



## Consumed by War

### The End of Aleppo and Northern Syria's Political Order

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- The fall of Eastern Aleppo into rebel hands left the western part of the city as the regime's stronghold. A front line divided the city into two parts, deepening its pre-existing socio-economic divide: the west, dominated by a class of businessmen; and the east, largely populated by unskilled workers from the countryside. The mutual mistrust between the city's demographic components increased. The conflict between the regime and the opposition intensified and reinforced the socio-economic gap, manifesting it geographically.
- The destruction of Aleppo represents not only the destruction of a city, but also marks an end to the set of relations that had sustained and structured the city. The conflict has been reshaping the domestic power structures, dissolving the ties between the regime in Damascus and the traditional class of Aleppine businessmen. These businessmen, who were the regime's main partners, have left the city due to the unfolding war, and a new class of business figures with individual ties to regime security and business figures has emerged.
- The conflict has reshaped the structure of northern Syria – of which Aleppo was the main economic, political, and administrative hub – and forged a new balance of power between Aleppo and the north, more generally, and the capital of Damascus. The new class of businessmen does not enjoy the autonomy and political weight in Damascus of the traditional business class; instead they are singular figures within the regime's new power networks and, at present, the only actors through which to channel reconstruction efforts. Aleppo has lost its former political weight vis-à-vis Damascus and risks falling under its dominance.



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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The destruction of Aleppo,<sup>2</sup> which began when rebel forces seized portions of the city in 2012 and concluded with the Syrian regime's takeover four years later, is perhaps the most important event of the Syrian conflict. This paper investigates the transformation of the city in the course of the conflict, which has engulfed the country since 2012. While the conflict has certainly deepened previous socio-economic divisions throughout the country, in Aleppo, it has uniquely created the preconditions for a new city and a new balance of power between the north and Damascus.

Before the uprising, Aleppo was the focal point of northern Syria. The Aleppo region's economic activities converged in Aleppo; raw materials produced in eastern Syria supplied Aleppo's industry and factories, which made up the near totality of Syria's manufacturing capacity. A network of relations linking the traditional Aleppine business class and Syrian regime figures shaped and balanced the relationship between this economic centre and the capital, Damascus. Within Aleppo itself, the business class was mainly concentrated in the western part of the city, but it employed personnel from Aleppo's east, a poorer area of informal neighbourhoods mostly populated by Syrians from the countryside.

Since 2012, the conflict has dismantled the set of relations that once sustained Aleppo as a hub for the north, cleansed its population, left large parts of its urban structure in ruins, and deepened the pre-existing, socio-economic divisions between the residents of the west and the east. Beginning in the summer of 2012, battalions of the armed opposition expanded their presence in most of the eastern areas of the city of Aleppo, which manifested in the city's division into two parts that became known as Eastern and Western Aleppo.

The conflict has changed, if not fundamentally altered, the nature of what the »west« and the »east« once were. The east, under rebel control, was targeted by a

brutal regime-led bombing campaign that resulted in massive population displacement. By December 2016, the regime had regained complete control over the city following an agreement to evacuate all residents from the opposition neighbourhoods. But what the regime regained in geographic space, it lost in terms of the nearly 1.5 million former residents and their built environment – regime bombing destroyed a significant number of structures in Eastern Aleppo.

At the same time, the adjacent neighbourhoods (i.e. Western Aleppo) generally remained as they were before the uprising, at least in physical terms. Yet the patterns of life and the nature of socio-political relations therein, as well as with the central government in Damascus, had been changed fundamentally. The networks of large-scale industrial production that gave the city its economic dynamism were dismantled completely. A new class of local businessmen arose, connected to either the local war economy or directly with the regime in Damascus, but deprived of a meaningful political weight vis-à-vis Damascus.

The conflict has cut off many of the regions that used to be closely linked to Aleppo, thus removing from Aleppo's orbit regions that were once economically and socially dependent on the city. As an administrative unit, the Aleppo governorate has been irreversibly dismantled, and the localities formerly under Aleppo's sway have become more closely connected to Turkey – specifically, to Gaziantep and Kilis – to the Idlib region that is currently controlled by radical Islamist groups, or to the Qandil Mountains in Iraq, the headquarters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as is the case for the city of Afrin.

Destroyed, »cleansed« and cut off from its surroundings, Aleppo is a ghost city; even Western Aleppo, which has remained under regime control throughout the conflict, is a shell of its former self. While a return to the pre-war situation is impossible, it is likely that the process of reconstruction and repopulation of the city will play a significant role in determining the power balance in post-war Syria. It is in Aleppo and, concomitantly, in north-eastern Syria, where the power balance between key regional and international players – Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the United States (US) – will take shape in any future settlement of the conflict. In Aleppo, the shattered city, all of these players will have a stake.

1. The author would like to thank Armenak Tokmajyan and Ayman Al-Dassouky for many helpful discussions on the topic and providing data for this study.

2. The study refers to Aleppo city and its suburbs as »Aleppo«, while the greater Aleppo province (*muhafadha*) is called either »Aleppo province« or »Aleppo region«.

## 2. Methodology

This report is based on qualitative and quantitative data collected in the course of fieldwork undertaken between November 2016 and March 2017. Three research assistants conducted 60 structured interviews with samples of individuals from different localities within Aleppo and the surrounding countryside, in order to provide a systematic picture of the new relationship between the city and its periphery, and the changes to this relationship wrought by the conflict. The author also conducted 25 semi-structured interviews in person in Lebanon and Turkey, and via telephone and Skype with local residents from different areas of Aleppo and its countryside. Two interview strategies were thus employed throughout the fieldwork: one relied on closed-ended questions to establish basic facts about the localities and their changing conditions over time; the other used open-ended interviews to elucidate the mechanisms through which these changes occurred and affected the residents of these localities.

## 3. The Structure of Aleppo

Prior to the uprising, most of Syria's industrial production was concentrated in Aleppo.<sup>3</sup> It was also an administrative hub, from which the state provided services for the broader region. Aleppo's relation with the Assad regime had been a constant balancing act, with the regime having to mediate between the security establishment, largely dominated by Alawi officers, and the urban and diverse Aleppine business class – which included Sunnis, Christians, and Armenians and historically resided in the western part of the city.

As the Syrian uprising turned into a civil war, with the city of Aleppo divided between regime- and rebel-controlled areas, it became increasingly common to talk about the distinctions among the city's residents in spatial terms, between the city's west and east – the wealthier, generational residents of the city inhabited the west, and the poorer new migrants from the countryside populated the east. This distinction, which predates the uprising, would often be projected onto the present in order to explain the political identity and action of Aleppo's residents. Undoubtedly, the socio-economic structure of pre-upris-

ing Aleppo maps onto this single boundary to some degree – older, wealthier quarters are primarily in the west, while the east predominantly consists of newly built, informal developments by relative newcomers to the city.

What constitutes the difference between the two sides of the city, however, is not a simple cleavage between two homogeneous populations, but various, intertwined layers of distinction. For one thing, the separation of new and old parts of the city cannot be captured by slicing the city down the middle – new informal settlements form something of a crescent around the old city core, as indicated by the areas of the city classified by the government as illegal spontaneous building (*mukhalafat jama'iyya*, see figure 1). More importantly, many of the symbolic dimensions of these divides – among formal and informal areas, rich and poor, and generational Aleppine versus recent migrant – do not map neatly onto a single spatial boundary.

The east-west dichotomy is a reflection of this tendency towards neighbourhood segregation, but describing this tendency in strictly binary terms conceals more about the city than it reveals. Before the conflict became increasingly violent and divided the city, the interconnections between the diverse parts of the city were as significant as their divisions. The industry of the west could only function thanks to the labour coming from the east, and most of the state employees working in the governmental institutions in the west of the city resided in the east.<sup>4</sup> The conflict has actually proved that Western and Eastern Aleppo were divided as much as connected; when the east fell to rebels' control, industry in the west virtually ceased to exist, as the rest of this section will detail. In this sense, the process of conflict itself created the division between east and west that some analysts project backwards onto Aleppo before the uprising.

### 3.1 Aleppo as a Hub

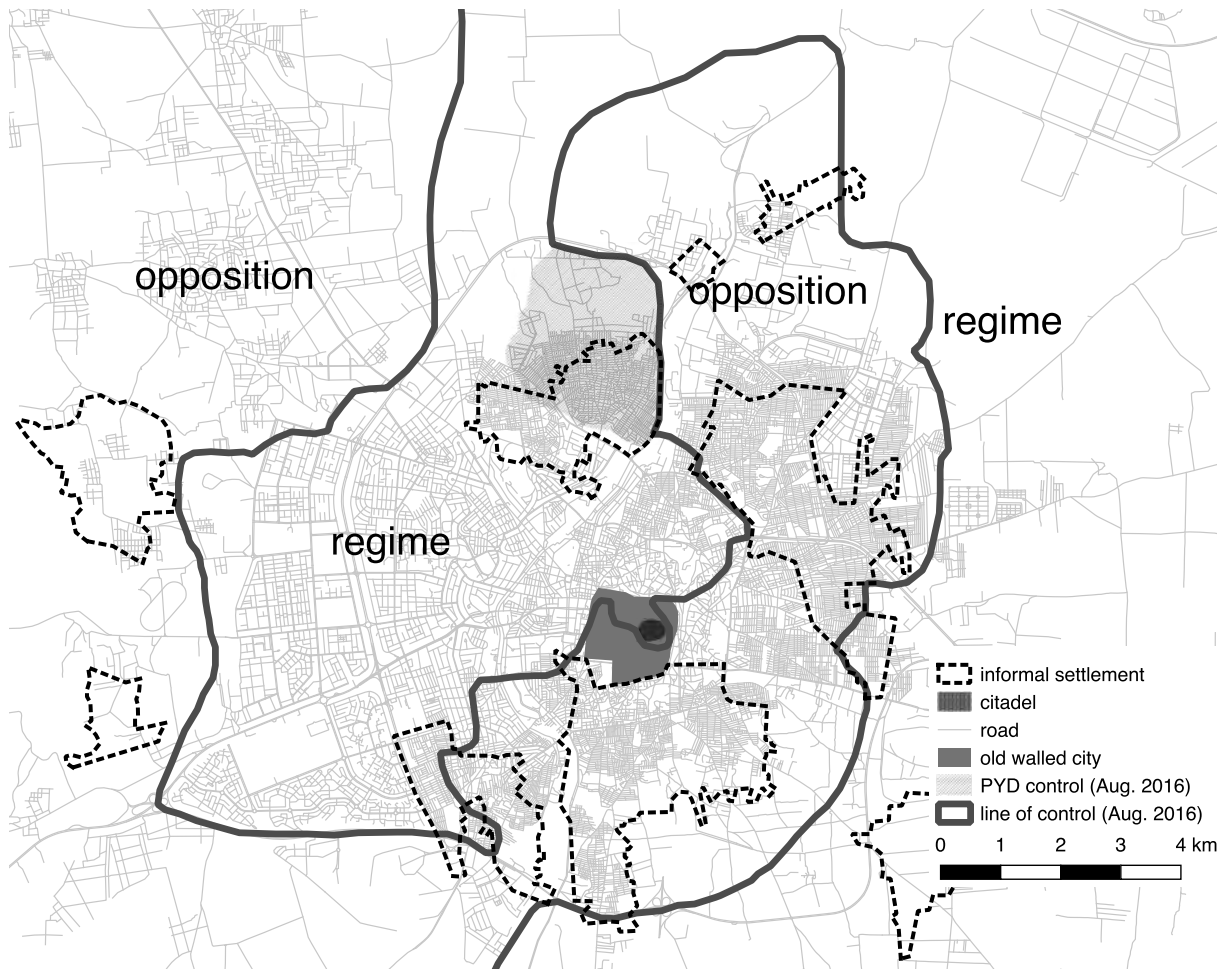
Historically, the heart of urban life in Aleppo was located around the Old City and to its west. During the last century, this was the city's original nucleus: the central market was located there and this is where the Aleppine Ottoman bureaucracy and traders had their homes. During the French mandate, these areas of Aleppo were also

3. See, for example, Philip Mansel (2016): *Aleppo: The Rise and Fall of Syria's Great Merchant City*, IB Tauris: 7–68.

4. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017.



Figure 1: Historical expansion of the city and territorial control



Notes: Informal settlement based upon government designation of areas of collective violation (*mukhalafat jama'iyya*), from al-Dayeri (2007): *Neighborhoods of Spontaneous Housing in Syria and Their Linkages with Specificities of Families and Residents*. Damascus: Public Housing Institution for Planning Affairs and Housing Studies. Control lines from Lund (<https://tcf.org/content/commentary/slow-violent-fall-eastern-aleppo>).

home to the regional headquarters of state institutions, the security agencies, and the military apparatus.

This history shaped the urban structure of Aleppo and the identity of its residents. Since the modern Syrian state was established in the early 1940s, the west of Aleppo has been an administrative, social, and economic hub for the city and the entire governorate. It has served as regional headquarters for many public institutions, such as the mayoralty, university, and hospitals; moreover, the Assad regime set up its security agencies there.<sup>5</sup> The western areas tended to be home to the wealthy indus-

trialist and mercantile classes, who had a palpable sense of community and neighbourhood identity. People living in these areas largely self-identified as «Aleppines», claiming deep family roots in their neighbourhoods. Most of Western Aleppo's residents were employed in the private commercial and industrial sectors.<sup>6</sup>

The rest of Aleppo city outside the western core was generally thought of in reference to that core – namely,

5. The Aleppo headquarters for all four security agencies – military intelligence, state security, air force intelligence, and political security – are based in Western Aleppo.

6. Azmi Bishara (2013): *Suriya, darb al-alam nahu al-huriyya: muhawela fi al-tarikh al-rahin* [Syria, a Path to Freedom from Suffering: An Attempt in Contemporary History]. Beirut: al-Markaz al-'Arabi lil-Abhāth wa-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsāt, 180; Jean Claude David (2014): *Production et qualification de l'espace urbain: entre informel et corruption*, in: *Alep et ses territoires: Fabrique et politique d'une ville* (1868–2011), Presses de l'Ifpo, Institut français du Proche-Orient, 194.

as its periphery. During the 1950s and 1960s, the city underwent a rapid spatial expansion, growing mostly towards the east, where populations from the countryside migrated in large numbers. Eastern neighbourhoods tended to have fewer and lower quality public services than western ones. The informal neighbourhood of Tel al-Zarazeir, for example, was notorious for sewage leakages and piles of waste accumulating in its narrow streets; similar conditions could not be found anywhere in other major Syrian cities like Homs or Damascus.<sup>7</sup> This distinction was also borne out in public finance patterns. The Aleppo local government underfunded the infrastructural development for the peripheral areas and engaged in high levels of land expropriation in the east of the city – where many residents did not have formal property titles. This treatment of the periphery was much harsher than that of local governments in other Syrian cities, like Damascus, Lattakia, and Tartous.<sup>8</sup> The east was also characterised by informal markets, small workshops and stores, narrow, winding streets, with the population relying far more on public transportation than in the west, where private vehicles and broad roadways were common. In 1974, the Syrian government's urbanisation plan deepened the segregation of the east, as most of the funds allocated for these investments ended up being funnelled to projects in the west.<sup>9</sup>

The eastern areas of Aleppo were largely home to the working classes or *mustakhdemin* (unskilled labourer), who often earned their livelihoods working in the factories owned by the industrialists in the west. Many of the civil servants and other state employees staffing the government institutions based in the west also lived in the east, where rents and the cost of living were much easier to afford on their modest salaries; civil servants throughout Syria earned between 300 and 400 US dollars per month, while traders and industrialists earned much more, driving up living costs for the west. Most of Aleppo's *ashoieat* («informal» or «spontaneous» neighbourhoods) were also found in the east; these were urban areas that had been unplanned by the government

and arose spontaneously with the influx of workers from the countryside, largely through the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

Generally speaking, people living in the eastern neighbourhoods would tend not to identify as Aleppine, even if their families had lived in the city for several generations.<sup>11</sup> Rather, it was far more common for people in the east to self-identify with the town or village around the Aleppo province – or indeed the rest of Syria – from which their family had migrated to Aleppo. Chain migration brought residents of a particular region or village to the same city neighbourhood, reproducing the family networks and social practices of that area in miniature within Aleppo itself. The neighbourhoods Salaheddin and Al-Sakhour, for example, are associated with and heavily populated by migrants from the towns of Haraytan, Anadan, Mare', and Tal Rifaat; Al-Kalasa and Bustan al-Qasr neighbourhoods with Daret 'Azza to the west; Tariq al-Bab with Al-Bab to the east; Al-Haydariya and Masakin Hanano with Manbij to the east; Shaykh Maqsoud and Al-Ashrifiya with the Kurdish city of Afrin to the north; Al-Sha'ar and Bab al-Neirab with the eastern Aleppo countryside; and Salaheddin and Al-Mashhad with the Idlib countryside. Aleppo was not a magnet for rural migrants alone – it also attracted many migrants from the city of Idlib, who clustered in the Saif al-Dawla, Salaheddin, and Masakin Hanano neighbourhoods.<sup>12</sup>

The only two neighbourhoods that did not fit on either side of the east-west division were Jama'iat Zahra and Halab al-Jadideh, which were residential areas built in the 1990s by private investors – supported by the state – and included modern homes and buildings, public gardens, and commercial shopping areas. Jama'iat Zahra and Halab al-Jadideh subsequently became home to a mix of both residents from the west and families from the east who had become wealthy.

### 3.2 Divisions and Mutual Mistrust

Whereas in other Syrian cities sectarian divides played a major role in structuring social life before and during the uprising, the vast majority of the residents in both West-

7. Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (2009): *Informal Settlements in Aleppo: Rapid Profiles of All Informal Settlements in Aleppo*. Aleppo Urban Development Project: 20.

8. David (2014), 193.

9. See Jean-Claude David (2016): *Comment l'histoire explique l'actualité d'Alep*. Les clés du Moyen Orient, <http://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Comment-l-histoire-explique-l-actualite-d-Alep-Partie-1-Alep-ville-perennne-dans.html>.

10. Ibid.

11. Author interviews with residents from Aleppo conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017 and in Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2016.

12. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017.





Figure 2: Neighbourhood names and informal settlements



Notes: Informal settlement based on government designation of areas of collective violation (*mukhalafat jama'iyya*), from al-Dayeri (op. cit.).

ern and Eastern Aleppo were Sunni Muslims. Multiple layers – such as social status, regional origin, economic condition, and employment – contributed to cementing mutual perceptions and segregating the population, causing residents of the city to identify with and associate primarily with people from their neighbourhoods.

These separations are evident in the fact that there were few places where individuals from different social backgrounds – even when sharing the same religious identity – would normally interact outside of business relations, the exceptions being state institutions and Aleppo University. Even interactions across social classes in a business context revealed the limits to such relations. An industrialist from the city's west, interviewed for this study, used to employ people from the east in his textile-dyeing factory, and said that the secret of his success was to never give a position of responsibility to someone from an *ashoieat* and to only ever trust family or those within his social network.<sup>13</sup>

13. Author interview with an industrialist from Aleppo conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017.

The common perception of the east among people in the west was that it was poverty-stricken, crime-ridden, and violent.<sup>14</sup> Many people in the west could lead most of their lives without ever visiting the east. Marriages between people from either side were almost unheard of; according to one interviewee, most people from the east were not wealthy enough and could not afford to marry someone from the west, and even if they were, the cultural distance was often too great.<sup>15</sup> Areas of Aleppo's west, for example, were more modern and westernised – featuring popular international restaurant chains with English menus, cafes, shopping malls, etc. They were also more socially liberal; in Western Aleppo, it was common to see women without a hijab or niqab, or wearing head coverings that were colourful and stylish. By contrast, Eastern Aleppo tended to be far more traditional and conservative, with few trappings of Western culture

14. Author interview with a resident from Aleppo conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, May 2017.

15. Several interviews with residents from Aleppo conducted in Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2016.

and almost all women on the street wearing hijab or niqab, uniformly in black.<sup>16</sup>

But the difference among neighbourhoods was deeper than just economic class and styles of consumption and self-presentation – it extended to the degree of local social control over public space and, indeed, different cultural languages used in the various areas. One story mentioned in an interview about a family moving between these worlds is illustrative. The family was originally from the eastern neighbourhood of Bab al-Nasr, close to the ancient citadel in the old city, but had spent much of their life in the upper-middle-class al-Zahra neighbourhood in the west, where the teenage daughter had walked about freely without wearing any head covering. Shortly after the family returned to Bab al-Nasr, people in the neighbourhood approached the family's son – who was in his twenties – to tell him that it was improper for his sister to be seen out in public showing her hair, and that she ought to cover it.<sup>17</sup>

Another interviewee described how in the upper-middle-class neighbourhood of Azaiya in the west, it was common for women to walk in public without a hijab.<sup>18</sup> At a certain point, groups of young men from the eastern area of Bab al-Neirab began making it a habit to come to Azaiya on Fridays and wander the streets cat-calling women. While locals tried to get them to leave, there was essentially nothing they could do, and thus many women began staying home on Fridays.

Divisions between neighbourhoods on each side of this boundary often influenced the flow of social life. For example, an Armenian man who lived in the west described how he would visit the (Arab) Christian neighbourhood of Al-Jala' – one of the richest areas of Aleppo and one of the rare areas where unmarried couples could be seen touching and kissing in public. The man said that whenever he entered a cafe or restaurant there, he felt himself treated like an outsider – where he would have to book a table in advance where locals did not, and the manner in which he was dealt with by the owners and staff was markedly different.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.3 The Aleppo-Regime Bargain

Prior to war engulfing Aleppo, a subtle pact based upon mutual interests regulated Aleppo's relations with the regime in Damascus. Aleppo was the regional hub through which state institutions administered northern Syria. The vast majority of Syria's industrial infrastructure was located in Aleppo, which accounted for nearly 50 per cent of total industrial labour and exports; a large portion of this was dedicated to textile production, chemical, pharmaceutical, electrical engineering, and tourism.<sup>20</sup> The city's industrial community was the economic engine upon which the city and its peripheries depended. Indeed, it was the economic epicentre of northern Syria. Almost all of the raw materials for this production, such as cotton and oil, came from the Jazira region in Syria's northeast.

Aleppo's industrialists, by dint of employing a huge number of labourers, held far more social power than commercial traders. This allowed them to play an important role in the regime's political machinery. Whereas wealthy traders might employ 100 people, a wealthy industrialist might employ 2,500 or more, making these workers and their entire families important electoral blocks that could be mobilised – for example, to support a candidate in parliamentary elections.<sup>21</sup> Thus an industrialist with less total wealth than a commercial trader could have far more power and influence in the city and be more valuable to the regime than the trader, due to his control over the livelihoods of a huge number of the city's residents.

Neo-liberal reforms during the 2000s consolidated the network between the regime and the business class in Aleppo. This represents a break with the regime's historical marginalisation of Aleppo; whereas Aleppo received only 17.6 per cent of formally approved private investment projects resulting from the 1991 partial economic liberalisation compared to Damascus's 50 per cent, the number of international passenger and cargo flights to Aleppo doubled in relation to those to Damascus between 1991 and 2010 (from 5 to 10 per cent).<sup>22</sup>

20. See Syrian Economic Forum, *Economics of Aleppo*, March 2015, [http://www.syrianef.org/assets/reports/english/economics\\_of\\_aleppo.pdf](http://www.syrianef.org/assets/reports/english/economics_of_aleppo.pdf).

21. Bassam Haddad (2012): *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 76.

22. Fabrice Balanche (2014): *Alep et ses territoires: une métropole syrienne dans la mondialisation*, in Boissière, Thierry, and Jean-Claude David (eds.): *Alep et ses territoires: Fabrique et politique d'une ville (1868 – 2011)*. Beyrouth: Presses de l'Ifpo, Institut français du Proche-Orient, 39–66.

16. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017.

17. Skype discussion with a Syrian researcher from Aleppo, May 2017.

18. Author interview with a resident from Aleppo via Skype, May 2017.

19. Skype discussion with a Syrian researcher from Aleppo, May 2017.



With the retreat of the state from the economy, opportunities flourished, creating a business model in which Aleppines and regime-affiliated figures at various levels of seniority collaborated on joint ventures. A top level of these agreements consisted of partnerships between the richest Aleppines with the most senior regime figures. An Aleppine businessman recounted in an ironic tone that, in private conversations with other businessmen, he would ask »ramramit al-mashroua'« (literally, »Is the project Rami-ized?«); common among Aleppine businessmen, this expression made a verb out of the first name of Assad's cousin Rami Makhoul, a key business and regime figure. It was a way of asking whether Makhoul would be partner of the venture. Aleppine mid-level traders had deals with regime security people in the customs duty offices in Aleppo and Latakia, which made import and exports faster.<sup>23</sup>

These patronage-based business dealings were present even among the smallest shop owners in Aleppo, who were inclined to establish pragmatic relations with regime officials. An Armenian mechanic recalled how he would regularly fix the cars of police and security officers and officials of the Interior Ministry for free and provide them with invoices saying the official or officer paid for the service, allowing the latter to claim compensation from their governmental employer. The mechanic helped the government officials in this manner in order to be able to call in a favour from them at some point in the future.<sup>24</sup>

As the ties between the Aleppine business class and the regime strengthened, they further exacerbated the social and economic gap between an enriched and powerful Aleppine business class, on one side, and the residents of Aleppo's east and countryside, on the other.

## 4. Violence in Aleppo

Aleppo's economic and social divides erupted into political and military ones when rebel forces, which had been gathering strength in the Aleppo countryside, invaded the city proper in the summer of 2012. Within

several months, the armed opposition controlled Eastern Aleppo, establishing front lines against regime-held, western portions of the city that would remain relatively unchanged for the next four years.

The resulting separation of formerly interdependent communities of industrialists and workers, and the war's disruption of all economic activity have deeply damaged Aleppo's once dynamic economy. In place of the large-scale textile production that was the region's leading industry before the conflict, traders in the war economy and real estate speculators have arisen and amassed substantial wealth. This has left much of Eastern Aleppo in ruins<sup>25</sup> and, consequently, destroyed much of the productive base on which Western Aleppo depended. As a result, the conflict has reshaped the balance of power between Aleppo and the regime in Damascus.

### 4.1 Diverging Reactions to Rebels in the City's East and West

The presence of rebels in Aleppo's urban space provoked distinctive reactions in its different areas. These diverging reactions are best explained in terms of the structure of the city and the history of its communities – the east driven by its grievances and the west concerned with its self-preservation – which compelled their opposition to or support for the uprising.

Regardless of their political affiliations, the social composition and residents' region of origin in Eastern Aleppo made it easier for rebels to integrate and mesh with the local population. These populations, like the rebels, often hailed from Aleppo's rural areas. Eastern Aleppo's neighbourhoods collectively mobilised in non-violent demonstrations in the early phases of the uprising – often motivated by socio-economic grievances. Their expressions of opposition to the regime – combined with these neighbourhoods' experience of regime repression – meant that the rebels were generally accepted there. Rebels entering Eastern Aleppo could find a social incubator in the local families that they could not find in the west, allowing them to settle in this part of the city.

23. Author interview with an industrialist from Aleppo conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, December 2016. Author interview with a resident from Aleppo, via Skype, June 2017.

24. Author interview with an Armenian resident from Aleppo via Skype, June 2017.

25. A UNOSAT analysis of satellite imagery of Aleppo in September 2016 found 35,722 damaged structures as a result of the fighting.

The trajectory of Al-Sukkary, a neighbourhood in the south of the city, exemplifies the ways in which the relationship between rebels and local populations developed and solidified an Eastern Aleppo identity in the course of the uprising and war. Al-Sukkary is an area that began to be transformed from pistachio tree groves into informal housing for migrants from the nearby countryside in the 1960s. The people building in this area constructed simple, artisanal dwellings and initially had to provide their own electricity, water, and sewage infrastructure. The area eventually received these basic services and simple amenities – such as a health clinic from the state – but all major administrative, health, and security functions required a trip into the city centre or the dispatch of state agents from the centre into the neighbourhood.

As the uprising began in 2011, local residents in Al-Sukkary both capitalised on the situation – by extending informal buildings – and organised demonstrations. By early 2012, the regime had begun to repress the demonstrations. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) had already formed at this time and started to operate in the Aleppo countryside, though not yet in neighbourhoods like Al-Sukkary. The organisers of demonstrations in Al-Sukkary, who had formed a Local Coordinating Committee, sought the help of FSA members, asking for »protection of the demonstrations« (*himayat al-mudhaherat*). Two factors facilitated the request and entry of the FSA: pre-existing networks between members of the local community, who maintained family ties to villages in the Aleppo countryside; and FSA soldiers, who were from those same villages. A gradual increase in the FSA presence followed, culminating in full FSA control of the neighbourhood in the summer of 2012, facilitated by the cooperation of many people on the ground.<sup>26</sup> This process by which the FSA gained control of localities, in coordination with members of the local community who also joined FSA ranks in increasing numbers, created a clear territorial *and* social boundary between communities –

between those remaining under and with the regime, and those under and with the rebels.

Rebel control of Al-Sukkary caused some residents – and recently arrived Syrians who had been displaced by conflict in nearby Idlib countryside – to flee, not fearing the rebels themselves, but regime reprisals against the area after having allowed rebels in. Even when families left, however, it was common for a young male member to stay behind and join the FSA to defend the neighbourhood. This was the case even during the heavy fighting of 2015; one interviewee estimated that only 2,000 families remained in Al-Sukkary at this point (whereas the 2004 census lists the neighbourhood as having 10,082 families).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in spite of this depopulation, he stated that »no house was empty«, because all families left behind a member to fight with the FSA.<sup>28</sup>

During 2013, rebels set up more than 60 local councils on the neighbourhood level (*majalis al-ahya'*) in the east of Aleppo city. For the first time, this provided the city's east and peripheries their own administrative and governance structures. They had always previously been administratively dependent on the Aleppo city council (*majlis al-madina*) and provincial council (*majlis al-muhafadha*) based in the west.<sup>29</sup> This signified the first time eastern neighbourhoods had acted independently from the west, creating the sense of »Eastern Aleppo« as a self-constituting entity and fostering a corresponding shift amongst residents to identify with this new entity. Because these alternative administrative institutions threatened to replace those of the Syrian state, located in the west, Eastern Aleppo became a constant target of regime barrel bombings; the regime's stepped up bombing campaign in late 2013 and early 2014 succeeded in this regard, pushing many of the international NGOs, whose funding was crucial to the functioning of local

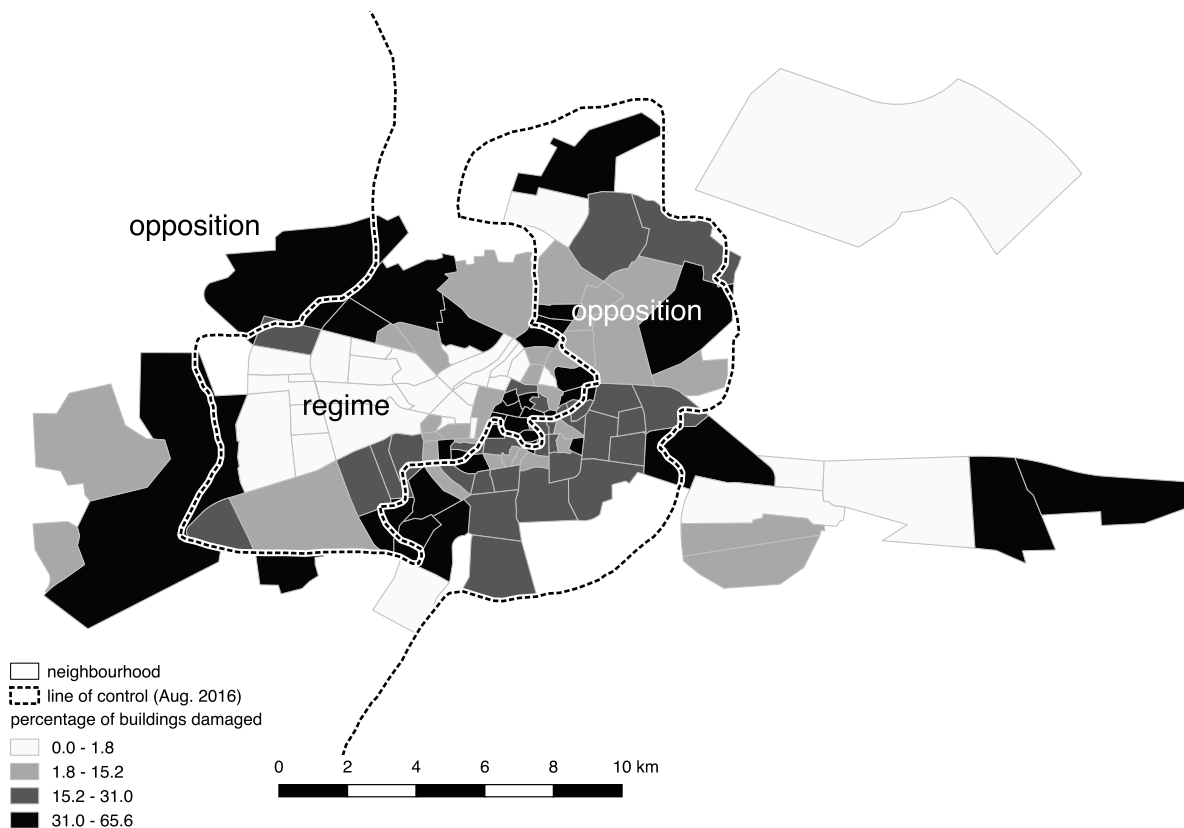
26. Interviews with an activist from Al-Sukkary conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017. Many neighbourhoods in Aleppo's periphery followed a similar pattern: pro-regime militia repression of demonstrations, requests for FSA protection of demonstrations through pre-existing networks, and FSA control of the neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods experiencing this trajectory include: Al-Sukkary, Seif al-Dawla, Hay al-Aziya', Salaheddin, Dey'at al-Ansari, Fardous, Al-Saleheen, Al-Kalassa, Bustan al-Qasr, Al-Sakhour, Masaken Hanano, Al-Hayderiyya, Al-Halik, Al-Furqan (Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017).

27. Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria (2004): *2004 National Census*; available at: <http://www.cbssyr.org/indicator/hp-f.htm> (last accessed on 20.6.2013).

28. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2016.

29. Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami (2016): *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, Pluto Press: 94f. Bahjat Hajjar, Corinne von Burg, Leila Hilal, Martina Santschi, Mazen Gharibah and Mazhar Sharbaji (January 2017): *Perceptions of Governance – The Experience of Local Administrative Councils Opposition-held Syria*, in: Swiss Peace Foundation. See also Joseph Daher (2017): *What Happened in Aleppo?* in: Jacobin; available at: <http://jacobinmag.com/2017/01/eastern-aleppo-syria-assad-war-russia-us-ypg-fsa/> (last accessed on 6.9.2017). See in particular the sub-chapter entitled »What Eastern Aleppo Means«.

Figure 3: Territorial control and neighbourhood destruction, 2016



Notes: Regime and opposition control lines from August 2016, drawn from maps cited in Lund (op. cit.). Destruction figures gathered by UN OCHA, based on September 2016 satellite pictures (<http://www.unitar.org/unosat/map/2508>).

councils, to cease operation in Eastern Aleppo.<sup>30</sup> The bombing also displaced an estimated 600,000 people in the second half of 2013.<sup>31</sup>

Figure 3 shows the lines of political control in early 2016 and the percentage of buildings in each neighbourhood destroyed during the conflict (through September 2016). The highly negative correlation between regime control and levels of destruction suggests the lengths to which the regime went to dampen independent political and social life in areas of the city outside its control.

By contrast, in most of Western Aleppo, a rebel advance into their areas was perceived as a threat to the

self-preservation of local residents. In the eyes of the west's residents, rebels rocked the political stability on which their social and economic status depended, without proposing a clear model to replace it or a leadership with whom they could build new ties. What was seen as a revolution in Eastern Aleppo was seen as the rise of the peasantry in the west, and this constituted a direct threat to their businesses, factories, lines of trade, and general livelihoods.<sup>32</sup> As the uprising descended into sustained violent conflict and armed Islamic extremist groups became more common between mid-2013 and 2015, this reinforced the perception of Western Aleppo residents that the uprising was hostile to their interests. For the Assad regime, Western Aleppo – with all its state institutions and the immense economic heft of the business community there – was key to maintaining political

30. Kheder Khaddour (2015): *Shielded by the State*, Carnegie Middle East Center.

31. Violation Documentation Center in Syria, *Potential Death Falling From the Sky*, March 2014; available at: [www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1394885517-Arabic.pdf](http://www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1394885517-Arabic.pdf) (last accessed on 16.10.2017).

32. Giovanni Pagani (2016): *Urban Conflicts and Multiple War Narratives: The Case of Aleppo*; available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/25061/urban-conflicts-and-multiple-war-narratives> (last accessed on 16.10.2017).

power over a large swath of northern Syria, and thus the regime was ready to expend significant military and financial resources to do so.

The spatial separation of these two areas solidified the distinctions and isolations latent in the structure of the city into tangible, lasting divisions among these populations. There was relatively limited movement of the frontlines for the next four years – before the final campaign by pro-regime forces to retake all of Aleppo. The notion of an »Eastern Aleppo« – as a contiguous area differentiated from the city's historic core in the west – is its most visible result. Even amongst those who fled Aleppo, the divide between the city's east and west remains. For instance, in the city of Gaziantep in southern Turkey, which hosts 325,000 Syrian refugees,<sup>33</sup> many of the traders and industrialists who have relocated from Western Aleppo have taken homes in the same areas, and frequent the same stores and restaurants, keeping an established social distance from refugees from Eastern Aleppo and other areas that may have supported the Syrian opposition.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.2 »The Time of Al-Qaterji«

The conflict has destroyed the city's industrial infrastructure and curtailed trade of raw material that supported Aleppo's industry. This has compelled the traditional business class to abandon the city and fostered the emergence of new business figures. Almost the entire Syrian economy has been transformed into a war economy, with little capital investment in manufacturing capacity and greater focus on unproductive sectors such as trade and real estate. The new business figures conduct themselves differently as a result.

The capital and infrastructure to run the factories is almost entirely gone. Both rebel groups and regime-affiliated militias ransacked factories to sell off the equipment to buyers in Turkey; some small industrialists were able to relocate their operations to regime-held areas along Syria's coast or outside the country, but most were unable to, due to the difficulty of moving complex ma-

chinery and finding the necessary skilled labour.<sup>35</sup> The fragmentation of northern Syria into numerous areas of control split between opposing armed groups severed Aleppo from access to the raw materials produced in east Jazira, and severely curtailed possible distribution networks. All of Aleppo's large, well-established industrialist families have left the city, moving to Damascus, the coastal areas of Syria held by the regime, Turkey, or Egypt, thus ending the business model that had been building up since the neo-liberal bargain was forged between this class and the regime.

For instance, an industrialist interviewed for this paper said he had tried to reopen his factory in Syria's coastal region, but there had been a shortage of professional staff to do so. The key people he needed – including members of his family and his close network – had already left Syria to avoid being drafted into the Syrian army. The industrialist then said he had reopened his factory in Egypt, and would not return to Aleppo until certain criteria were met: one, that loans were provided at favourable conditions; two, that there were open roads for the flow of raw materials from Jazira, meaning not having to pay bribes at checkpoints and no risks of shipments being commandeered; three, that there would have to be guarantees against looting and extortion by local militias and his employees would have to be exempt from being drafted.

Those who replaced the traditional business class are a new class of businessmen who entered into new deals with the regime, either by filling the gap left by traditional Aleppine traders or by filling economic niches created by conditions of war. A good example of the former is Hussam Al-Qaterji. Born in Al-Raqqa in 1982, Al-Qaterji's father had made a small business giving loans to farmers from eastern Syria and then buying their harvests to sell back to the markets in the country's west.<sup>36</sup> Following the war and Syria's eastern regions falling either to Kurdish forces or the Islamic State group, Al-Qaterji resorted to the business networks set up by his father and continued to arrange purchases of wheat from these areas through intermediaries, which he would then have transported to areas under regime control, including Damascus. A refrain about Al-Qaterji

33. See Turk Press, *The geographic distribution of Syrians in Turkish cities*, 26 February 2016; available at: <http://www.turkpress.co/node/18969> (last accessed on 15.10.2017).

34. Author interview with a resident from Aleppo conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017.

35. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017.

36. Author interview with an industrialist from Aleppo conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, May 2017.

that has since arisen amongst the traditional business class is that, »He used to wear Adidas tracksuits, now he wears Zegna«, referring to the luxury Italian fashion house. Al-Qaterji is attempting to expand his new-found wealth through further investments; he is currently negotiating an agreement to make a major investment in the Homs oil refinery. He is also a patron of pro-regime militias in Aleppo and, in 2016, became a member of the Syrian Parliament for Aleppo.<sup>37</sup> Al-Qaterji's political position indicates that new figures are potentially replacing the Aleppine traders both in their economic activities and as the business counterpart of the regime in the city. The son of a former officer in the Republican Guard, the Syrian army's elite forces, aptly characterised the new phase of regime relations with Aleppo by saying, »*hada zaman, zaman al-Qaterji*« (»this time is the time of Al-Qaterji«).<sup>38</sup>

Other figures profited through their direct involvement in the militia war. Sami Qubri is a generational resident of Aleppo who was a member of the Aleppo City Council before 2011, but not a member of the city's traditional business class. Qubri had become wealthy through his ownership of several businesses, including a mall called Family House, an amusement park, and a car dealership. He began covertly funding pro-regime militias (*shabiha*) in 2012 and, following the city's descent into war in 2014, he became the head of the local National Defence Forces (NDF) militia, playing an important role for the regime through 2014 and 2015. Similar to the case of Al-Qaterji, Qubri's rise to power was despised by Aleppines. While hailing from Aleppo, figures like these two represented to the traditional business classes a rival political and economic force.

Qubri's decline also indicates the evolving relationship between local actors in Aleppo and the regime. After Eastern Aleppo was taken by the regime in 2016, Qubri was replaced in this role by an army officer – Colonel 'Emad Hassan – who was the only NDF leader in Aleppo not from the city.<sup>39</sup> There is much speculation about the reasons for Qubri's fall; businessmen cited the NDF's

rampant looting and pillaging of civilian properties under his command, and the regime's desire to put local affairs back under its control also likely played a role. Qubri was formally ousted by the regime's Aleppo governorate Security Committee (*lajna amaniyya*), not the Presidential Palace, indicating at least an attempt to return to institutional governance.<sup>40</sup>

One might imagine that the move to marginalise Qubri, an Aleppine, and put in his place an army officer would antagonise the trading and industrial classes of Aleppo. Yet rather than fear and resent the central government, his removal was cheered by one businessman queried on the subject – the looting undertaken by Qubri and his men harmed the ability of local businessmen to do their work. If anything, the greater threat to the Aleppine business class would be from economic rivals. This fear was hinted at by the businessman when he described the relationship with the central government as follows: »we are under Damascus, not the Damascenes«.<sup>41</sup>

The undoing of pre-war business ties reshaped the balance of power between Aleppo and Damascus in favour of the latter. Unlike the traditional business class, the new traders like Al-Qaterji are lone figures, disconnected from each other. This means that they have no meaningful political weight vis-à-vis the regime. In short, while the Aleppine traditional business class constituted an important part of the regime's power network and dealt with it on equal footing, new figures are isolated clients of Damascus.

The traditional business class is also adapting to the new phase, welcoming a renewed role of the regime in the city as long as it can help bring back the political stability needed to restart their economic activities. One Aleppine businessman who recently returned to Aleppo from Egypt was eager to restart his business. He expressed relief at the removal of both Qubri and the rebels who had demanded payments from him, judging the regime to be the best option available. He stated that his business faced major issues with electricity and manpower (the main workers available were women and men over 50

37. List of Parliament members in 2016, Sana News Agency, (18 April 2016) available at: [http://www.sana.sy/?page\\_id=6050](http://www.sana.sy/?page_id=6050) (last accessed on 16.10.2017).

38. Author interview with an industrialist from Aleppo conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, May 2017.

39. See *Qasioun* (15.9. 2017); available at: <http://bit.ly/2fB2Tt6> (last accessed on 16.10.2017).

40. Author interview with a member of the NDF via Skype, August 2017.

41. Phone interview with Aleppine businessman and industrialist based in Cairo, March 2017. The distinction made here is between the political and security institutions built by the regime in Damascus and the business community of Damascus, which has existed in parallel to and competition with the Aleppo business community since long before the establishment of the current regime.



years old), but that it was only a matter of time before the conditions returned that would allow him to operate effectively again.<sup>42</sup>

## 5. Severing Aleppo's Connections

Years of fragmented political control have broken down the state institutions based in Aleppo that provided the backbone of economic and daily life for the Aleppo countryside. Now many cities and towns formerly linked to Aleppo typically have their own governance structures – be they local councils or the administration of groups such as the Kurdish PYD or the Islamic State group. These new governing bodies established control only over isolated strips of territory that remain disconnected from each other and linked to the agenda of external backers, without constituting a new cohesive institutional umbrella able to replace the Syrian state.

The process of changing political control and trying to implement a new model of governance in Aleppo and its countryside has contributed to the breaking of links between the city of Aleppo and its surrounding region. Jarablous and Afrin, two towns that were previously related to Aleppo are now under the control of armed groups – the opposition and the Kurdish PYD respectively – and linked to these groups' regional supporters, Turkey and the PKK, which is headquartered in Iraq's Qandil Mountains. Hence, Aleppo has ceased to be a point of reference for its surrounding areas, leaving it a shattered city.

### 5.1 Aleppo's Orbit Breaks Up

Aleppo was the primary point for state services for the entire governorate. Forty districts and over 1,255 villages – which made up almost a quarter of the total Syrian population in 2010 – depended upon the planning expertise and decision-making from the Aleppo Governorate Planning Directorate in Aleppo city, and received their budgets from the Governorate offices in Aleppo. Exports of locally produced goods passed through Aleppo, as bulk imported goods were resold from the city's markets. The military conscripts of all of northern and

eastern Syria were required to report to a military facility in the Hanano Military Conscription Barracks (*thakant hanano li-tajmea' al-mujanadin*) in Aleppo to be assigned for service. The University of Aleppo also drew students from the surrounding regions. These factors made Aleppo the primary point of reference for Syria's northern regions before 2011, meaning that virtually all major economic activities and state services beyond simple procedures or residents of the region flowed through Aleppo city.

In their aim to establish themselves as an alternative to the regime in Damascus, the opposition developed their own governance structures. They did so within the framework developed by the Syrian regime for de-centralisation (codified in Law 107/2012 for local administration and decentralisation), while attempting to provide its own services.<sup>43</sup> In rebel-held Aleppo city and the surrounding countryside, the opposition established the Council of Liberated Aleppo Governorate (*Majlis Mohafazat Halab al-Hurra*) after 2012 to be the highest governing body.<sup>44</sup> At its height, the Majlis oversaw 130 local councils in the Aleppo countryside, 67 in the city, and had 51 non-governmental organisations operating in its territory.<sup>45</sup>

These local governance bodies served largely as a channel for external donor funding to local communities. Yet they also strived to develop an organic relation with the Majlis in terms of administration and budget distribution, similar to that which governed Aleppo's relation with the countryside prior to the war. If part of the challenge of making such an arrangement was inherent in developing a new form of governance in a conflict environment, the regime's targeted bombing of Eastern Aleppo made the task even more challenging. By the end of 2013, following repeated aerial bombardment, the opposition moved the Majlis from the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city to several towns in the countryside, depriving local councils in the countryside of a potential new centre, Eastern Aleppo, and leaving them isolated, governed by hyper-local bodies that were formally still operating under the Majlis' umbrella but *de facto* disconnected from it.

42. Author interview with an industrialist from Aleppo conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, May 2017.

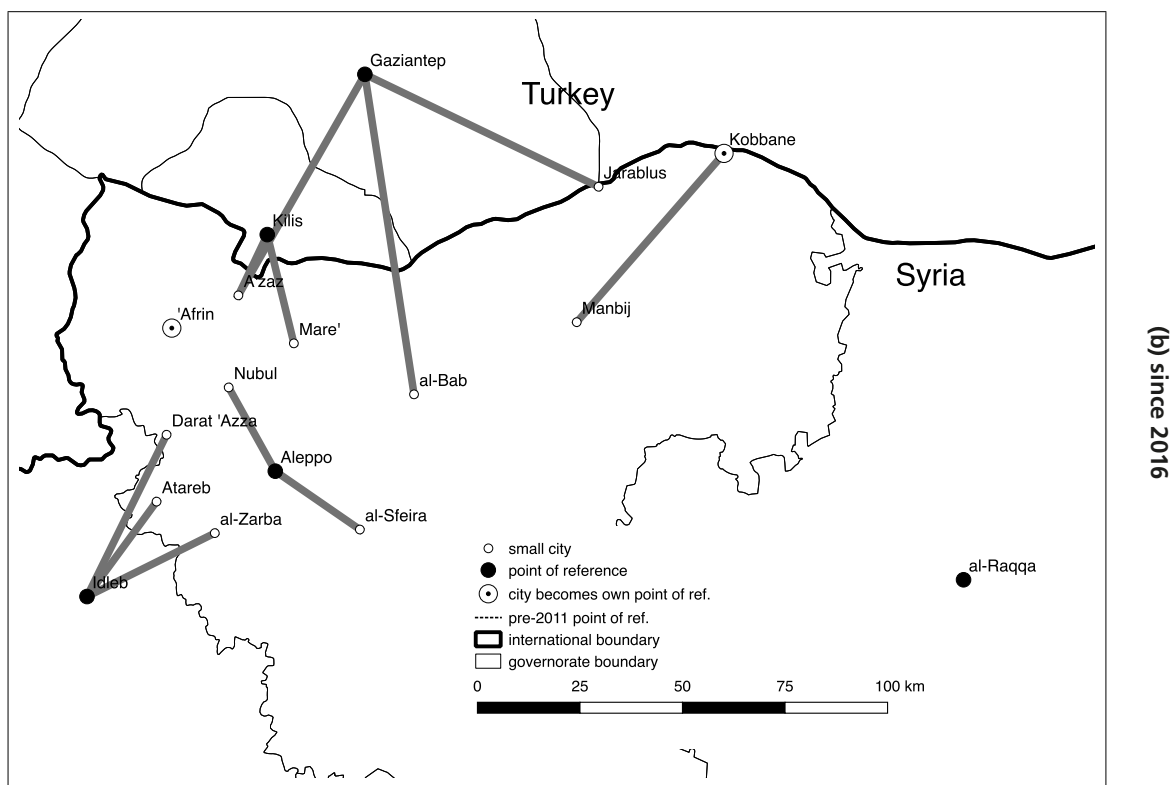
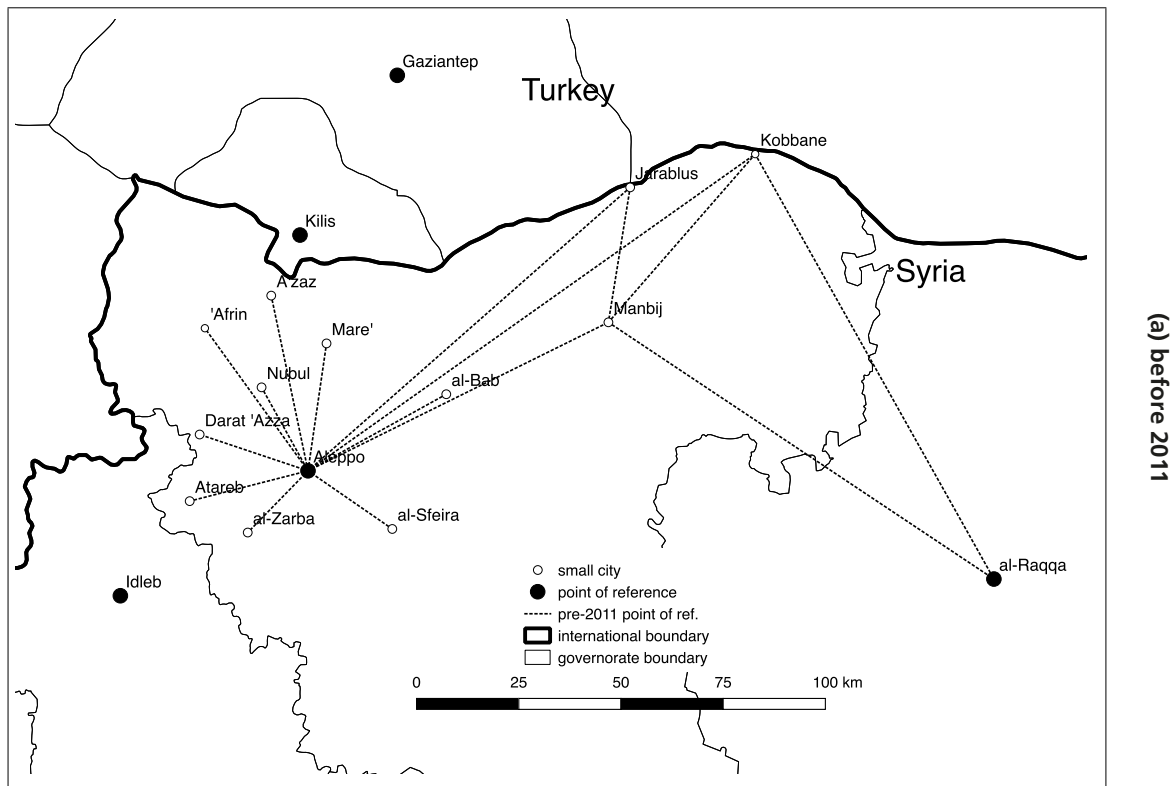
43. The opposition worked under the framework set up by the regime in order to one day assume the central organs of power from Damascus.

44. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017.

45. Ibid.



Figure 4: Points of reference before and during conflict



## 5.2 The Afrin-Qandil Connection

The unfolding conflict broke the political, administrative, and institutional links between Aleppo and the rest of Syria's northern region. The primarily Kurdish city of Afrin, located in the western corner of Aleppo's governorate at the Syrian-Turkish border, is a telling example of how a city once in Aleppo's orbit has, through the conflict, developed its own political, administrative and economic centres.

Due to the regime's historical restrictions on more complex economic activity in Kurdish regions, which would have allowed them to become self-sustainable and autonomous from the Syrian state, Afrin's economy depends heavily upon olives, pressing them for oil and using the remains to produce soap. Afrin's soap factories and oil presses found their largest market in Aleppo. Thus, before the uprising, Afrin developed only to the extent that it remained connected to Aleppo. Compared with Afrin, the primarily Kurdish neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah in Aleppo enjoyed a larger leeway to develop businesses, because they operated within the framework of Aleppo city. Most of Afrin's educated class attended university in Aleppo and family ties linked Afrin with Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah.<sup>46</sup>

As Aleppo plunged into conflict, Afrin was able to develop an economy of its own, autonomous from the city. Afrin's strategic location to the northwest of Aleppo, between the rebel-held areas of Azaz and Idlib and in close proximity to the regime-held towns of Nubul and Zahra, made it a prime holding and transit hub for goods and supplies headed in all directions. Moreover, the PYD placed taxes on goods transiting through Afrin to rebel-controlled areas in Western Aleppo.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile inside Afrin, the PYD established their own institutions independent from the Syrian state, such that

Afrin even began issuing its own license plates and local school curriculums were switched from Arabic to Kurdish.<sup>48</sup>

Though Afrin developed greater independence from the regime and a governance system outside the Syrian state during the conflict, it developed a new dependence on the PYD's mother party, the PKK. Cadres of the PKK, whose main decision makers are Turkish citizens, came to hold massive sway over the PYD, the Syrian-based Kurdish party dominant in Afrin and, thereby, decision-making over the newly established institution.<sup>49</sup> A doctor from Afrin recounted that, when he applied to open a charity for Afrin children, he submitted a formal request to the local administration, but ultimately received the approval from a PKK-trained cadre he had to contact through family connections, and whom he met at 2 a.m. in order to avoid the meeting being detected.<sup>50</sup> PKK control has brought intra-Kurdish rivalries to the fore. The family running Afrin's main soap and olive oil processing factories has historical loyalties to Masoud Barzani, President of the Iraq Kurdistan Region and a rival of the PKK. The result was that the PYD began raising taxes and tariffs on soap and olive oil producers until the family was forced out of business.<sup>51</sup>

## 5.3 The Jarablous-Gaziantep Connection

The pattern of the conflict that has broken linkages between Aleppo and the cities in its orbit is not limited to Kurdish areas. The city of Jarablous, located near the Turkish border, has become integrated into trade and political networks extending to the Turkish city Gaziantep, making the latter the city's primary points of reference today. While it is not impossible to imagine these relations being reconfigured, the conflict has shattered the ties that made Aleppo the point of reference for Jarablous, and it is difficult to see a short or easy path along which those ties might be reconstructed.

46. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017. Author interview with a businessman from Afrin conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017.

47. Though the PYD formally controls the city of Afrin, it is in a strategic location for moving products and supplies across the border. The Turkish government has an interest in moving goods across the border to the Euphrates Shield armed groups it supports, and individuals and local groups have an interest in trading, as well as moving goods between Western Aleppo and the Euphrates Shield controlled areas. This creates a large incentive for smuggling operations – whether by evading PYD authorities or with their tacit compliance – at this important border point. Author interview with a resident of Afrin conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017.

48. See International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? PYD Precarious Rise in Northern Syria*, May 2014.

49. See International Crisis Group, *PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, May 2017.

50. Author interview with aid worker from Afrin conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017.

51. Author interview with a businessman from Afrin conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, February 2017.

During the summer of 2012, the FSA undertook a military campaign to take Manbij and then Jarablous from the regime. Jarablous had been administratively and economically linked to Manbij, which is about ten kilometres away and was itself heavily integrated into Aleppo's orbit. As long as both were under rebel control, the Jarablous-Manbij connection endured.

Jarablous and Manbij were both under the Islamic State's control from 2014 until 2016, but in August 2016, YPG forces took control of Manbij and, a few weeks later, the Turkish army launched the Euphrates Shield (*Daraa al-Furat*) military campaign, seizing the cities of Jarablous, Azaz and Al-Bab. These events cut the road connection between Jarablous and any other YPG-controlled areas to the west (Afrin) and to the east (Kobane).

After the operation, Jarablous suddenly became disconnected from Manbij and fell completely under Turkey's influence. The point of reference for Jarablous became the city of Kilis and Gaziantep in Turkey, with Turkish state representatives from both Gaziantep and Kilis visiting the city. Turkmen Syrians from nearby villages assumed a more leading role in local decision-making, and Jarablous has developed its own local councils that are connected to and dependent upon Turkey; its six NGOs cannot work without the acceptance from the Turkish authorities, and twelve Turkish NGOs are working in the Jarablous area. None of these organisations has any relation with those in Manbij.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Jarablous has become an important border control point from Turkey because it manages any smuggling trade that flows towards YPG-populated areas, which remain under the embargo of their Iraqi Kurdish neighbours, as well as Turkey. These political shifts have fostered an institutional set-up and new economic networks that push Jarablous increasingly away from its neighbour Manbij and the hub to which both were formerly related, Aleppo.

Apart from its military objective of preventing the continuity of Kurdish-controlled territories, the Euphrates Shield operation also secured important leverage for Turkey in the future reconstruction of new Aleppo. Any reconstruction of the economic and social ties of the Aleppo region will have to recreate the interdependent relationship between Aleppo's countryside and Aleppo city. By controlling a part of the countryside, Turkey and

other regional players can force Damascus to reach a compromise in defining their sphere of influence within northern Syria.

## 6. What the Destruction of Aleppo Means

Today Aleppo lies in ruins. Eastern Aleppo is effectively cleansed of the majority of its population, while Western Aleppo remains largely intact physically, but the mechanisms by which it used to function – and serve as an administrative, economic, and political hub for all of northern Syria – have been destroyed. Pro-regime forces pounded Eastern Aleppo for four years, culminating in a brutal month-long siege in December 2016 that forced the remaining armed groups to sign an evacuation agreement, which formalised the cleansing of an urban population unprecedented in the history of the modern Middle East.<sup>53</sup> Eastern Aleppo's residents were forcefully displaced and are today scattered between Idlib and Syria's coastal region, Euphrates Shield controlled areas, and Turkey.

Northern Syria's territorial order has profoundly changed. Aleppo's regional function will remain uncertain as long as there is no clear settlement in YPG-controlled eastern Syria and along the upper Euphrates. The challenge of rebuilding is no less important than relinking Aleppo to the Jazira in order to once again access the resources that are needed for industrial production. In deciding that, Turkey will have a key role, considering its ongoing struggle with the PYD/YPG's mother party, the PKK. The regime and its allies might leverage this destruction and, along with their former regional rivals – including Turkey – craft a settlement that parcels out shares of the city's economic reconstruction, security control, and repopulation.

A return to the pre-war scenario is no longer possible. The loss of Aleppo's historical sphere of influence in surrounding regions, and its falling under the political sway of Damascus no longer make it a peer to the capital. A completely new Aleppo will emerge from the conflict, one that is subordinate to Damascus in several aspects.

52. Data collected through fieldwork November 2016–March 2017.

53. Ben Taub (2016): *Aleppo's »Evacuation« is a Crime against Humanity*, The New Yorker (22.12.2016); available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/aleppos-evacuation-is-a-crime-against-humanity> (last accessed on 16.10.2017).



At present, the east and west cleavage no longer exists, because both demographic components (west business class and the east unskilled workers) have left the city. In the political and security vacuum created by the conflict, a class of business figures who dealt with or associated with the regime is already emerging. The emergence of these figures might, on the one hand, shape and consolidate new business networks with the regime that will de facto replace Western Aleppo's traditional business class, offering Damascus the opportunity to absorb Aleppo into its own sphere or in one of its regional and international allies – Iran and Russia. On the other hand, the reconstruction will occur in a hyper-securitised environment in which both new business figures and regime security forces will control the repopulation of the city. In this scenario, people from Aleppo will be kept economically dependent on and exploited by powerful business networks, but deprived of the political weight that the traditional Aleppines wielded to make Aleppo's voice heard in Damascus. Rather than a west-east gap, the city will suffer from the deeper cleavage between regime-related networks and those who will be dependent on them – be they members of the former business class from the west or residents from the east.

In this scenario, donors will find the new business elites who emerged from the war to be their only counterparts. Channelling reconstruction funding through these figures will risk falling into and consolidating the regime's power in the city. In this light, conditions must be placed on reconstruction funding. Reconstruction aid should be provided only on the condition that no security restrictions will be placed upon the return of refugees and IDPs, and that independent Syrian technocrats should be involved in the reconstruction process in an oversight function to its spending and management.

This picture of the »new Aleppo« suggests hypotheses for the future of post-war Syria. The uprising and subsequent conflict profoundly upset the old set of relationships that had made it possible for Damascus to gain Aleppo's compliance in ruling Syria. For the regime in Damascus to survive, the old set of relations with and inside Aleppo had to be dissolved and then a new set of relations had to emerge from the ashes of that destruction; the new class of war profiteers are the new power network Damascus is using to dominate Aleppo today, and the regime intends to use this network in ruling post-conflict Syria.





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