

## Dust coats Damascus facades: Where do maintenance plans stand on the list of priorities?



As visitors approach Damascus from the city’s entrances, the layers of dust and soot accumulated on the facades of residential, official and historic buildings become plainly visible a scene that has become part of daily life in the Syrian capital after years of war and deteriorating services, even in areas that did not witness direct destruction.

These layers of pollution, known locally as “shahwar,” reflect the effects of accumulated neglect, negatively affecting the city’s visual landscape at a time when Damascus is seeking to restore its tourism profile and reopen itself to visitors after the fall of the former regime.

This report sheds light on the state of the visual cleanliness of building facades in Damascus and discusses the responsibilities of the relevant authorities and their plans for maintaining official and heritage buildings, as well as the extent to which this issue figures among their priorities.

The report also examines how this reality affects the image of the capital, alongside the economic and social factors that have limited building cleaning and maintenance work, particularly the living pressures facing residents and the

economic and financial constraints hampering the government's work.

### A study in preparation

At the official level, the Damascus Media Directorate told NoonPost that a study is underway on improving building facades in the city of Damascus, whether in Old Damascus or across the city's neighborhoods. However, this is not a study specialized solely in building facades; rather, it comes within the framework of a broader study concerning Damascus as a whole.

The directorate said the study includes several axes related to urban and service planning, including building facades, road and sidewalk space, gardens, tree coverage, as well as traffic infrastructure and public services. It also addresses the condition of neighborhoods in terms of population density and residents' needs, such as the number of schools, hospitals, service buildings, mosques and places of worship, among others, in proportion to the population of each area.

The study is still being worked on and needs time before yielding results or clear implementation plans. Once it is completed, it will be possible to set specific timelines for improving facades and others for improving streets and roads, given that all these elements are interconnected and cannot be separated from one another in the planning process.

It added that at present there are no precise or final answers regarding timelines or implementation mechanisms, because the current reality in Damascus is still in the study and assessment phase. The study is expected to take time that may extend until the end of 2026 or perhaps the beginning of 2027. The directorate noted that the study is being conducted in cooperation with Italy's Venice University, with the participation of U.N.-affiliated programs, in addition to volunteer initiatives concerned with Damascus' heritage and urban fabric.

### What are the causes of building facade pollution?

The beauty of building facades in Syrian cities has deteriorated because of accumulated factors, most notably the war and the former regime's neglect of this issue, in addition to corruption and the absence of oversight over machinery and public services.

Architect and governance expert Mazhar Sharabji told NoonPost that the war had a major impact on the urban and visual landscape, as fires and destruction in a number of areas were directly reflected on building facades.

During that period, the regime was not interested in providing any services related to public cleanliness or reducing environmental pollution. On the contrary, some military checkpoints lit fires for heating or other purposes that contributed to disorder. The phenomenon of burning tires also spread in many

rebellious areas, whether in cities or the countryside, which increased pollution levels.

Sharabji said the improper use of fuel, as a result of corruption and adulteration in petroleum products, led to an increase in harmful emissions from various types of machinery, whether industrial, service-related or transportation vehicles moving through the streets, in addition to severe overcrowding in inhabited areas, especially in major cities.

There was hardly any concern for the facades of institutions, including government ones, whether in terms of sidewalks, garbage containers, or cleaning and general maintenance work. Some containers were even burned to dispose of waste because of the absence of collection and cleaning services, at a time when the state was preoccupied with repression, abuses and checkpoints spread across Damascus.

He added that the relocation of many industries from rural areas to cities, because large parts of the countryside fell outside regime control during the war, increased environmental pollution inside cities. In addition, rubble and accumulated dust in most areas contributed to distorting the overall visual scene, an effect that continues to this day and has even affected tourism.

He pointed out that Syrian cities had long suffered from heavy congestion caused by technically unfit machinery and vehicles amid weak oversight and widespread corruption. But this problem worsened significantly during and after the war, with the growing number of vehicles of all kinds and their dense presence inside cities without clear standards or effective oversight of their technical or environmental condition.

Even after liberation, cities still suffer to varying degrees from traffic chaos and vehicle density, in the absence of clear standards related to the technical condition or roadworthiness of vehicles, which continues to affect both the environment and the overall streetscape.

The war also led to a major decline in the ability of state institutions to manage cities and provide basic services, whether related to cleanliness, traffic regulation or infrastructure maintenance. Even today, cities still suffer from a lack of the tools and mechanisms needed to manage the urban scene in an orderly and effective way.

Improvement requires a collective effort

By contrast, Sharabji believes the current government cannot be held fully responsible for this reality, given the scale of destruction inflicted on infrastructure during the war years, as well as the economic collapse and

depletion of state resources left behind by the war. The corruption and looting suffered by state institutions and local resources across the provinces also left deep effects on the ability of service bodies to perform their role as required.

Even so, some institutions and local bodies are trying to carry out limited restoration and improvement work, but weak economic resources and the state treasury's need for funding pose a major obstacle to providing integrated services and achieving broad improvements at the level of cities and infrastructure.

For that reason, there remains a need for the state to focus in its strategies on improving the general appearance of cities, as a fundamental element in restoring visual identity and tourism appeal.

The engineer stressed that improving facade cleanliness and the visual landscape of cities truly requires the combined efforts of several parties, starting with citizens, passing through civil society organizations, and reaching the state, which is supposed to be the main body responsible for guidance, awareness and setting priorities related to public services and the urban appearance.

But the primary role must remain with the state, as the body capable of setting public policies, launching awareness programs for citizens, and encouraging them to participate in cleaning cities and preserving public facilities, as happens in some participatory experiences in other cities around the world. Restoring the aesthetic identity of historic cities such as Damascus is tied not only to restoration work, but also to restoring the city's overall appearance in a way that helps attract tourists and reflects a civilized and beautiful image.

Sharabji suggests starting with pilot experiences in one neighborhood or more, then developing them later and generalizing them to the rest of the areas so they become replicable models for improving the urban landscape. In this context, support from international civil society organizations could be used if directed toward clear and specific projects, alongside involving students and educational institutions in tree-planting, cleaning and public-space improvement initiatives.

“Taramem” and attempts

At a time when this issue is viewed as one of the deferred priorities on the list of official concerns and may take a long time before it is addressed, youth initiatives have emerged offering facade-cleaning services as paid work based on direct fees or donations.

One such initiative is the company Taramem, which has cleaned the facades of many buildings in Damascus, including some with a historic character, at the request of donors who wanted that done.

Marine engineer Obada Kabrita, the company's founder and the originator of the idea, told NoonPost that Tameem is a private company concerned with cleaning natural stone in non-damaging ways, and that it began from a purely personal motivation.

He added that after returning from Turkey to Syria, he was surprised by the scale of pollution on building facades, which prompted him to begin by cleaning the facades of some mosques in the city of Douma as volunteer work at first, before the idea later developed into providing specialized services in restoring and cleaning natural stone, in addition to facade painting work.

He noted that the cost is usually calculated per square meter depending on the size of the facade, the type of stone and its condition, and is roughly the same as traditional methods such as sandblasting or using what is known as a "grinder," while causing no dust or harm to neighbors.

Kabrita believes the problem of dirty facades stems from weak awareness of the importance of visual cleanliness, which gives a negative image of society. He noted that the difficulties he faces include limited resources and a lack of effective cleaning materials in the local market.

According to Kabrita, community initiatives can help compensate for the absence or weakness of the official role, but the primary responsibility should fall on the government, either by issuing laws obliging building and property owners to clean them, or by contracting specialized companies and allocating taxes to beneficiaries.

Between official efforts still under study and small, limited initiatives, the issue of improving the visual landscape of building facades in Damascus and Syrian cities more broadly remains one of the challenges on the table, reflecting broader dimensions related to city management and its public image.