared to yours]?
What are in your opinion the reasons for these differences? |
Appendix 3 Abandoned Courtyard House in Damascus (own picture)

Appendix 4 Abandonment in the Jewish Quarter (own picture)
Appendix 5 Residential Alley before Gentrification (own picture)

Appendix 6 Residential Alley on the Gentrification Frontier (own picture)
Appendix 7 Boutique Hotel on the Gentrification Frontier 1 (own picture)

Appendix 8 Boutique Hotel on the Gentrification Frontier 2 (own picture)
Appendix 9 Strait Street in 2004 (own picture)

Appendix 10 Strait Street in 2011 (own picture)
Appendix 11 Suq Midhat Pasha in 2004 (own picture)

Appendix 12 Suq Midhat Pasha in 2011 (own picture)
Appendix 13 Traditional Old Damascene Coffee Shop (own picture)

Appendix 14 Modern Café in Old Damascus (own picture)
Appendix 15 Historic Property under Construction (own picture)

Appendix 16 ‘Beit Mamlouka’ – the First Boutique Hotel in Damascus (own picture)
Appendix 17 Courtyard of the Boutique Hotel ‘Dar Mamlouka’

Appendix 18 Luxurious Room in the Boutique Hotel ‘Dar Mamlouka’
Appendix 19 Restaurant ‘Beit Jabri’ (own picture)

Appendix 20 Courtyard of the Mustafa Ali Foundation (own picture)
Appendix 21 New-built Gentrification in Old Damascus: Restaurant 'Naranj' (own picture)

Appendix 22 New-built Gentrification in the Damascene Periphery: the World's Biggest Restaurant 'Damascus Gate' (own picture)
Appendix 23 Replica of an Old Damascene Residential Alley in the Theme Park ‘Sham Village’ (own picture)
Appendix 24 Damascus Today

Appendix 25 Old Damascus Today

الخطط التوجيهي المرحلية
لإحياء مدينة دمشق القديمة

ملاحظات:
- في محور 1:40000 لتحديد التوزيعات ذات اللغة العربية واللغة الإنجليزية
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- الأراضي المفتوحة ذات القيمة الاجتماعية:
- الأراضي المفتوحة ذات القيمة الثقافية:
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**Explanations:**

- **R1** – Housing with cultural and religious focus
- **R2** – Housing with developmental occupations
- **R3** – Housing with need for improving structures
- **R4** – Housing, culture, handicraft

- **MR1** – Housing with cultural, touristic, and traditional handicraft occupations
- **MR2** – Housing and educational, historical, cultural, and religious occupations
- **MR3** – Housing, retail, and traditional and cultural occupations
- **MR4** – Housing and educational occupations

- **C1** – Central markets with touristic occupation
- **C2** – Traditional markets with touristic and commercial occupations

- **X1** – Commercial and touristic axis
- **X2** – Local commercial and touristic axis
- **X3** – Touristic axis with traditional handicrafts
- **X4** – Touristic cultural axis with traditional handicrafts
Appendix 28 Cafés, Restaurants and Boutique Hotels in Old Damascus
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al-Aliya Restaurant</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garmaray Restaurant</td>
<td>Veggieateria</td>
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Source: Syrian Arab Republic/ Ministry of Local Administration (year unknown). Integrated Conservation and Development Plan For Old Damascus City, pp. 173-175.
Appendix 29 Prospectus “Old City Highlights” distributed by Municipal Administration and Modernisation Programme (MAM), map and description; selected pages
33. Bil al-Fahdah: Typical of Damascus houses that date back to the 17th century, the house is decorated with geometric designs.

34. Al-Madiqya Church (Greek Orthodox Patriarchate): Known as the oldest church in Damascus, it was restored after the destruction caused by civil war, and today it is a symbol of religious coexistence and tolerance.

35. Al-Imamya Minaret (The White Minaret): Called this, it is one of the oldest and most prominent minarets in Damascus. Standing 43 meters high, it was constructed in 1550 AD.

36. Al-Nouriya Square: The square is named after the Nouriya Mosque, which is one of the oldest mosques in Damascus. It was built in 1605 AD and is known for its beautiful architecture and the intricate designs adorning its walls.

37. The Roman Victory Arch: Called this arch, it is one of the most beautiful and oldest triumphal arches in Damascus. It was built in AD 1550 and is decorated with intricate designs and statues of Roman emperors.

38. Old Damascus Highlights: The city of Damascus is rich in history and culture, with many UNESCO World Heritage Sites and other notable landmarks.
Appendix 30 Prospectus Restaurant ‘Beit Jabri’

It’s a story of a dream coming true...

This dream was established in 1932. But my family story was
engaged with it when my grandfather Nahed Jabri, son of
Hussein Ali Jabri bought this house from the late Emir Said,
the father of Emir Suleimani. He brought his own in the past of
the house.

My family generations have lived in this house for decades,
since 1932, in this wonderful piece, we had the most precious
times and memories, as a family

But on 1977, the house became a large one to be served
by the weather of the family, so my parents asked me to
assist them to insects, as they were too old to care
of it. The time passed away, and the house was abandoned
for years.

Cracks started to show, the walls. Dust invaded into the precious
architectural, and the floor, which once a perfect family
house, became an old place deserted place.

One day my dream decided to exploit the old house, which had
became a big wonder. I called my father and we both
started a beautification of the house and even the land and a
suggestion of coffee, that the house must remain to agree on
whether we knew that you visit.

Unfortunately, the hands you love, but also their ideas,
not the philosophy on anything to the wonderful house.

Sawing and saw my share. I’m passionate about this
story, in the house, you can know that my childhood
journey years. However, you are also there hanging over the
healing of the traditions, meaning through the windows,
and swinging with the evening sun.

My house of sharing in the house, the time that
I have never wanted to do something to save this beautiful
pieces, and argue with the world at its vision.

The idea of turning it into a restaurant

To turn it into a small restaurant or the best solution is to keep
the original house with the old land.

At first, I wanted to try to turn it into the old
land, in order to preserve the history and its
feel, but the present

I also wanted to keep the simplicity of the original house

I wanted to keep it simple as possible to use it.

In addition, I tried to minimize the amount of

construction and decoration.

I tried to change the vision and

But the whole project, not of being in an old ortical

Damascone house with a view.

It was a long difficult journey till my dream became true.

Here scattered all over the world. Reading, discovering and meeting them with
the project was a hard task and sometimes an impossible mission.

After, I started gradually the restriction work,

I welcomed the closest friends as

visitors.

And that was the first step in

finishing my dreams project.

My friends spread the address

out. We promoted the project

through the simple word of

mouth. People started telling about it, and by
time, crowds came to enjoy

the fountain and the fresh

scented breeze.

In addition, I tried on

preserving traditional and

delicious plates known to

the Damascene well-loved kitchen.

The quarter neighbors were surprised with this new action.

They could not understand or guess why strangers come into

the old house every night. Therefore, they filed a complaint to

Damascone Governorate, which closed the house and sealed

it with red wax.

I had this troubles several times, but my determination and

faith gave me enough strength to go on. Consequently, the
neighbors and the governorate officers started to respond,

and even to like the house.

My precious dream held other dreams within it. I opened one

of the halls for contemporary plastic arts exhibitions. I also

spread a cultural mission by holding seminars, poetical and

classical music evenings. And the planning to start a bookshop

for buying and selling used books, especially Islamic Arab

Intellectual Heritage books.

The fact is that, I don’t know how much we are ready to read

for these wonderful Damascene houses, nor how those

exceptional pieces are actually in need. But I know that

this house has given me the inspiration, passion and

determination to accomplish this beautiful dream.

It’s my grandfather’s wish...

Today it’s your door... Welcome! Let’s share its original brewhouse.

Raed Jabri
Talisman (1) is the first stand on the Talisman chain of hotels, a luxury place with a beauty center, and the only swimming pool in the Old Damascus. The courtyard, lounge, and outdoor space is 12 meters and 10 meters. Suitable for the "Royal Service". Damascus' "magnificent theater" in the heart of the city. Located in the heart of Old Damascus, 2 kilometers from the airport, the hotel, with its French and Swiss architecture, offers a unique atmosphere in the Old Damascus. Talisman (2) is a 600-year-old Damascus house with three courtyards, a salon, small Qasr, and antique furniture equipment. 12 rooms and suites and a private apartment, each one not only a "home to host Damascus," but also a "home to host Damascus."