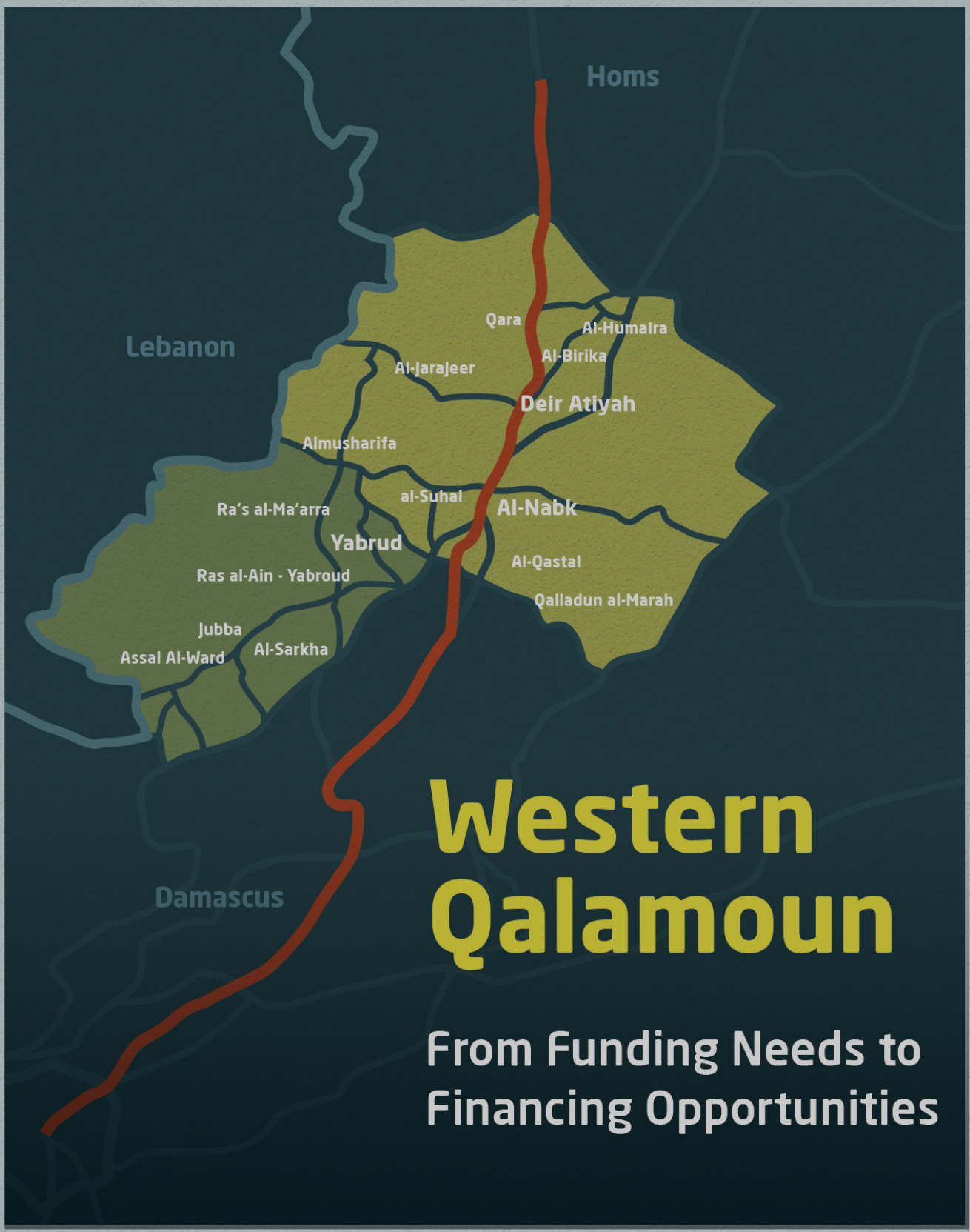
Policy Paper
2026



Western Qalamoun

From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

Toward a Locally Led Development
Vision with Potential as a National Model

Sultan Jalabi

An independent research consultant holding a Master's degree in Development Studies from Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. His work focuses on sustainable development, institutional analysis, and transformative reconstruction. He is also an award-winning journalist and serves as an investigative editor for Al-Jumhuriya.net.

The writing of this paper followed the United Nations gender-inclusive
drafting guidelines
https://www.un.org/ar/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml

MAUJ for Development Foundation October ©2026
All intellectual and property rights are reserved for the MAUJ non-profit Foundation and the contributors to this work. It is allowed to copy, distribute and transfer the work in whole or in part by any means or form for non-profit development purposes only, provided that the work is attributed to the foundation and its contributors, with mentioning the title and link to the original copy of the work as required by the Creative Commons license.

MAUJ for Development Foundation

“MAUJ” is a Syrian nonprofit civil society foundation guided by the principles of feminism and non-discrimination. It works collaboratively to address social and development issues, linking them to media content rooted that seeks to bring about change. Through four strategic programs: supporting pluralism and social cohesion; promoting the participation of women and youth in public life; and developing and producing gender-sensitive media.

MAUJ Syria - Rgstr. N. 1176 /2025
Al-Watania Complex,Mujamaa Str, Al-Nabk, Syria
+963 11 722 4650
+963 936 456 190
info@mauj.org
www.mauj.org

“Tariq” is a long-term development project that the MAUJ Foundation has been implementing since 2020 as part of the Program to Support Pluralism and Social Cohesion. It works to promote good governance and participation in the management of public affairs and development by empowering youth and local actors, building the capacities of local institutions and structures, and creating spaces for collaboration, accountability, and joint action.

The project began in Western Qalamoun as a space to develop and test this model, which combines capacity-building, learning by doing, knowledge production, and advocacy, thereby enabling the development of adaptable practices and tools that can be built upon.

Table of Content

01 **Introduction**
03 **Theoretical and Methodological Approach**
04 **Western Qalamoun: A Profile of the Region**
07 **Analysis of Development Assets and Opportunities**
07 Advanced Infrastructure
09 Diaspora, Transnational Networks and Capital
10 Local Business Sector
10 Diverse Tourism Assets
12 Agriculture and Livestock
12 Renewable Energy Production
16 Human Capital
17 **Analysis of Constraints**
17 Structural Weaknesses in Local Governance Institutions
21 Weak Social Cohesion
25 Civil Society as a Vehicle for Social Change
28 **Stakeholder Analysis**
29 **Conclusion for a Local Development Vision**
31 **Recommendations**
31 I. Government and Local Administration
32 II. Civil Society Actors
33 III. Private Sector
33 IV. International Cooporation

Introduction

Throughout the years of war in Syria, international cooperation has largely focused on emergency response programmes, often prioritizing the areas most severely affected by the conflict. This left limited space for thinking about long-term development at either the local or national level and contributed to what can be described as 'developmental blindness'.

Today, nearly two years after the fall of the Assad regime and the establishment of a transitional government, moving beyond the emergency-response mindset remains difficult across most sectors. This applies both to a government that has yet to articulate a developmental vision capable of addressing the country's economic and social war legacy alongside climate risks and the region's geopolitical uncertainties. and to parts of the Syrian and international NGO community operating in the country.

Syria's transitional phase requires a national vision for sustainable economic, social and environmental development. Such a vision, however, cannot be built from the centre alone. It needs to emerge from local development visions at the level of regions and governorates, with the national vision functioning as a synthesis of local priorities and plans within an integrated framework, rather than as a centralized planning exercise that marginalizes local communities and confines them to the role of passive recipients of centrally determined policies.

At the local level, however, there is also a significant gap in development-oriented thinking, as most Syrian communities remain preoccupied with immediate and pressing needs. Yet some areas retain the conditions for more sustained development thinking, and there are opportunities to deepen it through community dialogue, knowledge and programme development, and economic and political investment.



Weaving Hajj headbands, one of the crafts practiced by the women of Yabrud

Western Qalamoun is one of the areas where This paper examines Western Qalamoun as a potential learning and inspiring setting for other areas of Syria. It also provides an opportunity to reconsider the modalities of international engagement in Syria, within a context where government institutions, civil society and community-based actors, and the private sector can interact around a transition from emergency response toward a development pathway that supports sustainable social stability.

The choice of Western Qalamoun is based on two main considerations. First, unlike many other Syrian areas, the region did not experience large-scale urban destruction, although it was nevertheless deeply affected by other consequences of war, including siege, displacement and social fragmentation. Second, the region retains a substantial set of geographical, natural, economic and social assets on which a development process could build.

Against this background, the paper addresses four main questions:

- What makes Western Qalamoun a promising setting for launching a development pathway based on investing in opportunities rather than responding only to immediate needs?
- Which opportunities and sectors have the greatest potential for growth and economic and social impact, and what linkages exist between them?
- What institutional, economic and social constraints prevent these opportunities from translating into development?
- What types of interventions and policies are needed to support an inclusive and sustainable local development pathway, and what roles can different stakeholders play?

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

The theoretical framework of this paper rests on three principles:

First, Western Qalamoun is treated not as a collection of separate towns, but as an interconnected economic and social system extending across Qara, Deir Atiyah, al-Nabk and Yabroud and their surrounding rural areas. This perspective makes it possible to analyse local assets as components of a single system linked through complementary relationships.

Second, building a local development vision is not merely a technical planning exercise. It is a cumulative social process that requires research and policy work, community dialogue, and a lot of innovations that connect resources across sectors and geographical areas. The recommendations proposed in this paper are therefore grounded in locally articulated priorities rather than being produced through purely technocratic planning. They are also connected to people and groups on the ground who can form a social constituency for their implementation and sustainability.

Third, a national development vision should be built upon local development visions. This necessarily raises questions about the distribution of authority between local and central levels of government. Decentralization is therefore not only a political question concerning the structure of the state; it is also a development requirement. It enables local communities to participate in public affairs, experiment, learn and gradually build their own capacity for development.

The paper uses a participatory approach combining research expertise with the experience of civic engagement accumulated by the Mauj for Development through previous projects. It also incorporates stakeholder input collected through several rounds of fieldwork, including:

- **27 in-depth interviews** conducted across the four main towns and parts of their surrounding rural areas, covering different groups of residents, specialists, activists, professionals and local officials.
- **A short survey** targeting people interested in or engaged with public affairs. The survey examined levels of trust in public institutions, perceptions of participation, and local perspectives on barriers to recovery and development priorities. A total of 78 respondents participated.
- **Cross-analysis of qualitative and quantitative data** to identify local resources and opportunities and their linkages, assess the constraints on their effective use, and identify the interventions required from different stakeholders.

1 Western Qalamoun: A Profile of the Region

The Qalamoun region lies in the northern part of Rural Damascus Governorate, extending along the eastern-Lebanon mountain range between Damascus and the Syrian-Lebanese border toward Homs. The Western Qalamoun area examined in this paper includes two administrative districts: Yabroud district includes Yabroud city and the towns of Ras al-Ayn, al-Sarkha and Ras al-Maara, and Al-Nabk district includes Al-Nabk, Deir Atiyah and Qara, in addition to towns such as al-Sahl and al-Humayra.



Map of Western Qalamoun showing the four main towns, surrounding rural areas, road network and mountainous terrain (OpenStreetMap).

The social structure of Qalamoun is strongly family-based. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim, with a smaller Christian population for which no official statistics are available; local estimates put it around 10%.

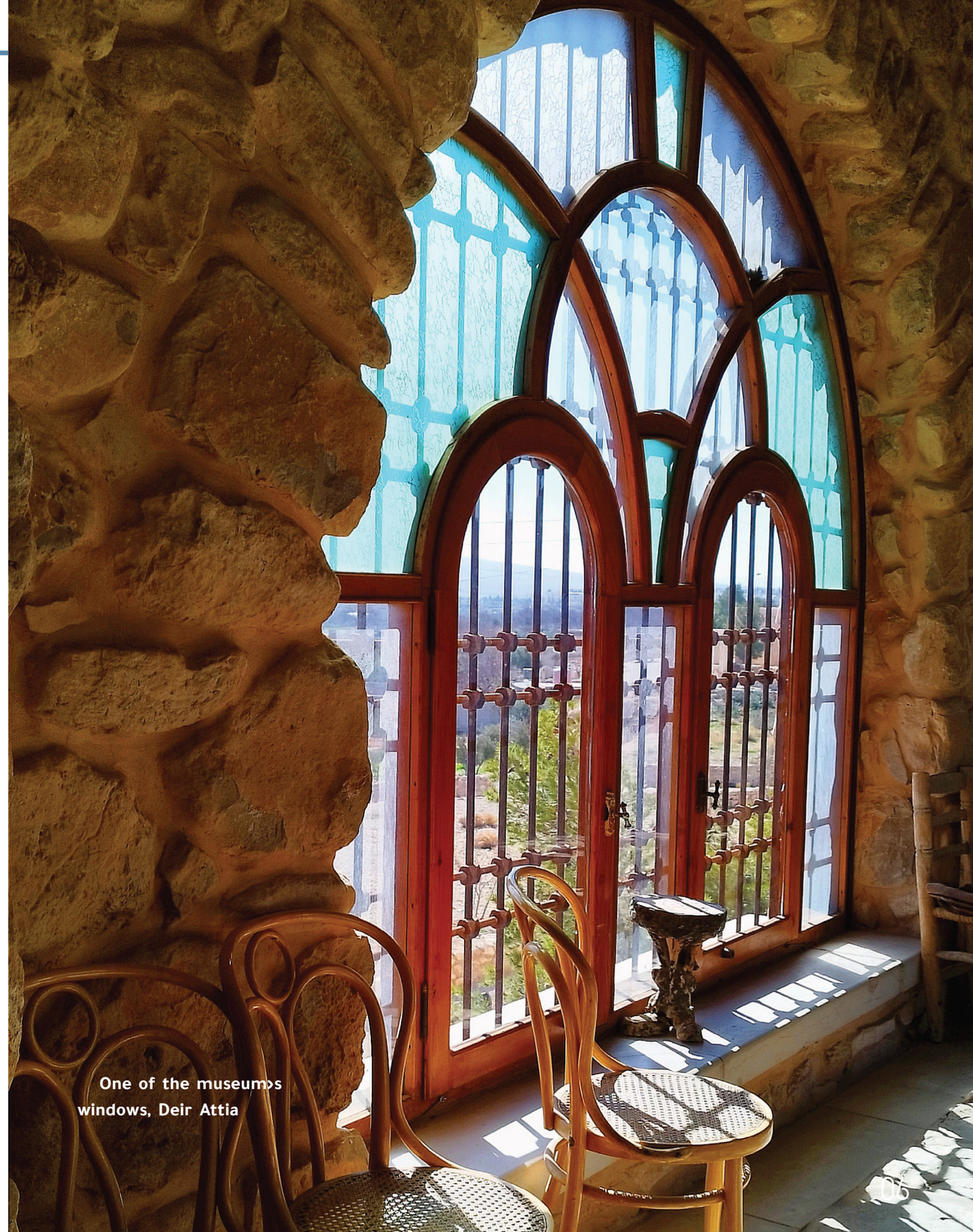
Migration has historically played an important role in shaping the region economically and socially. The region is consequently connected to extensive diaspora networks that have generated remittances, resources and cross-border economic relationships. These networks continue to play a role in supporting local services and community initiatives.

During the early years of the uprising, as protests evolved into armed conflict, the region became an area of armed opposition activity. In late 2013, government forces and Hezbollah launched a major military campaign to regain control of the area, culminating in the fall of Yabroud in March 2014. The Qalamoun towns subsequently experienced large waves of displacement and refugee movement, particularly toward the nearby Lebanese town of Arsal and toward Turkey.

The experience of war and displacement reshaped the region's demographic structure, disrupted local social networks, and altered patterns of influence and representation. These changes became particularly visible with the subsequent return of displaced residents after the fall of the Assad regime and in the emerging divide between those who remained in the region and those who had been displaced during the military operations.

Main towns and their economic profile			
Town	Local population estimate	Main economic weight	Other characteristic
Yabroud	50,000	Industry	Significant tourism assets
al-Nabk	70,000	Services	Largest population
Deir Atiyah	30,000	Services	Received preferential treatment under the former regime
Qara	25,000	Agriculture	Highest proportion of returnees

> ***"People from Qalamoun have been migrating and returning since around 1900. Over the decades, they have accumulated ideas, experience and capital abroad and brought them back home."***
>
> A doctor and civic activist from Deir Atiyah



One of the museum›s windows, Deir Attia

2 Why Western Qalamoun?
An Analysis of Development Assets and Opportunities

This section draws on the available economic and development literature on Western Qalamoun as well as the fieldwork. Together, they point to a diverse set of economic and social assets that could serve as foundations for recovery and development.

2-1 Advanced Infrastructure

Western Qalamoun possesses relatively developed infrastructure compared with comparable areas of Syria, much of which survived the war. One of the most important assets is **the M5 international highway,** the country's main north-south transport corridor connecting Damascus with Homs and extending toward the northern governorates and Aleppo. It is a major asset for the region's development potential and could provide the backbone for an economic system based on trade, logistics and tourism.

Western Qalamoun also contains three industrial zones, in Yabroud, al-Nabk and Deir Atiyah. These have provided the region with an established industrial base, particularly in Yabroud, including food processing, plastics, pharmaceuticals, metal structures and other activities.

The three industrial zones are located between two major industrial centres: Adra Industrial City in Rural Damascus, approximately 68 km to the south, and Hisyah Industrial City in Homs Governorate, approximately 51 km to the north. This creates a potential competitive advantage, particularly given the difference in land prices: approximately USD 30 per square metre in Adra and Hisyah compared with around USD 14 in al-Nabk.

Our interviews indicate that the industrial zones currently contain relatively few large operating facilities, as many businesses and investments were disrupted during the war. Nevertheless, they provide a strong foundation for local industrial development through existing road and service infrastructure, high-voltage electricity lines, accumulated expertise and physical assets. An additional advantage is the growing government interest in developing these industrial areas.

Within the towns, interviews indicate problems with wastewater infrastructure, particularly in al-Nabk. Respondents expressed greater satisfaction with electricity, water and telecommunications networks. Although parts of these systems have deteriorated because of years of limited maintenance, they remain relatively more functional than in many other parts of Syria.

Infrastructure quality, however, varies across the four towns. Deir Atiyah appears to have benefited disproportionately from public investment.



Damascus-Homs Highway, at the entrance to the city of an-Nabk

2-2 Diaspora, Transnational Networks and Capital:

At the entrance of the al-Nabk municipal council stands a large sculpture of a migratory swallow, adopted by the town as a symbol of its migrants—people who leave in winter and return home in summer, much like the swallow. A lawyer from al-Nabk explained that the town's population increases by roughly one-third during the summer compared with the winter. A similar pattern exists, to varying degrees, in the other three towns. The region's long history of migration dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Migration first extended to Latin America, later to the Gulf states during the 1970s and beyond, and during the years of conflict increasingly toward Europe. Migration has consequently become part of the region's identity and an important factor in shaping its economy and society.

Diaspora networks that have remained connected to the homeland have brought ideas and capital and contributed to the region's development over decades—from the introduction of mate culture around ninety years ago to the introduction of modern medical equipment into local hospitals.

Today, diaspora remittances are an important resource not only for households but also for financing public services in health, education and municipal affairs. An official in Yabroud



Al-Mudharraj Square, the main square in the city of an-Nabk

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

> ***"Around one hundred fast-food restaurants opened in al-Nabk this summer. Most of them will probably have to close because of bankruptcy before the end of next winter. This is how the loss of small amounts of capital accumulates into a major loss for the local economy."***
>
> **A director of a local organization in al-Nabk**

municipality explained that much of the municipality's expenditure is supported by the community, particularly diaspora members.

Annual visits by diaspora members also stimulate the local economy and have contributed to the expansion of hospitality businesses, including restaurants, cafés and recreational facilities. Many of the experts and activists interviewed therefore stressed the importance of reconnecting diaspora networks to the local economy through more efficient and transparent mechanisms, not only as donors and visitors, but as investors, business partners and participants in strengthening the efficiency and integration of the local economy, with a focus on value chains, partnerships and sustainability.

This represents a potential area for further intervention and research.

2-3 Local Business Sector:

Anyone travelling through Western Qalamoun quickly discovers that this is not simply a poor rural area. The scale of residential construction and the presence of large houses and villas around the towns point to a substantial population with accumulated wealth. The emphasis on attracting diaspora investment therefore should not imply overlooking the existing local private sector. This sector represents a development asset that can be expanded, connected to new markets, and encouraged to play a greater development role through corporate social responsibility, provided that trusted entry points and a clear framework aligned with its interests are available.

2-4 Diverse Tourism Assets

Western Qalamoun possesses substantial and diverse tourism assets. These include archaeological and religious sites, a relatively cool summer climate, winter snow and mountain landscapes, an open local society, restaurants and local services, crafts and place-based products. Yabroud is particularly significant because of its historical, religious and cultural value, with heritage extending from the Aramaic and Roman periods to early Christian and later Islamic heritage.

The greater opportunity, however, lies in moving from treating individual tourism sites as isolated destinations toward building a regional tourism routes or integrated tourism system for Western Qalamoun. Such a system could combine religious, cultural and sports tourism and attract domestic visitors during both summer and winter. Diaspora networks could also provide a bridge to international tourism markets. Subject to improvements in security and investment conditions, tourism could become an area for intervention through destination branding focused on archaeological sites, local products, cultural heritage and natural landscapes, alongside professional capacity building in tourism services.



Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helena in Yabrud



The Yabrud Mountains

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

2-5 Agriculture and Livestock

Western Qalamoun is a mountainous region and does not possess extensive agricultural areas comparable to major plains elsewhere in Syria. Yet its mountain environment, climate and soils have supported specialized agricultural production, including Damask roses and high-quality fruits such as grapes, cherries and apricots. Encouraging experimental cultivation could therefore represent an important area for intervention.

At the intersection of agriculture and livestock, Western Qalamoun also contains areas of relatively flat land between the eastern Qalamoun mountain range and the steppe. Much of this land is currently underused because of drought, but some of it could support drought-resistant fodder crops. Local groups have discussed cultivating these areas not primarily for commercial crop production, but to support livestock production, including cattle and sheep farming. Local experts believe the region has greater potential for livestock production than is currently realized, given the availability of grazing land and the suitability of the cooler climate for livestock productivity.

This creates opportunities for integrated support to small-scale projects in fodder production, livestock raising and related vocational training. These activities could subsequently be linked to the region's dairy and cheese-processing indistruty, strengthening a local and sustainable supply chain.

2-6 Renewable Energy Production

The region possesses promising natural conditions for renewable energy production. First, solar irradiation is among the highest in Syria, while elevated areas offer better conditions for wind power. Second, the region contains extensive uninhabited mountain uplands known locally as the jroud. These areas could provide large spaces for utility-scale solar and wind projects without creating major conflicts with agricultural land uses. Third, high-voltage transmission lines pass through the region. This could reduce one of the major costs associated with connecting renewable-energy projects to the national grid. It would also allow electricity generated locally to be transmitted to other parts of Syria or potentially to neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, relying on the existing interconnected Syrian transmission network, which is linked through high-voltage lines to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Interviews also indicate that the region has experienced rapid growth in household and business scale standalone solar installations over the past decade. This has generated local knowledge, experience and confidence in solar technologies, creating an important foundation for local renewable-energy investment.

“The potential for more profitable crops such as saffron, capers, rosemary and other spices and medicinal plant”

An agricultural expert from Al-Nabk



One of the devices that uses wind power to pump water from wells in the city of an-Nabk



Rainwater and Floodwater Collection Dam Between an-Nabk and Deir Atiya

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

2-7 Human Capital

Government statistics from 2004 indicate that school enrolment rates in Western Qalamoun were among the highest in Syria. More than 98% of children aged 15-17 were enrolled in education, with no difference between girls and boys. This reflects a long-standing local investment in education, also demonstrated by the establishment of Syria's first private university in Deir Atiyah in 2003. The university became a centre attracting academics, professionals and students from across Syria.

Together, these factors have contributed to the accumulation of substantial human capital, including a large pool of people with advanced degrees across a range of disciplines. High levels of female education also constitute an important component of this human capital. Women's participation in education and professional work represents a significant resource for local development. Its value extends beyond supplying skilled labour: it also creates opportunities for greater female participation in public life, civic engagement, development priority-setting and local decision-making. Investment in women's capabilities and stronger linkages between their skills, economic opportunities, local institutions and spaces for public engagement therefore represents an underused development opportunity.

The availability of scientific and technical expertise, including among women and young people, is therefore an asset on which development can build. A practical first step would be to identify these skills, create databases, connect them to markets, businesses, government institutions and civil society, and create pathways for their participation in development projects and public affairs.

> **"Ask me to bring together one hundred female and male engineers and architects from the area within two days and it would not be difficult. Ask for people with advanced degrees in any scientific or technological field and you will find them in Qalamoun."**
>
> An engineer from Deir Atiyah

3 Analysis of Constraints

Societal Fragmentation Undermines Economic Potential

The listening tours point to three interconnected factors constraining the region's transition toward a stable development pathway. The first concerns local governance institutions; the second concerns social fragmentation and cohesion; and the third concerns civil society and community-based organizations.

3-1 Structural Weaknesses in Local Governance Institutions

Under Syria's administrative system, local administrations are expected to play a leading role in development. They are responsible for planning for local development in alignment with national priorities and creating the conditions for implementation through mobilizing and organizing resources, establishing regulations, issuing licences, and applying incentives and sanctions.

In practice, however, Syria couldn't get representative and effective local administration institutions during decades of authoritarian rule. This remained the case even after the adoption of Local Administration Law No. 107 of 2011, which formally granted substantial powers to local councils in towns and cities. Local administrations remained under the control of the centre, the Baath Party, security agencies and central government institutions.

During the transitional period, the local administrative system has been undergoing changes whose direction remains uncertain. Listening tours in the four towns indicate that the new authorities retained the existing administrative structures at the executive levels, while leaving the local council level vacant and replacing it with District Administrators appointed by governors. These district administrators in turn appoint executive offices to run municipalities.

Local experts generally view these changes as having further shifted authority from local communities toward the government, from local councils that are expected to represent residents and their interests toward governors acting as representatives of the central authority.

> **"The executive offices (municipality level) are supposed to be elected by the local councils, which are themselves elected by the community. But these appointments have disrupted the administrative system. Regardless of whether the appointed people are competent, the fact that they are appointed raises questions about their ownership of the decisions they make. Their accountability shifts from the local community and its voters to the authority that appointed them."**
>
> A political activist from Yabroud

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

> ***"There is considerable uncertainty about how decisions are made. It sometimes feels as if decisions come from a black box—we cannot see what is happening inside. There is also a communication gap between us and the local administration."***
>
> A director of a local humanitarian organization

The appointed administrations have so far failed to establish effective institutional channels for public participation that could compensate for the absence of electoral legitimacy. The effects of weak representation, participation and transparency resulted in lower levels of trust in local institutions compared with community leaders and civil society. The survey confirms this pattern.

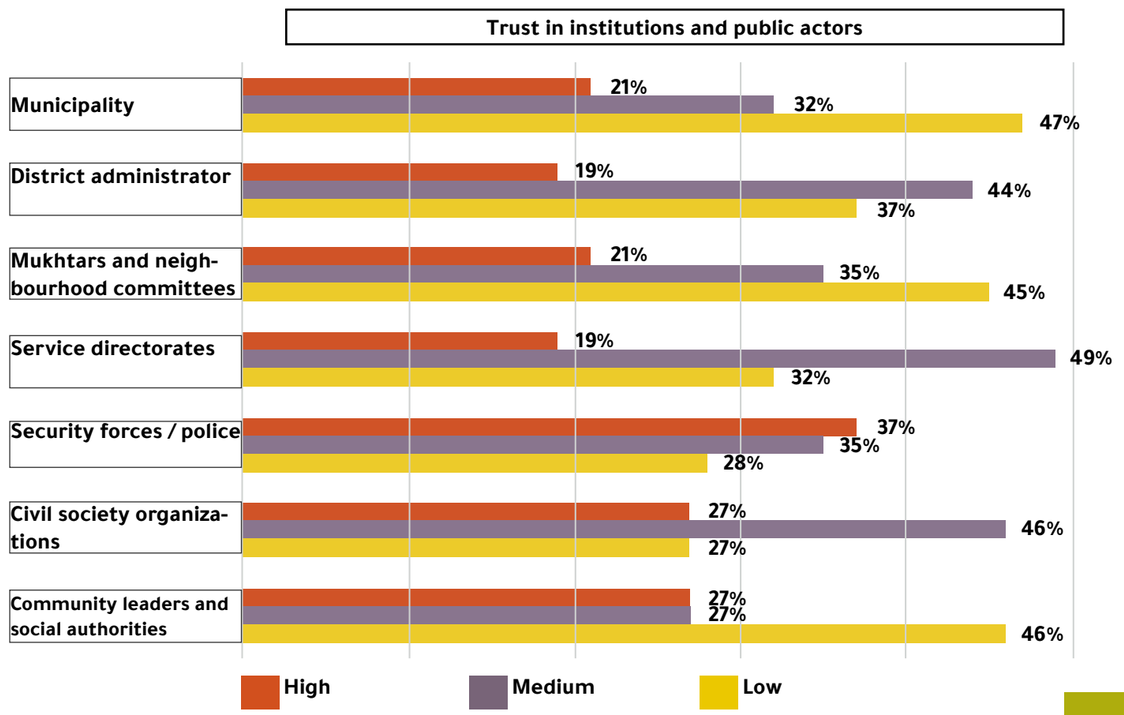


Figure 1. Levels of trust in local institutions and public/community actors. (n=78)

Local officials emphasize that municipal offices are open to citizens. Field visits confirmed that municipal officials are accessible for face-to-face communication. Yet this informal access does not appear sufficient. 67 percent of survey respondents indicated that local public institutions need to supplement open-door practices with clear and effective institutional channels through which residents can participate, submit complaints and objections, and follow up on them. This is particularly important in a context of social fragmentation, where some residents may avoid face-to-face contact because of concerns about discriminatory treatment. The survey reflects these concerns and indicates a communication gap.

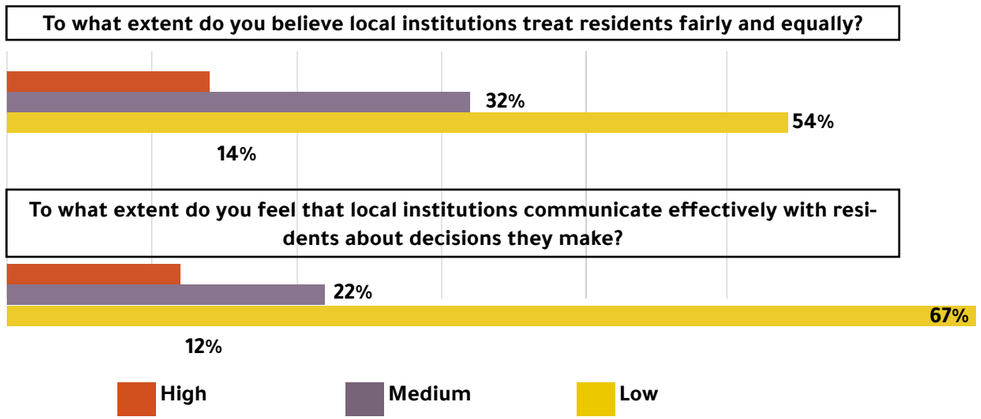


Figure 2. Perceptions of local institutional communication and equal treatment.

In the absence of elected local councils, development-planning capacity and the ability to represent local communities vis-à-vis central authorities, the balance between the centre and localities becomes distorted, as does the relationship between local administrations and the communities they govern.

The use of appointments has also carried significant social costs. Many appointments have favoured returnees while marginalizing residents who remained in the towns under the former regime. This has contributed to existing social tensions.

As a result, local administrations have become less capable of policy-making and development planning and increasingly focused on business-as-usual administration

The representation and participation gap therefore constitutes a key entry point for interventions aimed at establishing more effective and consequential interaction between local communities and public administrations.

“We receive proposals for large, long-term investments on municipal property, but as the current administration we cannot launch projects whose effects will extend thirty or even forty years into the future.”

A senior government official in Yabroud

Sheep herding by women in the Ras al-Ain plain, Yabroud

3-2 Weak Social Cohesion Constrains Bottom-Up Initiatives

Years of war have eroded social capital across Syria and produced deep social divisions. Although Qalamoun is not characterized by the same degree of religious or ethnic diversity and tension found in some other Syrian areas, it has nevertheless experienced significant social division between residents who were displaced during the conflict and those who remained under the former regime. The social cohesion issue is not only a source of risk to social peace. It also reduces the prospects for developing shared understandings around common priorities on the community level and undertaking collective action to achieve them. This in turn affects the community's capacity to mobilize, advocate and influence decisions affecting their lifes.

> **"In general, we do not have well-developed and institutionalized local forces in the form of political or intellectual currents. Instead, we have many small and constantly changing groups, often organized around personal, family or interest-based relationships. Most have not yet developed organizational structures or coherent political or intellectual visions that can grow. Even the promising youth and civic organizations that became active after liberation remain organizationally fragile."**
>
> A political activist from al-Nabk

The existence of many small groups is not necessarily a problem. They can be understood as nascent building blocks of a local civic and political environment, particularly in a society that was excluded from public life and prevented from exercising civic agency for decades. The more important question is how these groups interact with one another e.g. do they follow a political logic based on dialogue and negotiation leading to compromise, or a non-political logic characterized by negative competition, rejection and mutual exclusion?

The trajectory of interaction among these groups and social constituencies remains uncertain and sensitive to local conditions, including the space available for civic and political activity and the extent to which dialogue can prevail over confrontation. The assessment presented in this paper points to an urgent need for intervention. The legacy of authoritarianism and exclusion, the divide between returnees and residents, and the government's limited engagement in creating and enabling environment for social dialogue and political development all increase the likelihood of conflictual interaction.

> **"We need to bring politics back into the public sphere, politics as a belief in the value of dialogue and negotiation."**
>
> A political activist from al-Nabk

> **"Instead of working with each other, we are working against each other." The phrase captures how different**
>
> A civil society activist from Qara
>
> The phrase captures how different groups can act against one another at the expense of shared public interests.

The Marbles Game on Abu Seifo Street, an-Nabk

At the same time, interviews reveal significant continuing capacity for solidarity and collective action when people face concrete problems rather than abstract visions. Trusted community figures, volunteer teams and diaspora networks remain capable of mobilizing resources and contributing effectively to public services. One prominent example is the Saqya Al-Nabk campaign (Watering Al-Nabk), led by local personnel to raise funds for repairing the city's water wells after the water crisis intensified. The campaign raised more than twice its target, with strong participation from both residents and diaspora members. One of the campaign organizers attributed its success to three factors: A concrete problem and a clearly defined solution; the involvement of trusted and recognizable community figures; most importantly, full financial transparency, including an open online platform that regularly published donation amounts, donor names and subsequent expenditures.

The central problem, therefore, is not the absence of social capital, but the weakness of the linkages and institutional mechanisms through which social capital can be converted into sustained institutional cooperation beyond small groups or one-off collective action. This creates an important area for intervention, including strengthening social cohesion, accelerating integration between returnees and residents, and supporting the institutionalization of existing civic and community-based initiatives such as volunteer teams and youth and community groups.

Strengthening their organizational foundations around agreements that prioritize the broader local public interest could allow existing groups to develop into more sustainable civic and political organizations. This would strengthen social capital, facilitate and structure collective action, and improve its sustainability.

The survey provides additional insight into the social structure of Western Qalamoun. The community is primarily organized around the extended family, followed by religious affiliation. Local and territorial identities, such as belonging to a village, town or neighbourhood, also remain significant. Political affiliations play a considerable role in local polarization, potentially reinforced by the divide between returnees and those who remained. The most significant finding, however, is the limited capacity of civic institutions such as professional associations, unions and civil society organizations to connect different population groups and mobilize them.

The survey also shows that the most important constraints on successful collective-action initiatives are the dominance of certain individuals or groups in the public sphere, followed by divergent interests and priorities among local actors. Low levels of trust rank third, followed by the absence of institutional or social frameworks that bring people together.

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

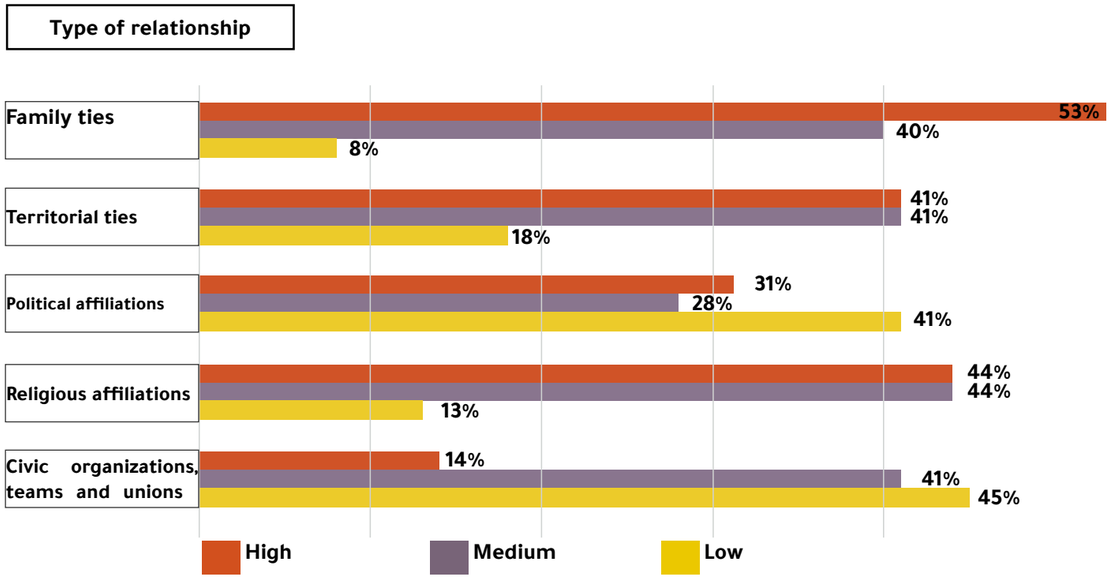


Figure 3. Perceptions of the strength of relationships connecting population groups in Western Qalamoun.

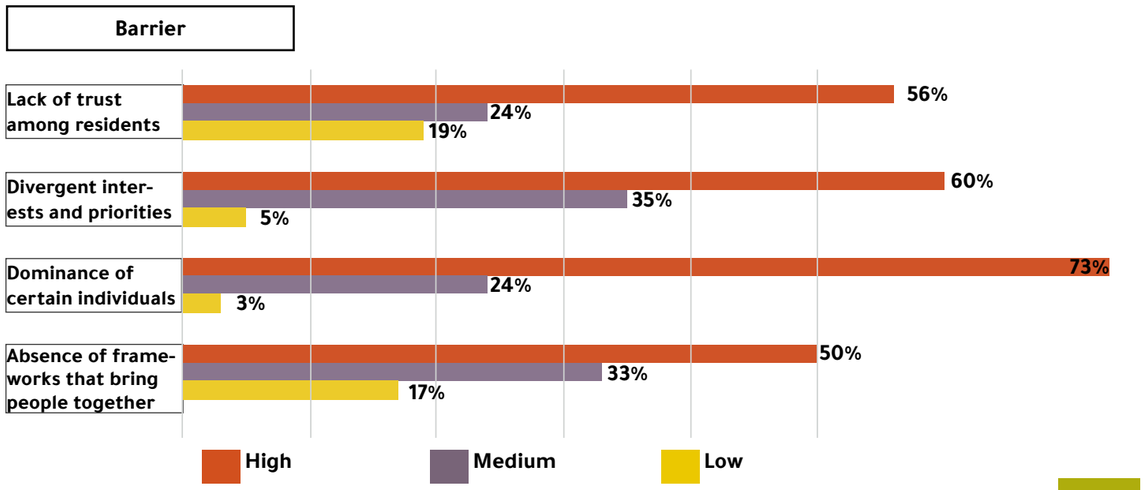


Figure 4. Respondents' assessment of barriers to successful collective action in Western Qalamoun

The pursuit of local development could provide a common issue around which local actors can organize and demonstrate their positions before the wider public.

Although civic organizations currently have limited capacity to mobilize the wider population, as reflected in the survey, family structures remain the strongest social ties in Qalamoun. It is therefore worth considering how local development can be introduced into the "sahret al-taifeh", a local expression referring to regular extended-family gatherings in manazil, family meeting spaces that function somewhat like traditional guesthouses where extended families meet periodically. Some manazil have evolved and begun to play a role in public life, particularly in Al-Nabk. Collaboration between local civil society and manazil as one expression of community-based action could strengthen the local civic sector of Qalamoun. These spaces could also provide platforms for dialogue and joint programmes that encourage manazil to engage more actively in public affairs while strengthening links between civic and community-based organizations.

3-3 Civil Society as a Vehicle for Social Change

Hundreds of civic and community-based organizations emerged in Syria during the conflict and now constitute an important part of Syrian civil society. However, the fact that many of these organizations emerged during war or in exile has shaped their organizational structures and their relationships with local communities and donors. Their relationship with public authorities remains relatively new.

The most notable feature of the civic landscape in Western Qalamoun is the limited number of established civil society organizations compared with the large number of temporary initiatives and youth teams that emerge and disappear over time. There is therefore a need to strengthen different forms of civic organization and support their organizational, intellectual and institutional development. The listening tours identified four main types of civic organizations operating in the region.

1. Established local NGOs: These organizations have legal status, internal governance systems and international partnerships. There are no more than one or two such organizations in each town, but they provide an important institutional entry point.

2. Youth volunteer teams: The number of youth volunteer teams increased substantially after the fall of the former regime. They rely primarily on local and diaspora resources and have established a visible presence in the public sphere through campaigns to clean streets and rehabilitate roads and public spaces. Their main weakness is limited organizational sustainability

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

> ***"These initiatives are not very sustainable. They become active at certain times and then decline. They are also more vulnerable to fragmentation because of weak internal organization and limited resources."***
>
> one Yabroud volunteer team leader

Dozens of such teams were identified across Qalamoun. Importantly, some are now moving toward registration as associations or NGOs, which would provide them with greater organizational coherence and legal personality. Therefore, legal, organizational and governance support could accelerate the institutional development of these emerging civic organizations.

3. Hybrid organizations: The third category consists of hybrid organizations combining community-based, civic and political characteristics. These include manazil and groups of returnees called 'Alahrar' which can sometimes play influential roles in the public sphere and mobilize communities.

These organizations are important because they can be relatively cohesive and socially embedded. At the same time, they are among the organizations most in need of organizational support and among those least able to absorb such support. Their organizational and decision-making dynamics are often based on personal knowledge, trust and oral communication, which limits their ability to scale horizontally.

4. Professional associations and unions: Professional associations and unions are expected to play important roles during transitional periods. Interviews with lawyers', doctors' and teachers' associations indicate, however, that these bodies currently play little visible role in civic public life. Their work remains largely focused on regulating their respective professions. This institutional withdrawal reflects decades of authoritarian rule during which professional associations were transformed into semi-governmental institutions subordinated to the state. This pattern continued after the fall of the former regime, when the transitional government dismissed existing union boards and appointed replacement boards.

Nevertheless, professional associations remain an important form of civic movement because of their specialized nature, organizational advancement and access to relatively sustainable financial resources.

> **"these associations now have greater room to engage in civic work and local and international partnerships, as is happening in cities such as Homs, Damascus and Aleppo: "We need a push that brings lawyers back into the civic sphere rather than keeping them within the orbit of authority."**
>
> A lawyer from an-Nabk



The Rosary" is a handcrafted piece by one of the monks of the Monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian

4 Stakeholder Analysis

The central problem in Western Qalamoun is not the absence of actors. It is the weakness of the linkages that connect their resources and capabilities around a shared local development agenda. Local actors generally operate within separate spheres defined by town, sector or relationship networks.

Stakeholder	Main role and resources	Influence
Governorate of Rural Damascus	Administrative authority, spending decisions and project approval	High
Municipalities and local administrative units	Services, land management and implementation of local projects	Low
Government directorates (health, education, agriculture, etc.)	Technical expertise, service management and production	Medium
District administration	Links with governor, municipal sectors, directorates and security sector	High
Diaspora and businesspeople	Finance, investment, expertise and external networks	Medium-High
Civil society and local initiatives	Community access, mobilization and implementation of initiatives and services	Medium
Community leaders and notables	Social capital, mediation and support for social peace	Medium-High
Women and youth	Human capital, small enterprises and innovation; limited institutional representation	Low
Donors and international organizations	Funding, expertise and technical assistance	High
Local community groups	Limited participation, largely confined to implementation rather than decision-making	Low

Within this stakeholder network, civil society can function as a flexible intermediary and connector among community-based actors, professional associations, hybrid organizations and public institutions. It can help establish initiatives and partnerships that address local development, from collective vision-building and priority-setting to implementing projects that strengthen the local economy, address service challenges and improve social cohesion.

5 Conclusion for a Local Development Vision

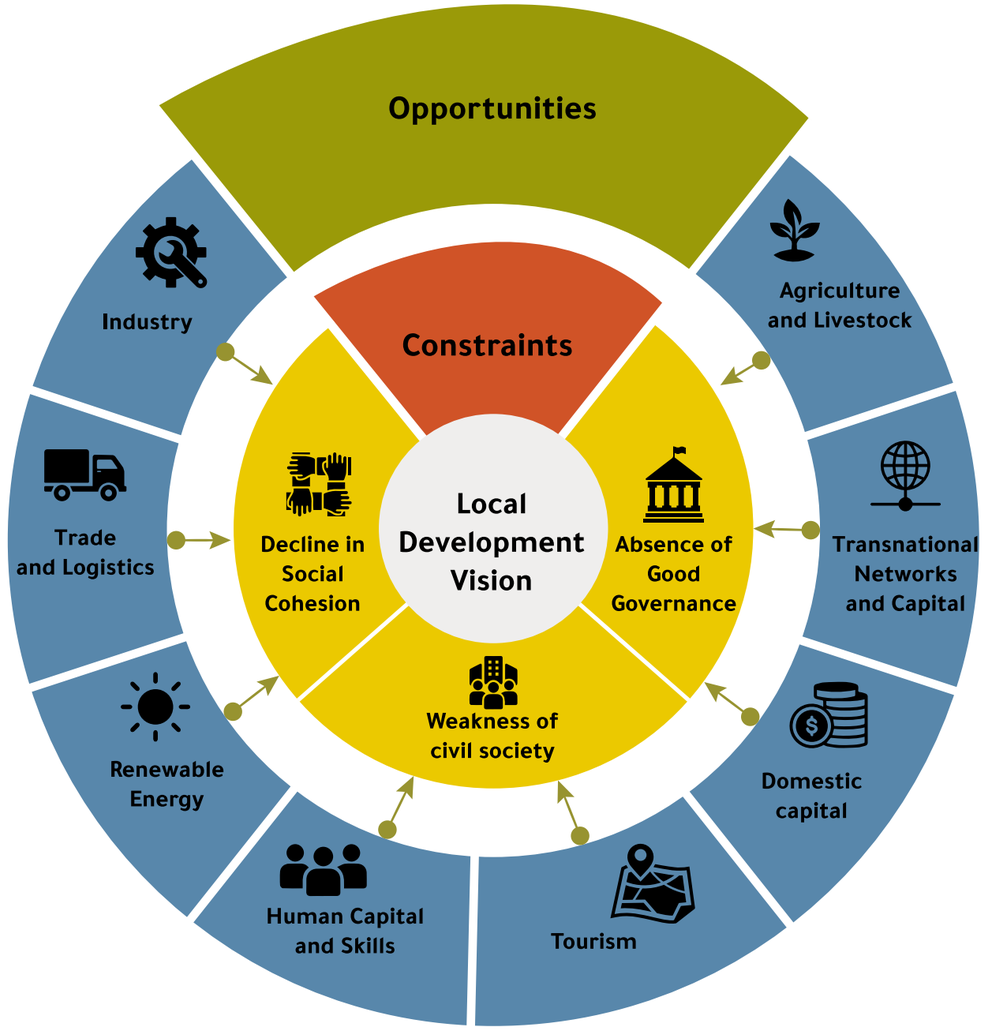
The development vision for Western Qalamoun is based on a shift from responding to needs to leveraging assets and opportunities. This means moving away from treating the region as an area that must be rebuilt from scratch and instead recognizing it as a system that already possesses resources, infrastructure, human capital and social and economic assets that can be organized, connected and developed. Which requires moving from isolated projects toward an interconnected local development system:

connecting industry with agriculture, services and markets;
connecting the international highway with industrial and logistics zones;
connecting tourism with heritage and local products;
connecting energy with productive sectors;
connecting local skills and diaspora networks with investment and employment opportunities.

This economic vision cannot be separated from building a society capable of participation and cooperation, nor from more transparent and responsive local governance that allows residents across different groups, generations and areas of expertise to participate in setting priorities and developing solutions. It also requires a shift in civic engagement from responding to immediate needs toward building community capacity for public participation, political engagement and preparedness for the next phase of political development in Syria.

Western Qalamoun therefore does not offer a single project that can simply be replicated elsewhere. Rather, it offers an experiance to build a participatory local development vision from the specific characteristics, resources and constraints of each area. Then, each locality needs to identify what it can lead, where it needs partnerships, and what it can learn from other areas.

In this way, development can move from a collection of fragmented interventions toward a locally grounded, learning-oriented pathway that can evolve and potentially scale at the national level. The accompanying figure summarizes the main findings of the paper in terms of opportunities, constraints and the approach required to reach a sustainable development pathway.



6 Recommendations

I Government and Local Administration

1. Institutionalize local participation and strengthen public-sector transparency

Establish regular and clearly defined channels through which residents can participate in setting priorities, discussing projects and monitoring implementation, rather than relying primarily on individual meetings or ad hoc initiatives. The paper also recommends strengthening the practice of making information available about local administration, budgets, projects and public expenditure.

This would strengthen institutional trust and provide the public with the information needed to form informed positions and participate meaningfully in public affairs. Particular attention should be given to groups that have limited access to conventional communication channels, including women and residents who feel marginalized.

2. Support the creation of a participatory mechanism for developing a local development vision for Western Qalamoun

The government should avoid applying a uniform approach to all Syrian areas based on reconstruction from scratch. Differences in the scale of destruction and the availability of local assets make differentiated development approaches possible and appropriate. In Western Qalamoun, there is a need for a consultative process bringing together municipalities, government administrators, economic actors, civil society, professional associations, and representatives of youth, women and diaspora communities.

The purpose would be to stimulate collective development thinking at the local level through a clear process capable of producing shared priorities and identifying opportunities that extend beyond the boundaries of individual towns.

The government could also use the region's relative readiness to pilot more advanced approaches to service delivery, such as digital transformation and public-service automation. Such pilots could generate practical lessons for other Syrian areas.

3. Reconsider appointment policies and mechanisms for local administrative positions

Given the current difficulty of organizing local elections to fill vacant local councils, the government should review appointment mechanisms within local administration, particularly positions that directly influence decisions related to services and local development. Appointments can undermine social capital and generate local tensions. Clear and transparent criteria for assessing competence, experience and qualifications could, however, reduce many of these tensions.

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

This review is particularly important during the transitional period because the quality of appointments affects not only public administration performance but also the trust and the ability of local administrations to communicate and work with residents. Appointments that do not take competence or local context into account may deepen existing tensions and divisions and weaken the administration's ability to build working relationships across different social groups.

II Civil Society and Community-Based Actors

4. Support the sustainability and institutional development of civic and community-based organizations

Technical, legal and organizational support for volunteer teams, youth initiatives and local associations can help them develop internal structures, diversify funding sources and establish sustainability plans. Support should not be tied exclusively to formal registration or short-term activities. It should respond to the maturity of each initiative and the nature of its local role.Partnerships between established organizations and emerging initiatives can also facilitate knowledge transfer and strengthen organizational continuity.

5. Build partnerships among civil society, professional associations and community-based actors

Cooperation among civic organizations, unions, volunteer teams and manazil ..etc, should be encouraged. These partnerships could take the form of joint initiatives addressing concrete local problems, sectoral working groups, or dialogues around development priorities.

The objective is to combine the trust and mobilization capacity of community networks with the organizational and technical capabilities of civic and professional institutions. Therefore, strenthening the local community front.

6. Support dialogue and strengthen social cohesion

Spaces for cooperation should be developed that can bridge divisions created by war and displacement through joint projects addressing shared and achievable goals. Such initiatives should not be limited to symbolic reconciliation meetings. They should enable residents to participate meaningfully in identifying priorities, implementing initiatives and monitoring their results.

There is also a need to strengthen the role of local media in supporting public debate and accountability. Local media initiatives could provide information about projects, services and economic opportunities, facilitate public discussion of development priorities, and monitor the commitments and performance of responsible institutions. This could reduce reliance on information circulating through social media, which is often misleading, or on rumours transmitted through personal networks. It would also provide a shared communication space for residents of the four towns and their surrounding rural areas.

Several local radio experiences in Syria have demonstrated the potential of local media to reduce incitement and misinformation in their areas of operation. This function could make an important contribution to local social cohesion.

7. Invest in women and youth as underutilized human capital

Develop programmes that build the capacities of women and young people and enable them to move from participation in local initiatives and activities toward more substantive roles in civic, public and political affairs.

This includes developing skills in leadership, organization, collective action, dialogue and negotiation, advocacy, communication with public institutions, and participation in local decision-making.

Women and youth should also have spaces in which to develop their own initiatives and agendas and connect with local actors and civic and professional institutions. This would strengthen their presence in the public sphere and create the basis for broader participation in Syria's next political phase.

III Private Sector and Diaspora

8. Shift from individual donations toward investment and development partnerships

Diaspora and business networks should be understood not only as sources of charitable contributions, but also as sources of expertise, commercial relationships, market knowledge and investment capital.

This can be supported through regular and direct dialogue on investment opportunities in the region, identifying administrative and service-related constraints facing businesses, and connecting investors with local skills and relevant public institutions. Any framework for cooperation should be based on reliable information about opportunities, feasibility and risks. Encouraging investment also requires greater clarity around procedures and licensing and greater transparency in the management of public assets.

9. Activate the local private sector and broaden the investment base

The existing, war-survived, local private sector should be treated as a development asset to build upon rather than replace, particularly in industry, agriculture, tourism and services. Its capacity to expand and generate employment should be strengthened, alongside its links to markets outside the region.

Networks among local enterprises can also be developed, competition encouraged, and new investors attracted. The objective would be to make Western Qalamoun a more attractive environment for economic activity rather than limiting development interventions to attracting isolated projects.

IV International Cooperation

10. Expand the definition of intervention priorities beyond the most damaged areas to include areas with development potential

International engagement during the transitional period should not be determined solely by the scale of physical destruction or humanitarian need. It should also take into account areas possessing assets and opportunities that can be invested in and transformed into drivers

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

of development and stability. Areas that have not experienced extensive urban destruction should not therefore be assumed to have no need for external support.

In some cases, they may offer better conditions for moving more quickly from meeting basic needs toward investment in the local economy, institutional capacity and social capital. Investment in such areas could generate practical learning experiences that can later inform interventions in other parts of Syria.

11. Invest in civic and political capabilities during the transitional period

Support for Syria's transition should not be reduced to reconstruction and service delivery. It should also invest in building the civic and political abilities of local communities. Political transition depends not only on the ability of institutions to provide services, but also on communities capable of participating in public life, understanding institutions and political processes, and exercising their rights and responsibilities in an informed and organized manner.

International cooperation can support long-term capacity-building programmes for local actors, particularly women, youth, civic organizations and professional associations, in areas including civic participation, citizenship, dialogue and negotiation, understanding institutions and decision-making processes, policy analysis, advocacy and elections. Such programmes can help prepare communities for upcoming political processes.

International partners can also support safe spaces for public discussion, helping residents gradually move from the position of service recipients to that of active participants in public affairs. Investment in political readiness should therefore not be treated as separate from development. It is part of building the capacity of local communities to identify their priorities, participate in policy formation, hold institutions accountable and protect the gains of the transitional period.

12. Support local development experiments that generate learning and can be adapted elsewhere

A limited number of initiatives could be selected that combine the resolution of a concrete problem with the strengthening of collective action. Examples could include service projects, the development of a local production value chain, or improved management of a public resource. Such initiatives could be designed as pilot interventions, with their results documented and independently evaluated before expansion.

This would make it possible to test the capacity of local partnerships to function effectively, identify the conditions required for sustainability, and generate knowledge that could be applied in other parts of Syria.

Western Qalamoun: From Funding Needs to Financing Opportunities

References

1. Policy Analysis Unit, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. (4 December 2013). The Battles of Qalamoun: Calculations and Stakes of the Parties to the Conflict. https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/document_3AFAEEBA.pdf
2. OpenStreetMap. (n.d.). Map of Western Qalamoun. Map used in the study. https://www.openstreetmap.org/way/1507428881?
3. Al-Watan. (30 September 2021). Director of Rural Damascus Industry: Significant Growth in the Number of Industrial Facilities. https://alwatan.sy/مدير-صناعة-ريف-دمشق-نمو-كبير-في-عدد-المنشآت/?
4. Syrian Al-Ikhbariya. (2025). The Ministry of Economy Sets Land Purchase Prices in Industrial Zones. https://alikhbariah.com/وزارة-الاقتصاد-تحدد-أسعار-شراء-الأراضي/
5. Doushesh Classifieds. (2026). Industrial Land for Sale in Central al-Nabk, Rural Damascus - 5,195 m². https://doushesh.com/listing/llbyaa-ard-snaaay-fy-mrkz-alnbk-ryf-dmshk-5195-m2-115134?utm
6. SANA. (16 July 2026). Industrialists and Investors in Qalamoun Discuss Ways to Improve the Investment Environment with Ministry of Economy Officials. https://sana.sy/economy/syrian-economy/2529656/?utm
7. Housh Arab Facebook Page. (2026). Post on the Qalamoun Mountains and Their Natural Environment. https://www.facebook.com/housharab/posts/2377745279151345/
8. Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Syrian Arab Republic / Ministry of Commerce of China. (2021). Investment Map of the Syrian Arab Republic 2021. https://sy.mofcom.gov.cn/qgzb/art/2021/art_44a5ee54558e4ace8d69267561cabe31.html
9. World Bank / Global Solar Atlas. (2023). Syria - Solar Irradiation and PV Power Potential Maps. https://globalsolaratlas.info/download/syrian-arab-republic
10. Kawn Group. (2024). Availability and Potential in Wind Energy. https://psc.gov.sy/site2/indicator/hp-m.htm
11. Central Bureau of Statistics of the Syrian Arab Republic. (n.d.). Statistical Indicators. https://sy.mofcom.gov.cn/qgzb/art/2021/art_44a5ee54558e4ace8d69267561cabe31.html
12. Saqya al-Nabk Campaign Facebook Page. (2025). Saqya al-Nabk. https://www.facebook.com/p/%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%83-61574877941853/



info@mauj.org
www.mauj.org