Fig. 1. Aleppo. Image by Sultan Kitaz.

THE OLD CITY OF ALEPPO. SITUATION ANALYSIS*

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In the wake of the Syrian conflict that has been ongoing for over five years, key cultural sites in the country have been rampaged including the Old city of Aleppo. Despite the tremendous local and international efforts to observe and document the damage to Syrian heritage, little attention is given to the time gap between the conflict and post-conflict reconstruction periods, during which irreversible damage may be inflicted on the heritage. It is of utmost importance to deliver first aid emergency measures once Old Aleppo is accessible in order to stabilize and secure assets, but also to pave the way for an inclusive post-conflict reconstruction process that meets the needs of the affected community.

Keywords:
Syria – Aleppo – heritage – conflict – reconstruction

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increase in the frequency and nature of threats to our cultural heritage. Climate change has played an instrumental role in this increase. Armed conflicts, however, have intensified hazards to human lives and their heritage to an unprecedented level. To counteract these events there has been an active movement in the field of cultural heritage to enact coordinated multi-agency mechanisms aiming at the protection of cultural heritage in times of emergencies and at the integration of a cultural sector in the humanitarian relief and recovery system established by the United Nations and other international bodies. Key among these activities is ICCROM's Disaster Risk Management Programme, which includes a training on First aid to Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis (TANDON, 2013).

First aid to cultural heritage response is a process that aims to first mitigate damages to heritage after a crisis, then stabilize the situation and finally prevent further damage. It is an all-inclusive approach, designed so as to create channels of communication and collaboration among the different stakeholders, evolving in three phases: situation analysis, on-site survey, security and stabilization actions (TANDON, 2016). In partnership with several other agencies, such as the Smithsonian Institution, ICCROM has successfully applied First Aid measures to cultural heritage damaged by natural disasters in countries like Nepal, Myanmar, the Philippines, et.al. But the high complexity of armed conflicts and their transitional phases from conflict to resilience have led international organizations to adopt risk-avoidance attitudes (KILA, 2013; LABABIDI and QASSAR, 2016).

In the wake of the Syrian conflict, which has caused a devastating humanitarian crisis and rampaged Syria's patrimony, several local and international initiatives have been launched to observe and document the damage to Syrian heritage (ECHO FACTSHEET, 2016). The greatest attention was concentrated on the historic urban center of Aleppo that spans a history of 7000 years (fig 2) and has been heavily damaged since the start of the conflict (fig 3). But here again, the agencies involved are mainly focusing on the post-conflict reconstruction process, overlooking the hazards of the transitional period.

This paper presents a situation analysis of the cultural crisis that has been escalating during the last four years in Aleppo. Situation analysis is a key tool in first aid response for collecting and organizing information in a systematic way which may eventually lead to a contextual and inclusive response. With this in mind, this paper provides a contextualized analysis for the primary and secondary hazards affecting Old Aleppo

* *This article was finished in November 2016, just before the recapture of the Old City by the forces of the Syrian regime backed up by Russian forces.*

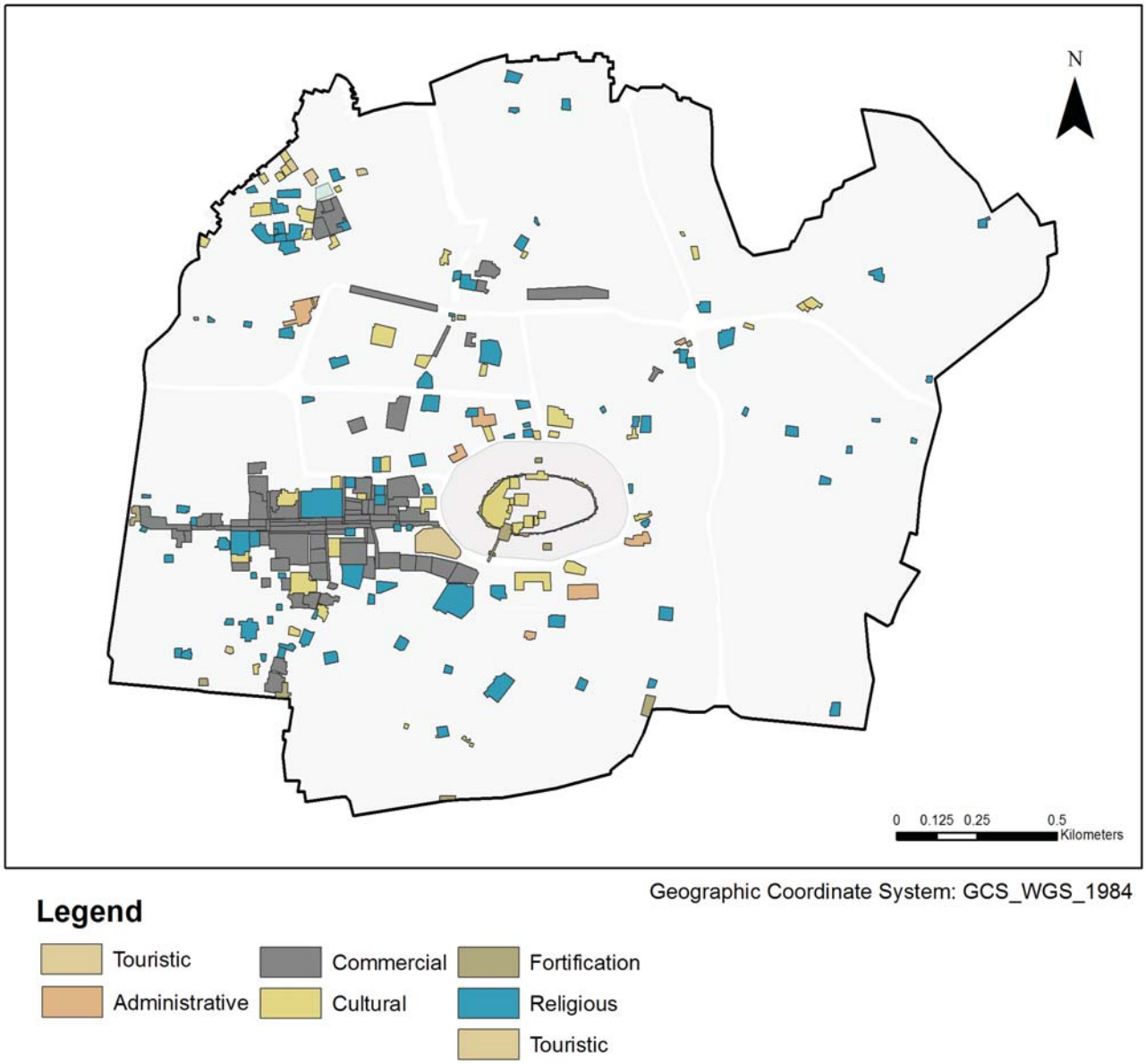

Fig. 2. The old city of Aleppo by Rim Lababidi.

in light of the changing dynamics of the conflict and the different sides fueling into it. It also examines the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of applying first aid measures to stabilize Old Aleppo.

This research has been developed by the author as part of her M.A. thesis, submitted in 2014 to the University College London. It is an introduction for a first aid to Old Aleppo which is being developed by the author. Selecting Old Aleppo as the focus of this paper stemmed from the rich cultural heritage of the city and the severity of the damage affecting it.

2. CONFLICT

In March 2011 a civil uprising sparked in Syria, demanding democratic reformations in the country, freedom of speech and a shared power. The violent response of the government, along with involvement of regional and international actors, turned the Syrian revolution into an armed conflict that spread throughout the country and reached Aleppo in July 2012. The hostilities divided Aleppo into a western part controlled by the regime and an eastern part controlled by the armed opposition, and marked Old Aleppo as a contested zone separating the two

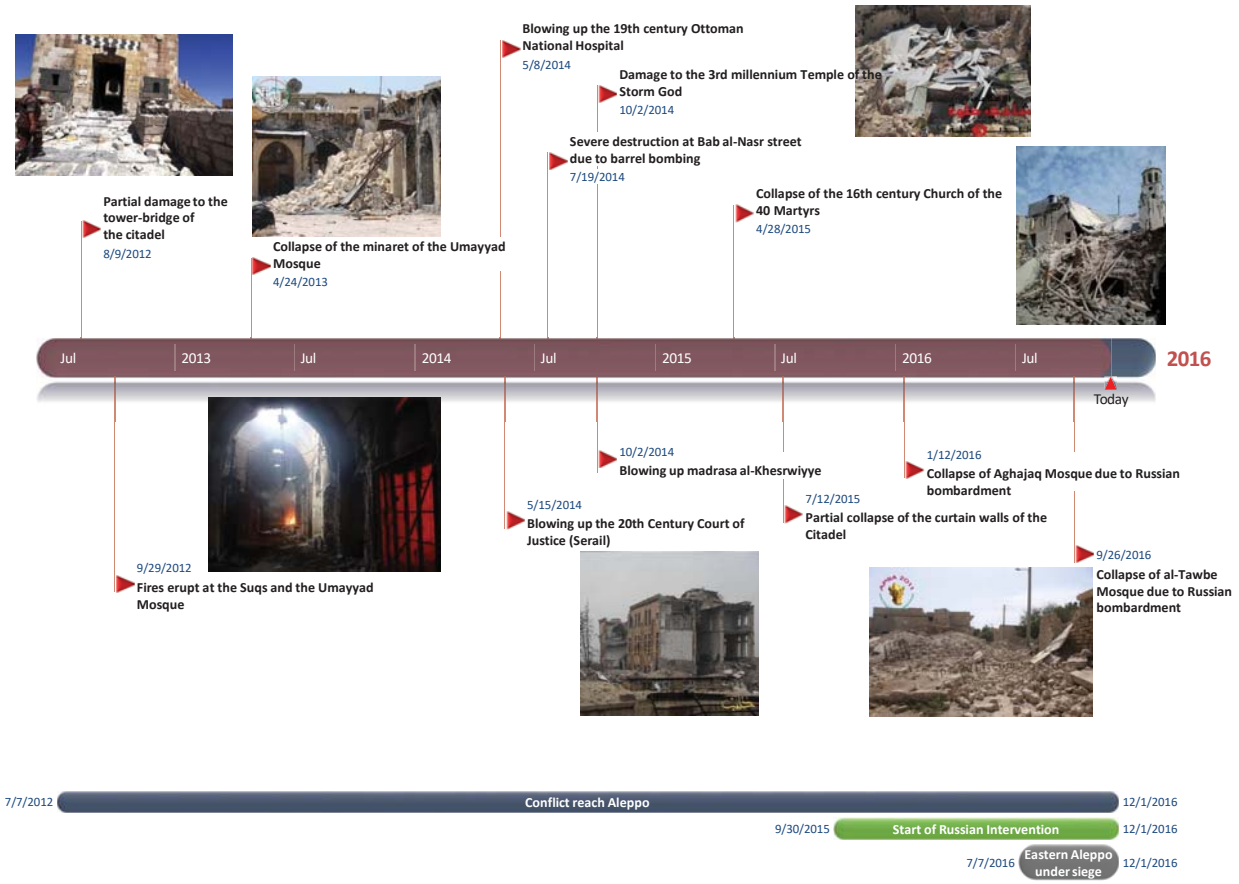

Fig. 3. Timeline of the conflict at Old Aleppo by Rim Lababidi

halves. Once the confrontations reached the ancient enclosure, both sides fought for the advantage of the 42m high Citadel which overlooks Old Aleppo. The Citadel was eventually captured by the regime with minor damages affecting its bridge-tower. The armed confrontations thence moved on to the perimeter of the citadel, which the regime successfully controlled. Accordingly, the major frontline within Old Aleppo was pushed further to the west, managing to include key assets like the Umayyad Mosque and the Suqs (fig 4).

Parallel to the severe damages to the western axes of Old Aleppo, both conflicting sides infiltrated into the remaining ancient enclosure and turned its ancient monuments into military bases for their operations. Minarets became bases for snipers and courtyards of houses and madrasas turned into missiles' launching facilities (fig 5), exposing Aleppo's historic structures to intentional targeting, as in the case of the 11th century minaret of the Umayyad mosque that was targeted and destroyed in April 24th, 2013. However, the ethno-religious fueling of the Syrian conflict, especially by regional actors, lead to an ideological radicalism that also affected Aleppo's heritage, as will be discussed later.

3. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY HAZARDS

During the first two years of the conflict in Aleppo primary hazards to the integrity of heritage were weaponry, shelling and air campaign bombardments, which caused partial collapses in historic structures. But beginning with 2014 the nature of hazards intensified, as each side adopted highly destructive methods against its opponent. Barrel Bombs, which are unguided bombs of large amounts of explosives and of a far more destructive impact than that of artillery or other air strikes (HRW, 2014), were deployed by the regime against its opponents. At the same time the armed opposition embarked in digging explosive tunnels, some of which reaching up to 130m in length, in order to target barracks of the regime (SOQUR AL-

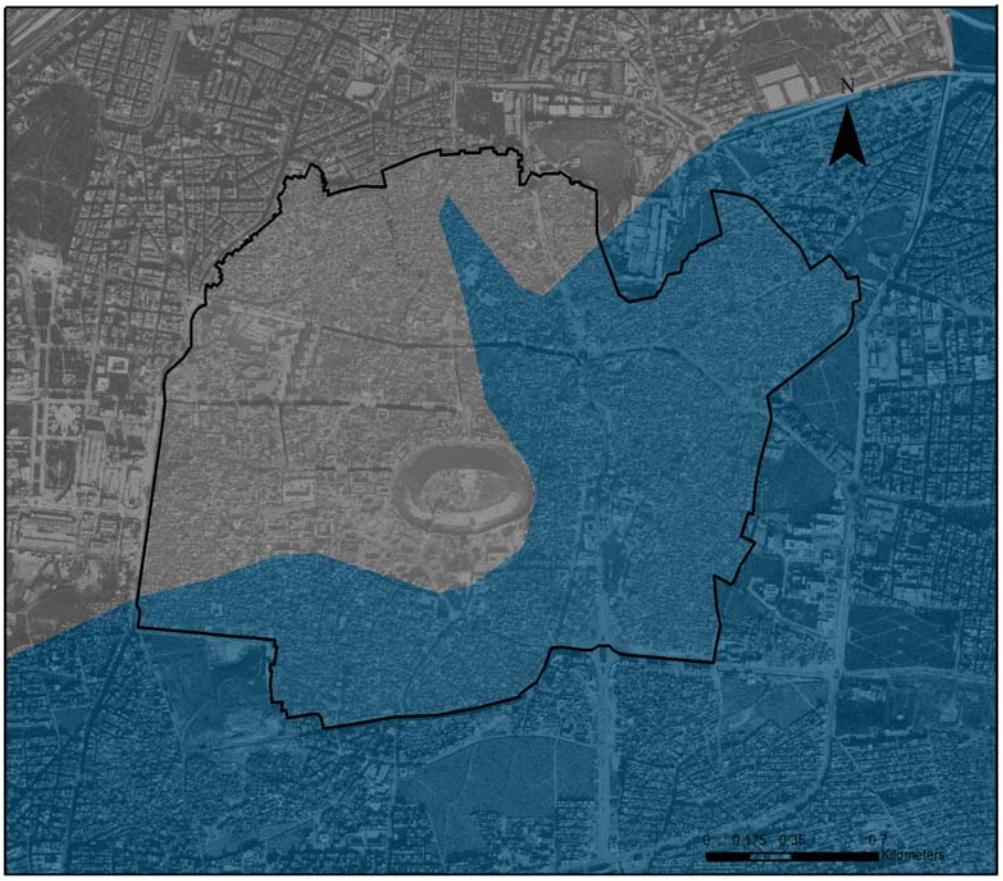

Fig. 4. Map illustrating distribution of power, based on (Tokmajyan, 2016, p. 3) © Rim Lababidi.

Fig. 5. Artillery based in a courtyard of a khan in old Aleppo by photo.halabnews.com.

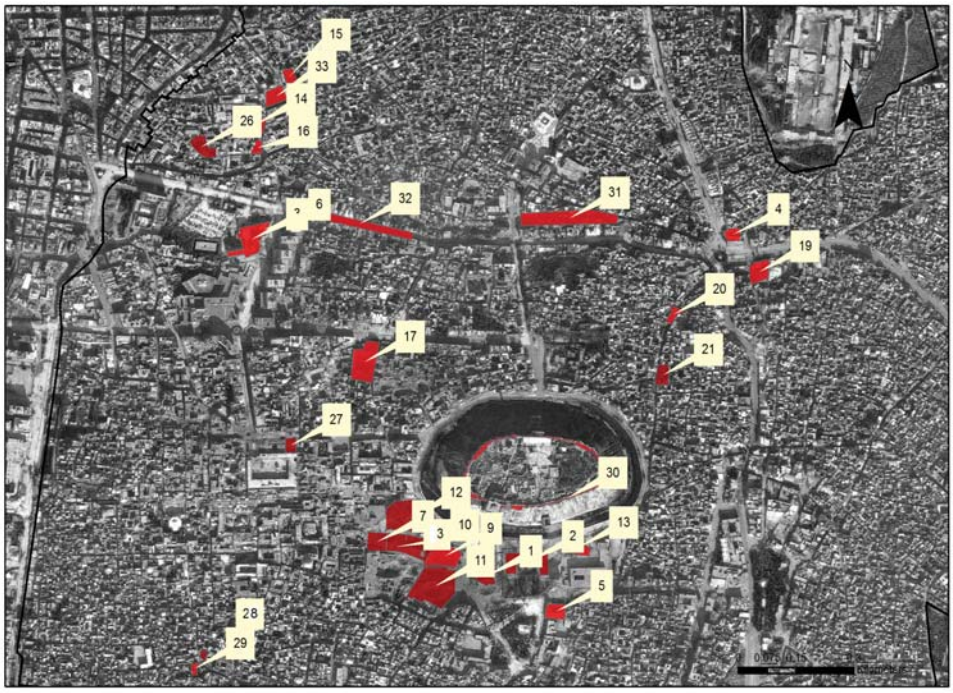

Fig. 6. Illustration of historic structures lost or heavily damaged due to barrel bombardments and explosive tunnels. In the background is a satellite image obtained from DigitalGlobe by Rim Lababidi.

SHAM, 2014). The impact of both methods, combined together, has turned a considerable number of structures into rubbles, e.g. the 17th century Church of the 40 Martyrs that embraced a highly significant memorial for the victims of the Armenian Genocide and al-Wakfiyya Library, with a collection of exceptionally significant historic Islamic manuscripts (fig 6).

The Russian intervention in Syria which started at the end of 2015, marked a new phase in the damage to Aleppo's heritage caused by air bombardment. Several structures, including the Mamluk al-Tobe Mosque and the Ottoman Aghajaq mosque were destroyed (fig 7). However, the residential structure of the old city suffered the most, which caused the death toll to spike. In an attempt to highlight how serious the situation is, a campaign was launched by activists on social media using the hashtags #SaveAleppo and #Save_Aleppo, which had a great impact on the international community. Today there is great fear for the safety of the people of Aleppo and their heritage, after the recent escalation in hostilities the city has been witnessing due to a siege that was enforced by the regime on eastern Aleppo in July 2016 (TOKMAJYAN, 2016a; TOKMAJYAN, 2016b).

As long as the conflicting parties continue to use Aleppo's cultural assets as bases for their forces, these assets will be vulnerable to prevailing threats of partial or complete collapse. Of particular emphasis are threats to the Citadel and its perimeter, as it is the main stronghold of the regime. Of equal concern are assets located on the frontline of the ancient enclosure. It is, however, difficult to identify the exact assets as conflicts are of changing dynamics, hence the coordinates of the frontline are constantly changing.
In this hostile context, several other significant structures have endured collateral damage, either due to inaccurate targeting or due to the implications of proximate barrel bombs and explosive tunnels. Besides partial collapses, it is likely that the structural stability of assets located close to the blasts has been compromised. To illustrate the impact of explosive tunnels, it is worth mentioning here that people living 8km away from locations of such explosions had repeatedly reported sensing the vibrations.

Similarly, secondary hazards from the conflict have been severely damaging to Old Aleppo. One of the main secondary hazards are destructive fires, which usually erupt following gunshots and bombardment in areas of exposed electric cables. On 29th September

Fig. 7. Destruction of al-Tobe Mosque due to Russian bombing by Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology [apsa2011.com].

2012 armed confrontations inside the Suqs caused destructive fires that quickly spread to the Umayyad Mosque due to abundant flammable material and wooden elements in both structures. Organized looting and illicit trafficking is another secondary hazard, unfailingly prevalent in times of war, due to inexistent security measures. Several looting incidents have been reported in key cultural assets at Old Aleppo, such as the 17th century Ghazale House and the Museum of Folklore Traditions, where objects on display were looted in addition to dismantling and sacking the highly esthetic wooden panels covering the walls (GUIDETTI, and PERINI, 2015). Security gap also fosters extremist activities that impose specific ideologies in spite of collective communal opposition to these ideologies. Within a period of six months, from the middle of 2014 to the beginning of 2015, the previously known as al-Nasra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliated group, vandalized three historic mosques inside Old Aleppo. One of those mosques was the

Fig. 8. Destruction of al-Tobe MosquLeaks in the Water Distribution System at Qarleq Neighborhood by Aleppo Today.

Fig. 9. Front loader swiping away debris of the 15th century al-Sarawi Mosque by photo. halabnews.com.

Madrasa al-Keltawiyya, where al-Nasra combatants exhumed the remnants of the body of a prominent Muslim scholar, Imam al-Nabhany, in order to prevent the people from worshipping the dead.

Lacking accessibility and required resources to deliver adequate maintenance work is another secondary hazard of the conflict. In several areas of Old Aleppo, like Bab al-Neirab and Qarleq, there have been reports of severe leaks in water distribution or sewer systems that sometimes continued for weeks without repair. This was due to either inaccessibility of these areas or to workers striking for not receiving their salaries for several months now (fig 8), this latter being standard procedure in areas controlled by the Interim Government. Moreover, there has hardly been any proper response to securing damaged assets; it is mostly at random that people sweep away debris of affected properties using front loaders to bring routes and roads surrounding damaged structures back in order (fig 9).

On a smaller scale of secondary hazards comes graffiti, which has been heavily used in old Aleppo by both sides of the conflict as a tool for war propaganda to express specific political alignments and/or to deliver specific messages to opposing sides (fig 10).

The vulnerability of Old Aleppo's assets to secondary hazards is closely related to the prevailing primary

Fig. 10. The 15th century al-Maqam Gate painted with the symbol of the Syrian revolution in many locations by Aleppo Today.

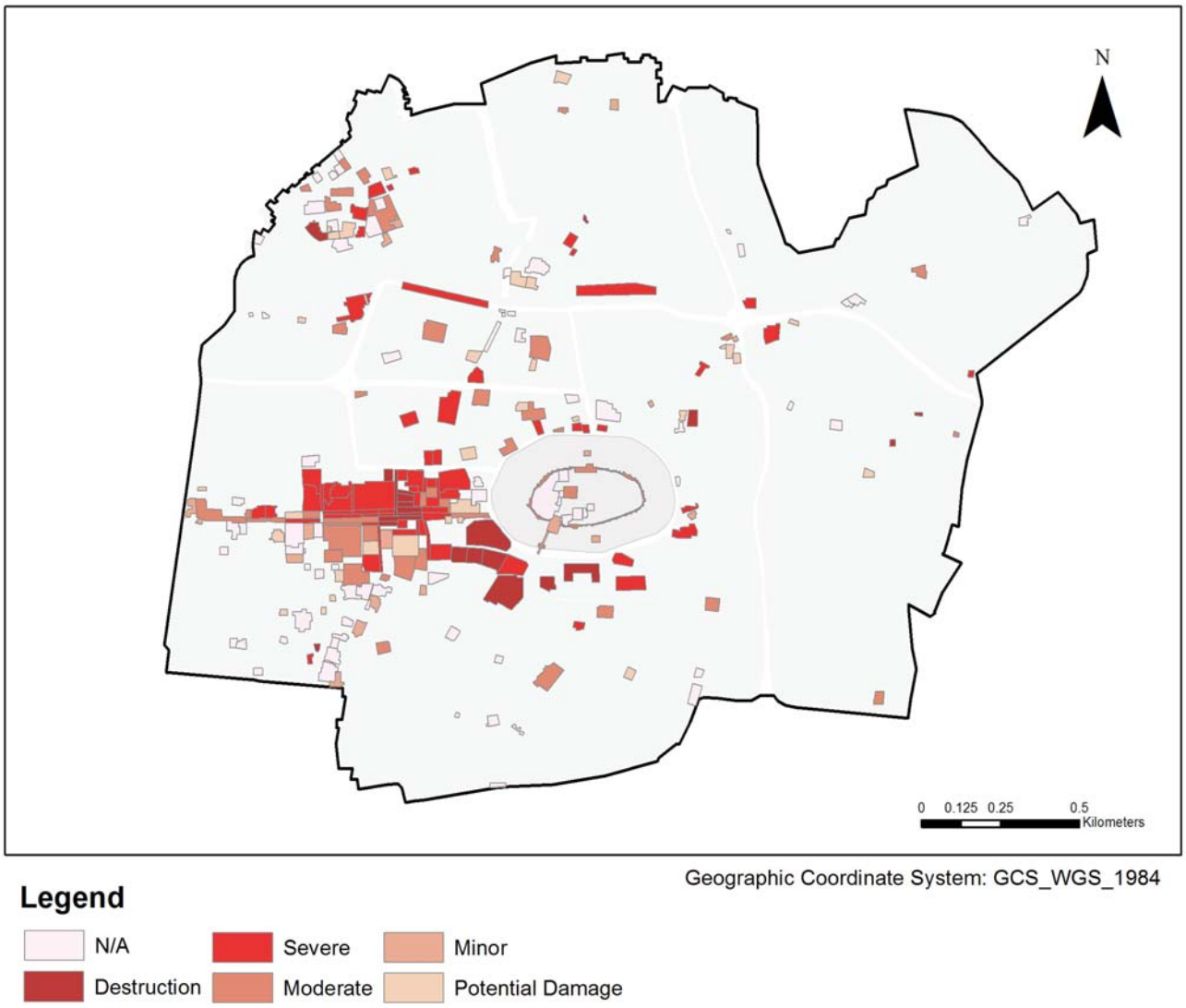

Fig. 11. Levels of damage to the old city of Aleppo by Rim Lababidi.

hazards of the conflict. Threats to the safety of heritage are equally intense in both rebel-held areas as well as those controlled by the regime, as long as they are inaccessible to professionals.

Considering the afore mentioned factors in light of the arid-continental climate of Aleppo, which is characterized by being hot and dry during summer and cold and wet in winter, the historic properties of Aleppo are exposed to accelerated cycles of deterioration that can in the long run be severely damaging. No less alarming is that Aleppo is located in a region tectonically prone to earthquakes and it has experienced three destructive earthquakes: in 642 AD, in 1138 AD and in 1822 AD (AL-NAASAN, 1982: 3, 12; GONNELLA, 2007: 105, 109). That makes the ancient enclosure highly vulnerable to earthquakes, especially in the present fragility of its structures (fig 11).

4. MAPPING THE ACTORS

Prior to the war, Old Aleppo was a vibrant and diverse hub that embraced 110.000 inhabitants of different ethno-religious backgrounds along with hosting an extremely vital commercial hub (UBERBAU, 2010: 24; AROUS, 2012: 114). Despite the economic vitality of the commercial part of the city, Old Aleppo's inhabitants suffered a lower average income with high ratio of illiteracy and unemployment, especially among women (KARAZOUN, 2006: 32–34; AROUS, 2012: 115). In the wider context of war, the cultural heritage of Aleppo features a new array of stakeholders who enjoy various levels of authorities and responsibilities and they relate differently to the heritage of the city. A consensus among the stakeholders in regard to the post-conflict response towards heritage will be challenging to achieve, as their assessments and decisions will be consequential to their self-interests.

Primary actors to the heritage of the city are those who directly relate to Old Aleppo and they can impact the post-conflict response. They include armies and armed combatants who could play a key role in securing cultural assets, contributing to regulating the response and assisting in physical labor, such as moving debris away. Obviously, local specialized agencies in the sector of cultural heritage, i.e., the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), the Syrian Ministry of Endowments which retains the ownership of a considerable number of Old Aleppo's assets, and the Antiquities Department of the Council of Free Aleppo, which is part of the Interim Government, are also primary actors. These agencies will be professionally and technically active in the response and they can provide data on Old Aleppo that they have acquired from previous projects. The local community living within the ancient enclosure or those who own properties in Old Aleppo equally relate to Old Aleppo and their visions about the future of the old city are indispensable. Their contribution may feed into the professional, technical, regulatory or physical sectors of the process. By the start of the post-conflict reconstruction, primary actors might include consultants, contractors, suppliers and workers who will be directly involved in Old Aleppo.

Secondary actors are those who connect to Old Aleppo but are not directly involved. This group includes the diverse local community of Aleppo residing out of Old Aleppo but relating differently to the old city. Their contribution will be similar to that of those who live inside the ancient enclosure, but adding the possibility of securing donors among them. Secondary parties also include local and international heritage professionals and agencies that have been involved in projects on Old Aleppo, such as the University of Aleppo, The Archaeological Society of Aleppo (Aladeyat), UNESCO, ICOMOS, etc. This group is fundamental for professional intervention, interns, building capacities and providing archives. Not to forget bodies and agencies, such as humanitarian actors who might be involved in the old city for different reasons other than heritage and whose work and interests might intersect with those of cultural agencies.

Third actors exist too, who might show interest in Old Aleppo for different reasons, such as neighboring countries and religious and ethnic groups who might claim rights over specific assets within Old Aleppo. At this stage of the post-conflict process it is difficult to assess their impact, but it is essential to map them and identify their interests at an early stage.

5. STRATEGY AND RESPONSE, SWOT ANALYSIS AS A CONCLUSION

According to the 2015/2016 annual report by Amnesty International, the Syrian population has lost access to protection and basic rights and has been exposed to unlawful killing, abduction, sieges and denial of humanitarian access (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2016). Despite existing ethno-religious tensions, political division continues to be the prevailing threat to the social cohesion of the country. Given the vital role of cultural heritage in disaster reduction and rebuilding resilience, it is our responsibility as cultural heritage specialists in such dark contexts, to complement the humanitarian work.

It is advised to deliver first aid emergency measures once Old Aleppo becomes accessible, in order to secure and stabilize assets and to pave the way for an inclusive post-conflict reconstruction process that meets the needs of the affected community. In order to achieve a sustainably developing plan it is a necessity to prioritize the Suqs and Caravansaries of Aleppo, which together embrace over 3000 shops and constitute an anchor for the economy of the city, if not the entire country. Key religious and public cultural assets like Mar Elias Church, the Umayyad Mosque and the Citadel of Aleppo are equally important as they can bring people together regardless of their political division and it can foster the reconciliation process.

Strengths

1. Heritage: strong cultural identity and comprehensive documentation of Aleppo's heritage by previous projects.

2. Demographics: young and diverse population.

3. Capacities: high professional and academic capacities among the Syrian community.

4. Funding & economics: prospective donors, a long history of commercial and industrial vitality that can support the redevelopment process.

5. Laws and regulations: Directorate of Old Aleppo, an already established municipality and an Old-Aleppo-specific law which regulate the urban and architectural interventions in the old city.

Weaknesses

1. Heritage: sheer extent of damage.

2. Demographics: local prejudices among the different groups of the community, especially political, and a sharp drop in the population.

3. Capacities: high percentage of the population has been abducted, killed or fled the city, shaken governmental institution.

4. Funding and economics: severe breakdown in the economic system of Syria.

5. Laws and regulations: deep hierarchal and corrupt system, lack of trust between the local community and the Syrian authorities, incomprehensive legal frame in terms of post-conflict response.

Opportunities

1. Heritage: immediate documentation, stabilization for damaged heritage, and securing cultural materials of high significance.

2. Demographics: creating channels of communication between refugees and the local community continuing to live in Aleppo and enforcing social cohesion.

3. Capacities: immediate training for the local community, governmental institutions and the army.

4. Funding and economics: enforcing sustainable-development plans.

5. Laws and regulations: adopting test strategies to create more flexible and transparent systems.

Threats

1. Heritage: delay in access, exacerbating damage, looting and illicit trafficking.

2. Demographics: cultural conflicts and divisions.

3. Capacities: threats to the safety of involved teams.

4. Funding and economics: favoring investors and those in power over the needs of the local community.

5. Laws and regulations: intertwining heritage with politics and providing access for specific international teams, regardless of their qualifications or the concerns of the local community.

Immediately after conflicts that shatter people's everyday lives and their heritage and traditions, people tend to have an urgency for a rapid restoration for these tangible and intangible assets of their lives. Nicolas Stanley-Price calls this urgency "the thread of continuity" (STANLEY-PRICE, 2007). The old city of Aleppo collectively resembles the thread of continuity for its inhabitants, hence, it is essential to adequately respond to the damage affecting it once it becomes accessible. A first aid response constitutes a first step in counteracting the horrendous impact of war and it can pave the way for an inclusive and sustainable recovery process.

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