# RECONSTRUCTING ALEPPO

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## INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict will eventually end, as all wars do, and reconstruction will start. This process will involve numerous challenges: reversing economic collapse, fighting corruption, rebuilding housing, schools and hospitals, reestablishing law enforcement forces such as the police, and reworking the legal system so that it supports human rights and provides a fairer environment for business. Another important aspect of this process will be welcoming returnees and providing them with shelter and work opportunities.

At the moment it is difficult to imagine people heading back to Syria. This will change with the cessation of major hostilities. Experiences of post-war reconstruction in cities such as Kabul, Beirut and Sarajevo show that refugees will likely return to urban centers where the economic opportunities lie. For Syria, Aleppo will be one of these centers. The city, which was once home to some 3 million people, offers internal and regional trade opportunities, has been the industrial hub of Syria and is surrounded by fertile land. To take advantage of this, however, the government will have to invest extensive efforts in reconstructing the city.

Rebuilding a city is a multi-dimensional and multi-level process. This paper focuses on the problems that are likely to occur in just two of the many areas that will have to be addressed:

a) Resettling returnees after the war. Aleppo already suffered problems handling an enormous rural-urban migration in the past decade. The proliferation of informal settlements was an outcome of this internal mobility and failed economic policies. Now, many of these settlements are destroyed or damaged, skilled workers and professionals have left the country, the legal system is not up to the task of resolving the many land disputes that will arise and the government will face a housing crisis when people decide to return.

b) Balanced urban-rural development. Under Bashar al-Assad, the government orchestrated an economic transformation to what it called "a social market economy." This policy opened the country to foreign investors and banks, modernized the communications sector and revived tourism. These policies, however, gave birth to a new generation of crony capitalists who controlled the economy and guided the traditionally dominant public sector to its deathbed. The effect of these policies on agriculture was dramatic. Poverty increased in the countryside, pressure increased on the metropolitan areas and cities boomed as the countryside suffered. This paper argues that during reconstruction the government should invest money in the countryside,

namely in agriculture. Doing so in the north will decrease pressure on Aleppo and create job opportunities in the countryside.

## CONFLICT ARRIVES IN ALEPPO

Syria is suffering the brutal winter that followed the Arab Spring – the popular desire for social, economic and political change in the Middle East and North Africa that started in Tunisia and has not ended yet. In Damascus, in February 2011, a group of Syrians defied the heavy hand of state repression and demonstrated against a ruling establishment that has been in power since 1970, when Hafez al-Assad seized control.[1] The arrest and the torture of several children aged between 10 and 15 by the political intelligence branch in Deraa prompted large protests in March. For the first six months, the protesters were non-violent although the state responded with brutality. By September, armed rebel movements had begun to overshadow peaceful protests and Syria became a battlefield for many conflicts.

Aleppo is an important part of this story. In early 2012, armed activities spread from the northern Idlib countryside to Aleppo. As of summer 2012, the rebels had already occupied large swaths of land in western and northern parts of the province. Despite the overall calm in the city, there were demonstrations and suicide bombings from early 2012, but the civil war really arrived with a rebel attack in July that year. The dynamic of the armed activities indicated that the conflict was brought into the city rather than arising from within. A rebel leader from the Aleppo countryside said, "We liberated the rural parts of the [Aleppo] province. We waited and waited for Aleppo [city] to rise, and it didn't. We couldn't rely on them to do it for themselves so we had to bring the revolution to them."[2]

Divisions between Aleppo and its hinterland had only grown in the previous decade as the government steadily cut support for rural communities while encouraging an urban-focused crony capitalism. The decreasing support for agriculture and the failure to respond to the worst drought in at least a century heightened both migration to the cities and a deepening of rural resentments. Syrian cities, Damascus and Aleppo in particular, experienced an inflow of the rural population. These people usually built their own housing in informal settlements. By the late 2000s, 27.46% of the area under Damascus city's jurisdiction consisted of informal settlements.[3] Half of all the homes in Aleppo were in informal settlements, which occupied 37% of the city's territory.[4]

Urban-rural grievances, the regime's brutal response including the strategy of barrel bombings, the lack of organization among opposition groups and their inability to take over the city quickly led to the prolongation of the war in Aleppo city, which, in turn, led to the partial destruction of Aleppo.

There is no clear way out of the conflict. The regime continues its air campaign against the eastern part of the city, and the rebels have not been able to defeat the regime. This suggests that the destruction is likely to continue.

## EXTENT OF THE DESTRUCTION

Aleppo is Syria's largest city. According to government figures, the Aleppo Governorate had around 4.2 million inhabitants in 2006.[5] It is difficult to track the population in the city of Aleppo, but commonly used numbers are about 3.1,[6] about 2.4[7] and 2.1[8] million inhabitants. In 2004 the population was approximately 2.25 million and the annual growth rate was approximately 3.3%, meaning that in 2011 the projected population was 2.6-2.7 million. However, in 2009 the approved master plan of Aleppo[9] included 17,000 hectares in the urban area, and the population of this area is around 3.1 million.[10] Annual population growth in the 22 informal settlements is approximately 4%.[11] Close to 40% of the population lived in these settlements in 2010, and they covered 37 percent of the city's area.[12]

After the onset of the war in Aleppo, the city's demographics as well as its physical structure dramatically changed. A distinction must be made between the eastern and western parts of Aleppo. The damage caused to regime-held, western areas is almost exclusively due to exchanges of fire on the frontlines. Thus, the damage is concentrated at the edges of the regime areas. The damage in the eastern opposition-held areas is widespread because of the government's air power.

Out of the 125 districts of the city assessed in 2014, 20 are heavily damaged, 61 partially damaged and the remaining 44 are almost undamaged.[13] Nearly all heavily damaged districts are in the eastern (opposition-held) areas whereas the 44 unaffected districts are mainly in the regime-held areas. In early 2014, the *Masaken Hanano* and the surrounding areas (north-east Aleppo) were the most affected with 85.7% of shelters damaged.[14] When considering the overall destruction in the city, housing settlements are the most affected with 78% either heavily damaged (not habitable) or partially damaged (needing repairs but habitable).[15]

Not surprisingly the extent of the damage and the government's systematic bombardment of the rebel-held areas has caused massive displacement. More than half of the population was displaced by November 2013. Of this number, roughly 50% left the governorate while the other half found shelter within it.[16] According to another estimate, the remaining 1 million in the government-held areas received around 550,000 Internally Displaced People (IDP), meaning the number of residents increased. In the devastated rebel-held areas, the

population decreased from 1,930,000 to 357,000, half of whom were IDPs from outside Aleppo.

Some 90 per cent of the drinking water in Aleppo comes from the Euphrates.[17] This supply line is still functioning. The cause of water shortages in the city is the damage to pipes within the city. As of September 2014, three out of four main pipes has been destroyed.[18] According to a survey conducted only in the eastern part of the city in early 2014, lack of drinking water is the top household need that is lacking.[19] In August 2015, according to residents, the government confirmed its inability to provide water and urged people to dig wells.[20]

## WILL PEOPLE RETURN TO ALEPPO?

Starting in September 2014, the 'Aleppo Project' at the Center for Conflict, Negotiation and Recovery conducted several surveys asking a variety of questions of Aleppines living inside and outside the city. One of the questions for those who had left the city was whether they considered "going back to Aleppo in the near/far future?" As the table below shows, 95% of the survey was done online through Syrian support and service network websites and freely available Google.doc forms. The results show that three-quarters of the respondents plan to go back to Aleppo at some point in the future. Some of the popular reasons were: "to rebuild the city," "because they belong there" and "for family reasons."

Besides some possible flaws and biases in the survey results, the most important factor to be kept in mind is the possibility that the Aleppines might change their views depending on the prolongation of the war in Syria, security conditions in Aleppo and the conditions of their new life. The longer the war rages, the more people will settle abroad, and their enthusiasm to return will likely diminish even though currently most want to return.

| **Location** | **Survey mode & date** | **Respondents** | **Yes** | **No** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kilis refugee Camp (Turkey) | Face to face, Dec. 2014-Jan. 2015 | 44 | 44 | 0 |
| Online survey | Online/Feb. 2015 | 481 | 403 | 78 |
| Online Survey | Online, Dec. 2014-Jan. 2015 | 39 | 19 | 20 |
| Online Survey | Online/Feb. 2015 | 327 | 204 | 123 |
| | | 891 | 670 | 221 |
| | | 100% | 75.2% | 24.8% |

Table 1. Do you consider going back to Aleppo in the near/far future?"
*Source: The Aleppo Project, 2015*

## RESETTLEMENT IN ALEPPO: INEVITABLE CONFLICTS

One of the questions when it comes to the return of refugees or IDPs after the end of the conflict is: Where will they return? Even if some Aleppines find

better lives abroad and decide not to return, the city is likely to be a potential destination for many returnees. The list of returnees includes a percentage of Aleppines who left the province, which was estimated to be between 900,000 and 1,000,000 in early 2014.[21] It will also include some of the city residents who moved to the countryside, believed to number around 700,000.[22] Furthermore, many job-seekers will head to the capital of the north. The local government needs to provide housing for the newcomers, but it will be impossible to properly accommodate everyone. Kabul, for instance, after the cessation of war, grew from 500,000 in 2001 to 3.2 million in 2012 becoming the 5th fastest growing city in the world.[23] It is very likely that Aleppo may face a similar reality.

Even before the conflict 40% of the population of Aleppo lived in slums.[24] The city authorities had a budget of some 200 million USD and were unable to integrate the slum population economically, socially or politically. Even in the master plan of 2009, there were no clear solutions to at least three problems: 1) the concentration of industries in the eastern side of the city, 2) the future of 22 informal settlements and 3) the social cohesion of Aleppo as a whole, which was riven by an east-west divide.[25] Due to the war, the investment needed to reconstruct the city is much higher. The reconstruction of Aleppo will require some 7-9 billion US$.[26] Hence, any reconstruction process should be managed through some type of cooperation between local and international actors.

Land disputes are another looming problem. Two factors, particularly present in Aleppo, may exacerbate the situation: the high number of IDPs and informal settlements. Depending on the duration of the war, some of the resettled IDPs, who number about 550,000 in the western part and 175,000 in the eastern part, might claim properties they occupied as refugees. This is less likely to happen on the western side because there are no slums, the legal status of settlements is mostly indisputable and the level of destruction is low. This is not true for the eastern side. Land disputes will be aggravated by the fact that there is massive damage, almost all the informal settlements lack any form of legal registration of property and many IDPs have established a life there. What adds to all this is the absence of professionals in the field who can settle these disputes. For instance, before the war there were 2000 judges in Aleppo. According to a Syrian expert, even if all 2000 were to return to the city, this would not be a sufficient number to settle land disputes.[27]

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a wide range of factors that the government should consider when reconstruction starts. Below I will discuss two policy recommendations that are

likely to help the government solve the urban-rural imbalance and deal with the informal settlements issue:

a) Urban-Rural Development

Equal urban-rural economic development should be one of the government's post-war reconstruction objectives. To stem the massive inflow to the city, the government should prevent the concentration of wealth in major cities, such as Aleppo, and invest in the countryside. To some degree urban migration is inevitable – globally, the population is moving to cities as rural economies require less labour and offer fewer opportunities.[28] But if Syria is to develop a diversified and successful economy, it will need to invest in agriculture.

Agriculture was the largest contributor to Syrian GDP in the 1960s (38% in 1963).[29] However, the percentage declined over time reaching 23% in 2003 and 17% in 2011.[30] In theory, this shift in economic focus is not necessarily bad. In Syria, however, in the past decade, the focus shifted from supporting traditional sectors such as agriculture (including agriculture-based industries), towards supporting the service sector, primarily tourism and construction.[31] This was the outcome of the government plan for a social market economy. Between 2004 and 2009, average annual GDP growth was 5.9 per cent. This number however does not capture the birth of a "new business elite" – essentially a very corrupt group of crony capitalists who captured much of this economic growth.

Growth rates do not tell us much about the distribution of wealth or the extent of poverty. In 2007, 12.3% of the population (2,358,000 million people) were in extreme poverty. Another 22% were in the bracket just above and were facing a possible fall into extreme poverty.[32] The population living in slums and the countryside, where most of the people either directly or indirectly rely on agriculture,[33] make up the bulk of poor Syrians. Geo-spatial studies have found that links between geographic location, climate, water availability and soil degradation have impacted poverty levels. Not surprisingly, data suggests that higher income areas that rely on agriculture are located in irrigated or higher-rainfall areas in Syria.[34]

While it is important for the Syrian government to invest in this sector, it will face obstacles. To develop a successful agriculture sector - like that in neighbouring Turkey - Syria will have to reform land use, adopt more effective low-water-use, drip irrigation and re-establish extension and credit networks that were dismantled in the 2000s and have now been destroyed by war. But a united Syria would be one of the few nations in the Middle East that could develop a genuinely diverse economy and capture export markets in an area of growing populations. There would also be vast challenges, like the worsening impact of global warming, more reliance on rivers controlled by

Turkey, lack of foreign investment, insufficient exporting experience and continuing insecurity.

| Country | GDP/ capita | Irrigated land (%), in 2011 | Agricultural exports (USD million) | | Agricultural imports (USD million) | | Share of agriculture in the GDP (2010) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 2007 | 2008 | 2007 | 2008 | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Syria | 2,808[35] | 10.1 | 2,464 | 760[36] | 1,884 | 2,807 | 17 |
| Turkey | 10,135 | 13.1 | 6,542 | 10,564 | 7,251 | 10,245 | 9.5 |
| Jordan | 4,370 | 9.6 | 762 | 1056 | 2,012 | 2,799 | 3.4 |
| Lebanon | 8,755 | | 374 | 445 | 2,852 | 2,198 | 4.3 |

Table 2. Agricultural data in Syria, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon in 2010. Source: World Bank unless otherwise stated.

Syria has not been successful in modernizing its agriculture under the Assads. Up until 2010, only 10.1% of agrarian lands were irrigated, and these used wasteful open systems rather than drip irrigation.[37] The transformation of agricultural lands to grazing as well as desertification due to land mismanagement were problems before the conflict.[38] The several droughts that hit Syria in the past decade resulted in massive migrations and declines in agricultural production. Around 1.5 million people moved to cities to find jobs.[39] Some 800,000 rural people had lost their livelihoods by 2010.[40] The value of agricultural exports dropped from 2,464 USD million to 760 USD million between 2007 and 2008.[41]

## UPGRADING THE INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

It is in the interest of cities to prevent the growth of slums or to upgrade them to proper housing settlements because the problems that come with slums affect the region as a whole.[42] There are numerous examples of successful and failed settlement upgrades. One option that the post Syrian war government could consider is developing a decentralized financial system that would enable each municipality to undertake the upgrading process within a general strategy, supervised by the central government. This would be a major challenge for Syria because of the long tradition of strong, and slow central authority. Nevertheless, Bolivia's post-1994 experience, when it introduced the Law 1551, is instructive. The law set up a national legal framework which enabled local communities to participate in budgeting and expenditure control.[43] The participation of the "slum community" is vital for Aleppo due to its strong cultural particularities. At least in Aleppo, one of the advantages that these communities have is strong local leadership and governance.[44]

The minimum the government can do is to create a legal framework for settling possible disputes in a consistent manner.[45] It is likely that slums will

proliferate in Aleppo with lightning speed and neither the government nor cooperating bodies will be able to fully control the situation. Alternatively, authorities should draft a plan that enables citizens to build settlements in a way that can later be upgraded to proper settlements. In fact, the *maditnatuna*[46] initiative, before the war, recommended that the government "upgrade [the informal settlements] by legalization and provision of public space, education and community facilities."[47]

To implement such a massive plan, the Syrian government will need human resources at a time when many people have fled the country. In the framework of internal or external mobility, the skilled and trained have better chances of surviving. Four years after the Syrian conflict began, many skilled workers have left the country, searching for a better life. The longer the war continues, the further these Syrians will go and the more settled they will be. Rebuilding Syria will require skilled workers, and if there is a lack of such human resources, the government in cooperation with other bodies should have a program for capacity building.

In conflict studies, this aspect occupies an important place. Ideally, this process of capacity building should start *before* the end of the conflict, but in cases likes Syria's where the end of the war is not foreseeable, convincing potential funders that such planning is important is difficult. In theory, capacity building is not actually building from scratch but expanding on what already exists and investing in people's abilities. Conceptually, this process is linked to empowerment: moving from "I/we *cannot* effect desired change" to "I/we *can*."[48]

In the Syrian case, due to the prolongation of the conflict and the increasing brain drain, this empowerment process should precede any major ceasefire by keeping skilled workers in the region or helping new ones to emerge. A wide range of experts in Beirut emphasized that Syria will need skilled workers after the war including urban planners, architects, managers and doctors to manage the reconstruction process in the country.[49] A good example of this is doctors in Aleppo. As of May 2014, the city had just 40 remaining doctors, down from 2000 before the war. There were just fifteen surgeons to undertake the 1500 operations needed each week.[50] There are no statistics about lawyers and judges, who would play a fundamental part in land disputes. More than 90 judges are believed to have escaped to Turkey. This makes up 7 per cent of the number of judges before the war, and the remaining ones are in regime-held areas.[51]

## CONCLUSION

Post-conflict reconstruction will be one of the most, if not the most, challenging task for Syrians in their modern history. The likelihood is that

post-conflict Syria will be dominated by small, almost autonomous units that will be controlled by militias that may or may not recognize any central government. Local authorities are likely to have a high degree of independence and almost no central oversight. The legal system will be even weaker than before and institutional capacity to manage the economy severely diminished.

Post war economies often experience rapid growth – although there is an element of the "dead cat bounce" to this as their economies have nowhere to go but up. Afghanistan experienced 8.7% average annual growth between 2003 and 2011.[52] In Syria, much of the growth will come from reconstruction funding to rebuild housing and infrastructure. This is an important moment to assess the wider needs of the economy and the importance of rural development alongside industry and services.

Most countries suffer from a continuation of cronyism and corruption; indeed this often gets much worse with the insertion of vast amounts of lootable aid. Syria lacks an appropriate legal system or any other checks on corruption and may well fall victim to the same problems that have recently plagued Afghanistan and Iraq. Avoiding all these problems will not be possible. However, starting to think about reconstruction as early as possible will help the country be better prepared for the coming post-war challenges.

ENDNOTES

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[24] "Informal Settlements in Aleppo: Rapid Profiles," p. 8.

[25] Saad and Stellmach, pp. 120-129.

[26] Author's interview with a Syrian architect.

[27] Author's interview with a Syrian architect.

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[31] Haitham Joud, the main force behind the Syria Holding Company, believed in three priorities: trade, tourism and then industry (M.J. Barout, *العقد الأخير في تاريخ سورية: جدلية الجمود والإصلاح* (The Last Decade of Syrian History: the Dialectic of Stalemate and Reform), Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 2012, p. 75. In 2007, the director of the Central Bank said that economic reforms were aimed at moving Syria "from an oil economy to one based on banking, services and tourism."

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**Հալէպի Ճարտարապետական Վերակառուցումը**

(Ամփոփում)

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Սուրիոյ մէջ շարունակուող հակամարտութիւնը բազմաթիւ քաղաքներ ծանրօրէն աւերակեց: Պատմութիւնը կը հաւաստէ, սակայն, որ մեծ քաղաքներ - ինչպէս Հալէպը - չեն մեռնիր: Ընդհակառակը, անմիջապէս որ բրտութեան ալիքը դադրի, լայնածիր վերակառուցման աշխատանաքներ կը սկսին հոն:

Հեղինակը կ'արծարծէ Հալէպի վերակառուցման ծրագրերը: Ան կ'ընդգծէ որ վերակառուցման ծրագիրը պէտք է լաւապէս սերտուի, մտածուի եւ քննարկուի՝ պատերազմի աւարտէն ***առաջ***: Հեղինակը կը հիմնաւորէ իր այս տեսակէտը՝ բերելով օրինակները նախորդ փորձերու, ինչպիսիք են Սարայէւօն եւ Պէյրութը: Զեկոյցը կը մատնանշէ որ յետ-պատերազմեան շտապ վերակառուցումը բազմաթիւ ընկերային, տնտեսական եւ ճարտարապետական բարդութիւններ յառաջացուցած է, որոնցմէ վերոյիշեալ երկու քաղաքները ցարդ կը տառապին: Հեղինակը կը քննադատէ նման շտապողական եւ ոչ-խորապէս քննարկուած վերակառուցումը, ուր նախապատուութիւն կը տրուի տնտեսական շահերու, մինչ նախկին բնակչութեան մեծ շերտ մը կը մնայ դուրս, եւ մինչ շինարարական ընկերութիւնները կը կառուցեն փայլուն, ապակեպատ շէնքեր, անդին նախկին քաղաքաբնակները կը կառուցեն խրճիթներ՝ ու կ'ընդարձակեն քաղաքը:

Հեղինակը, կը միտի Պէյրութի եւ Սարայէւոյի փորձէն մեկնելով յառաջադրել վերակառուցման տարբեր ծրագիր մը Հալէպին: