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Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins

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Principal Findings

What's new? Almost six years after retaking Aleppo, the Assad regime is again largely in control, but the city is a shadow of its former self. Many neighbourhoods remain in ruins from Syrian army shelling and Russian bombing. Militias roam the streets and an informal economy thrives, but there is little else.

Why does it matter? Aleppo was Syria's largest city before 2011 and the hub of production, trade and services in the north. Its revival is key to the area's long-term prosperity and stability. If a city of this importance cannot be rehabilitated, the future of other war-ravaged towns is bleaker yet.

What should be done? Damascus, plus Russia and Iran, could aid Aleppo residents and its formerly vibrant entrepreneurial class by reining in militias, restraining security agencies and regime cronies, and ending the persecution of people accused of opposition links. Large-scale reconstruction is off the table, but small internationally funded "recovery" projects can ease hardship.

Executive Summary

Aleppo offers a glimpse of the grim realities of post-war Syria. It was the country's largest city and its economic engine before the Syrian army and Russian air force bombed entire neighbourhoods into rubble, displacing most of the residents. Many people have yet to return and businesses to recover, as government-linked militias stake out turf, looting homes, demanding bribes and engaging in other forms of predation on those who have remained. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad and its allies are doing little to get the city back on its feet. Business leaders resent the arbitrary rule of state security agencies and the regime cronies in their shadow; many are leaving as an unhealthy economic climate perdures. Although they have shown little appetite for doing so thus far, Russia and Iran have an interest in using their influence to stop unruly militias from extorting residents and stealing property. Those steps would help revive the city.

Fighting came to Aleppo in mid-2012, spreading from the surrounding countryside and splitting the city into zones of regime and rebel control. Rebel-held areas were primarily informal settlements populated by labourers hailing from the hinterlands, while regime-held Aleppo, including primarily the city centre and its western flank, consisted of more affluent neighbourhoods. While the latter part of the city suffered damage, and the quality of public services and access to basic goods declined, an indiscriminate bombing campaign by the regime and its Russian ally destroyed and depopulated entire swathes of the former.

With Russian airpower and Iranian technical advice and ground support, the regime drove rebels out of Aleppo in late 2016 and fully retook the city. Yet the rebels' defeat has not meant a return to stability, let alone prosperity, for Aleppo's inhabitants. Large areas of the city remain in ruins and there is no evidence of a coordinated state vision or effort to rebuild them beyond estimating the number of destroyed buildings.

The security situation remains shaky. Regime forces have primary but not exclusive control of the city, as militias, though nominally aligned with the regime, engage in sporadic clashes with soldiers and one another and harass residents. Rebels are ousted, no foreign player has an interest in renewed intervention to challenge the regime and the population is too exhausted and impoverished by years of war, and too preoccupied with meeting basic needs, to stage another uprising. Moreover, most of the city's inhabitants who were displaced to opposition-held areas or abroad have been unable to return, mainly because they fear either conscription or reprisal for their suspected involvement in the revolt.

Economically and socially, Aleppo is nothing like it was before the war. Regime-allied militias backed by Iran and Russia operate openly in neighbourhoods throughout the city, looting properties and shaking down residents at will. They and the security forces also levy heavy taxes on the city's major economic activities: trade in products flowing in from the outside and lucrative generator monopolies to supplement meagre state electricity provision. These conditions make Aleppo's industrialists, many of whom moved their operations to neighbouring countries in the war's early years, loath to risk reinvesting in their native city. Many of the skilled workers they

formerly employed have also left and the constant threat of conscription facing all young males makes the supply of labour insecure. This situation renders the chances of even a partial return to the city's pre-war economic vibrancy slim.

The Syrian regime lacks a comprehensive plan, much less the capacity, for rebuilding the city, and nothing suggests that international assistance is forthcoming. Neither of the regime's backers, Russia and Iran, has expressed an intent to spend large sums on reconstruction. Western actors remain committed to a national political transition, believing that without it major investment will only reinforce the regime's repressive rule and thereby aggravate the conflict. Some Gulf Arab states, notably the United Arab Emirates, have signalled that they may be prepared to support reconstruction, perhaps hoping to pull Syria out of Iran's orbit and roll back the Turkish encroachment in the north, but they worry about running afoul of U.S. secondary sanctions on dealings with the regime. International organisations have expanded their humanitarian work but struggle to navigate a maze of often incoherent donor limitations on their mandate. They also face scepticism among beneficiaries who often doubt their bona fides, precisely because the regime has assented to their presence.

There is no early prospect of Aleppo – or any other Syrian city heavily damaged in the war – returning to its pre-2011 levels of prosperity or human well-being. Indeed, the experience of this city and other parts of Syria suggest that, rather than restrain militias and security services that exploit average citizens and businesses, the regime has moved to strengthen these elements in order to control society through a mosaic of fiefdoms. At the core of this form of rule is a shift from purely arbitrary predation on local populations during wartime to post-war plunder that sometimes comes with the trappings of legal procedure but is still unaccountable and stands in the way of even a modest recovery.

The city could nonetheless be made more hospitable for its entrepreneurial classes and more liveable for its residents. While large-scale reconstruction aid is out of the question, small internationally funded projects – reviving bakeries, for example, or restoring health facilities and sanitation systems – could help ease suffering, though offering no hope in themselves of bringing about structural change.

A far more consequential step would be for the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran to curb the predation of militias and security agencies, as well as regime cronies acting in the slipstream of, or in collusion with, the men with guns. Damascus has previously taken such action with smugglers and its own security agencies when they overstepped their bounds, while Russia and Iran could rein in militias and security agencies under their sway. At present, without complete control of Syria's borders or territory, the regime lacks key aspects of statehood, meaning that Russia and Iran must periodically prop it up. Helping curb the chaos in Aleppo could relieve this headache for Moscow and Tehran in at least one important locale. Damascus and its foreign allies may be unable to stop the predation entirely, but if they can reduce its severity, they would help the city take a crucial first step toward recovery.

Aleppo/Beirut/Brussels, 9 May 2022

Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins

I. Introduction

The people of Aleppo, Syria's largest city, largely stayed on the sidelines, when the March 2011 uprising erupted and rapidly spread throughout the country.¹ The city's prosperity under President Bashar al-Assad was built upon links to the regime that many Aleppans, regardless of their politics or personal feelings, were reluctant to break.² But in late 2011, regime attacks on rebels around Aleppo spurred demonstrations and clashes with state agents in the city's eastern neighbourhoods, where rural migrants had settled in the preceding decades. In March 2012, the previous year's small, sporadic demonstrations rapidly grew into violent confrontations with regime forces.³

By mid-2012, many neighbourhoods in eastern Aleppo had fallen out of regime control. Damascus retained its grip on the city centre and affluent areas in the west, while rebels associated with the Free Syrian Army, the umbrella organisation of armed groups opposed to Assad, defended neighbourhoods they had seized in the east. Local residents in these rebel-held areas established committees to administer services formerly provided by the state. Rebel successes in this part of the city became a model of how to drive out regime elements and hold territory. Because of these accomplishments and Aleppo's economic and strategic significance, the city became a bellwether for the entire rebel effort.⁴

The regime's response underscored the importance it attached to the city and its immediate environs. As rebels took more of the surrounding countryside, the regime fought fiercely to keep its hold on western Aleppo.⁵ In late 2013, it began rolling barrels and dumpsters packed with explosives out of helicopters, indiscriminately striking civilian homes, hospitals and schools, as well as rebel units.⁶ Russian airpower helped prepare the ground for an eventual regime offensive.⁷ That came in December 2016. It rapidly overwhelmed rebel defences, paving the way for a Russian-mediated

¹ Nada Bakri, "Pro-Assad rally shows Syrian government can still command support", *The New York Times*, 20 October 2011.

² Muhammad Jamal Barout, *The Last Decade of Syria's History: A Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (Beirut, 2012), pp. 372-382 (Arabic). Fear and memories of repression of the Islamist uprising of the early 1980s also played a role in limiting the size of protests in Aleppo in 2011. But these factors cannot fully account for the phenomenon: massive protests occurred in Homs and Hama, cities that saw similar regime brutality in the 1980s.

³ Kheder Khaddour, "Consumed by War: The End of Aleppo and Northern Syria's Political Order", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2017, p. 10.

⁴ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°155, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, 9 September 2014, p. ii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ "Syria crisis: 'Barrel bomb strikes kill 72' in Aleppo province", BBC, 31 May 2015.

⁷ Anne Barnard and Ivan Nechepurenko, "Airstrikes on Aleppo resume as Russia begins new offensive in Syria", *The New York Times*, 15 November 2016.

deal between the regime and the rebels to evacuate the latter and their families to rebel-controlled areas in the Idlib and western Aleppo governorates.⁸

After the evacuation, regime forces and allied militias became the dominant military powers in much of Aleppo, but their rule could hardly be described as creating a stable political or social order. Skirmishes with small rebel groups continued in subsequent years.⁹ These included the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which retained control of most of the city's Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya.¹⁰ Other areas that the regime had lost during the war remained largely destroyed and depopulated for several years afterward.¹¹ There are no systematic plans to rebuild any of them.

Eastern Aleppo provides an example of the new realities in post-war Syria, shedding light on the emerging order in cities recaptured by the regime. It has the greatest number of damaged buildings of any Syrian city.¹² Many other cities have suffered devastation, such as Deir al-Zor and eastern Ghouta, a vast suburban area of Damascus, which saw even higher rates of destruction per hectare than eastern Aleppo, while entire districts of Homs and Hama have likewise been left in ruins.¹³ The predatory relationships that exist in many of these places today – between the regime and allied militias, on one hand, and the population, on the other – emerged in the aftermath of this destruction.

Aleppo's fate also bears on the socio-economic well-being of Syria's entire north. The city was an important economic and administrative centre before 2011. Raw materials and bulk goods flowed through it. The region's residents came to town for

⁸ "What's happening in Aleppo?", BBC, 23 December 2016; "8,500, including 3,000 rebels, leave eastern Aleppo in less than 24 hours", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 16 December 2016.

⁹ For example, the regime fully cleared the largely destroyed al-Zahra neighbourhood of rebels only in March 2020. See "A year of regime control ... al-Zahra neighbourhood in Aleppo is without services or public facilities and locals are seeking aid", *Focus Aleppo*, 6 March 2021 (Arabic).

¹⁰ These neighbourhoods are home to 56,517 residents, 3.5 per cent of the total city population, per UN Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program (HNAAP) data (see Appendix A for detail). Kurdish forces in Aleppo have reached an uneasy accommodation with regime agents and other militias, inverting the power balance in the city of al-Qamishli, where the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) encircle pro-regime forces. Tensions in one locale are frequently mirrored in the other. An army officer told SDF representatives in April 2021 that the army would not intervene on Kurdish forces' behalf in Aleppo if tensions between the SDF and pro-regime forces in al-Qamishli spilled over, implying that the regime would withdraw the protection from other militias it was providing to Kurdish forces in Aleppo. "Struggle for control of Tayy neighbourhood continues ... The regime threatens expulsion of YPG from Aleppo", *Television Syria*, 27 April 2021 (Arabic); and "Responding to tensions in al-Qamishli ... The regime restricts SDF influence in Aleppo", *Enab Baladi*, 15 January 2021 (Arabic).

¹¹ The population of the informal, spontaneously built areas on the city's eastern periphery fell to around 325,000 during 2016 and 200,000 in 2017, rising again to 395,000 in 2018 and 475,000 in March 2021, compared to a pre-war population of 1,342,281. Computed from data shared by the UN HNAAP and "Results of the 2004 General Population Census at the Neighbourhood Level", Central Bureau of Statistics of Syria.

¹² Robert F. Worth, "Aleppo after the fall", *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 May 2017.

¹³ "Syrian Cities Damage Atlas: Eight-Year Anniversary of the Syrian Civil War", REACH Initiative, March 2019. Raqqa, a city in eastern Syria, also saw a higher rate of destruction per hectare than eastern Aleppo. It is presently under SDF control, and thus the regime-militia predation dynamic described in this report does not apply there.

administrative services and advanced medical treatment. Local industrial production generated much of the area's economic growth.

This report analyses how regime and militia rule over what remains of eastern Aleppo prevents a return to stability and a revival of the local economy. It examines the limits of what Western donors can hope to achieve. It also proposes steps the regime and its external sponsors could take to improve conditions. It is based on some 45 interviews conducted in Syria, Lebanon and remotely in November 2020-February 2022, as well as analysis of satellite imagery. It builds on Crisis Group's four previous reports on Aleppo and the north of Syria since the uprising turned into civil war.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°209, *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, 25 November 2019; N°213, *Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib*, 14 May 2020; N°204, *Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, 31 July 2020; and *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs*, op. cit.

II. Unruly Militias and Other Armed Actors

The risk of renewed armed conflict in Aleppo city is remote, as the regime and allied militias are dominant enough to stamp out any coordinated challenge to their authority. Yet the security situation is hardly stable for average citizens. Periodic clashes between militias and predation upon residents remain constant threats.

Pro-regime militias arose during the fight for Aleppo between 2012 and 2017, through both residents' initiatives and security agencies' encouragement. Residents with strong ties to the regime created "popular committees" (*lijan shaabiya*), funded by pro-regime businessmen, many of which later joined the National Defence Forces (NDF), the umbrella group of paramilitaries directed by regime security figures.¹⁵ These militias took on a number of tasks – defending their neighbours, fighting rebels on front lines, smuggling goods into the city for supporters and looting property of regime opponents – often with the support of the regime and its foreign backers, Iran and Russia. As the conflict over Aleppo tapered off, these militias refocused on enriching themselves while retaining ties to their patrons. Militia activity inside Aleppo receded somewhat in 2021, largely because the regime sent many fighters to fronts to the city's north and east. The militias remain a major presence, however, and state security forces, to the extent that they have taken the militias' place, behave in much the same ways.

A. From Cooperation to Destruction

Before 2011, Aleppo was a vibrant economic centre and a primary engine of Syria's economic growth. The city had historically been a hub of commercial activity for the entire region, with business relationships underwritten by trust built between trading and business-owning families over several generations.¹⁶ Trade and, especially, manufacturing grew substantially in the decade preceding the 2011 uprising.¹⁷

This prosperity was a function of collaboration between the city's business elites and economic migrants from Syria's hinterlands, with the latter working in the former's factories and workshops. Although these two groups cooperated and depended on each other, they lived largely apart. The more affluent business families resided primarily in the old city centre and the villas and tower blocks on its western flank, while the migrants built spontaneous, informal settlements, mainly to the city's east, but also extending to the south and south west, in a conurbation colloquially referred

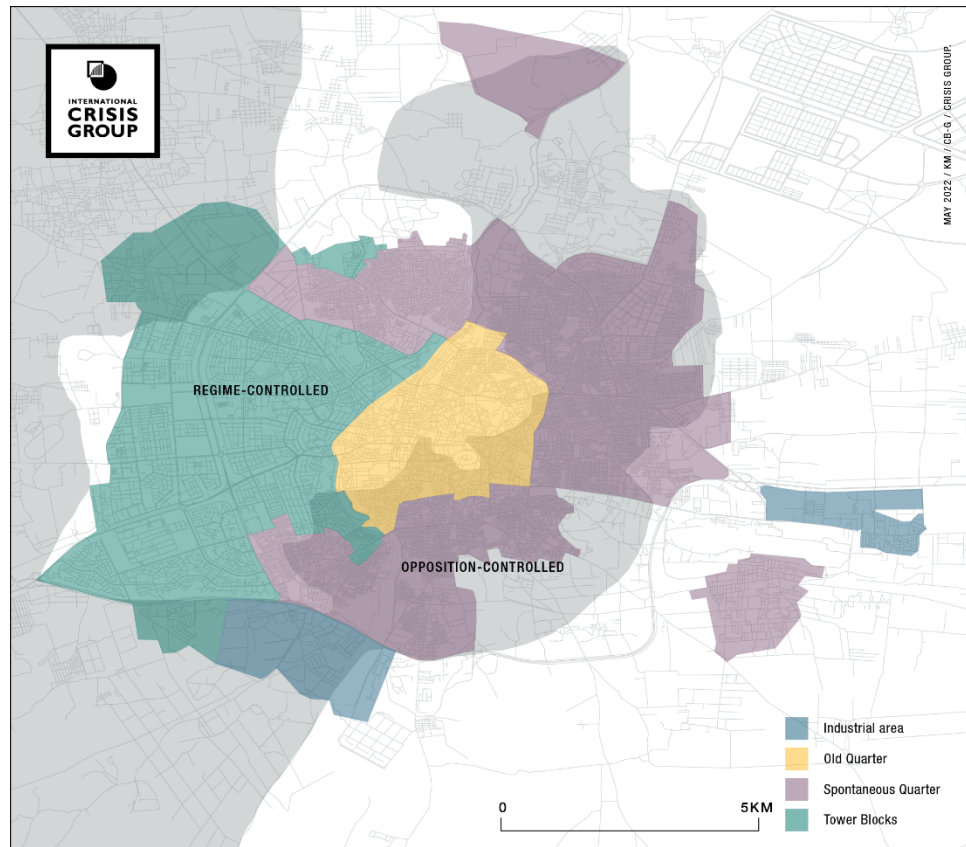
¹⁵ Khaddour, "Consumed by War", op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Aleppo businessman living in Europe, 24 November 2020. See also Françoise Métral, "Alep, le commerce et les affaires", in Thierry Boissière and Jean-Claude David (eds.), *Alep et ses territoires: Fabrique et politique d'une ville (1868-2011)* (Beirut, 2014), pp. 283-296; and Paul Anderson, "The Social Life of Yarn in Aleppo: Trust and Speculation in a Time of Economic Transformation", *ibid.*, pp. 333-350.

¹⁷ Because the merchant class supported the Islamist uprising of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the regime starved Aleppo of business opportunities for several decades. Upon coming to power in 2000, President Bashar al-Assad undid Aleppo's isolation, seeking out Gulf and Turkish investment and awarding many preferential state contracts to local entrepreneurs. As a result, exports from Aleppo airport doubled as a share of national exports between 1990 and 2010. See Barout, *The Last Decade*, op. cit., p. 374.

to as “eastern Aleppo” (see Figure 1). Marriages across the residential barrier were exceedingly rare and the migrants, who were largely of tribal background, brought with them rural patterns of fertility and extended family solidarity.¹⁸

Figure 1. Aleppo Pre-War Neighbourhoods, by Building Type

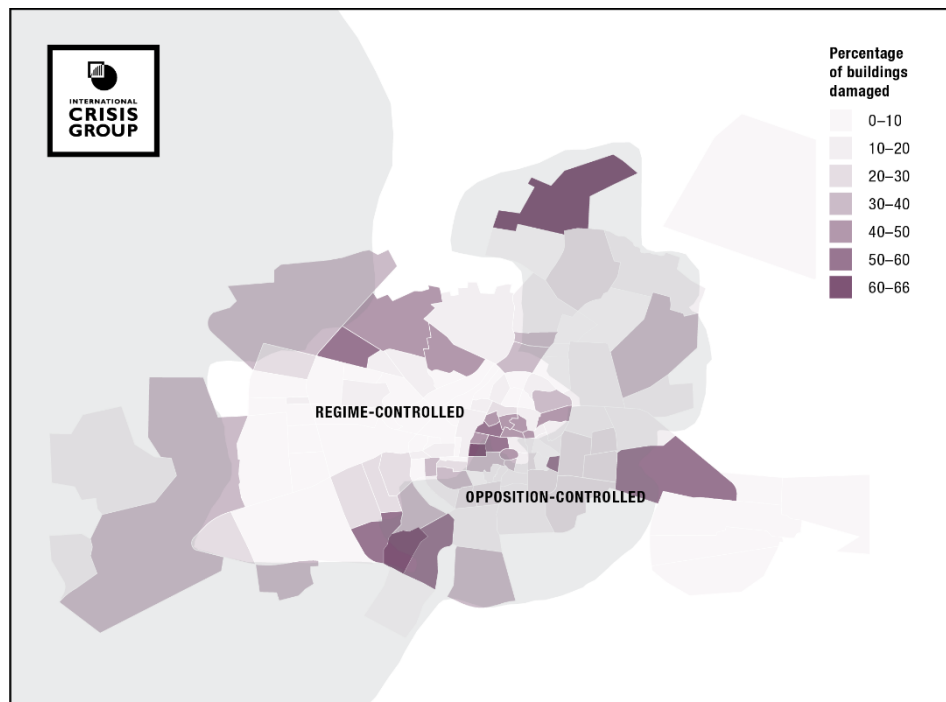


The fighting that took place between 2012 and 2017 tore the city’s social and physical fabric. Battle lines between rebels and the regime largely followed the divide between the city’s affluent western parts and its informally built eastern periphery. The regime and its Russian allies resorted to indiscriminate bombing in areas where the rebels asserted control, but rebels lacked the heavy weaponry and air support to inflict an-

¹⁸ Migrants tended to marry far earlier and have more children than generational city residents. They maintained distinct styles of dress and gender relations, limiting the presence of women in the public sphere more than their generational resident counterparts. The city’s peripheries were not exclusively populated by migrants; many of its less affluent generational residents, including labourers and state employees, were priced out of their native neighbourhoods and moved east. Roughly one quarter of the pre-war population of these neighbourhoods were generational residents. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aleppo, December 2020. See also Khaddour, “Consumed by War”, *op. cit.*, p. 7; and “Informal Settlements in Aleppo: Rapid Profiles of All Informal Settlements in Aleppo”, Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 2009.

where near the same amount of damage on regime-held areas.¹⁹ As a consequence, eastern neighbourhoods suffered the greatest damage during the war (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percent Housing Destroyed in War, by Neighbourhood (September 2016)



The fighting also destroyed businesses' inventory and other physical assets. Industrial areas, though located primarily in the rebel-controlled east, were spared bombing. The regime's primary targets were residential and commercial areas housing rebels and people loyal to them. Nonetheless, wartime circumstances allowed militias to loot industrialists' storehouses.²⁰

Years of violent conflict also destroyed the trust vital to the functioning of the local economy. Not only did trading families take opposite sides during the war, but the looting and exploitation that were enabled by prolonged periods of fighting, and the formation of militias, upended pre-war relations, both within the city's business class and between owners and their employees.²¹

¹⁹ Data for this mapping of destruction come from "Percentage Damage in Residential Area of Aleppo City", UN Institute for Training and Research, 20 December 2016. The report identifies 33,521 damaged structures in the city.

²⁰ The storehouses of regime security forces and public institutions were not spared. Virtually any item that could be resold was taken, and residents recalled the smell of smoke generated by burning the plastic from industrial cables to obtain the copper parts. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aleppo, December 2020.

²¹ One Aleppan businessman bitterly related how a relative recognised one of his family's former labourers at a militia checkpoint and had to pay to pass. Similarly, as trade has come to be dominated by businessmen who rose to prominence during the war, the trust established between generational trading and industrial families, which often allowed for transactions without written contract, has vanished. As the same businessman put it, "You only know your nuclear family anymore in Aleppo". Crisis Group telephone interview, 24 November 2020.

B. *Enduring Insecurity and Predation*

Since retaking eastern Aleppo in late 2016, regime forces and militias have met only limited, sporadic resistance from the population. Rebels in Idlib and the western Aleppo countryside are significantly weakened and have not attempted a major advance on the city since 2016.²² The population chafes at the predation and arbitrary violence of regime forces and militias, yet Aleppo residents lack the capacity to mount a sustained protest campaign, being focused on subsistence and survival.

Following the rebels' defeat, a patchwork of overlapping state security forces has returned to the city. Preeminent among them is the elite 4th Division of the Syrian Army, whose soldiers man the checkpoints on roads leading from the city to other provinces and to opposition areas.²³ Air Force Intelligence has the second most powerful military presence, with heavy involvement in coordinating militia activity and suppressing dissent.²⁴ Several other official security agencies, including Military Intelligence, State Security and Political Security, focus on administrative tasks – executing the governor's decisions, issuing identity documents and handing out business licences.²⁵

While this patchwork of security actors is effective in preventing coordinated challenges to the regime's authority, the state hardly has a monopoly on the use of force in Aleppo. A range of militias linked to the regime and its allies are present throughout the city. In the eastern al-Sukkari neighbourhood, for example, both the Iran-aligned Liwa al-Baqir and Russia-aligned Liwa al-Quds are everywhere in evidence.²⁶ As a practical matter, anyone with a gun and wearing fatigues can exercise authority over average residents; a phrase many residents attribute to militiamen sums it up: "Hey, we are the state!"²⁷ Militia members greatly outnumber police in many of Aleppo's eastern neighbourhoods. Local notables, *mukhtars* (mayor-like administrators), Baath Party members and government employees sometimes act as intermediaries between armed men and residents to resolve disputes over issues like property rights and the size of bribes given to authority figures.²⁸

The presence of so many militias makes the city vulnerable to unpredictable bursts of violence. The groups tend to be aligned with either Iran or Russia and frequently clash with one another – over turf and spoils, at times, and over personal matters, at others.²⁹ They even skirmish sporadically with regime agents.³⁰

²² "What's happening in Aleppo?", op. cit.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020.

²⁴ In late 2020, the regime removed two Air Force Intelligence checkpoints in the city's east. One resident observed that persistent citizen complaints through institutional channels, such as the governor and local administrative councils, about the security agents' depredations were ignored until residents, who are largely of tribal background, threatened to attack the checkpoint over the harassment women suffered when passing through. "Relief in Aleppo's eastern neighbourhoods after removal of Air Force Intelligence checkpoints", *Enab Baladi*, 31 December 2020 (Arabic).

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aleppo, December 2020.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, notable in al-Sukkari, Aleppo, December 2020.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, November 2020.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, police colonel, Aleppo, November 2020.

²⁹ In late 2020, for example, after a Liwa al-Baqir militiaman beat his wife severely, her brothers, who belonged to the National Defence Forces (NDF), brought three trucks full of NDF members to

All these actors, militia members and regime agents alike, prey on the population in various ways. Control over all checkpoints into and out of the city allows members of the 4th Division to levy hefty duties on people and goods passing through. The soldiers often tax the same goods multiple times, even when the owner can produce evidence of prior payment.³¹ The tariffs extracted by state agents keep building materials prices in Aleppo, at least one third higher than in neighbouring Turkey, from which they are imported.³² Currency exchangers are regularly arrested and fined for small technical infractions – or reportedly kidnapped for ransom – by security forces.³³ Additionally, residents allege that municipal officials and security officers take bribes to allow illegal rebuilding, and municipal workers clear rubble from streets of destroyed buildings to enable security agencies and militias to loot houses for valuables.³⁴

Non-state militias engage in similar forms of predation, notably the looting (*taafish*) of private homes.³⁵ Many rank-and-file militiamen hailing from outside the city live for free in seized flats in eastern neighbourhoods, while militia leaders are known to expropriate houses in wealthier western Aleppo. Residents are forced to call upon connections to high-ranking state and security officials (*wasta*) or pay rival militias large sums of money to push these leaders out of their homes.³⁶ Militias also sell oil products smuggled from Syrian Democratic Forces-controlled areas and bread they have obtained from government bakeries (through their ability to skip bread queues, discussed

confront him, prompting three hours of clashes in which regime forces declined to intervene. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aleppo, December 2020.

³⁰ Militias often come into conflict with police, sometimes because of their exploitation of residents, and sometimes because both are fighting over the same goods, whether looted materials or subsidised bread and gas. In June 2021, for example, police arrested men affiliated with the militia of the Al Birri family for drug smuggling. Several days after their arrest, militia members attacked the police station, took its store of weapons and freed the men. Similarly, one resident recalled that NDF members looting homes in eastern Bab al-Faraj drove police away with gunfire and grenades. In some cases, notables are forced to mediate between the two groups to contain violence in their areas. Crisis Group interviews, police officer, Aleppo, June 2021; residents, Aleppo, December 2020.

³¹ A lorry driver said 4th Division members ensure payment by threatening to turn drivers back, meaning that they would have to pay customs fees at each previous checkpoint. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020. “Syrian regime’s 4th Division charging people passing through Aleppo unreasonable transit fees”, *Enab Baladi*, 27 February 2021.

³² Crisis Group interviews, residents, eastern Aleppo, December 2020; building materials merchant, November 2020.

³³ One currency exchanger who had been arrested several times in this manner stated that security forces consider members of his profession “valuable goods”. “Blackmail and arrests according to the jurisdictions of the security branches in Aleppo”, *Enab Baladi*, 10 January 2021.

³⁴ Scrap metal is particularly valuable. The 4th Division controls trade in reinforcing steel bars, a key material for rebuilding, and is able to extract them over the protestations of homeowners. Crisis Group interviews, residents, eastern Aleppo, December 2020.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, notable from al-Sukkari, Aleppo, December 2020. Though recaptured by the regime in late 2016, many destroyed areas in eastern Aleppo were cleared of debris only some four years later, so that regime-aligned militia members and security agents could loot the remaining buildings. Crisis Group interviews, residents, eastern Aleppo, December 2020. The Aleppo City Council was continuing to document rubble removal efforts on its Facebook page in August 2021.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, militiaman in eastern Aleppo, resident of western Aleppo, December 2020.

below), all at a significantly higher price than the actual cost.³⁷ Citizens are generally powerless to challenge the terms set by militia members for fear of retribution.³⁸

Regime security forces have gradually been pushing some militias out of the city since late 2020, dismantling their checkpoints and sending them, in the words of a police colonel, “to confront ISIS groups in the Syrian desert and on hot fronts in Idlib”.³⁹ This move may be aimed at restoring the authority of – and traditional competition between – the aforementioned four regime security branches.⁴⁰ While some residents associate the growth of the security forces’ authority at the militias’ expense with a reduction in predation, for the most part, the city’s inhabitants see little in the way of positive change.⁴¹ Many militias still have a major presence in Aleppo, and to the extent they are gone, security forces have in many cases stepped into their shoes. The militias, meanwhile, are able to protect their members when the regime seeks to arrest one or more of them for criminal activity.⁴² State security forces also harass, detain and extort people simply for having relatives who live in opposition-controlled areas – even those who have completed formal “reconciliation” processes (see below).⁴³

The gradual strengthening of security forces provides a glimpse of the post-conflict order that is likely to crystallise in both Aleppo and Syria more generally. At its core is a shift among armed actors. In the place of armed groups’ arbitrary predation is

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, notable from al-Sukkari, December 2020; Aleppo native, Beirut, 24 December 2020. See also “New developments in case of assault on old man in Aleppo”, *Halab al-Yawm*, 3 November 2020 (Arabic).

³⁸ In March 2021, a NDF militiaman killed one person and sent two more into intensive care when he threw a grenade into a shop selling electronics after arguing with its owner over returning a product for which he had found a lower price elsewhere. “Verbal altercation over a ‘price difference’ ends in a grenade thrown at a shop in Aleppo”, *Enab Baladi*, 7 March 2021 (Arabic). When state authorities hear of cases of militia looting, they often shrug their shoulders. One resident making a report in the Karm al-Myassar neighbourhood recalled being told by police, “May God compensate you”. Baraa al-Ahmad, “Crime increases in Aleppo city in the midst of fragile security situation”, *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 21 February 2021 (Arabic).

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, police colonel, Aleppo, November 2020.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Liwa al-Baqir militia member, Aleppo, June 2021. Crisis Group correspondence, Aleppo native in Turkey, 18 December 2020. The Russia-backed Liwa al-Quds was sent to fight in the east in late 2020, after losing many fighters to desertion because it reduced salaries and began clashing with opposition forces, including members of militiamen’s extended families. “Liwa al-Quds slashes fighters’ salaries and discharges some of them in Aleppo”, *Enab Baladi*, 13 January 2021 (Arabic). The above-cited Liwa al-Baqir member noted that, in 2020 and 2021, the regime prevented his and other Iran-backed militias from holding a Shiite-inflected Ramadan celebration in the city centre that they had held in 2018 and 2019. These celebrations closely resembled those that Hizbollah was holding in parallel in Beirut, leading one Aleppo native to observe, “If not for the national anthem, you wouldn’t feel you’re in Syria”. “Iran puts on ‘Bright Nights of Aleppo’ ... and occupies the city with a ruler, an army, security services and ‘cultural’ gatherings”, *Ayn al-Madina*, 22 June 2018 (Arabic).

⁴¹ Crisis Group correspondence, Aleppo native in Turkey, 18 December 2020. Crisis Group interview, Aleppo native, Beirut, 24 December 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo City Council employee, Aleppo, June 2021; residents, Aleppo, December 2020. Crisis Group correspondence, Aleppo native in Turkey, May 2021.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, *mukhtar*, eastern Aleppo, June 2021. See also Mazen Ezzi, “Post-reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?”, European University Institute Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project, 27 November 2020, p. 15; and “Qatirji appropriates houses on Aleppo’s airport road”, *Enab Baladi*, 4 January 2021.

more organised coercion that, because it is carried out by regime security forces, has the trappings of formal legal procedure. With little pressure on the regime to restrain security services, whether from international actors or organised residents, this sort of formalised predatory rule is unlikely to be disturbed in the short term.

C. *Militias' Social Roots*

The most powerful militias in Aleppo have a range of social bases, but most have grown out of residents' pre-existing family networks. Some, such as the Al Birri clan, were involved in crime, with security service complicity prior to the war, and expanded these activities after its onset. Long active in smuggling, Al Birri members aided the regime in repressing demonstrations during the 2011 uprising.⁴⁴ The largest militia, Liwa al-Quds, formed around Muhammad Said, a Palestinian nationalist militant, who served before the war as an intermediary between the Palestinians in Aleppo's Nayrab refugee camp and the regime.⁴⁵ Similarly, Kurdish extended families in the Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maqsoud neighbourhoods have their own militias.⁴⁶ Several small NDF units are also composed mostly of members from the same extended family or neighbourhood.⁴⁷

Some regime-aligned militias also have ties to outside powers, notably Iran and Russia. Prominent among those linked to Iran is Liwa al-Baqir, a militia composed primarily of al-Baggara tribe members, who received patronage in return for loyalty to the regime before 2011. Many Liwa al-Baqir members were involved in repressing early protests and more recently converted to Shiism. The militia's leader, Khalid al-Hassan, adopted the moniker Haj Baqir, using the honorific "Haj" and a single name, on the model of Hizbollah commanders, rather than a military title.⁴⁸

A second important Iran-linked militia is Faylaq al-Mudafaeen an Halab. The group started out as a Shiite-majority militia in the Aleppo and Idlib countryside – although with a significant portion of its membership drawn from regime-affiliated Sunnis of tribal background. It later gained a reputation for looting and for clashing with other militias and tribal communities, while fighting alongside the regime to expel rebels

⁴⁴ The leader of Al Birri clansmen repressing demonstrators, Zaynu Birri, was killed by rebels in 2012, pushing additional family members into a militia that would become close to Iran during and after the fight to retake Aleppo. Mazen Ezzi, "War of the Aleppan Peripheries", The World Institute, 25 October 2016 (Arabic); and "Iran is present in regime parliamentary candidacies", Television Syria, 27 June 2020 (Arabic).

⁴⁵ Liwa al-Quds oscillated between drawing support from Iran and Russia, in part due to leadership struggles, before aligning more closely with Russia in 2019. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, November 2020. See also "Liwa al-Quds slashes fighters' salaries"; and Ezzi, "War of the Aleppan Peripheries", both op. cit.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, November 2020.

⁴⁷ "Who is Faylaq al-Mudafaeen an Halab?", *Jesr Press*, 10 August 2019 (Arabic).

⁴⁸ Al-Hassan's relative, Omar Hussein al-Hassan, has been a parliament member since 2016. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, November 2020. See also "The tribes in Aleppo and the revolution", *Jesr Press*, 13 July 2019 (Arabic). An Iranian-Russian push and pull is visible in the actions of Liwa al-Baqir. A militia member said the organisation has made renewed attempts, at Iranian insistence, to recruit from Shiite villages in the Aleppo area and incorporate non-Syrian fighters. At the same time, security agencies tied more closely to Russia are trying to limit the influence of Liwa al-Baqir and other Iran-aligned militias. Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, June 2021.

from Aleppo.⁴⁹ It acquired its current name in 2017. Its leader, who is known as Haj Muhsin and rumoured to be Iranian, took the helm after the militia's original leader was killed in a suspicious traffic accident in 2018.⁵⁰

While a few militias do have a stated ideology – for example the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is present in the Kurdish neighbourhoods of Aleppo, dominates the Autonomous Administration in Syria's north east and is associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – it tends to be less important in keeping them together than family ties or issues related to personal security and subsistence.⁵¹ Sometimes, these considerations overlap. For example, joining a militia is both a way of avoiding conscription and, for many, the only way to make money.⁵² A man from al-Shaar neighbourhood, from a rural tribal background, explained that because he could not feed his family of eight on his taxi driver's salary, he allowed three of his sons to join a militia to which other relatives belonged. He said his sons later provided his family part of their salaries and an apartment free of charge. But generational Aleppans – ie, those who belong to families that achieved status through decades of economic and civic engagement – refused to deal with him and accused his family of looting and thuggery.⁵³

Tribal identity can play a role in the formation of, and recruitment into, militias, but it is a secondary factor. As the al-Shaar resident's story suggests, family connections within tribes help pull members into a given militia, but entire tribes rarely align with a certain militia or foreign backer. Liwa al-Baqir, for example, is led by a member of the al-Baggara tribe and heavily associated with it, yet many tribesmen have joined opposition militias.⁵⁴ Other Aleppo tribes are partly associated with opposition factions, but no tribe entirely went with the rebels or stayed with the regime. In general, the regime attempted to retain clientelist links to tribal elders (*wujaha*) to create small pro-regime militias to shield itself from attack by rebels from the same tribe.⁵⁵

The general result of these dynamics on the ground is a reversal of the pre-war social order. Families that held most local economic power for generations have been shunt-

⁴⁹ "Faylaq al-Mudafaeen an Halab: Four 'quarters' of Iranian influence", *Al-Modon*, 30 June 2019 (Arabic).

⁵⁰ "Who is Faylaq al-Mudafaeen?", op. cit.; and "Local defence' in Aleppo lose their founder... and influence?", *Al-Modon*, 4 May 2018 (Arabic). Haj Muhsin emulates the appearance of Hizbollah commanders (a beard and fatigues without insignia showing his rank) and goes to public events alongside the Aleppo governor and Baath Party branch head. He has never spoken in public, fuelling speculation that his accent would give away his Iranian origin. "Faylaq al-Mudafaeen an Halab", op. cit.

⁵¹ "Struggle for control of Tayy", op. cit.

⁵² Joining a regime-aligned militia is a solution to the imminent threat of conscription but does not legally relieve its fighters of the obligation of military service. It does, however, generally allow members to serve closer to home and collect twice an army conscript's salary, as the militia receives Iranian support. "Who is Faylaq al-Mudafaeen an Halab?", op. cit.

⁵³ He noted, "Our men have neither jobs nor education, so they join the pro-Assad forces and militias to support their families, get subsidised bread and oil, and cheaper generator electricity from the militia leaders". Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, December 2020.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aleppo, December 2020.

⁵⁵ "The tribes in Aleppo and the revolution", op. cit. ISIS used similar shielding tactics with tribal leaders in Deir al-Zor. See Faisal al-Mashhour, "Sons of Tribes in Deir al-Zor: From Stability to Revolution, Dynamics of Struggle and Factors of Social Peace", Justice for Life Organisation, July 2017 (Arabic).

ed aside, while a new elite of warlords and militia leaders, primarily from the city's periphery and surrounding countryside, has emerged.⁵⁶ The resentment directed at residents, such as the former taxi driver whose sons fight in militias, reflects the way that war has inverted hierarchies in the city and deepened the divide between generational Aleppans and those of rural background. The former view the economic (and military) power that pro-regime militias now hold as their own birth right. Few generational Aleppans belong to these militias.

A clear indication of this reversal of roles came with the 2020 parliamentary elections, when warlords gained seats at the expense of traditional business figures and regime clients. For instance, Fares Shehabi, an established Aleppo businessman with close ties to the regime, lost his seat. In contrast, Hussam Qatirji, a warlord from the Aleppo countryside, who became central to the oil and wheat trade between regime- and ISIS-controlled areas during the war, won a seat.⁵⁷ Conventional wisdom in the city was that Shehabi lost despite his longstanding ties to Damascus, because he was insufficiently pliable and deferential, while Qatirji won because his economic and military interests are directly aligned with, and subordinated to, those of the regime.⁵⁸ While elections in Syria have a veneer of popular choice, they are in practice controlled by the regime.⁵⁹

D. *International Approaches*

The picture for international reconstruction aid is bleak. The U.S. and European countries have conditioned such assistance on a comprehensive political transition.⁶⁰ Their approach is based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, passed in 2015, which stipulates a roadmap for such a transition. Given the Syrian regime's unwillingness or inability to take even small steps in this direction, such a transition is unlikely short of regime collapse or removal by external military intervention. The support for Damascus from Moscow and Tehran makes these already highly unlikely prospects even more remote.

⁵⁶ An Aleppan businessman living in Europe lamented generational traders' loss of power and described the emergent elite as the "new *shabbih*", using a vernacular term for thugs acting as regime enforcers. Crisis Group WhatsApp interview, 24 November 2020.

⁵⁷ "New blood in the People's Assembly of Syria reflects Russian-Iranian quotas", *Enab Baladi*, 29 July 2020 (Arabic). Similarly, the honorary commander of Liwa al-Baqir, a militia loyal to Iran, was elected for the rural Aleppo governorate and a member of the Al Birri family retained his seat, while the number of established Aleppo businessmen and tribal sheikhs in parliament declined considerably. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020. See also Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, "Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016-2020)", European University Institute Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project, 30 April 2020, pp. 13-20.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aleppo, December 2020; by telephone, May 2021. "New blood in the People's Assembly of Syria reflects Russian-Iranian quotas", op. cit.

⁵⁹ Parliamentary seats are distributed largely at the regime's discretion, and successful candidacies reflect evolving regime patron-client relations. Between intense vetting by the ruling Baath Party and security services and widespread voter irregularities, parliamentarians in effect obtain their seats more through appointment than election. Karam Shaar and Sammy Akil, "Inside Syria's Clapping Chamber: Dynamics of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections", Middle East Institute, 28 January 2021.

⁶⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the issues involved, see Crisis Group Report, *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, op. cit.

Moscow and Tehran have themselves put little effort into reconstruction to date, focusing instead on shoring up their strategic positions in the country. Russian investment consists primarily of contracts for natural resource extraction. Russian private companies have shown little interest in broader investment given the dim prospects of profit in wartime conditions.⁶¹ Iran, facing its own fiscal challenges, has mostly limited itself to undertaking small reconstruction projects that support allied militias.⁶²

U.S. secondary sanctions on Syria, imposed in June 2020, make other states, companies and non-governmental organisations even more reticent to invest in Syria. The 2019 Caesar Civilian Protection Act newly focused prohibitions of material support to, or business transactions with, the Syrian regime on non-U.S. entities. These sanctions' vagueness and breadth have created a climate of over-compliance that has also affected donor governments, commercial entities and NGOs, causing some to avoid even small-scale projects.⁶³ Some Gulf Arab states have signalled that they might be prepared to support reconstruction, perhaps hoping to pull Syria out of the Iranian orbit and roll back Turkish encroachment in the north. But, for now, they are hesitant to take the risk.⁶⁴

The EU's main activity on the ground in Syria has been providing humanitarian assistance, distributed mostly by the UN and international NGOs. Its member states have, so far, stuck to the line of Resolution 2254, requiring substantive political change

⁶¹ Crisis Group Report, *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, op. cit., p. 22.

⁶² Organisations linked to local militias and Iranian allies have been carrying out small development projects for loyalists. Crisis Group interview, real estate broker in al-Shaar neighbourhood, Aleppo, June 2021. Projects include construction of hospitals, provision of medical aid for wounded militiamen and electrification of Nubul and Zahra, Shiite towns on the outskirts of Aleppo. "How did Iran become embedded in Aleppo?", *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 6 November 2020 (Arabic). These tactical steps in Aleppo to support militias advancing Iran's interests contrast to Iran's strategic efforts to put down roots in the country's sparsely populated east through religious conversion campaigns and development of religious and social institutions. Crisis Group correspondence, Iran foreign policy analyst, 8 February 2021. See also "Shia-sation in Deir al-Zor: From the beginning to today", *Deir al-Zor* 24, March 2020 (Arabic).

⁶³ Crisis Group Commentary, "U.S. Sanctions on Syria: What Comes Next?", 13 July 2020. The humanitarian aid situation is in flux, with a tendency toward greater acceptance of so-called resilience work. This change is reflected in language used in UN Security Council Resolution 2585, which mentions the term "early recovery" three times, as well as shifts in the U.S. position, including an April 2021 U.S. Treasury Department clarification of the forms of trade and humanitarian aid the Caesar Act sanctions allow (the act still prohibits large-scale reconstruction investment). UN Security Council, "Resolution 2585 (2021)", 9 July 2021; U.S. Treasury Department, "FAQ 884" and "FAQ 885", 5 April 2021. In November 2021, the Treasury rolled out new authorisations for NGOs to facilitate humanitarian assistance. "US amends sanctions regulations to ease aid delivery in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, 25 November 2021.

⁶⁴ For example, at an October 2021 trade fair in Dubai, the Syrian and Emirati economy ministers discussed how to increase economic cooperation and investment, giving rise to the formation of a Syrian-Emirati Business Council. "Decision to form Syrian-Emirati business council", Syrian Arab News Agency, 20 October 2021 (Arabic); Abbas Al Lawati, "UAE discusses investment with Syria amid foreign policy shift", Bloomberg, 5 October 2021; Giorgio Cafiero and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Where do Gulf states stand on Syria's decade-old conflict?", *Politics Today*, 31 March 2021; and "US sanctions challenge Syria's Arab League return: UAE", *Al Jazeera*, 9 March 2021.

before they will provide support for reconstruction.⁶⁵ There has, however, been a move by EU members to expand aid beyond basic humanitarian needs. Termed “humanitarian plus” or “early recovery”, this aid goes toward basic rebuilding projects, like rehabilitating schools, bakeries and sanitation systems, but stops short of full-scale reconstruction and the international loans and aid for infrastructure redevelopment it entails.⁶⁶ In 2017, the EU high representative for foreign affairs, Federica Mogherini, proposed a “more for more” approach, under which early-recovery programs would be greatly expanded following concrete steps by Damascus toward political inclusion.⁶⁷ This approach has not been fleshed out in detail, much less attempted, in large part because the regime has shown little willingness to reciprocate on even minor issues.⁶⁸

Some international humanitarian organisations have opened field offices in Aleppo. An Aleppo-based representative of one such organisation reported a corresponding palpable improvement of field access, in particular the ability to conduct need assessments and a generally cooperative attitude from local authorities.⁶⁹ Still, eastern Aleppo residents from a range of occupational and social backgrounds expressed to Crisis Group their scepticism that they would benefit from international aid, apparently convinced that the regime captures most of this assistance and directs international organisations’ local staff to distribute benefits only to people in regime-aligned areas.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ While some EU member states have begun to re-establish diplomatic relations – and several, including the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, never formally broke them – influential EU member states have indicated no plans to change this stance. Muriel Asseburg, “Reconstruction in Syria”, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, July 2020, p. 25.

⁶⁶ A July 2021 Security Council vote endorsing “early recovery” and a November 2021 U.S. Treasury Department clarification of a list of allowed early recovery activities opened the door to these forms of aid. Samy Akil and Karam Shaar, “The politics of early recovery aid in Syria. Is it actually reconstruction aid?”, Atlantic Council MENASource (blog), 8 February 2022; U.S. Treasury Department, “FAQ 938”, 24 November 2021. Joint EU-UN early recovery work has begun in several Syrian cities. See the tweet by Dan Stoenescu, head of the EU Delegation to Syria, @DanStoenescuEU, 10:23am, 22 March 2022.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group explored the terms under which rebuilding could proceed in 2018. See Crisis Group Report, *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Asseburg, “Reconstruction in Syria”, op. cit., p. 31. Opposition from the E3 group, comprised of the UK, France and Germany, is a significant factor here. A French diplomat told Crisis Group that the EU and French positions “will not change – no normalisation, no lifting of sanctions and no reconstruction – until a political solution is reached”. Crisis Group telephone interview, 31 March 2022.

⁶⁹ NGOs on the ground must navigate a maze of donor definitions, having to distinguish between degrees of “rehabilitation” and “early recovery” that some support and others eschew. One NGO representative said, “Some donors only accept ‘rehabilitation light’. You can replace a portion of damaged pipe but not the whole pipe. Or they would accept light rehabilitation only for water, sanitation and hygiene. Livelihood support is rarely accepted, but some donors do vocational training. If we want to distribute fertilisers to farmers, some donors consider it early recovery and reject it, while others accept it as an emergency intervention because it’s about securing food”. Crisis Group remote interview, 10 June 2021. International organisations active in Aleppo include Oxfam, Norwegian People’s Aid, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN Development Programme, UN Habitat and UNICEF.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, June 2021. These views tally with the assessment of a range of independent research organisations, namely that Damascus regularly diverts donated resources to its clients and its own purposes. See, for example, “Syria: Major Problems with UN Procurement Practices”, Human Rights Watch, 27 January 2022; “Syria in 2022: New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis”, Center for Operational Analysis and Research, 6 January 2022, p. 9.

III. Navigating Predatory Rule

New forms of governance emerging in post-war Aleppo have reshaped life on the ground. The militias' arbitrary rule, violence and predation create often unpredictable risks and make the environment for inhabitants difficult to navigate. Economic conditions are harsh, with inflation eating away at the value of what meagre incomes residents can earn. Basic services formerly provided by the state, such as electricity, water and sewage disposal, are either absent or of very poor quality. Residents are thus compelled to pay a large portion of their income to private service providers (especially for electricity). All too frequently, they must do without basic services.

Some former residents of Aleppo are returning, but the population remains far smaller than before the war.⁷¹ Returnees come primarily from regime-controlled areas. Aleppans in opposition-controlled Idlib or abroad fear arbitrary detention and abuse due to suspicion that they participated in, or supported, the opposition.

This environment similarly affects the economy and housing markets. The entrepreneurs who made Aleppo an engine of Syria's economic growth in the decade before 2011 are among those most reluctant to return. Those who supported the opposition cannot return, while those who remained neutral or sided with the regime cannot see a way to turn a profit in a city deprived of its labour force and run by militias and security services. When former residents of the city's heavily damaged eastern part do attempt to return, they encounter administrative barriers to rebuilding their homes, and militias pressing them to sell their houses for prices highly unfavourable to the owners or outright confiscating their properties.

A. *Living Conditions*

Signs of poverty are more evident today among Aleppo residents than in the immediate aftermath of the regime's reconquest. Perhaps the most important factor in the deterioration of living conditions – both in Aleppo and throughout the country – is the lira's collapse. The Syrian currency has lost 85 per cent of its value since Aleppo was retaken in 2016 and nearly 99 per cent since early 2011.⁷² War has made Syrians rely on imported goods even more than before 2011, so the lira's devaluation has made meeting basic needs a struggle for much of the population. To make matters worse, pressures on state finances have led to cutbacks in state subsidies for goods, on which most of the population depends; a January 2022 government directive trimmed by 15 per cent the roll of citizens eligible for subsidised goods, including food and fuel, with further cuts planned.⁷³ Even Syrians receiving money from relatives abroad find that many products are unavailable in markets.⁷⁴

⁷¹ UN H NAP data show that the number of residents and returnees (residents who left and returned to Aleppo during war) rose from 1.11 million in 2017 to 1.45 million in 2021; the number of internally displaced persons (Syrians from outside of Aleppo living in the city) fell from 465,000 to 170,000 over the same period.

⁷² The black market lira-to-dollar exchange rate stood at around 3,600 in late January 2022, compared to roughly 500 when Aleppo was retaken in late 2016 and 50 in 2011. "US dollar exchange rates", SP Today, 16 February 2022.

⁷³ One stipulation was that only cars made before 2008, and with small engines, remained eligible for subsidised fuel, raising demand for these smaller, older cars; the price of one popular 2008 model

One such product is government-subsidised bread. People throughout Syria wait in lines for several hours to buy the loaves, whose quality has deteriorated following a national wheat shortage.⁷⁵ Subsidised bread is sold for 250 lira (\$0.07) per 1.1kg bag, while unsubsidised bread costs 1,350 lira (\$0.38) for the same quantity.⁷⁶ One reason for the shortages at government bakeries is that much of the bread produced there is diverted. Among the culprits are police, security officials and militia members, who skip queues via “express” lines, and private vendors who sell the bakeries’ bread outside the premises for multiples of the subsidised price, often in plain sight of security officials and police.⁷⁷ (Hours-long queues alongside “express” lines are also visible at petrol stations.⁷⁸)

Much of the city’s physical infrastructure remains in ruins. Al-Kindi University Hospital, Syria’s largest pre-war medical facility, exemplifies this problem. Taken over by rebels in 2013 and destroyed by regime bombing, the hospital has since been looted for metal and supplies and sits idle; most qualified doctors have left and those remaining lack medical supplies.⁷⁹ In addition, buildings damaged in fighting, primarily by regime and Russian air bombardment, routinely tumble down and kill people still living in them. A 2019 government study found that thousands of residential buildings are in danger of imminent collapse. In December 2021, state authorities staged emergency evacuations of three buildings that had sustained major damage during the war; two of them crumbled on their own before workers could knock them down.⁸⁰

The electricity grid and generation capacity were also badly damaged in the war and have yet to be repaired. In western Aleppo, residents are entitled to state-provided electricity for half the day, on a three-hours-on, three-hours-off schedule. This schedule is frequently interrupted in winter peak demand months, when oil supplies run out and the poorly rebuilt power grid breaks down. Much of the city’s eastern part receives only a few hours of state-provided electricity a day under ideal conditions.⁸¹

jumped 10 per cent overnight in used car markets. Abdallah al-Bashir, “Syrian regime excludes 596,000 families from subsidies”, *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 30 January 2022 (Arabic); “Decision to exclude from subsidies ignites rise and fall in Syrian auto market”, Halab Today TV, 11 February 2022 (Arabic).

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, November 2020; Beirut, 24 December 2020. Horse-drawn carts operate on some former public transit lines because animal fodder, unlike petrol, is cheap and regularly available. “Absence of fuel in al-Assad regions pushes Syrians to use unfamiliar means of transport”, *al-Durar al-Shamiya*, 3 April 2021 (Arabic).

⁷⁵ “Syria: Bread Crisis Exposes Government Failure”, Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2021.

⁷⁶ When announcing the withdrawal of subsidies from 10 per cent of recipients, a government official noted that the full cost per kilogram of bread is 1,800 lira (\$0.50). “Syrian regime government defines bread price for those excluded from subsidies”, Syria TV, 1 February 2022 (Arabic).

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, government bakery employee, Aleppo, December 2020. See also “With the spread of mobile bread sellers, ‘supported’ allowances shrink in Aleppo”, *Enab Baladi*, 2 February 2021 (Arabic).

⁷⁸ “‘Connections’ in distribution of petrol in Aleppo”, *Halab al-Yawm*, 19 December 2020 (Arabic).

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Health Directorate employee, Aleppo, December 2020.

⁸⁰ “Aleppo governorate decides to evacuate ten thousand buildings in danger of collapse”, *Enab Baladi*, 4 February 2019 (Arabic); “24 families escape death, collapse of cracked buildings in Aleppo’s al-Salhin after evacuation of their residents”, *Hashtag Syria*, 27 December 2021 (Arabic).

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, November 2020. See also “Electricity in Aleppo city: Connections, protection money and bribery”, *Focus Halab*, 24 November 2020 (Arabic).

Residents thus turn to private generator operators to secure electrical power. The first generators were set up in 2013 by NDF members, but today many are run by whichever armed group is dominant in the neighbourhood. Russia- and Iran-backed militias control the electricity market in eastern and central Aleppo; Kurdish family militias do the same in Sheikh Maqsoud; and Military Intelligence provides power to the Halab Jadida neighbourhood, where its headquarters are located.⁸²

Many labourers and state employees spend a significant fraction of their salaries on electricity. Mid-level government employees are paid salaries of between 60,000 and 70,000 lira (\$17 to \$19) per month and manual labourers earn between 3,000 and 10,000 lira (\$1 to \$3) per day. The amount of generator power needed to run basic electric appliances typically costs about 240,000 lira (\$70) per month.⁸³ Of course, residents have other expenses than just the power supply.

Average residents of Aleppo and business owners alike complain about the pricing by generator operators, who charge consumers multiples of the state-set tariffs for supplemental electricity and frequently provide far fewer hours of coverage than agreed, while demanding additional payment to repair broken equipment.⁸⁴ Fares Shehabi, a prominent Aleppo businessman, who is not involved in the generator economy, expressed this frustration publicly in January 2021, claiming that the real goal of state rationing policies is to promote the business of generator operators. He went so far as to compare the state-run electricity company to ISIS, citing the generator economy's negative impact on the city's business climate and people's livelihoods.⁸⁵

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, private generator operator, eastern Aleppo, June 2021; residents, Aleppo, December 2020. Independent operators often pay protection money (*atawat*) to militias dominant in a particular neighbourhood for permission to operate there. "Electricity in Aleppo city", op. cit.

⁸³ Whereas state-provided electricity is metered and billed according to actual consumption, private generator electricity in Aleppo is sold at a flat weekly rate. Prices are set according to the maximum amount of electricity available to a consumer at any one time, measured in amperes. The cap and hence the weekly cost of a subscription, is determined by the strength of a circuit breaker that the generator operator installs for every customer. Crisis Group interviews, private generator operator, eastern Aleppo, June 2021; residents, Aleppo, November 2020. For background, see "Owners of generators allege fuel price increases – prices of amperates exhaust Aleppo residents", *Enab Baladi*, 8 February 2021 (Arabic); and "Cement price rises in Aleppo and building and reconstruction activity retreats", *Enab Baladi*, 3 January 2021 (Arabic).

⁸⁴ See, for example, "Owners of generators allege fuel price increases", op. cit.

⁸⁵ "Shehabi attacks the regime with sharp words and deadly poisoning reaches Tartous and al-Latakia", Television Syria, 5 January 2021 (Arabic). While the electricity company's inner workings are not public, residents said a prominent militia leader claimed that electricity, which they believed arrived from the public grid, in reality came from a generator he operated and for which he demanded payment. On their telling, state employees were powerless to stop him because of the well-armed militia behind him. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020. Such behaviour has also been widely reported in the local press. See "Collusion between electricity company employees and amperate contractors in Aleppo", *Halab al-Yawm*, 21 January 2021 (Arabic); "Electricity in Aleppo city: Connections, duties and bribery", op. cit.; and Mustafa Abu Shams, "Picture of abandoned Aleppo", *Al-Jumhuriya*, 21 April 2021 (Arabic). Shehabi reiterated this criticism in January 2022, when he attacked the government in a Facebook post claiming that the amount of money spent by Aleppans monthly on generator electricity would be sufficient to build a ten-megawatt power plant. "Fares Shehabi: 'When will we learn that the hazelnut [half-solution] is no solution?'", *Snack Syrian*, 22 January 2022 (Arabic).

Yet the strain that electricity prices place on Aleppans' budgets is also a function of the lira's collapse. The market rate is around 10,000 lira (\$2.78) per ampere per week for eight hours of electricity daily.⁸⁶ Based on a World Bank study of the generator economy in Lebanon and market diesel prices in Aleppo, a generator operator would have to charge 6,100 lira (\$1.69) to break even.⁸⁷ Generator operators are thus enjoying margins of 39 per cent, a tidy profit, but not the many multiples of their costs that residents allege.

In other words, while citizens are at least partly mistaken to blame generator operators for high prices, they certainly face hardship in paying. Moreover, this analysis suggests that even generator operators face extremely high costs as a result of the lira's falling value and their dependence on imports for nearly all inputs to generate electricity.

These conditions are not unique to Aleppo. Long bread and fuel lines are regular sights in Damascus and many other cities, and similar shortages of electricity are common throughout the country.⁸⁸ Militias and security forces dominate daily life and compete with one another in other places as well. Iran-backed militias jostle with regime security forces in Deir al-Zor, for example, and a May 2021 dispute over grain profits between an NDF leader and security force members in the Hama countryside led the latter to burn acres of crops.⁸⁹ The armed actors' predation is less severe in areas that never fell out of regime control, but it is not entirely absent. In the Damascus suburb of Jaramana, for example, the government removed checkpoints that were sources of illegal profit for security forces in early 2019, but militias and security officers are still extracting duties on trade, particularly in construction materials.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ The price jumped from 2,500 lira per ampere per week for eight hours daily in late 2020 to 5,000 lira in early 2021, due to an increase in world diesel prices and the fall in the lira's value. Further increases in the local diesel cost pushed the rate to 10,000 in June and 15,000 in December 2021. Crisis Group interview, private generator operator, eastern Aleppo, June 2021. See also "Shehabi attacks the regime with sharp words", op. cit.; "Amperates for 10,000 lira in Aleppo: Exploitation or crisis?", *Business to Business Syria*, 3 April 2021 (Arabic); and "Aleppo: Rise in nightly amperate prices pushes citizens to cancel them", *Enab Baladi*, 10 April 2021 (Arabic); "Rise in amperate prices in Aleppo push residents to cancel their subscriptions", *al-Hal*, 30 December 2021 (Arabic).

⁸⁷ See Appendix A for details of these calculations.

⁸⁸ Generators are not in widespread use in central Damascus but are commonly found in the suburbs, many of which receive only a few hours of state-provided electricity per day. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February 2022. See also "Bill for 'amperates' and diesel stops the work of workshops and artisans in eastern Ghouta", *Enab Baladi*, 13 October 2021 (Arabic); "Electricity crisis makes Syrians face the high cost of alternatives", *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 4 January 2022 (Arabic). Homs also receives only several hours of power per day, leading the governor to publicly criticise the electricity minister for depriving the city of its fair share of electricity. "Homs governor attacks the Syrian government because of electricity ... 'the situation's bad!'", *al-Hal*, 26 December 2021 (Arabic).

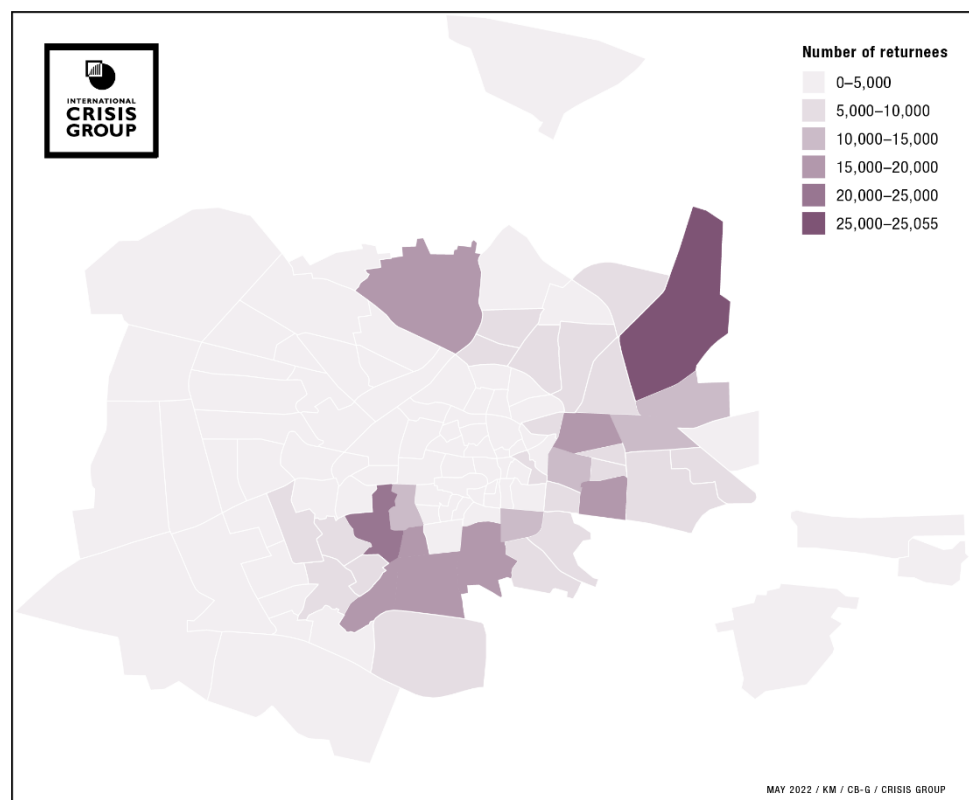
⁸⁹ "Deir al-Zor, victim of militia extortion", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 December 2020 (Arabic); and "Dispute between regime-affiliated militias deepens wounds of citizens in Hama countryside", *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 17 May 2021 (Arabic).

⁹⁰ "Damascus: Jaramana is cleaned of al-Assad checkpoints and fears continued theft and thuggery", *Zaman al-Wasl*, 4 March 2019 (Arabic).

B. *Barriers to Return*

The difficult living conditions and predation discussed in the preceding sections make return impossible or very unattractive for many Aleppo residents who were displaced by war. Nonetheless, some people have returned to the city's east (see Figure 3), primarily from other regime-controlled areas of Syria. The eastern neighbourhoods' population fell from 1.3 million in 2004 to 220,000 in January 2017, when the regime retook them; approximately 310,000 residents have since returned. By contrast, the population of the central neighbourhoods rose from about 350,000 in 2004 to 545,000 in January 2017. Since this area never fell out of regime control, it experienced far less displacement and acted as a refuge for many residents fleeing violence. Only 26,000 former residents have returned since 2017. The population of the old quarters in the middle of the city fell from about 405,000 in 2004 to 300,000 in January 2017 and has since risen by about 80,000.⁹¹

Figure 3: Returnees to Aleppo by Neighbourhood (January 2017-March 2022)



But return is dangerous for the majority of Aleppo's displaced, who during the war moved to Turkey or to Idlib and other rebel-controlled areas of the north west. The mere fact of having lived outside regime-controlled areas exposes returnees to suspicion of sympathising with, aiding or actively participating in rebel activities. This suspicion can be pretext for arrest or exploitation.⁹² Returnees from opposition areas may

⁹¹ See Appendix A on neighbourhood classifications, return data and methodology.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, mayor, eastern Aleppo, June 2021; residents, Aleppo, December 2020. Crisis Group correspondence, researcher specialised on Aleppo, 11 November 2020.

be apprehended for alleged opposition activity or avoiding mandatory military service. Police may detain others simply to extract a ransom payment.⁹³

The regime has created a mechanism to facilitate reconciliation and return, dubbed “settlement of security status” (*taswiyat al-wadaa al-amni*), but it inspires little confidence. The process involves a formal clearance with each of the four major security agencies and a verification that the person in question has satisfied all mandatory military service requirements.⁹⁴ Individuals report, however, that going through it has put them at greater risk of detention and extortion in subsequent interactions with security officers.⁹⁵ A *mukhtar* and former Baath official in eastern Aleppo recalled that security forces regularly enquire about youths who have undergone these reconciliation processes, in order to “invite” them to “visit” the security branch, where they are then rearrested. Many disappear.⁹⁶

Even basic civil registry documents can complicate return. The regime does not recognise marriage, birth or death records made by opposition or Autonomous Administration authorities, pushing many displaced Aleppans to remain outside regime-controlled areas. Others may have to go through strange contortions. One couple, who married while displaced to an opposition-controlled area, where they had a child, returned to Aleppo two years later and registered themselves as “just married”. Nine months later, they registered their two-year-old as a newborn.⁹⁷

Displacement dynamics are also at play between Aleppo’s eastern and western neighbourhoods. Those who remained in the destroyed eastern part after regime recapture were primarily poor and/or elderly – those who lacked the means to get out or who feared the unknown more than staying.⁹⁸ Many former residents of the east, now displaced to the city’s west, have exhausted their savings and depend on remit-

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Aleppo, December 2020.

⁹⁴ “Settlement of Status”, Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Arabic). See also “Settlement of status ... New nightmare keeps Damascus area residents up at night”, Al Jazeera, 17 June 2018 (Arabic).

⁹⁵ “Blackmail and arrests”, op. cit. Even for those not suspected of participating in opposition activities, the risk of conscription is a great deterrent to return. Military police periodically set up checkpoints at major intersections and raid houses to find men wanted for mandatory military service. “Military police begin a campaign in Aleppo to conscript youths for mandatory and reserve service”, *Enab Baladi*, 4 February 2021 (Arabic); and “Regime forces arrest a person in Aleppo. And the reason!”, *Halab al-Yawm*, 9 October 2020 (Arabic).

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, June 2021. Explaining the summons, the *mukhtar* commented, “I heard many times from security officers and staff that they would not ever forgive anyone who stood against the [regime], expressed opposition attitudes, participated in a demonstration or fought against the Syrian government”. See also “Syria: Former Refugees Tortured, Raped, Disappeared after Returning Home”, Amnesty International, 7 September 2021.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Tariq al-Bab resident, Aleppo, December 2020. They waited the additional nine months, because social norms dictate that children should be conceived only by married couples.

⁹⁸ One long-time eastern Aleppo resident, who remained in his neighbourhood from the beginning of the uprising, observed that most families with extended family ties in the city’s western part moved there during the conflict or left to opposition areas or abroad. People remaining in eastern Aleppo were primarily from the countryside or newcomers to the city, with lesser means. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020.

tances to pay rent in flats across town in the west, which was far less heavily destroyed and has better security and public services.⁹⁹

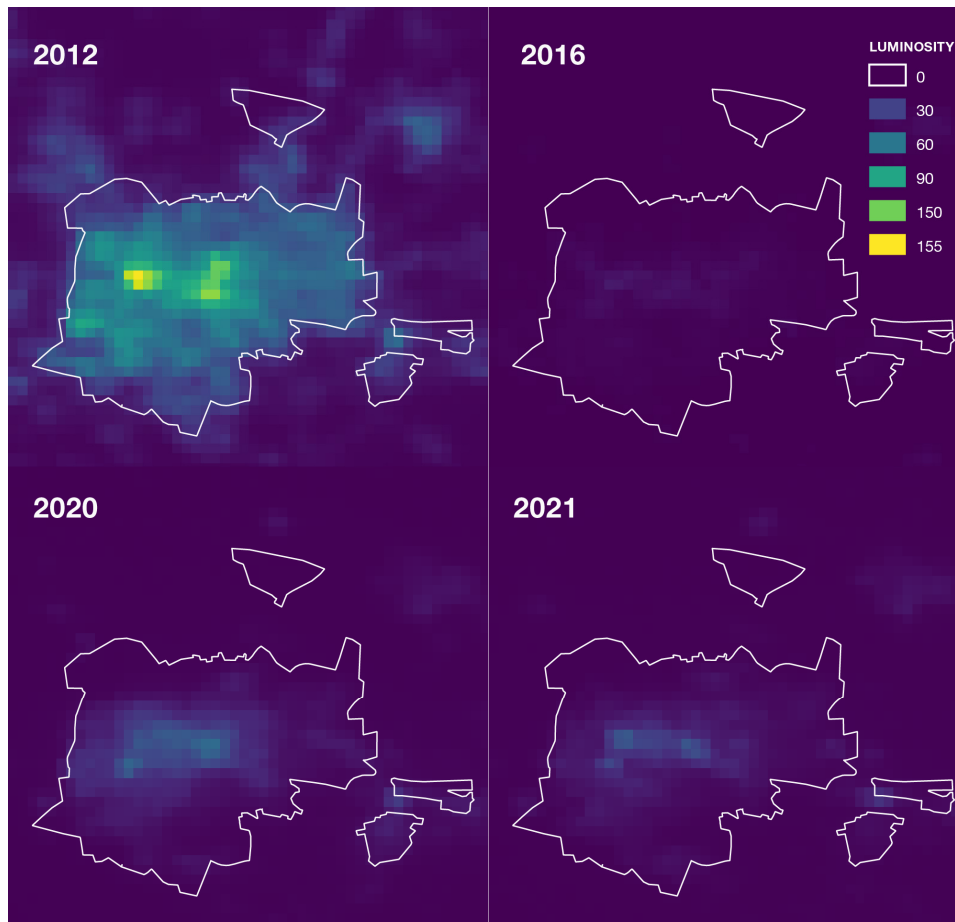
The migration of eastern Aleppo residents and non-Aleppans to the city's west during and after the fighting has accentuated pre-2011 identity divides and contributed to the inversion of the city's hierarchy of power.¹⁰⁰ The dominant economic actors in Aleppo today are primarily traders and militia leaders who have established themselves during the last decade and lack generational roots in the city. As indicated above, many generational residents resent what they feel is a loss of ownership of the city and hold a grudge against residents with roots in the countryside, even though most of these people have suffered similar harm from war and predation.

Satellite imagery of night-time light emissions starkly illuminates the divide between east and west, both during and after war (Figure 4). The picture dated April 2012 represents the last days before fighting engulfed Aleppo, when light is visible in all parts of the city. By 2016, the city has gone nearly dark. Light slowly begins to return in 2020, particularly in western neighbourhoods, but it falls again in 2021, likely due to the declining ability of the government and private generator operators to produce electricity.¹⁰¹ This series of images demonstrates not only how little electrification the east has had, but also the disproportionate return to western neighbourhoods.

⁹⁹ One government employee, who owns a flat in Aleppo's eastern al-Qatirji neighbourhood but is renting an expensive flat in western Aleppo, said he could not return to al-Qatirji, because it has little electricity, no functioning schools or hospitals, poor roads and public transport – and because its residents are at constant risk of militia predation. "I will return to my own flat in al-Qatirji, when I can feel safe and can satisfy my basic needs". Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, December 2020.

¹⁰⁰ One generational Aleppo resident living in a western neighbourhood estimated that 85 per cent of local residents are from eastern Aleppo or moved into the city during the war. As he put it, "Today, I meet new faces who don't know the city's streets or neighbourhoods. They want government jobs to outsource government projects to their contacts and [compel the government] to buy stuff from their contacts' stores at inflated prices to make profits. They have no emotional ties with the city and don't belong here". Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, December 2020.

¹⁰¹ The total light emissions recorded in Aleppo in the April 2016 image are only 3 per cent of those recorded in April 2012. Emissions in the April 2020 image rose to 18 per cent of the 2012 total, while the 2021 image recorded only 12 per cent of the 2012 total.

Figure 4. Aleppo: Night-time Light Emissions over Time

C. *Business in the New Order*

War destroyed the warehouses, dispersed the workers and shattered the supply chains of Aleppo's industrial and trading families, which ran Aleppo's pre-war economy. The largest industrial producers mostly moved their operations abroad, primarily to Turkey and Egypt.¹⁰² While some industrialists retain a limited, often symbolic presence in Aleppo, so as to be able to scale up once conditions improve, many lack the resources to do so.¹⁰³ Smaller workshops, however, have sprung back into operation, with individual artisans making products like shoes and wooden furniture by hand. Many of these workshops are set up by migrants in residential neighbourhoods rather than by established businesspeople in industrial zones.¹⁰⁴

Security tops the list of obstacles to business returns. Many entrepreneurs, whose livelihoods were not dependent upon state largesse and who disliked the regime's

¹⁰² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Aleppan businessmen, November 2020; May and September 2021.

¹⁰³ As one businessman put it, large industrialists still in Aleppo are "buying and selling hope", trying to be "ahead of the curve" if and when conditions improve, rather than operating at a profit. Crisis Group interviews, traders and residents, Aleppo, December 2020. Crisis Group correspondence, Aleppo native in Turkey, 18 December 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, UN staff member, Beirut, 5 January 2021.

arbitrary and violent rule, supported the opposition and now face the scrutiny security agencies apply to all Aleppans returning from outside regime-controlled areas.

Another problem for industrialists is the labour shortage. Many skilled labourers joined the opposition, or have extended family members who did, and hence they fear being caught in the security agencies' dragnet should they return to Aleppo. Even unskilled youths with no opposition links are wary of working in the city due to the threat of conscription.¹⁰⁵ Most labourers in factories are either teenagers or men over 45 (the age range for mandatory conscription being 18 to 42). With so few men available, one construction contractor said he has begun to depend more heavily on female workers.¹⁰⁶

Operational difficulties are a third deterrent to investment. Unreliable electricity supplies from the public grid mean costly outages and expensive outlays for private generators, as described above. Inflation has wiped out capital belonging to small traders and industrialists, who held savings in Syria, making it impossible for them to purchase new products and capital equipment from abroad.¹⁰⁷ Even those who hold capital outside the country face difficulties importing the spare parts and supplies needed to make the products in which Aleppo specialised, such as textiles and plastics. Industrialists must smuggle these goods in through Lebanon or Turkey, forcing them to pay multiples of what they would have paid before 2011.¹⁰⁸ Most older businesses that remain are engaged in small-scale industry, such as clothing production, woodworking and basic metalwork.¹⁰⁹ Bribes extracted by state officials and protection duties (*atawat*) imposed by militias and security forces add to everyone's operating costs, whether traders, industrialists or even small vendors in Aleppo's markets.¹¹⁰

New businesses opened by entrepreneurs who established themselves during and after the war are far simpler and less productive than those common in pre-war Aleppo. They focus primarily on services, including restaurants, coffee shops, fast-food outlets and bakeries.¹¹¹ The most successful ones rely on militia and security agency connections to smuggle in fuel and Turkish goods, which wealthy Syrians prefer to Chinese or Syrian products.

These new, militia-connected economic actors are sidelining the old elite. This dynamic was visible in a June 2020 conflict between Fares Shehabi, a prominent

¹⁰⁵ Regime checkpoints at major intersections across the city make it impossible for labourers to evade security personnel when commuting to the Sheikh Najjar industrial zone, where many of the factories attempting to restart operations are located. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020. Crisis Group correspondence, researcher specialised on Aleppo, 11 November 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, December 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Adding to this domestic loss is the banking crisis in Lebanon, where many Aleppan traders deposited their wealth. These assets are now inaccessible and the great majority is likely lost. "Lebanon crisis wreaks havoc on Syria's war-torn economy", Reuters, 29 November 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Aleppo native in Turkey, 18 December 2020; Aleppo businessman in Europe, 24 November 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, member of Aleppo Chamber of Industry, Aleppo, November 2020.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, Aleppo businessman in Europe, 24 November 2020. See also "Regime government compels traders to move their goods to al-Amariya market in Aleppo", Halab al-Yawm, 17 October 2020 (Arabic).

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020.

businessman before 2011, and Khudr Ali Tahir, a former chicken seller from Tartus, who commanded a militia close to the 4th Division during the war and now runs companies involved in cross-border trade and smuggling, as well as a security force protecting Iranian pilgrims.¹¹² Following accusations from Shehabi broadcast on state television that Tahir destroyed the Aleppo plastics industry by flooding the market with illegal imports, the interior ministry banned state institutions from working with Tahir. Tahir, however, used his regime connections to get the decision overturned and the Shehabi interview footage removed from the state television channel's website.¹¹³

State officials are also involved in predation on established entrepreneurs, as demonstrated by an agreement between the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce and the Syrian Customs Directorate. In late December 2020, customs officials confiscated large amounts of goods from established Aleppo traders and moved to close the central market on the grounds that traders had evaded customs duties. The traders retorted that customs officers were trying to extract bribes on top of payments they receive from warlords to allow the warlords to flood the market with goods smuggled from Turkey. The dispute led to meetings of the Chamber of Commerce, the Customs Directorate and security agencies, which defined the terms under which customs officials could enter the market and made the Chamber the mediator between the Directorate and individual traders.

This mediation proved ineffective in reducing predation. Seizure of goods and demands for bribes by the Customs Directorate and other security agencies continued throughout 2021, prompting traders in Aleppo's markets to go on strike in August.¹¹⁴ The overall effect of competition from warlords and predation by officials is that many remaining traders cease operations or move to Damascus or abroad.¹¹⁵ The traders' discontent reached the point that Industry Minister Ziad Sabbagh travelled to Aleppo in December 2021 to reassure them that Damascus would amend rules governing import of foreign textiles to protect domestic production. Yet he took no specific action in this regard, frustrating the traders further.¹¹⁶

¹¹² "Khudr Tahir: Businessman who compelled the interior minister to back down", *Enab Baladi*, 26 March 2019 (Arabic).

¹¹³ "Exceptional *shabih*: 'al-Ghawar' from chicken seller to biggest whale on al-Assad's farm", Orient TV, 24 June 2020 (Arabic).

¹¹⁴ "For a third day ... Traders in Aleppo protest by closing their shops", *Enab Baladi*, 31 August 2021 (Arabic); "Strike and calls to protest ... Impoverishment and blackmail force Syrians out of their silence", *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 11 August 2021 (Arabic); and "Aleppo industrialists under the blows of the 'secret office'... The solution is to close", *Enab Baladi*, 3 September 2021 (Arabic).

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, building materials trader, Aleppo, June 2021. Many of the Aleppan traders who stayed through years of civil war are now attempting to leave the country for places where other traders went years ago, such as Egypt and Turkey. Hussein al-Khatib, "What it promotes does not reflect reality: The regime tightens the noose on Aleppan traders", *Noon Post*, 14 September 2021 (Arabic); and "Aleppo ... Arrests of traders who closed their shops and attempted to leave Syria", *Enab Baladi*, 9 September 2021 (Arabic). See also "To solve the problem of confiscation of goods – 'Traders of Aleppo' reach agreement with customs directorate", *Enab Baladi*, 11 January 2021 (Arabic); and "Shehabi attacks the regime with sharp words", *op. cit.*

¹¹⁶ "Regime government bows in face of storm of Aleppan Industrialists", *Zaman al-Wasl*, 8 December 2021 (Arabic).

D. *Home Demolitions and Expropriation*

Housing is a crucial field in the struggle to shape Aleppo's future. The city's eastern part, site of the most physical destruction, has seen little rebuilding. On the contrary, authorities have undone repairs made by residents, sending municipal work crews to demolish newly refurbished parts of buildings, to further their own control over who returns to the area.¹¹⁷ Militias loyal to the regime are intervening in many eastern neighbourhoods to serve their purposes, expropriating houses or pressing residents to sell properties at below-market rates, taking over trade in building materials and distributing housing to their fighters. By controlling who is able to live in these areas, militias bolster support for the regime, while reaping profits.

Residents of damaged eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods face enormous challenges in keeping buildings habitable. Building collapses occur several times a year.¹¹⁸ A 2019 study by the government's Public Company for Studies and Technical Consultations found 10,000 buildings that were likely to fall down and recommended that 4,000 families immediately evacuate. The study's scope did not include informal neighbourhoods, the most heavily damaged during fighting. Another study from 2019, by the Governorate Council, estimated that 70 per cent of buildings in eastern Aleppo were damaged and that 30 per cent would need repairs before anyone could move back in. Yet many of these buildings are still inhabited.¹¹⁹

The state has invested little in reconstruction. It has cleared many eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods of rubble, but these areas are usually abandoned, and militias and security services move in to scavenge for loot among what is left.¹²⁰ Residents themselves usually do – and pay for – what little repair work is done. In many eastern Aleppo areas, the *mukhtar* and notables collect money from shop owners and residents, and coordinate with government engineers and labourers to buy materials and make repairs.¹²¹ Building materials, however, are a major target for extortion, as security forces and militias impose their own informal duties on traders bringing these items into the city.¹²²

¹¹⁷ "Demolishing 'building violations' in Aleppo: Beyond the implementation of Decree No. 40 of 2012", *Syria Report*, 10 February 2021.

¹¹⁸ For example, see "Syria war: Aleppo building collapse kills 11", *op. cit.*

¹¹⁹ "Aleppo governorate decides to evacuate ten thousand buildings", *op. cit.*; and "After winter rains, fear of damaged building collapse in Aleppo", *Enab Baladi*, 31 January 2021 (Arabic). The 2016 UN study, based on images taken several months before the end of fighting, found 33,521 damaged structures. "Percentage Damage", *op. cit.*

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, general contractor, Aleppo, December 2020. See also "After winter rains", *op. cit.* UN agencies, in coordination with the regime-linked Syria Trust, are also assisting in rubble removal. See Facebook post by Aleppo City Council, 12 April 2021.

¹²¹ An engineer for the state-run Water and Sewage Company said high-level government officials are aware of these agreements but "turn a blind eye because they have no other solutions. The government has employees and engineers but no money, so the local community sponsors the governmental works". Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, December 2020.

¹²² All traders bringing materials into Aleppo must pay off members of the army's 4th Division. The cost of materials in Aleppo is around one third higher than in cities under Turkish-backed opposition control, such as Azaz and al-Bab. Despite these elevated costs, building materials – including those imported from a range of European countries that have imposed sanctions on Syria – remain widely available, albeit at prices well out of reach for most Aleppo residents. Crisis Group interviews, building materials traders, Aleppo, December 2020 and June 2021.

Residents of heavily damaged areas also confront legal and bureaucratic barriers to repairing their homes. In practice, only those with the ear of power – security forces or militias – can secure informal permission to make repairs. An Aleppo City Council decree lays out a formal registration process for refurbishing damaged buildings. Yet this process is available only to people in the city's formally built areas and entails documenting a property's formal ownership and paying a "damage licence" fee – not to mention bribes to government employees.¹²³ Most destroyed areas are outside the formal city plan – and thus not eligible for licencing – and their owners lack the required land tenure documentation.¹²⁴ Moreover, new national legislation gives authorities in Damascus power to expropriate areas destroyed in war.¹²⁵

Residents attempting to rebuild without official permission risk home demolition by authorities.¹²⁶ All construction outside the city's formally zoned areas is considered illegal. Technically, authorities can order any such building demolished, though they have tolerated large amounts of informal construction over decades of rural-to-urban migration. A 2012 declaration laid out procedures for formalising previous illegal construction and harsher penalties for that carried out subsequently. Yet post-2012 construction is hardly distinguishable from other illegal or even legal work, particularly in areas heavily damaged by war.¹²⁷ In practice, it is only residents without

¹²³ Contractors typically have connections to the local authorities and obtain their tacit approval in exchange for bribes before beginning construction. As one contractor put it, "There is a price for everything. It is easy to obtain a building licence in two weeks if a contractor pays a big bribe. Otherwise, the licence will take weeks and the application may disappear on the employees' desks". Another observed that, whereas illegal building in pre-2011 Aleppo would occur at night and on holidays, it now proceeds in broad daylight if owners pay bribes. Crisis Group interviews, general contractors, Aleppo, November and December 2020.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, engineer for Aleppo Municipality, Aleppo, June 2021. See also Myriam Ferrier, "Rebuilding the City of Aleppo: Do the Syrian Authorities Have a Plan?", European University Institute Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project, 19 March 2020.

¹²⁵ Law 10 of 2018 applies to the whole country a 2012 law covering several areas of Damascus that authorises the state to expropriate any property in zones affected by fighting, demolish all structures built there and compensate owners with shares in a joint-stock company given ownership of the new property. Sune Haugbølle, "Law No. 10: Property, lawfare and new social order in Syria", *Syria Untold*, 26 July 2018. Aleppo City Council Decree 55/2020 lays out a formal registration process for repairing damaged buildings; unpublished City Council documents stipulate that all informal areas should be demolished. "Aleppo City Council imposes fees, rather than compensation, on permits to repair properties", *Syria Report*, 21 October 2020.

¹²⁶ The city council ordered the demolition of extra floors constructed illegally since people started returning to eastern Aleppo in 2018. It has greatly stepped up demolition efforts since January 2021. "Regime government destroys illegal buildings in Aleppo", *Halab al-Yawm*, 28 August 2020 (Arabic). The council announced 40 demolitions in the first month of 2021, posted pictures of an additional 59 demolitions done in March and April on its Facebook page, and noted many additional demolitions during this period. See Aleppo City Council's Facebook page, various posts, March-April 2021. Local correspondents concur that many more buildings than those pictured have been destroyed. See "Demolishing 'building violations' in Aleppo", *op. cit.*

¹²⁷ As per the terms of government regulations on informal construction, Decree No. 40 of 2012. "Why does Syria's latest amnesty decree exclude 'building violations'?", *Syria Report*, 12 May 2021.

ties to security services or militias whose houses are subject to demolition, regardless of when they built the dwellings.¹²⁸

Rebuilding is concentrated in the spontaneously settled areas to the city's east and south. To better understand the spatial distribution of actors able to flout formal building rules, Crisis Group made a map of where reconstruction is occurring, using high-resolution satellite imagery of Aleppo.¹²⁹ Figure 5 charts the reconstruction that occurred between September 2020 and January 2021, the period in which it began to pick up. Reconstruction in informal areas is concentrated in areas that experienced high levels of destruction.¹³⁰ It is not evenly distributed in heavily destroyed areas but appears primarily in districts, such as al-Sukkari and al-Qatirji, run by regime-allied militias.¹³¹ By contrast, there has been little reconstruction in the old city, which was on the front line of regime-rebel fighting, or the Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods to the north east, Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maqsoud. The reasons stem from relations between local armed actors and the regime. The PYD and other cadres dominating the latter two neighbourhoods are far more ambivalent about the regime than the militias in the city's east.¹³²

¹²⁸ An engineer for the Aleppo municipality said demolition orders come from governorate officials and are evaded at several levels: supervisors tell municipal employees tasked with enforcing the rules that the governor asked that they spare senior officials and militia leaders. When city employees do try to carry out demolition orders for buildings militia members have restored, the militias often threaten them with violence. The employees must often call in the police to protect them. As the engineer put it, "Many times the policemen and municipality employees were attacked by militiamen in different parts of the city. I can say there are one or two illegal buildings [being built] in the city every day, but the municipality, with local police stations, cannot demolish them if their owners have strong connections to security officers and militia leaders". Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, June 2021. See also "Demolishing 'building violations' in Aleppo", op. cit.

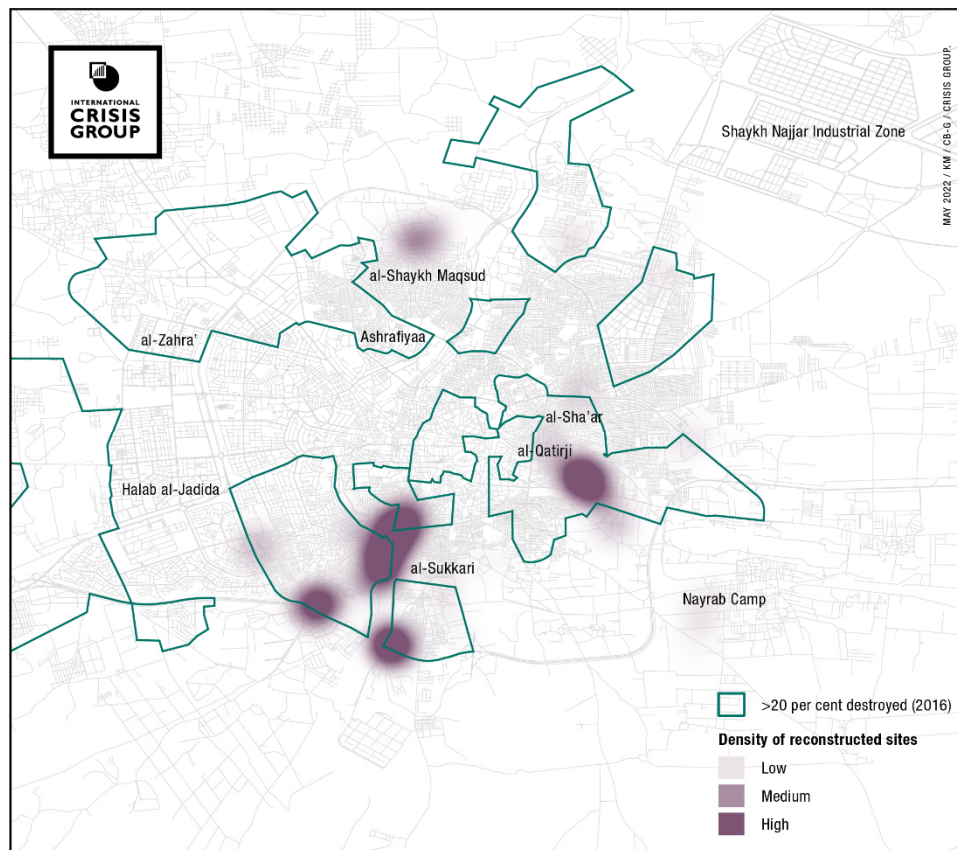
¹²⁹ The analysis draws on DigitalGlobe Worldview-2 and Worldview-3 satellite images, provided to Crisis Group through the U.S. State Department Humanitarian Information Unit's NextView License. It divides the city into 50 x 50m grid squares and uses a combination of human examination of the satellite imagery and automated, machine learning methods to guide human coders to areas that were likely reconstructed. See Appendix A for further details of the methods.

¹³⁰ Neighbourhoods in red outline experienced levels of destruction higher than 19.3 per cent of all residential buildings, the mean level of destruction across all Aleppo neighbourhoods.

¹³¹ Qatirji is also the name of a prominent warlord family in Aleppo. The neighbourhood's name predates the family's arrival in the city.

¹³² Crisis Group Middle East Report N°136, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013, pp. 6-16; and "Responding to tensions", op. cit.

Figure 5: Areas of Building Reconstruction (September 2020-January 2021), Compared with Patterns of Destruction (2013-2016)



On top of the challenge of rebuilding, residents of Aleppo face the threat of property seizure by militias. Leaders of militias have repeatedly expelled residents from their flats on the pretext that the owner supports opposition activists or insurgents, or that his sons are fighting alongside them.¹³³ Where militias do not seize properties outright, real estate agents connected to them use the threat of expropriation or security service intervention to press residents into selling at a price below market rate.¹³⁴

Regime-linked entrepreneurs are positioning themselves in the city's eastern areas for the long term. A company called Qatirji for Real Estate Development and Investment has been buying properties that agents allegedly seized from their original own-

¹³³ Although most expulsions have occurred in poorer eastern areas, militias have also thrown affluent residents out of their homes in the city's western part. Residents said only those with strong connections to senior regime officials or able to pay large bribes can recover their homes in these cases. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, December 2020.

¹³⁴ Agents often make repeated, unsolicited offers to buy properties, which escalate to threats of arrest and kidnapping of relatives, and demolition if the owners do not sell. "Real estate in Aleppo: Displaced people face two options – 'Sell your house or the state takes it'", *Focus Aleppo*, 27 December 2020 (Arabic). These entrepreneurs also falsify property deeds and quickly buy and resell property of owners known to be outside the country or in opposition-held territory; their absence and alleged association with the opposition prevents them from seeking redress in the regime-controlled legal apparatus. "From the generator market to seizing property", *Aks al-Sayr*, 12 May 2020 (Arabic); and "Aleppo real estate transferred from its owners to the grip of Iran and al-Assad", *Focus Aleppo*, 25 January 2021 (Arabic).

ers, many of which are in eastern Aleppo near a major highway.¹³⁵ Since many of these properties are uninhabitable, many residents speculate that the government has a plan for total demolition and centrally planned redevelopment – at their expense.¹³⁶ Similarly, subsidiaries of Qatirji Holding Group are doing restoration work in Aleppo's old city and numerous other neighbourhoods. They have created an industrial area to produce the needed building materials.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Crisis Group made numerous attempts to solicit comment from the Qatirji company on these allegations but received no reply.

¹³⁶ An accountant working in a Qatirji-linked company confirmed the group's purchase of land with intent to develop it in this manner. Crisis Group interview, Aleppo, June 2021. See also "Qatirji appropriates houses on Aleppo's airport road", *op. cit.*; and "East Aleppo: Katerji buys", *op. cit.*

¹³⁷ Mazen Qatirji, director general of the Qatirji Group's building materials subsidiary, al-Asl Group for Investment and Contracting, stated in an interview that this company employed 5,000 workers in January 2022 and was planning to open 10,000 small workshops in the industrial area that would employ 25,000 additional workers by the end of the year. Even if these numbers are vastly inflated, they indicate the scale of ambition and extent to which such actors look to dominate Aleppo's economic future. "Al-Asl Group for Investment and Contracting | Katerji Holding Group", Sada FM Syria, 15 January 2022; and "Neighbourhoods of Old Aleppo Group | Katerji Holding Group", Sada FM Syria, 8 January 2022.

IV. What is to Be Done?

After Syrian security forces and regime-allied militias recaptured Aleppo from rebels in 2016 and 2017, they plundered a city already heavily destroyed in war (primarily by the regime and its allies). Socio-economic life in Aleppo today is dominated by the predation of state security forces and non-state militias tied to Damascus and its backers, Iran and Russia. Because these actors drive away the capital and labour needed to restart large-scale trade and production, their predation virtually guarantees continued stagnation in what was Syria's economic dynamo.

Aleppo's present governance has displaced and alienated the city's former entrepreneurial classes. Many have voted with their feet, taking their families and business operations out of the country.¹³⁸ Others have stayed but registered vocal complaints; businessman Fares Shehabi, for example, has repeatedly denounced the protection money importers must pay to militias and security agencies.¹³⁹ Muhannad Daadush, head of the textiles sector of the Damascus Chamber of Industry, recently enumerated the problems faced by entrepreneurs: the list includes an inconsistent, expensive electricity supply, persistent insecurity that makes it difficult to bring potential purchasers of Syrian goods to see what they would be buying, and the difficulty of obtaining specialised imports.¹⁴⁰

This bleak picture of Aleppo comes against an equally dispiriting broader Syrian political backdrop. There is virtually no prospect of genuine progress toward the political transition envisioned in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 that could clear the way for the external assistance and investments needed for a comprehensive reconstruction effort. A return to pre-war security and prosperity seems impossible to imagine at present. What, then, can be done to ameliorate living and business conditions in Aleppo and other areas of regime-controlled Syria?

Major reconstruction support – in the form of grants from donor countries and loans from international institutions for projects like rebuilding the power grid – is not on the table. Nor is the EU's "more for more" plan, proposed in 2017, that conditions broader relief on concrete action by Damascus. There is little appetite for either in Western capitals, with the U.S. and E3 standing by UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Indeed, recent experience has revealed the infeasibility of reconstruction plans. Internationally, the Geneva peace process has sputtered, due partly to the regime's intransigence – even rebuffing demands from its ally, Russia. In Syria, militias and security agencies prey on civilians and the regime does not follow through

¹³⁸ "Syrian industrialists fleeing to Egypt ... The sector's problems are without a solution", *Enab Baladi*, 8 August 2021 (Arabic). See also "Migration threatens continuity of inherited trading interests of Aleppo families", *France 24*, 3 September 2021 (Arabic).

¹³⁹ "Shehabi attacks the regime with sharp words", op. cit. Shehabi tweeted, "Do the economic decision-makers realise that the economic battle is the basis of the battle to preserve the homeland?... No one can work and operate anymore today except war traders". See tweet by Fares Shehabi, businessman, @ShehabiFares, 10:02am, 8 September 2021 (Arabic). Several Aleppan businessmen made similar complaints about protection money demanded by militias and security agencies. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppan businessmen, Aleppo, December 2020; and by telephone, November 2020; May and August 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Interview, Melody FM (local radio station), 7 August 2021 (Arabic). This list resonates with complaints voiced by Aleppo entrepreneurs interviewed by Crisis Group.

on its promises of reconciliation with those who stood against it. The informal governance that prevails virtually guarantees that large amounts of aid will be diverted; the constellation of regime and regime-affiliated actors in the city are likely to swallow up any such assistance, meaning that it will do little to encourage the return of residents and businesses.

The experience of Aleppo suggests that the regime, rather than bringing back the highly centralised pre-war patronage patterns, is gravitating toward a patchwork of territorial control propped up by warlords-turned-entrepreneurs. Whether this approach is a strategic choice or an opportunistic reaction to the regime's diminished power is unclear. What is clear, however, is that after years of latitude in the city, militias are entrenched to the point that no single edict from Damascus – much less one from outside powers – can root them out. Aspects of militia rule have been incorporated into state institutions and wartime tycoons have become deeply integrated into parts of the Aleppan economy.¹⁴¹

If this political context rules out large-scale loans and aid, it makes humanitarian aid – including “early recovery” activities like small-scale rehabilitation projects – all the more critical for ameliorating Syrians' suffering. In this vein, the U.S. Treasury Department in November 2021 signalled openness to activities like repairing schools and refurbishing mills, silos, and bakeries.¹⁴² Though meagre compared to the scale of the need, such aid, which represents the outer limit of what donors can provide with any confidence that it will contribute to restoring the city's socio-economic life rather than profiting the predatory few, is essential.¹⁴³

Still, expectations should be realistic about what it can accomplish – both for beneficiaries and in political terms. Early recovery projects now getting under way will provide more than the immediate sustenance of humanitarian aid, but not enough to address the basic infrastructural needs to make businesses viable and give city residents a degree of normalcy. Rebuilding a grain mill or bakery, for example, will remove a central barrier to a local community producing bread locally, which can make a difference to local Syrians' lives. But with the public electricity grid in tatters and international funding for repairing it out of the question, that same bakery will remain short on consistent, cheap electricity, and thus vulnerable to interruptions in

¹⁴¹ For example, the regime is bringing some militias into the official military hierarchy. Leaked government documents suggest that the regime has designated Iran-allied militias as Local Defence Forces, rather than National Defence Forces, to allow them to remain close to home and to join the official armed forces, from which the NDF are formally separate. The Local Defence Forces classification also allows members to satisfy military service requirements. Mazen Ezzi, “Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria”, European University Institute Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project, 13 March 2020, p. 6; and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Administrative decisions on Local Defence Forces personnel: Translation and analysis”, Pundicity (blog), 3 May 2017. Militias play an important role in bringing oil and wheat into regime-controlled areas. “Qatirji militia resumes transport of oil from SDF- to regime-controlled areas after over a month of stoppage”, Syria News Agency, 14 September 2021 (Arabic). In addition, the July 2020 elections for the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce gave eleven of its twelve seats to members of the al-Shahba list, close to Husam Qatirji. His brother, Muhammad Faysal, is the organisation's secretary. “Al-Shahba supported by Qatirji sweeps Aleppo Chamber of Commerce elections”, *Al-Watan Online*, 25 September 2020 (Arabic).

¹⁴² Akil and Shaar, “The politics of early recovery”, op. cit.

¹⁴³ Regime actors allegedly implicated in human rights violations prey even on humanitarian aid shipments. See “Syria: Major Problems”, Human Rights Watch, op. cit.

production and forced to pass on the high costs of generator electricity to their struggling customers. Nor will these small amounts of early recovery aid alter the basic state of predation prevailing in Aleppo at present and in Syria more generally.

A sober view of the limits to what Western states and international institutions can achieve also refocuses attention on the interests and abilities of actors on the ground, chief among them, the regime in Damascus. There is a tendency among analysts and Western policymakers to think about the regime in binary terms – it either has control over an area or it does not; it is a reliable partner or it is not. Reality on the ground, however, presents a far more nuanced picture of what passes for “government control”: the regime has not ceded authority completely to competing militias, but neither can it eject them entirely from the hierarchy of power. Though it repeatedly fails to honour commitments made in negotiations in Geneva, the regime can still take steps that would foster conditions more conducive to socio-economic recovery, boosted by foreign assistance. Indeed, it has a history of slowly bringing informal armed actors under control, giving them tacit licence to smuggle and extort, and reining them in when they overstep their bounds.¹⁴⁴

Damascus could take incremental steps similar to those it has taken in the past to curb predation by militias and state security agencies in Aleppo. Redeploying some militias to sites outside the city could have been a step in the right direction, but it has yielded little improvement, as the state agencies engage in the same behaviour. The problem lies less in whether the armed groups are affiliated with the state or a non-state entity, and more in what orders they receive and who, if anyone, is holding them accountable.

The regime's external allies could help. Russia and Iran may not be able or willing to strong-arm the regime into taking specific action, but they can press militia leaders to stop extorting businesses and abusing civilians. They exert such influence already as opportunities arise, such as when militias allied with one foreign backer to coordinate their activities; they could mount a similar sustained effort against predation.¹⁴⁵ Such action would also serve both states' interests, as each has expressed a desire to foster economic recovery in Syria.¹⁴⁶ To the extent that China, which has included

¹⁴⁴ Members of al-Assad's extended family, for example, long ran profitable smuggling operations on the Lebanese border, and in the early 1990s expanded their operations by erecting checkpoints on roads in the coastal mountains to extort motorists passing through; once the regime resolved to do so, it quickly and effectively shut down this checkpoint economy and reduced smuggling activity. Yassin al-Haj Saleh, “On the *Shabbiha*, *Tashbih* and Their State”, *Kalamon* (2012) (Arabic). Similarly, according to the former head of Political Security in Latakia, Nabil al-Dindil, this city's port was a major smuggling site for Assad family members, but the regime curtailed this activity in the 2000s at the behest of the president's brother, Maher. “Documentary series, Memories of the *mukhabarat*, episode 1: Nabil al-Dindil”, *Orient News*, 24 March 2014 (Arabic).

¹⁴⁵ For example, Iran-supported Liwa al-Baqir units moved from Aleppo to eastern Homs governorate earlier this year to support several Iran-backed forces present in the area. “Military convoys of Iran-supported militias reach Homs countryside coming from Aleppo”, *Halab al-Yawm*, 6 January 2022 (Arabic).

¹⁴⁶ Vladimir Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, stated that cooperation would support the Syrian economy and speed up refugees' return. “What does the summit between Assad and Putin involve?”, *The Syrian Observer*, 16 September 2021. An Iranian delegation met with the Aleppo Chamber of Industry in February 2021 to address factors limiting Aleppan producers' ability to export to Iran. “Iranian economic delegation visits Aleppo”, *Halab al-Yawm*, 7 February 2021 (Arabic).

Syria in its Belt and Road Initiative and identified Aleppo as a prospective site for investment, begins to put money into the Syrian economy, it might also use whatever leverage it has to convince the regime to curb militia abuses.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ “Syria joins China’s Belt and Road Initiative”, Xinhua, 13 January 2022. Business partnerships may provide more direct Chinese leverage over militias. In January 2022, a Katerji-affiliated media outlet in Aleppo broadcast news of a major agreement between Katerji Holding Group and an unnamed Chinese company to assemble trucks and buses in Aleppo. The Syrian state may also be keen to preserve these ties, as the Chinese company spokesperson cited a favourable new investment law and Syrian state funding for the partnership as motivating factors for signing the agreement. “Katerji Holding Group | Signing Contract with Chinese Company”, Sada FM Syria, 22 January 2022 (Arabic).

V. Conclusion

The issues facing displaced Aleppans and current residents crop up in much of regime-controlled Syria: predation by militias and security agents alike on average citizens, nearly non-existent public services, and unpredictable but severe punishment for anyone suspected of having supported the opposition. Meeting basic needs, not to mention rebuilding neighbourhoods and reopening businesses, is a struggle under these conditions. What makes the situation in Aleppo particularly painful is that the city was the economic engine of pre-2011 Syria. The city's domination by militias and businessmen who have arisen during the war comes at the cost of hurting established entrepreneurs and other Aleppans – and even the regime itself. After all, revived productive economic activity would provide much-needed revenue and go some way toward lessening the grievances of citizens living under the regime's rule.

The regime's unwillingness or inability to curb the opportunistic, exploitative actions of its security forces, let alone quasi-independent militias, operating in Aleppo suggests a grim future for the city and other territories under the regime's thumb. Absent a concerted effort by central authorities to limit this predation and encourage the return of traders and producers to former economic centres like Aleppo, regime-controlled Syria is set to remain a mosaic of competing fiefdoms that thrive on the misery of war-weary and disempowered populations.

Aleppo/Beirut/Brussels, 9 May 2022

Appendix A: Data Sources and Quantitative Methodology

The base maps for all figures are adapted from “Syrian Arab Republic – Subnational Administrative Divisions”, UN Cartographic Section, February 2021.

Data for Figure 1 are taken from Kheder Khaddour, “Consumed by War: The End of Aleppo and Northern Syria’s Political Order”, in Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, October 2017; Crisis Group interviews and open-source satellite images (found via Google Maps); Fabrice Balanche, “Alep et ses territoires: une métropole syrienne dans la mondialisation”, in Thierry Boissière and Jean-Claude David (eds.), *Alep et ses territoires: Fabrique et politique d’une ville (1868-2011)* (Beirut, 2014), pp. 39–65.

Data for figure 2 come from “Damage Density in the City of Aleppo, Syria”, UN-TAR Operational Satellite Applications Programme, 16 December 2016.

Figure 3 uses data shared with Crisis Group by the UN Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program.

Figures 4 uses Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) Monthly Cloud-free Day-Night Band (DNB) Composite data, hosted by the Earth Observation Group, Payne Institute for Public Policy, Colorado School of Mines. See C. D. Elvidge, K. E. Baugh, M. Zhizhin and F.-C. Hsu, “Why VIIRS Data Are Superior to DMSP for Mapping Night-time Lights”, *Asia-Pacific Advanced Network*, vol. 35 (2013).

Figure 5 uses satellite imagery from the DigitalGlobe WorldView-2 and WorldView-3 satellites, provided to Crisis Group through the U.S. State Department Humanitarian Information Unit’s NextView License.

Estimates of the cost and profit margins for private generator operators are based on a World Bank study of the generator economy in Lebanon. Ali Ahmad, “Distributed Power Generation for Lebanon”, World Bank, May 2020, pp. 22-36.

Calculations for Aleppo used the World Bank model, with modifications to the following items to reflect the local context: 1) cost per ampere per week (10,000 lira), 2) number of hours operated per day (seven), 3) number of customers per 500KVA generator (605), 4) maximum amount of electricity delivered per customer (4 kilovolt-amperes), 5) labour costs and land rents (50 per cent of the 2018 pre-crisis Lebanon rates in U.S. dollars) and 5) cost of diesel (2,660 lira [\$ 0.75] per litre). Assumptions 1) through 4) come from Crisis Group telephone interviews, Aleppo residents, February 2022; assumption 5) is taken from “Rise in amperate prices”, op. cit. (see also “Syrian Arab Republic – Food Prices”, World Food Programme, 13 February 2022). Alternate assumptions taken from interviews in “Rise in amperate prices”, op. cit., include a consumer price of 15,000 lira per ampere per week for 12 hours of service daily; these assumptions produce a 30 per cent profit margin for generator operators. Raising the labour cost and land rents to the full 2018 Lebanese amount raises the cost per ampere per week by 8 per cent.

Figure 5 was constructed by visually inspecting high-resolution satellite imagery for changes at the building level between September 2020 and January 2021. Images were obtained from the DigitalGlobe WorldView-2 and WorldView-3 satellites (0.46- and 0.31-meter resolution, respectively).

Sites of reconstruction were identified through visual inspection directed by machine learning algorithms trained to find potentially reconstructed areas of the city; this

technique was adopted to reduce the number of sites researchers needed to visually inspect without losing the precision of manual inspection.¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group analysts first divided the city on 50 x 50m grid, creating 141,434 individual squares. Then, to generate the data to train a machine learning model to identify grid squares in which buildings may have been reconstructed, analysts selected four neighbourhoods with varying physical and social geographies and levels of destruction for visual inspection. Coding was done by overlaying the grid cells on the satellite images and comparing several images.¹⁴⁹

Once this “training” dataset was constructed, Crisis Group analysts applied a random forest classification algorithm to predict whether each grid cell in Aleppo had potentially been reconstructed.¹⁵⁰ In order to prepare the satellite images for classification, several filters were applied to enable comparison of satellite images with qualitatively different characteristics, such as different levels of sun and colour grading. The first filter applied to the satellite images was an edge-detection filter based upon a Prewitt operator.¹⁵¹ This filter analyses changes in colour in order to detect whether or not there is an edge in the image. The edges detected by the filter create a new image that forms the basis for the rest of the analysis. This edge-detected image was then broken down into Haralick texture features, which produced several summary statistics about the texture of the images in 50-pixel-by-50-pixel chunks.¹⁵² These statistics were then aggregated up to the 50 x 50m grid squares and combined with the manually coded dataset to train a random forest model.

The random forest model was used to identify, based upon the differences in textures, grid squares potentially containing reconstructed buildings. In order to assure that all squares containing reconstructed buildings were selected for manual inspection, the model parameters were set to predict too much reconstruction rather than

¹⁴⁸ This operation followed the process laid out in Christian Knoth and Edzer Pebesma, “Detecting Dwelling Destruction in Darfur through Object-Based Change Analysis of Very High-Resolution Imagery”, *International Journal of Remote Sensing*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2017), pp. 273-295. The machine learning algorithm compared images from 10 September 2020 and 10 January 2021, and visual inspection used the same two images and supplemented them with three additional images taken from these satellites in the intervening months.

¹⁴⁹ Manual image analysis followed techniques detailed in Christian Knoth, Sofian Slimani, Marius Appel and Edzer Pebesma, “Combining Automatic and Manual Image Analysis in a Web-Mapping Application for Collaborative Conflict Damage Assessment”, *Applied Geography*, no. 97 (August 2018), pp. 25-34; and Liping Lei, Liangyun Liu, Li Zhang, Jiantao Bi, Yanhong Wu, Qunjun Jiao and Wenjuan Zhang, “Assessment of Spatial Variation of the Collapsed Houses in Wenchuan Earthquake with Aerial Images”, *Journal of Applied Remote Sensing*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2009).

¹⁵⁰ A random forest algorithm is an algorithm able to predict certain outcomes based on input variables by looking at statistical dependencies between the input variables and the outcome variables in “training” data. This algorithm is useful because it allows one to create an automatic prediction of destruction and other variables based upon the researcher’s expert manual coding. See Tin Kam Ho, “Random Decision Forests”, in *Proceedings of 3rd International Conference on Document Analysis and Recognition*, vol. 1 (1995), pp. 278-282.

¹⁵¹ G. T. Shrivakshan and C. Chandrasekar, “A Comparison of Various Edge Detection Techniques Used in Image Processing”, September 2012.

¹⁵² Robert M. Haralick, K. Shanmugam and Its’hak Dinstein, “Textural Features for Image Classification”, *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics SMC-3*, no. 6 (November 1973), pp. 610-621.

too little.¹⁵³ This process filtered out 77 per cent of all grid squares, allowing manual inspection to focus on the remaining 23 per cent as potentially reconstructed. The visual inspection of grid squares identified by the model followed the same process used on the training data, with analysts also examining squares adjacent to squares or groups of squares identified by the model. In total, an estimated 532 grid squares (out of 141,434) contained buildings that were reconstructed over this period.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group analysts optimised for recall rather than precision by weighting the F₁ statistic for recall by a factor of 100. This algorithm was able to predict 82 per cent of all reconstructed grid cells in the reserved portion of the training data. By visually inspecting the grid cells adjacent to those identified by the recall-weighted model, the visual inspection procedure is likely to have improved on this already high rate of proper identification.

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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May 2022

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2019

Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

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Gaza's New Coronavirus Fears, Middle East Briefing N°78, 9 September 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°204, 31 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°72, 27 November 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°213, 15 May 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit, Middle East Report N°214, 8 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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After Aden: Navigating Yemen's New Political Landscape, Middle East Briefing N°71, 30 August 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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