

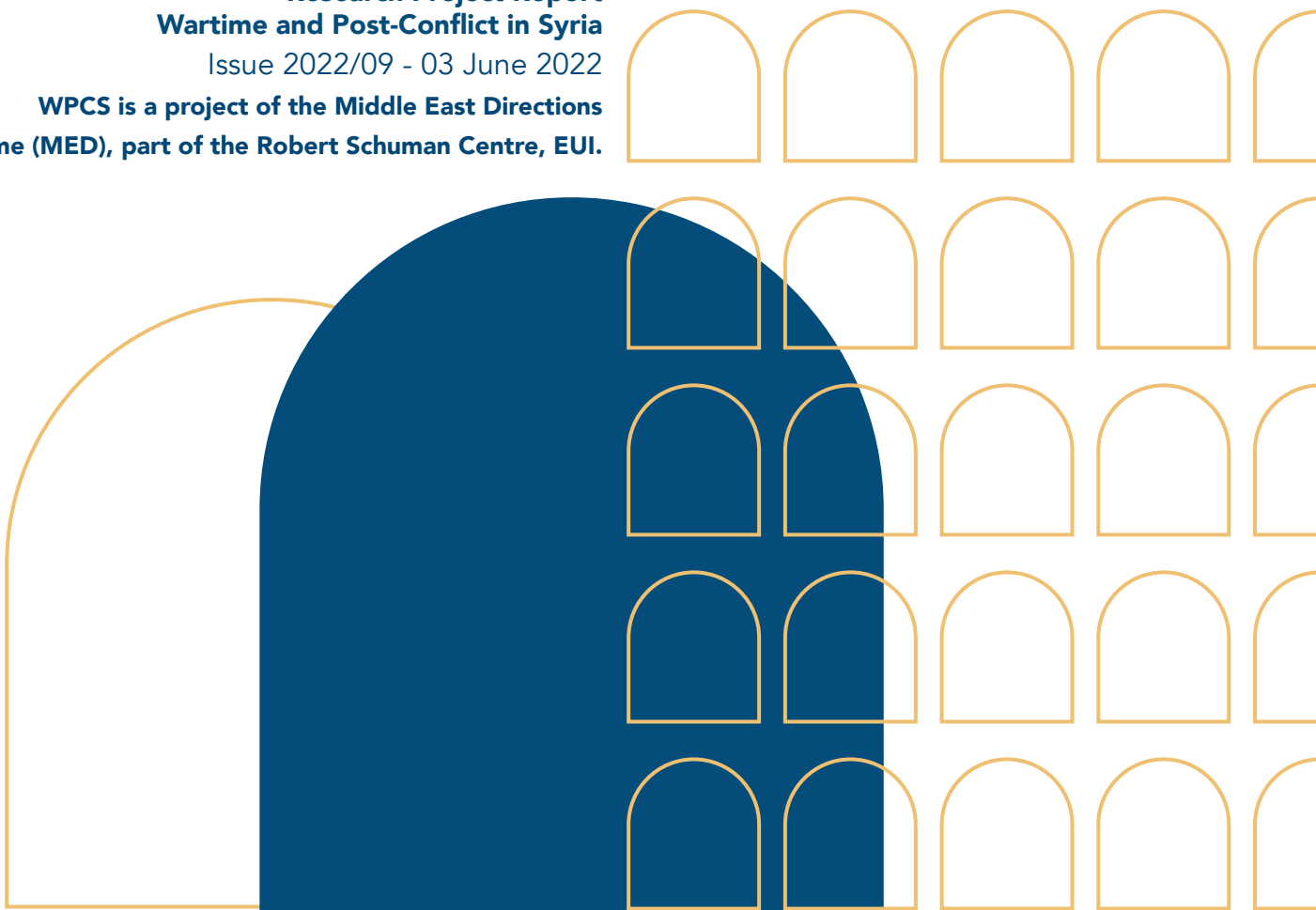
# Non-Governmental Organisations in Aleppo: Under Regime Control and at its Service

Ziad Awad

**Research Project Report  
Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria**

Issue 2022/09 - 03 June 2022

**WPCS is a project of the Middle East Directions  
Programme (MED), part of the Robert Schuman Centre, EUI.**



© European University Institute, 2022. All rights reserved. Licensed to the European Union under conditions.  
Editorial matter and selection © Ziad Awad, 2022

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by  
European University Institute (EUI)  
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014  
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy



Funded by  
the European Union

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

# Non-Governmental Organisations in Aleppo: Under Regime Control and at its Service

Ziad Awad\*

---

\* Ziad Awad is a journalist and researcher who works under the aegis of the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project in the Middle East Directions programme at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence.

The paper was translated from Arabic into English by Ghassan Zakaria and Livia Bergmeijer.

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. NGOs in Aleppo: A Collapsing Support Base and Diminishing Resources</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. A Marginal Impact of NGO Activities on People’s Lives in Post-War Aleppo</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3. The Levels and Instruments of Regime Intervention in the NGO Sector</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1 Governmental Intervention Tools: Ministries, the Governor and the Security and Military Apparatuses	12
3.2 Non-Governmental Intervention Tools: The Syria Trust and the Red Crescent	14
3.3 Clientelist Networks in the Associative Field	15
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>18</b>

## Executive Summary

After the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, officially registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Aleppo underwent multiple transformations in terms of their number, their staffing, their funding sources and the needs they met. During the battle over the city from 2012 to 2016, the security forces put a heavy strain on local NGOs, targeting anti-regime staff members and volunteers. Most of the NGOs lost the social and economic bases which were their main sources of funding, before the UN-led humanitarian response brought in new sources of funding.

Despite the end of military operations with the recapture of Aleppo by the regime in December 2016, the city has not witnessed any clear signs of recovery. With worsening economic conditions humanitarian needs have increased, as have the number of target beneficiaries. In addition, government institutions have failed to provide the resident population with basic services. This population was estimated at 1.2-1.3 million in late 2021. In the context of such dire circumstances, 63 local charity and development associations strive to fill gaps in the fields of relief aid, healthcare, education and care for orphans, the disabled and people with special needs. Their tangible impact, however, is limited due to the sheer magnitude of the needs and to discrimination practices.

Local NGOs benefit the regime by serving its social base and by channelling financial resources allocated by UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to jointly implement projects in the city of Aleppo. The regime intervenes in the NGO sector in two ways: officially through ministries, the governor and the intelligence services; and unofficially through two affiliated NGOs, the Syria Trust for Development and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. In addition, the regime uses clientelist networks that formed during the war comprising businessmen, government officials, local employees of international agencies and religious and militia leaders who serve as local NGO chairpersons and board members.

These instruments allow the regime to intervene at four main levels: (1) at the foundational level, by rejecting applications to licence new NGOs or by dissolving existing ones; (2) at the structural level, by dissolving boards, dismissing board members or by vetoing chairpersons; (3) at the functional level, such as greenlighting or obstructing partnerships with UN agencies or INGOs, deciding on which projects are to be implemented and where, and denying certain beneficiaries access to aid and services; and finally (4) at the resource level, by seizing some of the funds or in-kind aid allocated for partnerships between UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs. Through these multi-level interventions, the regime ensures its domination over local NGOs and their backers to serve its own economic, social and political interests.

## Introduction

The NGO sector in the city of Aleppo saw rapid growth in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule (2000-2010), with new charities established and traditional ones revived.<sup>1</sup> Overlapping factors were behind this revival: first, the openness of the regime to the NGO sector, especially after Asma al-Assad emerged as its sponsor; second, the easing of restrictions on the Sunni religious movement, which constituted a major social and economic base for many NGOs; third, the involvement of a new generation of middle- and upper-class residents in voluntary associative work, which they considered a safe space independent of the regime. Confident of its power and stability, the regime's relation with Syrian society was largely conciliatory in the 2000s. This led to the lifting of many harsh security and administrative restrictions on NGOs which had been introduced by Hafez al-Assad during his confrontations with the Muslim Brotherhood between the early 1980s and the late 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

After the outbreak of the revolution in March 2011, the regime paid increasing attention to the NGO sector, leveraging its voluntary initiatives, various activities and international humanitarian interventions to achieve a set of objectives and satisfy its interests. During the war years in the divided city of Aleppo (2012-2016), registered NGOs participated in the humanitarian response launched by UN agencies. As they provided relief aid in the regime-controlled western neighbourhoods, they managed to fill the growing gap left by government institutions. In opposition-controlled eastern Aleppo, meanwhile, revolutionary activists established dozens of civil society organisations which provided relief aid, healthcare, education and media coverage. These opposition-leaning NGOs were an integral part of the governance system, together with neighbourhood committees and the local council, which was affiliated to the opposition structures. After the regime regained control over Aleppo in late 2016, most of these organisations were dissolved as activists and opposition factions left the city. The few organisations that survived moved either to other opposition-controlled areas or to Turkey. The economic and service conditions in the city, however, have barely improved since the end of the armed conflict. The city remains in a state of crisis, increasing the demand for NGOs and their services.

The participation of officially registered local NGOs in the humanitarian response led by UN agencies and other INGOs has led to debates between researchers and policymakers. Some have questioned the neutrality and independence of local NGOs *vis-à-vis* the regime. Others are sceptical about their impact on people's lives and their ability to achieve their humanitarian objectives. The UN humanitarian intervention in regime-controlled areas, which has become the main source of income for local NGOs,<sup>3</sup> has been the subject of many studies and reports, all of which conclude that the regime benefits from this intervention and subjects the UN and other INGOs to its constraints and directives.<sup>4</sup> However, especially following the fundamental economic, social and administrative changes in the past decade, the role of local NGOs has been largely overlooked.<sup>5</sup>

---

1 This paper focuses on NGOs registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. All local associations in Aleppo are officially registered. For the purposes of this research, the author defines an association as a non-profit officially licensed organisation which provides free or low-cost services to the local population in general or to specific social groups in particular. Law No. 93 of 1958 defines an NGO as a "group of individuals or legal persons, lasting for a predetermined or indefinite period of time, aiming to achieve a goal other than financial profit." The law defines a charity as "an organisation established to achieve one or more objectives of philanthropy or social welfare for its members or beyond. When a non-charity organisation carries out philanthropy or social welfare operations through internal committees, said committees shall be considered charities."

2 Interview with lawyer Ahmad Maqtafi, former director of the NGO department at the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate in the Aleppo governorate, February 2022.

3 Extreme budgetary secrecy surrounds joint projects between NGOs and UN agencies or INGOs. This paper therefore is unable to provide information on the financial aspects of these projects. It is worth noting that these projects are the primary activity of large local NGOs in Aleppo, which clearly state the donors in their publications or public statements without specifying amounts of funding.

4 For example, Natasha Hall, "Rescuing Aid in Syria," Analytic Paper (Washington DC, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS, February 2022), <https://bit.ly/3vJQ1VB>; Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity, "Weaponization of Aid. Interference and Corruption," November 2021, <https://bit.ly/3woELgI>

5 Ziad Awad, "What Role for Syrian Non-Governmental Organisations in Deir ez-Zor After the War?" Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project), March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3NCSLdq>

This study examines the relationship between local NGOs and the Syrian regime and the roles they play in the city of Aleppo, which despite the damage caused by the war is still significant as the second largest city in Syria and the economic and administrative centre for its regime-held countryside. The paper attempts to answer two main questions. What role have local NGOs played in Aleppo after the end of military operations? And how does the regime intervene in their ecology? It argues that NGOs in Aleppo have undergone deep transformations since 2011 and have since become instruments of the regime, primarily serving its interests and those of its war-born networks and only marginally addressing the needs of the local population.

The paper looks at registered NGOs since they are major players in the ongoing humanitarian response launched by UN agencies and INGOs. Based on extensive monitoring of the publications of 115 officially licensed local associations, it focuses on a sample of 17 local NGOs, both old and recently established, which are the biggest ones operating in the fields of relief aid, healthcare, education and care for orphans, the disabled and people with special needs.<sup>6</sup> The research does not cover Iranian-backed NGO networks, which are more active outside Aleppo city, and neither has it found local NGOs backed by Russia.<sup>7</sup>

The research is based on 55 interviews conducted between December 2021 and March 2022 with former and current board members and employees of UN agencies and INGOs operating in Syria, government officials, contractors delivering projects in the city and former militiamen who participated in the military operations in Aleppo. The research also uses information and data published in the Official Gazette since 2013, state-owned and pro-regime media, the websites of ministries, government agencies and UN agencies, and the Facebook pages of NGOs and their board members, and of companies and contractors working in Aleppo.

## 1. NGOs in Aleppo: A Collapsing Support Base and Diminishing Resources

Before 2011 there were approximately 83 NGOs registered with the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate in the Aleppo governorate, most of which were active in the city of Aleppo. Of these, around 20 were established between 2000 and 2010. Between March 2011 and late 2021 around 40 new NGOs emerged, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour dissolved 7 NGOs in 2013-2015.<sup>8</sup> There are currently 120 local NGOs operating in Aleppo, 63 of which are active in charity and development work and the rest are categorised as cultural or environmental. Charity and developmental NGOs can be distinguished as secular organisations, which constitute the majority, and faith-based organisations – 10 Islamic and 13 Christian.<sup>9</sup>

This rising number of NGOs after 2011 reflected a new government and security approach to encourage voluntary work as long as it is led by regime loyalists. On the other hand, hundreds of dissidents and revolutionary activists in the NGO sector have been targeted, forcing them to leave the city or the western part under regime control, or to disengage from public affairs or in rare cases to shift political positions. Therefore, the leaderships of most NGOs have been gradually dominated by regime loyalists.

---

6 The research does not cover cultural and environmental NGOs, except in two cases.

7 Among the registered NGOs in Aleppo governorate, four are linked to Iran, three of which (al-Kawthar, al-Ghadeer, and al-Misbah) operate exclusively in Nubl and al-Zahraa, which are Shiite-majority towns. The single activity of the fourth, al-Imar wal-Ihsan, is to manage al-Noqta Mosque, a sacred Shiite site in the city of Aleppo. Russian humanitarian intervention is not linked to any local NGOs in Aleppo and it is limited to the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development, which is affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, and the Ahmad Kadyrov Foundation, affiliated with the Chechnyan president.

8 Given the lack of official sources which give the numbers of associations and the dates of their foundation accurately, these numbers have been arrived at using the personal archive of a former employee of the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate in Aleppo, in addition to the Official Gazette for the years 2013-2021.

9 This categorisation is proposed based on two criteria: the names the NGOs chose for themselves; and the presence of a religious authority, such as a cleric or an institution, serving as patron.

For example, most board members and volunteers working for the For Aleppo Association (*Min Ajl Halab*, founded in 2005) and the Good People Association (*Ahl al-Khair*, founded in 2006) left the city in 2012-2013. During the same period, dozens of volunteers for the al-Taalouf Charity Association (established in 2005) and the al-Ihsan Charity and Development Association (founded in 2004) were forced to leave.<sup>10</sup> These four NGOs, which according to their official records were active in social and healthcare services, are all secular with a conservative background and they were the most active in providing care and support for those displaced from opposition-held eastern Aleppo.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to security threats, local NGOs have also faced financial challenges. Their funding, which depended on donations from their respective religious, social, and economic networks, together with real estate investments, has declined. For example, the al-Ihsan Association lost the support of its rich sponsors, the al-Zaeem family, after the charity's founder and director Hala al-Zaeem resigned in 2012. Similarly, the For Aleppo Association lost the support of the al-Dhakiris, a family of industrialists and merchants which stood against the regime, with Muneer al-Dhakiri and his two sons, Ahmad and Yasser, leaving the city in 2013. Furthermore, the network supporting the al-Taalouf Association, composed of conservative businessmen close to the Muslim scholar Rajab Deeb, disintegrated due to business losses and many of its members emigrating. Finally, the Islamic Charity Association (founded in 1918) suffered a similar financial crisis after 2012. In 2010 the annual budget of this traditional association was around USD 1.1 million,<sup>12</sup> more than half of which came from donations by business networks. It had been the most active in caring for orphans and children of unknown parentage.<sup>13</sup> Due to severe damage affecting its property during the war and the departure of most of the merchants and industrialists supporting it, its prominence in the NGO sector gradually receded. After the war, despite some of its board members and former patrons returning – such as merchant Mohammad Zaher Mahrouseh and industrialist and ironmonger Ahmad Shuaib, who returned as its director in August 2021 – it has not been able to resume its previous operations and neither has it managed to secure the funds required to rebuild its monumental charity complex, which had been its main project prior to the war.<sup>14</sup>

While Christian NGOs faced similar financial and social challenges, they were able to somewhat compensate for the decline in resources through their organic links with sponsoring churches and alternative sources of income provided by international Christian networks and organisations. One example is a nursing home affiliated with the Saint Mansour Charity Association (as the Society of Saint Vincent De Paul is known in Aleppo; founded in 1918), which is active in relief aid, education, empowerment and social services. The nursing home suffered significant losses during the war, with most of the industrialists and merchants who supported its parent NGO leaving the city – most notably its former chairman and businessman George Antaki.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the association has managed to resume its activities with the help of Catholic INGOs.<sup>16</sup> During and after the war, Christian NGOs

---

10 Interviews with the former chairman of the For Aleppo Association, Mahmoud Adel Badenjki, and five former volunteers for the four associations mentioned, January and February 2022.

11 Most of these displaced persons, at the time estimated at between 100,000 and 150,000, took shelter in the housing units of Aleppo University, schools, and mosques.

12 Interview with the former director of the Islamic Charity Association's orphanage, Mohammad Ameer Nasher al-Ne'am, March 2022.

13 Among the merchants who supported the Islamic Charity Association and served as board members was Abdulqader Tahhan, its chairman until 2012. Tahhan was considered the most prominent car dealer in Aleppo governorate until he left for Turkey in 2012. Another is Mohammad Zaher Mahrouseh, a member of a well-known family of merchants, and his father, an honorary president of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce.

14 The complex was located on the frontline between regime and opposition forces north of the city. It had an area of 30,000 m<sup>2</sup>, including a children's shelter, a school, vocational and educational workshops, and a few shops. In its quest to rebuild the complex, the association has so far prepared the necessary technical studies and removed rubble from the site. Hanadi Issa, "Thanks to Efforts of Benevolent Aleppians. Restoration of the Islamic Charity Association's Complex – Orphanage" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 25 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3J5k3aD>

15 George Antaki was one of the most active actors in Christian NGOs. In addition to the Saint Mansour Charity Association, he presided over three other Christian NGOs before 2011.

16 Such as Aid to the Church in Need, which funded the restoration of the nursing home in 2019. Aid to the Church in Need – ACN Syria, "The Papal Charity 'Aid to the Church in Need' Offered a Generous Donation to Restore, Maintain, and Rehabilitate the Nursing Home Affiliated With the Saint Mansour Charity Association, the Five-Storey Building in Farahat Square" (in Arabic), Facebook, 10 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/3J8ZsI0>



provided their church community members with quality services, particularly stipends for students and rent support for poor tenants. At the same time, they offered the wider community services regardless of religious affiliation, including food rations in Muslim-majority impoverished areas and healthcare services in clinics and health centres affiliated with other NGOs. The most noticeable transformation in Christian NGOs, however, was demographic, with the Christian population in the city shrinking from around 200,000 in 2010 to only 27,000 in 2021.<sup>17</sup> The emigration of the Christian population, which increased after 2011 primarily motivated by deteriorating security and then by economic and service conditions, was beyond the control of NGOs and churches. This phenomenon threatens the significance of Christian NGOs in the short term, and their very existence in the medium and long term.

While international Christian organisations have been vital in supporting their local counterparts, their support has remained limited compared to that provided by UN agencies, which have been the lifeline of the NGO sector in Aleppo since 2013. Indeed, some secular and faith-based NGOs have overcome their financial challenges thanks to partnerships with UN agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). For example, the Amelioration of Sanitary and Social Level Society (*Rafa al-Mustawa al-Sahhi wal-Ijtimaai*) – the honorary president of which is the former Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Hassoun, and the chairman of which is his son Inayatullah – has restored and reactivated most of its destroyed medical centres through partnerships with the UNDP and the WHO.<sup>18</sup> The al-Ihsan, al-Taalouf and Ahl al-Khair associations, on the other hand, have also seen increased operations after regime loyalists assumed leading positions within them, thus facilitating their partnerships with UN agencies since 2013. Since then, these three NGOs have become the most active in Aleppo. With the support of the WFP, and partial support from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in the year 2021 an al-Ihsan-affiliated soup kitchen offered 10,000 meals daily. Additionally, with the support of the WHO, the charity offered 30,000 medical consultations and provided 15,000 patients with medication through two of its health centres in the first half of 2021.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, NGOs that failed to enter partnerships with UN agencies and international organisations ended up shrinking in size and operational scope. This has been the case of NGOs that had significant but inactive and unprofitable assets, such as the Islamic Charity Association, the Sharia Education Association (*al-Taalim al-Sharii*, founded in 1962 and active in education, empowerment and relief aid) and the George and Matilde Salem Foundation (established in 1945, active in relief aid, culture and entertainment, development and housing). The same applies to NGOs which were active during the war, such as the Ahali Halab Initiative (founded as a community initiative in 2012 and registered as an association in 2015). The Initiative made several important achievements in wartime,<sup>20</sup> but its activity shrank after 2017 because its leadership failed to improve its performance in field operations and planning in alignment with UN strategies. In 2018-2020, the only project that the Ahali Halab Association carried out was restoration of the Bab al-Faraj clock tower, a prominent historical monument in Aleppo, and embellishment of its surroundings. The project was implemented in cooperation with some volunteer engineers and under the patronage of the governor of Aleppo, who provided the necessary funding.<sup>21</sup>

---

17 Interview with a Christian activist from Aleppo, February 2022.

18 The Amelioration of Sanitary and Social Level Society was founded in 1960. According to its official records, it operates in the fields of healthcare, social services and relief aid. Amelioration of Sanitary and Social Level Society in Aleppo, "Rehabilitating the Omar bin Abdulaziz Health Centre in Partnership with UNDP, with Japanese Funding" (in Arabic), Facebook, 11 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3j8SYld>

19 Al-Ihsan Charity and Development Association, "Al-Ihsan Continues to Implement the Healthcare Services Project in Partnership with WHO. Services Provided in Medical Centres, Including More Than 30,000 Medical Consultations" (in Arabic), Facebook, 31 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3rTw8JC>

20 The Ahali Halab Initiative succeeded multiple times in mediating between the regime and the opposition to neutralise or restore essential public utilities, such as drinking water plants supplying Aleppo, both close to the frontline and deep in opposition-held areas. Ahali Halab Initiative, "Overview of Some of the Ahali Halab NGO Activities... Ten Years of Voluntary Work, Services and Humanitarian Assistance" (in Arabic), Facebook (video), 4 June 2021, <https://bit.ly/3u6oe0I>. The Initiative also tried to convince fighting parties to neutralise the power plant to the southeast of Aleppo, according to Abdulkader Hamad, a co-founder of the Ahali Halab Initiative who remained active until he was injured with a bullet while trying to save the power plant and mediate between regime forces and the al-Nusra Front in 2013. The wound caused him permanent paralysis. Interview, January 2022.

21 The cost was around 2,000 USD. Interview with a former board member, February 2022.

## 2. A Marginal Impact of NGO Activities on People's Lives in Post-War Aleppo

Since the regime regained control of the whole city in late 2016, efforts to renovate public utilities and restore infrastructure in Aleppo have fallen short of supporting the city's recovery and overcoming the worsening economic crisis. Government attempts to improve the city's services and economy have proved ineffective.<sup>22</sup> Destruction still dominates the city's landscape, especially in the eastern neighbourhoods, where there were around 10,000 buildings at risk of collapse – mostly residential units – in late 2020.<sup>23</sup> Between 2012 and 2021, the Aleppo City Council received 100,000 applications to restore partially or fully destroyed homes.<sup>24</sup> In terms of services, the city suffers prolonged power cuts, which exceeded 20 hours a day in March 2022. These lead to breaks in drinking water supply in many neighbourhoods.<sup>25</sup> Cleaning services have also deteriorated, especially in eastern Aleppo, due to understaffing and a lack of equipment and vehicles.<sup>26</sup> Economically, the depreciation of the Syrian pound has negatively affected purchasing power and deprived the majority of the population of basic goods such as food, medicine, clothes and heating fuel. The average monthly salary of around 250,000 employees of the city in the public and private sectors ranges between USD 25 and 40 (at the December 2021 exchange rate) and barely covers average expenses for 4-5 days.<sup>27</sup> The industrial and merchant class is also heavily affected by the economic crisis, while the government is unable to create a business-friendly environment or to formulate solutions to such problems as smuggling, high taxation and production costs. According to official statements, several factories which had resumed their activities after 2016 in Shaykh Najjar Industrial City, the country's largest industrial zone,<sup>28</sup> had to close due to inadequate electricity supply.<sup>29</sup>

In such dire circumstances, which have driven many to emigrate in search of a better life,<sup>30</sup> 63 local NGOs are active in charity and development work.<sup>31</sup> Some of them address emerging needs created by the war, such as caring for the disabled, while others focus on needs exacerbated by the war, such as care for orphans, literacy campaigns and mitigating poverty. Although many are active in more than one field, the main fields of activity of these NGOs are relief aid, healthcare, education and care for the disabled.

There are around 35 NGOs active in relief aid (five of which are included in the study sample). However, the number of families receiving food provided by these NGOs with the support of the WFP, which was estimated at 150,000 in 2017, fell by 40% in 2018 and then again by 20% in 2019.<sup>32</sup> This number did not increase in 2020 and 2021, according to the largest NGOs in the relief sector, including the al-Ihsan Association (SYP 4 billion in its bank accounts in 2021, equivalent to USD 160,000), the

---

22 Mohammad al-Ahmad, "Council of Ministers Meeting in Aleppo. Assigning over SYP 145 billion for Service and Development Projects in the Governorate" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 22 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3LMdwY>

23 Rifaat al-Shibli, "The Fourth Annual Anniversary of Aleppo's Liberation from Terrorism. Head of the City Council: Rehabilitating Infrastructure for SYP 15 billion" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 16 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3r6fV33>

24 Interview with an Aleppo City Council employee, January 2022.

25 Interviews with five residents of Aleppo in different neighbourhoods, March 2022.

26 In the Sulaymaniya district, which consists of 13 residential neighbourhoods, only 65 staff members work in cleaning services, compared to 260 in early 2011. Antoine Basmahji, "Hellok Neighbourhood, Service Issues Need to be Addressed. Al-Sulaymaniya Service Department: Insufficient Staff and Cleaning Equipment" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 11 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/35HwniO>

27 Interviews with three employees living in Aleppo, February 2022.

28 650 factories were reopened in Shaykh Najjar Industrial City after 2016, out of around 1,000.

29 "Many Factories Suspend Activity. The Union of Chambers of Industry Submits Complaints About Long Power Cuts in Industrial Zones to the Council of Ministers" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 23 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ubkFA0>

30 In July-September 2021, the Aleppo Immigration and Passports Department received around 57,000 applications for passports. Interview with an employee at the department, March 2022.

31 Jarrah Adra, "The Effects of Poverty: Begging, Homelessness, Divorce, 63 Charities Provide Help, Support and Assistance to Families in Need in Aleppo" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 12 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3Ky09W1>

32 *Ibid.*

al-Taalouf Association (SYP 900 million, or USD 360,000), Ahl al-Khair and For Aleppo.<sup>33</sup> For example, the number of daily meals provided by the al-Ihsan Association's kitchen went down from 45,000 in early 2017 to 10,000 in late 2021.<sup>34</sup> The number of iftar meals offered by Ahl al-Khair also fell from 10,000 in Ramadan 2017<sup>35</sup> to 3,000 in Ramadan 2022.<sup>36</sup> The size of the meals has also been reduced. According to cross-checked reports, these meals covered around 20% of the dietary needs of beneficiaries in 2017 but only 5-7% in 2021.<sup>37</sup> The local population consider the food aid provided by NGOs to be marginal and ineffective, while those with unmet needs are steadily increasing in number.<sup>38</sup>

In healthcare, local NGOs seem to have a noticeable impact on people's lives (8 health-focused NGOs are included in the study sample). This is particularly the case in primary healthcare, with dozens of clinics and centres located in most of the city neighbourhoods. In particular, most of the impoverished population in eastern Aleppo relies on these healthcare services. Some NGOs also provide advanced healthcare services, such as the regular medical care offered to patients with kidney failure by al-Ihsan.<sup>39</sup> However, public hospitals remain the main providers of advanced healthcare services in the city, notably the Aleppo University Hospital and the Zahi Azraq Hospital, in addition to around 80 private hospitals for those who have the necessary financial capacity.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, the education sector remains heavily dependent on the public schooling system, with local NGOs only playing a marginal role. Around 1,620 schools are active in the city of Aleppo and its countryside, receiving 600,000 students in the year 2020-2021.<sup>41</sup> It remains difficult to assess the impact and sustainability of the infrequent courses some local NGOs provide to thousands of beneficiaries. For example, the Education and Literacy Association (founded in 1960) provides students in middle and high schools with additional tutoring, and the city's adult population with literacy courses. Among adults, illiteracy reached 25% in 2020.<sup>42</sup> Larger NGOs, such as al-Ihsan, limit their educational work to providing food aid to families with dropouts to encourage them to go back to school.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the number of people with permanent physical disabilities has considerably increased as a result of the physical injuries suffered by tens of thousands in Aleppo and its countryside. This has multiplied the demand for specialised NGOs. While seven local NGOs are active in this field, apart from a centre run by the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate, their impact seems somewhat limited. Of 27,000 disabled individuals registered with the Social Affairs Directorate, only around 3,000 receive long-term services, such as the provision of prosthetics or electric wheelchairs. It is also noticeable that in some cases former regime soldiers are privileged beneficiaries. For instance, the Hand in Hand

---

33 Interview with a government employee familiar with the NGO sector, March 2022.

34 These daily meals include dry food and fuel. Al-Ihsan Charity and Development Association, "Al-Ihsan Kitchen Continues to Cook and Prepare Daily Meals for Beneficiaries, with 45,000 Meals Offered Daily," (in Arabic), Facebook, 25 February 2017, <https://bit.ly/388PN0X>

35 Ahl al-Khair, "We Are Still Good Campaign: 10,000 Iftar Meals Offered During Ramadan" (in Arabic), Facebook, 28 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/3jYiRLh>

36 Ahl al-Khair, "The Organisation's Soup Kitchen Offers 3,000 Hot Iftar Meals Every Day" (in Arabic), Facebook, 10 April 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ExZClj>

37 Interviews with Aleppo residents, February 2022.

38 Stephanie Nebehay, "Syria's Hunger Crisis Worsens, COVID Outbreak Could Intensify – UN," *Reuters*, 26 June 2020, <https://reut.rs/3Lo6W4Q>

39 In 2021 this included regular dialysis treatment for 980 patients suffering from kidney failure. Al-Ihsan Charity and Development Association, "Healthcare Services Project Continues" (in Arabic), Facebook, 31 August 2021.

40 WHO and UNICEF are the main donors of healthcare services provided by local NGOs in Aleppo.

41 Hanadi Issa, "The Education Directorate in Aleppo During the Four Years After Victory: From 290 Schools Before the Liberation to 1,620 Schools Today, and Other Achievements" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 11 December 2020, <https://bit.ly/36XIZ6Z>

42 Hassan al-Ujaili, "Illiteracy Is a 'Plague' and its Eradication is an 'Intellectual Process' which is not Limited to any Department or NGO: Available Data Show Illiteracy Reached 25%" (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 15 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3HB9ryQ>

43 In 2019, al-Ihsan offered an electronic coupon worth SYP 88,000 to the family of each student who went back to school. The Education Directorate in Aleppo, "The Head of Planning and International Cooperation at the Ministry of Education. Meeting with WFP Team in the Office of the Education Directorate in Aleppo to Discuss Enhancing Cooperation and Partnership Between the Ministry and WFP" (in Arabic), Facebook, 15 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3K66A2m>

Association (founded in 2007 and chaired by former member of the People's Assembly Zainab Khawla), opened a prosthetic limb clinic in early 2021 with support from the UNDP.<sup>44</sup> This clinic excludes children from its services and prioritises regime soldiers injured in combat.

Although NGOs assure that they use rigorous criteria to register people in need in their beneficiary lists,<sup>45</sup> they routinely violate these criteria in favour of influential and well-connected individuals. This discrimination is noticeable in the provision of many quality services, which remain limited but are still useful, such as the provision of equipment and supplies to open small projects or to restore homes. Indeed, rebuilding projects are monopolised by regime-backed NGOs, including the Syria Trust for Development and the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East). Furthermore, anyone who is a close relative of a dissident, or absconded from military service or owns a house in an area designated as violating city zoning codes is automatically excluded from aid provided by NGOs.<sup>46</sup> Such discriminatory practices coupled with the magnitude of needs limit the impact of these services on people's lives. Moreover, the regime exploits local NGOs both financially and socially. At the financial level, funds allocated by UN agencies and INGOs are first transferred to the Syrian Central Bank in foreign currency, which converts them to Syrian pounds at a favourable rate before transferring them to designated recipient associations.<sup>47</sup> At the social level, local NGOs serve the regime's support base by providing 2,500-3,000 jobs in the city of Aleppo and its countryside, most of which are occupied by regime loyalists.<sup>48</sup> These benefits encourage the regime to further intervene in the NGO sector, using various tools in both Aleppo and Damascus.

### 3. The Levels and Instruments of Regime Intervention in the NGO Sector

Using various instruments, governmental and non-governmental, centralised and decentralised, the Syrian regime's intervention in the NGO sector manifests at four levels: (1) the foundational level, such as rejecting applications to licence new NGOs or dissolving existing ones; (2) the structural level, such as interfering in the composition of boards; (3) the functional level, such as greenlighting or obstructing partnerships with UN agencies or INGOs, deciding on what projects are to be implemented and where, and denying certain beneficiaries access to aid and services; and finally (4) the resource level, such as appropriating some of the funds or in-kind aid and imposing illegal taxes on its transportation. Thus, the regime ensures its domination over local NGOs and their backers while serving its own economic, social and political interests.

#### 3.1 Governmental Intervention Tools: Ministries, the Governor and the Security and Military Apparatuses

The law regulating NGOs allows the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour to reject licence applications submitted by new NGOs and to dissolve any existing ones.<sup>49</sup> Since 2011, the Ministry has rejected multiple applications and dissolved at least seven NGOs in Aleppo. Among the most prominent of those dissolved was the al-Afaf wa al-Takaful Association, the chairman of which, doctor Nour Maktabi, was

---

44 Hand in Hand Association, "The Hand in Hand Association, in Partnership with UNDP, Starts Offering Prosthetics" (in Arabic), Facebook, 13 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3J6A1RK>

45 In theory, NGOs providing food aid require their beneficiaries to be either women supporting families of orphans with no male children over 18, heads of families with 40% or more disability or people who suffer from cancer or kidney failure.

46 Interview with a government employee in Aleppo, February 2022.

47 Natasha Hall and Karam Shaar, "How the Assad Regime Systematically Diverts Tens of Millions in Aid," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 20 October 2021, <https://bit.ly/3kp1zas>

48 Interview with a former employee of the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate in Aleppo, February 2022.

49 Articles 10, 38 and 68 of Law No. 93 of 1958 regulating the work of NGOs.

detained and tortured to death for treating injured protestors. While the Ministry rarely offers public explanations, it is likely that the primary reason for dissolving NGOs is a predominance of dissidents on their boards. This is especially the case of anti-regime board members who moved to opposition-held areas and resumed their voluntary activities under the name of their association. In addition, the Ministry prohibits people stripped of their political rights from founding or joining NGO boards.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, the Ministry facilitates the registration of NGOs by active loyalists and influential individuals. This is evident in the case of Walid al-Boushi, a commander in the Tiger Forces who established the Wissam al-Khair Association in 2019 (see below). The Ministry also facilitates the registration of NGOs allegedly serving public purposes, such as caring for the war-wounded and the families of ‘martyrs,’ but mainly attending to regime soldiers. An example of this is the Together to Support Families of Martyrs and the War-Wounded Association (*Ma’an li-Da’m Dhawi al-Shuhada wa-Musabi al-Harb*), which was founded in 2014 and received intermittent financial support from the Qaterji brothers, who are well-known war profiteers.<sup>51</sup> The Ministry also has the authority to remove any board member or chairperson without any justification. In May 2021, for instance, the chairwoman of Together We Evolve (*Ma’an Nartaqi*), Raffif Majni, was dismissed from the board of the Aleppo Charity Union (*Ittihad al-Jamiyyat al-Khairiyya*).<sup>52</sup> Later, the Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun intervened in her favour and the Ministry withdrew its decision.<sup>53</sup> Finally, both the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervene in partnerships with UN agencies and INGOs. In May 2017 in coordination with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a decision banning the al-Ihsan and the al-Taalouf associations from partnering with UN agencies and INGOs and suspending projects in progress without offering an explanation.<sup>54</sup> A few days later, the Ministry reversed its decisions after Asma al-Assad intervened in al-Ihsan’s favour<sup>55</sup> and Izzeddin Ismael – former head of Airforce Intelligence and current security advisor at the Presidential Palace – intervened in al-Taalouf’s favour.<sup>56</sup>

Local authorities in the city of Aleppo, represented by the governor and the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate, complement interventions by the central authorities. Since 2012, the governor has enjoyed significant powers as chairperson of the relief sub-committee.<sup>57</sup> Of the four governors of Aleppo appointed over 10 years, the most collaborative with local NGOs was Mohammad Wahid Aqqad (2012-2014). However, Aqqad was helpless in front of the heads of intelligence services, who kept overturning his facilitative decisions – such as allowing volunteers and aid to pass freely through security checkpoints. Hussain Diab, the current governor (since 2016), is a former police officer and he frequently interferes with NGOs, especially those not backed by influential officials in Damascus. The governor can force NGOs to support government institutions in certain crises or events.<sup>58</sup> He also has the authority to dismiss any government official involved with NGOs. In April 2022, the governor requested the Ministry

50 According to Law No. 93 of 1958, candidates for board membership in NGOs of public interest must be pre-approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (Articles 3 and 47).

51 In addition, the Qaterji brothers provide dozens of regime soldiers’ widows with monthly financial assistance. They also fund various other projects, including a charity game show presented by Shadi Helweh, a loyalist journalist.

52 Snack Sour, “The Minister of Social Affairs and Labour Dismisses a Chairwoman from Her Organisation” (in Arabic), 12 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/35r6BQ1>

53 Engineer Raffif Majni is one of Hassoun’s followers. Between 2008 and 2012 she was president of the Together We Evolve team within the Amelioration of Sanitary and Social Level Society, the NGO sponsored by Hassoun, until the team was licensed as a separate NGO with Majni as its chairwoman. Nidal Youssef, “Inaugurating the Third Woman’s Fingerprint Festival in Aleppo” (in Arabic), *E.Syria*, 26 March 2011, <https://bit.ly/3wublPw>

54 Suhaib Anjarini, “Aleppo NGOs: Lost Billions and Chaos” (in Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 17 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/3wy8Z2j>

55 Interviews with Ammar Qabbani, a friend of al-Ihsan’s chairman, February 2022.

56 Interview with a government employee in Aleppo, February 2022.

57 The governor’s powers include “setting interim objectives and humanitarian projects in line with national needs and priorities ... determining and overseeing the role of partners in aid and humanitarian activities at all levels.” Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, “Introduction to the Aid Committee” (in Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/35TbEZ8>

58 As part of the campaign to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, Diab ordered local NGOs to work in public hospitals to increase their capacity to receive patients, and to offer food and medication aid across the city. Mohammad al-Anan, “Aleppo Governorate Launches an Initiative With the Charity Union to Increase Public Healthcare Capacity to Face the Pandemic” (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 26 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/36BJum9>; Mohammad al-Anan, “Local Initiative to Distribute Food and Health Aid in Multiple Neighbourhoods in Aleppo” (in Arabic), *al-Jamahir*, 28 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3L0bC1j>

of Social Affairs to dismiss Saleh Abdulrazzaq Barakat, Aleppo's Director of Social Affairs and Labour, despite his powerful connections as son of a member of the People's Assembly and a former police officer.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, local authorities intervene in tenders opened for NGOs through a quadripartite committee representing the governorate, the Directorate of Social Affairs, the government institution concerned with the tender, and the NGO's board. In most cases, this committee does not publicly state the details or name the contractors chosen for the project, thus awarding the project to whoever is chosen from regime-affiliated networks.

Furthermore, since 2011 the security services have expanded their interventions in NGOs, shifting from monitoring to keep associations away from political affairs to directly interfering with their resources, activities and administrations. Each local branch of the Political Security, the General Intelligence and the Military Intelligence directorates has dedicated a bureau for local NGOs, UN agencies and INGOs. Through the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate, these bureaus run security checks on NGO licence applicants to either reject the application or to refer it to a higher-level security apparatus in Damascus for review. In addition, through representatives in each NGO the security services receive all the data related to potential beneficiaries, project budgets and annual reports. These representatives also participate in general assembly meetings.<sup>60</sup> Finally, at the neighbourhood level, *mukhtars*, who are part of the security network managed by the intelligence services, participate in screening processes, especially in the eastern neighbourhoods of the city. Since 2013, the four security branches – General Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Political Security and Air Force Intelligence – have expropriated fixed amounts of the in-kind aid provided by UN agencies and the ICRC to the Syrian Arab Red Cross (SARC) and other large local NGOs. Using this 'share,' the security services have maintained a revolving stockpile that feeds 6,000-7,000 of their officers and agents and provides their families with monthly food baskets.<sup>61</sup>

The Fourth Division, led by the president's brother, Maher al-Assad, also imposes financial taxes on humanitarian aid sent to NGOs and INGOs operating in Aleppo, and also on construction equipment and materials belonging to humanitarian response projects. Through its mobile checkpoints and patrols in Aleppo's entrances and on its main roads, the Fourth Division extorts fees on each cargo depending on its contents. The size of the Fourth Division's economic network is reflected in the total number of its soldiers and civilian subcontractors, which is estimated at around 1,500 in the city of Aleppo and its surroundings<sup>62</sup> – compared with only 250 employees at the Aleppo Customs Directorate.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.2 Non-Governmental Intervention Tools: The Syria Trust and the Red Crescent

The Syria Trust for Development (STD) is led by Asma al-Assad and serves as the Presidential Palace's tool for intervention in the NGO sector in regime-controlled areas.<sup>64</sup> Since 2017 the STD has expanded its activities in the Aleppo governorate. Its regional director, Jean Maghamez, has wide influence among high-ranking local officials. A report from Maghamez to Damascus suffices to dismiss any official who does not facilitate the Trust's activities.<sup>65</sup>

---

59 Interview with a government employee in Aleppo, April 2022.

60 See, for example, the Saint Mansour Charity Association/Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Aleppo, "General Assembly Meeting: Under the Supervision of Mr Hussam al-Din Qarah Jalli, Representing the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate, and Representatives from Security Branches" (in Arabic), Facebook, 21 June 2021, <https://bit.ly/3vl4PEE>

61 Interview with a former employee of an Aleppo security branch, January 2022.

62 The most prominent Fourth Division officer in Aleppo is Lieutenant-Colonel Hazem Dayoub, commander of the Divisions's groups inside and around the city, including its checkpoints on the Aleppo-Damascus highway, the Industrial Zone Road and roads leading to Kurdish-held areas in Aleppo, i.e. the Sheikh Maqsoud neighbourhood and part of the al-Ashrafiyeh neighbourhood. Interview with a merchant from Aleppo, February 2022.

63 Interview with a former security officer in Aleppo, March 2022.

64 Ayman al-Dassouky and Sinan Hatahet, "The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War: Regime Sponsored NGOs and Armed Group Charities," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project), July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3wlgu5h>

65 Interview with a government employee in Aleppo, March 2022.

While the STD sponsors some local NGOs, the degree of support largely depends on the ability of the NGO's leader to curry favour with Asma al-Assad. In addition to removing bureaucratic and security obstacles, the STD's patronage guarantees partnerships with UN agencies owing to al-Assad's influence within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Social Affairs and on high-ranking Syrian employees at UN agencies – many of whom are former employees of the STD. Muzna Ulabi, for example, founder and chairwoman of the Syrian Association for Child Cancer Care and Treatment (founded in 2012), who was accused of corruption related to her tenure at the General Union of Syrian Women, has further expanded the activities of her organisation thanks to al-Assad's support.<sup>66</sup> Ulabi has done this in the city of Aleppo (opening a children's tumour centre in Ibn Rushd public hospital) and beyond (opening three health centres in Hama, two in al-Hasaka and two in Deir al-Zor), all through partnerships with the WHO and OCHA. On the other hand, Wassim al-Ghouri, chairman of the Darb Charity Association, was unable to rely on his local influence and strong connection with Mahmoud Kawwa,<sup>67</sup> director of international cooperation at the Ministry of Social Affairs, in the face of the STD. As such, Darb's health and community centre in al-Safira, south of Aleppo, was requisitioned and integrated into the STD's network of eight community centres across the Aleppo governorate.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the STD has enjoyed monopoly control over many UN-funded projects since 2019, including projects aiming to improve the legal status of women. Significantly, the Ministry of Social Affairs has issued a decision banning all Syrian NGOs – other than the STD – from receiving funding related to legal reform projects.<sup>69</sup>

Alongside the STD, the SARC has played a leading role in advancing the regime's strategy regarding the humanitarian response led by the UN and INGOs, both in Damascus and Aleppo. The SARC's Aleppo branch and in particular its executive director since 2008, Hael Assi,<sup>70</sup> play a pivotal role in the associative field, especially among the small and medium-sized local NGOs which have not entered into direct partnerships with UN agencies and INGOs. Assi determines each NGO's share of international donations, allowing the SARC to be not only a lifeline for small and medium-sized NGOs but also for NGOs linked with the Syrian army and militias – including the Wissam al-Khair Association, Together to Support Families of Martyrs and the War-Wounded Association, and the local branch of the Martyr Foundation affiliated with the National Defence Forces (NDF). Assi also serves as an unofficial NGO advisor to the heads of local security branches, owing to his strong ties with them thanks to the financial services he has provided them through the SARC. It is worth mentioning that between 2013 and 2016, while the international community was condemning the regime's military campaign against eastern Aleppo, the SARC was providing regime forces and militias with food, blankets and tents – especially the Tiger Forces led by Airforce Intelligence officer Suheil al-Hassan.<sup>71</sup>

### 3.3 Clientelist Networks in the Associative Field

In contrast to the governmental and non-governmental modes of intervention, clientelist networks that built strong and mutually beneficial connections with centres of power evolved spontaneously during the war. The boards of local NGOs affiliated with these networks include many traders, government officials, UN employees and religious and militia leaders.

---

66 Interview with a friend of Muzna Ulabi, January 2022.

67 Thanks to his father Nohad al-Ghouri, a former director of the governor's office for 20 years. Wassim al-Ghouri is also related by marriage to the assistant director of social affairs in Aleppo.

68 The Trust calls these centres *manarat* (beacons).

69 Natasha Hall, "Rescuing Aid in Syria," Analytic Paper (Washington DC, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS, February 2022), <https://bit.ly/3vJQ1VB>

70 With the support of the intelligence services, Assi was promoted from being an administrative employee at a SARC-affiliated hospital in the 1990s to being director of the SARC branch. Interview with the former chairman of a local NGO, January 2022.

71 Interview with an officer who participated in the military campaign, February 2022.

The composition of the Aleppo Charity Union's board, most of the 11 members of which are chairpersons of the city's largest NGOs, reflects the high degree of loyalty and subordination to the regime in the associative field.<sup>72</sup> In the current mandate (2021-2023), the Union's chairman, Mohammad Haitham al-Sabbagh (chairman of the Ahl al-Khair Charity), is known for his strong relationship with the intelligence services. His vice-chairman, Adnan Babelli, who also presides over al-Rajaa for People with Special Needs (founded in 2001), has been known among the merchants in the city's historic market for being an agent of the Air Force Intelligence since the 1990s.<sup>73</sup> The Union's board also includes Abdulkarim Ashram, a trader who presides over the al-Taalouf Association and who is close to Major-General Izzeddine Ismail, a former Air Force Intelligence officer who became a security advisor at the Presidential Palace after 2011.<sup>74</sup> Finally, the chairwoman of the For Aleppo Association, Mariana al-Hanash, who is an employee at the Aleppo Culture Directorate, an activist in the Baath Party and daughter of a former security official at the Party's Aleppo branch, also sits on the Union's board.<sup>75</sup>

At the neighbourhood level, some *mukhtars* have expanded their roles from security monitoring NGOs and censoring beneficiary lists to being board members of small NGOs. The *mukhtar* of Hellok, for instance, joined the board of Basmat Farah Charity (founded in 2014), and the *mukhtar* of the third al-Hamdaniya subdistrict became chairman of the Civil Martyr Charity (*al-Shaheed al-Madani*, 2015).

Similarly, many leaders of faith-based NGOs have consolidated their ties with the regime, most notably former Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun, honorary president of the Amelioration of Sanitary and Social Level Society. Other heads of NGOs have shifted from neutrality to loyalty, such as the current chairman of the Sharia Education Association (since 2014), who has allied himself with the regime's staunch loyalist networks of clerics and officials, thus overturning the historical impartiality enshrined by his grandfather and the charity's respected founder Sheikh Abdullah Siraj al-Din (who died in 2002). Likewise, the al-Birr wal-Ihsan Association (founded in 2012 and active in social services, relief aid, education and empowerment) is chaired by Sheikh Hassan Saeed Badenjki, a lecturer at Aleppo University's Faculty of Sharia. Badenjki has sought to curry favour with militias, particularly the Palestinian al-Quds Brigade, offering medical treatment in his association's infirmary to all the patients referred by the Brigade. A similar trend is seen in the Christian NGO environment, which had historically maintained a distance from the regime. For instance, many Christian NGOs actively participated in al-Assad's presidential campaign in May 2021. Moreover, notable participants in pro-regime rallies and celebrations include Moussa al-Khasi, an auxiliary bishop to the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church who has been a sponsor of the Nour al-Ihsan Charity (founded in 1954) and Ibrahim Nuseir, a Protestant priest who chairs the Abnaa al-Kalima Association (founded in 2017 and active in relief aid and social services).

Among the clientelist networks active in the local associative sphere, influential contractors who are involved in the NGO sector as chairpersons or board members seem to be the ones that get the most benefit. They belong either to the new economic elite that emerged during the war or to the traditional elite of merchants, industrialists and entrepreneurs. Both elites have produced powerful actors in the associative sector. As an example of the new economic elite, Mohammad Saeed, commander of the Palestinian al-Quds Brigade, became in 2018 president of the Arab Palestinian Club (founded in 1965 as a cultural association). Saeed's venture in the NGO sector may indicate an attempt to round off his social status, which he achieved by accumulating wealth and influence during the war. It may also indicate his interest in accumulating more wealth through the associative sector. In partnership with another contractor, Mohammad Tayeh, Saeed has set up the Saeed and Tayeh Commerce and Construction

---

72 The Aleppo Charity Union was founded in 1961. Its objectives include overseeing the interests of member NGOs, coordinating them and setting general policies for joint NGO services. "The Aleppo Charity Union and its Main Activities" (in Arabic), *Taht al-Mijhar*, 29 September 2011, <https://bit.ly/3vrO2Fa>

73 Interview with a businessman from Aleppo who had been a friend of Babelli, February 2022.

74 Major-General Ismail is a close business partner of Abdulkarim Ashram in Aleppo. Interview with a government employee familiar with the NGO sector, March 2021.

75 Al-Hanash was on the preliminary list of Baath Party candidates in the People's Assembly elections in 2020.



company, which has carried out many projects for the UN-led humanitarian response.<sup>76</sup> These projects include WHO-funded repair of the Zahi Azraq Hospital and UN-HABITAT-funded restoration of a bus station leading to the eastern countryside.<sup>77</sup> On a similar trajectory, Walid Umar al-Boushi has entered both the NGO and contracting sectors in Aleppo. Until 2014, al-Boushi was jailed in the Aleppo Central Prison for forgery, but he earned a presidential pardon following his participation in a fight with the prison guards against opposition factions which had besieged the prison. He then joined the Tiger Forces to become their main fuel provider. After 2016, al-Boushi's businesses expanded to include fuel stations, construction and rebuilding, bakeries and trade in wheat flour.<sup>78</sup> In 2019, al-Boushi licensed the Wissam al-Khair Association.<sup>79</sup> Contrary to his claims, the association depends on international aid, and its warehouses end up receiving the in-kind aid provided by UN agencies and other INGOs – such as the WFP and the Norwegian Council for Refugees – to the SARC, and sometimes to the STD.<sup>80</sup> Al-Boushi then determines who deserves the aid – naturally the war-wounded and families of fallen soldiers – in line with his vision that NGOs complement the military.<sup>81</sup>

Among the traditional NGO elite members who are making profits from humanitarian response projects is real estate developer Hisham Ismail, a native of al-Assad's hometown Qardaha. In the early 1980s Ismail moved to Aleppo, where he made an enormous fortune thanks to his personal ties with Hafez al-Assad. He became one of the influential elite members in the business community, and then he entered the NGO sector. He joined the Aleppo Family Club (founded in 1945 as an elite association) and then sponsored the Terry Fox Run, an international charity event that raises funds for cancer research.<sup>82</sup> During the war, Ismail's business briefly suffered, only to rebound with UN-funded projects in regime-controlled areas in the Aleppo governorate. In 2019-2021, the Ismail Trading and Contracting Company and the Beton National Group (owned by Ismail and directed by his son Diaa) carried out dozens of projects in Aleppo, including the UNHCR-funded restoration of the sanitary network in the al-Mashhad neighbourhood, the UNDP-funded restoration of the drinking water network in the Karm Qaterji neighbourhood<sup>83</sup> and the WFP-funded reconstruction of the government-owned Amiri Bakery in the al-Sakhour neighbourhood.<sup>84</sup>

---

76 Interviews with a contractor, a government employee and a resident of al-Nairab Palestinian refugee camp in Aleppo, March 2022.

77 The company's Facebook page: <https://bit.ly/3pZxcKW>

78 Some of these bakeries were rebuilt with funding from UN agencies and other INGOs, including the ICRC, which partly funded the rebuilding of the al-Safira bakery. Al-Boushi has invested in this bakery, which is owned by the city's council. He has also invested in another public bakery in al-Waha, his native town where his main social base resides, including workers and employees of government factories, especially military defence factories.

79 The NGO's name was inspired by a medal (*wissam* in Arabic) that al-Boushi received from Bashar al-Assad. Ahmad Zaher Haj Barah, "Interview with Mr Walid al-Boushi, Chairman of Wissam al-Khair, al-Shabaa Show with Fouad Azmerly" (in Arabic), Facebook (video), 28 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3tRFmGh>

80 SANA, "Wissam al-Khair: Leading Services in Humanitarian, Development and Relief" (in Arabic), 23 November 2021, <https://bit.ly/3lbyqJ3>

81 Good Morning Syria, "Charity Work in Aleppo: Rooting the Values of Love. Guest: Chairman of the Wissam al-Khair Association Walid al-Boushi" (in Arabic), Facebook (video), 22 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/3CzWKDv>

82 Ahmad Bitar, "Increasing Revenues of the Terry Fox Run Fund Build a Centre in Aleppo" (in Arabic), e. *Syria*, 2 December 2008, <https://bit.ly/3J6OVrn>

83 Ismail Trading and Contracting, "Project Repairing Drinking Water Network in Aleppo" (in Arabic), Facebook, 20 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3KrXNYj>

84 Ismail Trading and Contracting, "Project Rehabilitating the al-Sakhour Amiri Bakery in Aleppo" (in Arabic), Facebook, 15 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3voNujE>

## Conclusion

While some NGOs in Aleppo have managed to compensate their diminishing finances by getting involved in the UN-led humanitarian response, they have not compensated their staff loss after the departure of dissident activists. These NGOs have come under the exclusive leadership of regime loyalists who are part of the local crony network that was reconstituted during the war. These transformations in the composition of NGOs have consolidated regime control over the sector. Moreover, sources of external funding for local NGOs drive the regime to intervene further, either by directly appropriating resources or by channelling them in ways that save public expenditure and serve loyalist communities – including direct beneficiaries and the clientelist networks profiting from the humanitarian response. These spontaneously formed networks have evolved into regime intervention tools. They are used alongside official actors which operate between Damascus and Aleppo, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the governor, the security services, the STD and the SARC.

These different tools serve a single policy of domination and appropriation of registered local NGOs in all the cities, towns and areas controlled by the regime. The particularities of each area, however, influence the regime's approach to the sector. The tighter the military and security control over a city is and the more influence warlords have over local power and economic structures, the more powerful regime-affiliated networks grow within local NGOs. In addition, the larger the funding for humanitarian response projects, the more decisively the regime intervenes in local NGOs. Finally, the older and more established the charitable networks in the city, the smoother is the break with their old traditions. All these phenomena are seen in Aleppo, where merchants, clerics and educated people from the middle and upper classes continue to play leading roles in the NGO sector. This role, however, is conditioned on supporting the regime and collaborating with its networks, including militiamen and loyalist individuals from the city's periphery.

Despite the decline in the city's economic role and the devastating and lasting impact of the war, Aleppo remains important for the regime. Economically, the city has huge potential with its expatriate remittances and the expertise of its people in industry and commerce. Politically, the regime used its recapture of the country's second largest city as a proof of its decisive victory during the conflict. Consolidating this military victory requires rebuilding a governance system and parallel networks of domination. Due to the historic significance of the city, keeping it in its current state of ruin or rebuilding it would indicate the regime's failure or success in transforming military gains into economic and political achievements. Bankrupt, weak and deeply corrupt, however, the regime seems unable to rebuild Aleppo or facilitate its recovery. The regime also shows contradictory attitudes to actors involved in the recovery process, including local NGOs. On the one hand, it requires NGOs to fill the gaps left by failing government institutions; on the other hand, with its tight control and favouritism practices it actively undermines them.

In the short and medium term, local NGOs, along with the UN agencies and INGOs supporting them, are unlikely to achieve their humanitarian objectives. The new culture prevailing among NGOs and their leaders, who seek to achieve personal gains through voluntary work and are fully submitted to the regime's authority, prevents NGOs from performing their roles. Moreover, the compliance of UN agencies with the regime, which infiltrates them through Syrian employees in their ranks, similarly prevents them from properly carrying out their roles. The deep transformations undergone by the NGO sector will obstruct any long-term hopes placed in them, such as evolving a functional civil society or at least contributing to a public sphere relatively independent from the regime. Unless the regime changes or fundamentally changes its policies to allow local NGOs to also change – not only in terms of performance and roles but also of composition, culture and aspirations – such hopes remain futile.

**Research Project Report**

Issue 2022/09

03 June 2022

doi:10.2870/12772

ISBN:978-92-9466-226-2

QM-08-22-159-EN-N



Publications Office  
of the European Union

