

ALEPPO IN THE SYRIAN UPRISING

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By Harout Ekmanian, [Near East Quarterly](#), 29 July 2012

Harout Ekmanian is a freelance journalist and lawyer from Aleppo.

The Second City

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Adding to its status as a financial beehive, Aleppo has always enjoyed a rich variety of ethnic and confessional groups. However, after Syria's independence from the Ottoman Empire Aleppo relinquished its leading role in the region. The rise of Arab nationalism that ignited the independence movement between the two world wars required a more homogenous Arab city like Damascus, rather than the cosmopolitan Aleppo inhabited by Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Circassians and other nationalities, as Arabs. Adding to this, the cessation of Sanjak of Alexandrette (today Hatay province) and its annexation to Turkey caused the city's loss of its seaport--Aleppo's main link to the outside world. Consequently, the regional role of Aleppo diminished both politically and economically, but it largely remains an important game-changer in Syria.

From independence to Bouazizi

After the independence of Syria from France large businesses, which were passed through generations with indigenous traditions and rich experiences, started to merge. Politically, urban notables and important public figures from Aleppo had formed a strong bloc in the Syrian parliament. As such, they took over several governments in the country. However, Gamal Abdel-

Nasser's policy of nationalization during the short-lived union with Egypt (1958-61) greatly damaged the endeavors of the Aleppian political and business class.

When Hafez al-Assad came to power, socialist policies were put at the top of the government's agenda, and more people from the rural areas, especially from the coastal countryside, were appointed to public posts in favor of more educated urban citizens. This caused an escalated pace of influx of people from the rural areas to the big cities, which couldn't absorb the rapid social, cultural, economic and political changes. The social injustice, the crippling economy and many other factors made Aleppo a dangerous hotbed of civil strife in the early '80s.

During the '80s and the '90s, as Syria's second largest city, Aleppo was marginalized. Poor administration, bureaucracy and corruption left the city underdeveloped and saw a shadow economy take root across Syria in general. In addition to local problems there were international ones, too.

During the last decade another dynamic spread its roots in the country. President Bashar al-Assad's rule was marked by more liberal economic policies. Nevertheless, the regime lacked the political openness, transparency and pluralism needed to achieve broad development goals. This was more evident in Damascus and in Aleppo than elsewhere. The radical changes that were taking place were similar to the neo-liberal policies of some Latin American or ex-Soviet states. Syria needed a radical infrastructural development to rise from decades of setbacks that included the nationalizing private businesses, foreign sanctions and blockades, bad economic policy, more than a superficial modernism and facelift politics, which left the impression the government was throwing sand in the eyes of the people, rather than offer real reform.

As a consequence, social and cultural divisions cut deep into society. It is true that some internationally-famous brands and companies began opening stores in the major cities. However, these were mostly consumption-based rather than production-based corporations. The gap between the rich and the poor widened, whereas the middle class and small businesses, the backbone of any developing country, suffered during the most difficult period since the country's independence.

Reports by the German Organization for International Cooperation (GIZ), in October 2009, showed that 40% of Aleppo's settlements¹ are informal--one of the highest figures in the Mediterranean region. According to annual reports in local online media outlets, Aleppo had the highest rate of illiteracy and crime among all Syrian governorates.² These facts were signs of bigger problems looming on the horizon, but it lacked the spark that came in 2011.

Aleppo in the wake of the Syrian revolt

In March 2011, the wind of change that stormed the Arab world reached Syria. According to many Syrians, Aleppo was expected to be the first to ignite in the wake of the Arab Spring. Nevertheless,

the uprising in Syria started in the rural areas, not in the big cities. Aleppo largely remained unmoved until 2012, except for some protests at the Aleppo University and certain impoverished

neighborhoods for a few times.³ The reason behind this is that the last time Aleppo challenged the authorities, in the early '80s, it faced an iron fist. Besides, the business elite in the city, which controls much of the trade, was part of the governmental policies in the last few years and was one of the classes which most benefited, thanks to its multifaceted political and business ties with the regime.

The city largely avoided the bloodbath in other cities and towns. Even when protests were held in the rural Aleppo area and some of its neighborhoods, it didn't experience the same kind of brutal reaction as has been the case in other parts of the country. However, when the Syrian uprising turned more serious with the onset of Ramadan in late July 2011, Aleppo started to suffer from oil, gas and electricity shortages. Syrian state media and its quasi-state media backers used this phenomenon as a tool to blast the 'insurgents' who were blocking roads, cutting pipelines and holding up oil tanks coming to Aleppo from Homs, Hama and the Syrian coast. Meanwhile the opposition blamed the regime for fabricating the energy crisis as fear propaganda. Just recently, the Chamber of Industry of Aleppo threatened the regime by organizing worker protests and "industrial strikes" by closing their factories if the government applied the new rates of electricity prices.⁴

The Aleppo Chamber of Commerce stated in its meetings in May 2012⁵ that the price of building materials had nearly doubled, as had real estate rents. According to data provided from the central bureau of statistics, the rise of inflation in one month (February 2012) was 6%, whereas the rise of prices in the first quarter of 2012 was 60%.⁶ The rise in prices between January 2011 and January 2012 was at 42%.⁷

Compared to 2005, the prices of food, medicine, clothing, transportation have risen more than 72% in Syria. In Aleppo that number reaches peaks at 89%.⁸ Economic sanctions imposed on Syria by the EU, Arab countries and Turkey, have played a huge role in the economic meltdown of the country. The instability has also made a number of leading Syrian businessmen, in different sectors, to taking flight to Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.⁹

More action in Aleppo

The business elite, who largely controlled the situation in the northern city and worked hand in hand with the authorities to silence any movement that could endanger their interests and their existence, have been put to test and exposed as more efficient in theory than in practice.

The city was also shook by huge explosions in recent months,¹⁰ which happened in symmetry with Damascus blasts. If this was perpetrated by the armed segments of the opposition (Free Syrian Army, Al-Qaida, Al-Nusra Front and so forth) or if the regime's hand was behind these blasts, it made

one thing very clear: this was a near-formal blow to the remaining vestiges of the illusive conviction that Aleppo would remain a safe haven and come out of the uprising unharmed. The protest movement started to find solid ground in Aleppo, too. First, in al-Fardos, then Souccari, Shaar, Sayf al-Dawle, Marjeh, Ashrafiyyeh districts and most evidently at the University of Aleppo, which was stormed, in May, by thousands of students protesting the presence of the international observers.¹¹

The Dilemma facing Aleppo's minorities

Christians in Syria have always enjoyed special advantages by undertaking a pseudo-governmental role inside their communities. According to a report published on the Syria Comment blog, the number of Christians in Aleppo is under 100,000. Many analysts predict harsher days for Christians in the future.¹² As the situation in the more conservative countryside became more heated, Christians became increasingly worried. The rise of fundamental Islamist parties and their apparent control of power in other Arab countries have raised great many questions for these communities. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have backed, by proxy, the more radical Islamist and militarist segments of the opposition. Adding to that fact, since the start of the turmoil, the regime hasn't missed any chance to heavily underline the supposedly sectarian and extremist viewpoint held by the opposition.

Christians, who comprise a major factor in the social, cultural and economic part of Syria, feel threatened by the uprising and the escalated violence that has swept the country. The dilemma of not having a reliable option for change and looking at the bitter experiences of Iraqi-Christians and other Arab states, has worried not only Christians in Syria, but also in neighboring Lebanon. The Maronite Church has loudly expressed its concerns in the events in Syria in several occasions.¹³

While there may be a grain of truth in the argument that Christians in the region are under threat, the assumption is premature. In some sectors of society the Syrian regime has acquired a reputation of bravado and has won itself considerable public following among Christians and other minority communities. Yet this was not because it defended minorities against any oppression, but because there already exists a considerably high level of tolerance and coexistence among different ethnicities and confessional groups in Syria--more, perhaps, than in any other country in the region.

At the end of the day, many Christians in Aleppo are more interested in guaranteeing a dignified standard of life for themselves and for their communities--economically, socially and politically. The days of passive citizenship in Syria have come to an end, even for minorities.

What' next?

The situation in Syria is becoming more acute by the day. People are starting to think beyond their narrow personal interests and benefits and have started caring about long-term and large-scale solutions. Once the situation reaches its apogee, people in Aleppo will also understand that history and memory are not exclusive to governments and politicians, but belong to the whole population. Citizens will start to feel the importance of being a part of the process, rather than following the

impromptu judgments of greedy businessmen and corrupt politicians.

With Aleppo joining the uprising, it would appear naïve to implement the same kind of drastic government solutions that were being put into practice over a year ago in other Syrian cities and towns. That would only fasten an ugly departure for the regime and the country falling into chaos. The sooner they step back from the road to hell, the more helpful it would be for most of the parties in Syria. In either case, change is inevitable. It is simply a matter of time.

1. Report on Sustainable Urban Development in Syria, October 2009, published by Local Governance Ministry of Syria and GTZ (name changed later to GIZ).

2. Aleppo's illiteracy rate is the second only to Deir ez Zour and Raqqa according to Central Bureau of Statistics <http://www.cbssyr.org/>

We can cite the reference for the highest crime rates here:

<http://www.shukumaku.com/PDA/Content.php?id=17036>

3. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=2abQ8pDAeTQ

and http://syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=141693

4. See <http://aliqtisadi.com/index.php?mode=article&id=22701>

5. See <http://aliqtisadi.com/index.php?mode=article&id=22341>

6. See <http://aliqtisadi.com/index.php?mode=article&id=21885>

7. Ibid.

8. See <http://aliqtisadi.com/index.php?mode=article&id=20941>

9. See <http://aliqtisadi.com/index.php?mode=article&id=22714>

10. Lauren Williams, "Aleppo quiet and uneasy in aftermath of blast," *The Daily Star*, March 20, 2012, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Mar-20/167269-aleppo-quiet-and-uneasy-in-aftermath-of-blast.ashx#axzz1pfALe8F2>

11. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVd-6_vG5iw

12. See the following links: <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/main/?p=8469>

<http://www.dp-news.com/en/detail.aspx?articleid=84001>

<http://www.onenewsnow.com/Persecution/Default.aspx?id=1346594>

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-05-09/syria-christians-crisis/54888144/1>

13. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bzd-AGZ-qU>

