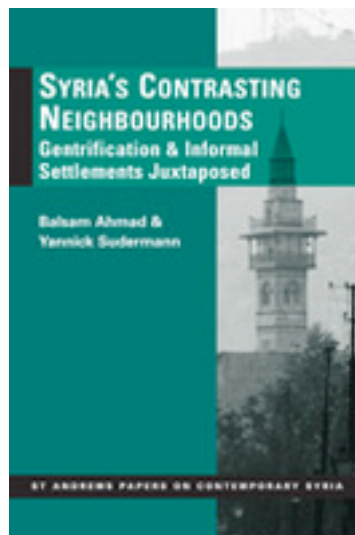


Syria's Contrasting Neighbourhoods: Gentrification and In- formal Settlements Jux- taped



Balsam Ahmad and Yannick Sudermann

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Foreword: Urban Divergence under Neoliberalism Raymond Hinnebusch

In 2011, Syria descended into crisis, an uprising against the regime which, arguably, was a manifestation of its unbalanced version of authoritarian upgrading. “Authoritarian upgrading” denotes the techniques by which formerly populist authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have sought to retain power while marginalizing their former plebeian constituencies in parallel to “post-populist” policies of economic liberalization, privatization and welfare reductions; in compensation, regimes sought to tap new resources, diversify their constituencies and re-regulated state-society relations (Heydemann 2007). However, what has since become clear from the Arab Uprising is that corresponding to each short-term gain for regimes from such techniques of rule were also cumulative long run costs that have led to the overthrow of presidents in Egypt and Tunisia and collapse or near collapse of regimes in Libya and Yemen, with a similar outcome possible in Syria at the time of writing.

Bashar al-Asad inherited an authoritarian state with built-in vulnerabilities which he set about “upgrading”: The need to trim a state overdeveloped on declining external rents and to foster the private sector and inward investment required a restructuring of the regime’s social base away from its initial populist alliance. It may be that these changes were inevitable, but their management proved inadequate. While Asad went relatively far toward restructuring the regime’s social base he failed to undertake a corresponding political adaptation. The overconcentration of power and patronage in the ruling clan debilitated the clientele networks that connected the regime to society while the new co-opted classes were not politically incorporated, by, for example, some pluralization of the party system; parallel to the debilitation of the Baath party which had connected the regime to its former constituency, the too rapid

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jettisoning of social services and legal protections for the regime's less well-off, rural and periphery elements created the seeds of rebellion (Hinnebusch 2012).

Syria's recent political trajectory is reflected in its housing and urban policy, and specifically the polarization between the luxury accommodation and profit opportunities for the new rich and the deteriorating provision for the lower middle and lower classes. In a recent article, Robert Goulden used urban and housing policy to trace and demonstrate the differential changes in outcomes for social classes as Syria moved from a populist to post-populist era (Goulden 2011). The 1960s-70s established, he argues, a near universal provision of social services and low poverty rates (with only 10% under the (\$2/day) poverty line compared to 20% for the region and 40% globally); over this period, life expectancy rose 28% and literacy by 40% while infant mortality fell by 76%.

Reflective of this in the field of housing was the near absence of slums. Even though 35-50% of Syria's housing is informal, only 10% of Syria's housing stock was rated by UN-HABITAT as slum housing compared to 40% in Egypt, 44% in Iran and 50% in Lebanon (UN-Habitat 2003). Since poverty was shallow, most squatters could afford to build acceptable quality housing (from sturdy material, usually concrete blocks) and, although illegal, informal communities were connected to many utilities and by law could only be demolished if alternative housing was provided. In 2008 formal property rights began to be extended to some of this housing stock.

A housing crisis became apparent in the 2000 although its roots go back some way. Decline in the welfare state began in the late 1980s. The population boom far exceeded the modest provision of public housing, which was hugely oversubscribed. Private owners, constrained by ceilings on rent, ceased to rent their property. Today slums are expanding. Poor construction led, e.g. to a 2002 building collapse, killing 52; conditions are unsanitary and health facilities absent in much informal housing. Some informal housing has been illegally cleared without authorities providing alternative housing. In parallel, investment of up to \$20 billion was channeled into luxury housing for the new rich and luxury tourist projects. State-owned land was sold cheaply to investors and scarce public funds spent on extending infrastructure to these developments. This made land less available to low income people while the influx of investment drove up property prices 300% in the 2004-06 period. When rent controls were lifted on housing in Hama, costs soared 7-10 times. The lack of affordable housing generated a crisis described

as a “time bomb.” And indeed anti-regime disturbances have been notable in such informal housing areas as Douma near Damascus.

Goulden’s account of polarization is taken further by the papers in this issue. Balsam Ahmad examines informal housing in Aleppo, in many ways illustrative of the downside of urban, welfare and housing policy under “post-populist” development. The decline in public funding for education and a halt to the building of state schools has left informal communities without such facilities and forces reliance on private tuition, hence, for the poor, lack of access to education. Educational attainment is the main determinant of health among women. When they acquire education, they can overcome the conservative patriarchal social norms that prevent them from seeking health care; education also goes with employment opportunities, which give women more power in the family especially in times of financial need: by contrast, illiterate girls, married off young by the parents to save expenses, have the opposite life chances, with partner violence and self-harm identified in one, not untypical, case in Ahmad’s account. Unfortunately, 80% of women were illiterate in informal Aleppo neighbourhoods.

Yannick Sudermann exposes the reverse of the coin in his examination of the gentrification of the old city of Damascus. He shows that gentrification was a function of and paralleled class polarization. In the seventies, Damascus was a middle class city, but thereafter differentiation began as the middle class was impoverished and a new rich emerged. In turn, gentrification, in driving up property prices and reducing affordable housing even for the middle class, itself increases polarization. It was also, however, a manifestation of the authoritarian upgrading by which the regime used access to profitable opportunities in the old city to co-opt investors who cut across networks composed of crony capitalists, the old bourgeoisie and external investors. This story well exemplifies both the risks and advantages of “authoritarian upgrading” for regime resilience.

These two analyses expose the peculiar features of the Syrian uprising. While for example, in Egypt, the urban centre was the site of the uprising, in Syria, the urban centres have been quiescent, a function in part at least of the influx of investment and tourism from which the well-off have benefited, enabling the regime to co-opt them, as Sudermann shows; conversely, the periphery, deprived and neglected, as Ahmad shows, has been the site of rebellion among the deprived, once the regime’s constituency, now its enemy.

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Neighbourhood and Health Inequalities in Formal and Informal Neighbourhoods in Aleppo Balsam Ahmad

Background

This article¹ is based on qualitative research conducted in Aleppo, Syria in April-May 2011. It is part of a doctoral research project that explores the relationship between individual and neighbourhood socioeconomic status, on the one hand, and self-reported health of women in formal and informal urban areas in Aleppo, on the other. Interviews were conducted with 27 women in formal and informal areas as well as with ten key informants (planners, NGO activists, private health providers and academics). The aim was to explore views of "compositional" (i.e. characteristics of individuals) as well as "contextual" features (i.e. characteristics of neighbourhoods and other upstream factors) that may result in gender and health inequalities. Key informants placed equal emphasis on compositional and contextual social determinants of health. They all pointed to educational attainment of women as the most important social determinant of their health. This study adds to the body of evidence on gender, urban and health inequalities in Syria. Understanding these interactions will be particularly important as Syria emerges from the present political crisis.

Introduction

Health has been defined by the World Health Organisation as "a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO 1946). In the last decade, the public health field saw a surge in research studies

investigating the association between features of neighbourhoods and health. Research on neighbourhood and health is underpinned by the hypothesis that places of residence independently influence health. This influence is seen as being over and above the characteristics, circumstances, and behaviour of individuals. Studies on neighbourhood and health emphasise the need to distinguish both conceptually and empirically between "compositional" and "contextual" effects (Curtis and Jones 1998; Macintyre et al. 1993, 2002): is it the characteristics of individuals (e.g. gender, race, education, social class) living in these areas ("compositional" factors) or the characteristics of the areas themselves such as neighbourhood socioeconomic status ("contextual" factors) which are more influential?

These characteristics, compositional or contextual, are known as the social determinants of health. According to the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, these are

"the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices. The social determinants of health are mostly responsible for health inequities - the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries" (WHO 2011a).

In this paper, I use the term "health inequalities" instead of "health inequities" which is used in the above WHO definition of the social determinants of health. Both terms are used to describe differences in health and in the distribution of health determinants between individuals and communities. In using "health inequalities", differences in health are attributed to unfair conditions outside individuals' control as well as variations between individuals in biology (e.g. age; or race) or those resulting from individuals' free will.² According to Kawachi and colleagues inequity and equity are "political concepts, expressing a moral commitment to social justice" (Kawachi et al. 2002:647) with "health inequity" referring to health inequalities that arise completely as a result of injustice or unfairness (Kawachi et al. 2002). The Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health adopted in October 2011 stresses the need for immediate action on the social determinants of health to create "inclusive, equitable, economically productive and healthy societies" (WHO 2011b).

Studying the social determinants of health and health inequalities in Syria, especially in informal urban areas, is pertinent. More than half of the Syrian population lives in urban areas and over 40% of urban residents reside in Damascus and Aleppo (Fernandes 2008). The proportion of urban residents to the total population is expected to reach 75% by 2050 (Fernandes 2008; Lavinal 2008). According to the report by El Laithy and Abu Ismail (2005), 38.8% of the poor in Syria are in urban areas and a large proportion of them live in what is called in the literature, academic and official, "informal settlements" or sometimes "shanty towns", "squatter" or "illegal settlements" or "slums". The term used in the official documents in Syria is "al-sakan al-*ʿashwāʿī*" (informal settlements).³ Throughout this paper I also refer to these settlements as "informal areas" or "informal neighbourhoods". Current estimates show that 40% of the population in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo live in informal settlements (Lavinal 2008). These are areas built haphazardly with no adherence to urban planning or building regulations. They are characterised by overcrowding, unsafe and poor quality housing and exposure to unknown levels of pollutants from unregulated industry, sewer outlets and waste dumps (Hammal et al. 2005). Communities in these settlements suffer from marginalisation, social exclusion and lack of opportunities (Kabani and Kamel 2007). Women, in particular, have been reported to bear a disproportionate burden of ill health and disability (Maziak et al. 2005).

The empirical literature on social determinants of health, including neighbourhood and health, is mostly quantitative and much of it is based on Western countries. This literature has been criticised for paying little attention to understanding the mechanisms by which neighbourhoods influence health and health inequalities (Macintyre et al. 2002; Riva et al. 2007). Besides, because most of this literature originates in Western countries, neighbourhood *informality* as a neighbourhood characteristic that influences health has been largely ignored. Results from published Western studies (Riva et al. 2007) show that characteristics of the place of residence such as socioeconomic ones affect women and men in different ways. An unpublished paper based on my PhD research (Ahmad et al. 2012) shows that women's health (but not that of men) is vulnerable to the effects of both socioeconomic characteristics and *formality* of neighbourhoods.

The aim of this paper is to examine the social determinants of health that may explain urban health inequalities, especially those

between and within formal and informal neighbourhoods in Aleppo. Based on a qualitative study exploring the perspectives of key informants, the paper is part of a mixed-method PhD study on neighbourhood and individual socioeconomic status and self-reported health of women in formal and informal neighbourhoods in Aleppo. My PhD research builds upon previous studies of informal settlements in Aleppo, Syria (Hammal et al. 2005; Maziak et al. 2005). However, it differs from them in that it explores in depth the relative influence of compositional and contextual characteristics as well as neighbourhood formality on self-reported health of married women.

Section 2 of this paper consists of a brief review of factors influencing the growth of informal settlements in Syria and the environmental and health challenges resulting from this growth. Section 3 is a brief description of the methods used in data collection and analysis, together with the characteristics of the respondents. Section 4 includes a detailed description of the empirical findings. In the final section, Section 5, I discuss these findings by placing them within wider debates in the published empirical literature on social determinants of health, trying to uncover the relative role that individual and neighbourhood characteristics have in explaining health inequalities between and within formal and informal neighbourhoods in Aleppo.

The Challenge of Informal Settlements in Syria

In Aleppo, Syria's second city, 29 informal settlements (out of a total of 114 neighbourhoods classified by the municipality) occupied about 45% of the city's inhabited area and were home to an estimated one million people in 2004, i.e. about 40% of Aleppo's estimated total population of 2.5 million (Hammal et al. 2005; Maziak et al. 2005). Most residents of the informal areas in Aleppo come from rural areas of Aleppo governorate or other Syrian governorates. Some also migrated within the city, especially from the old quarter, benefiting from the gentrification of the old city and rocketing property prices. Many sold their homes and bought multiple properties in informal settlements or other poor formal neighbourhoods (Fernandes 2008).

The current annual growth rate of informal settlements in Aleppo has been estimated at 4%. That is about 6,000 households a year, which necessitates the establishment of 125 new homes in informal settlements each week.⁴ Wakely (2008) gives a slightly

higher estimate: 160 new dwellings per week to accommodate the expected population increase. Population density in these settlements ranges from an estimated 200 person per hectare (pph) (20,000 per square km) to as high as 750 pph (75,000 per square km) in areas where multi-story apartment buildings have been built (Hammal et al. 2005). Informal settlements in Aleppo have sprung up in the eastern, northern, and southern parts of the city, while the western part is designated for planned expansion. Their levels of urbanization in the form of housing style (single-story or multi-story buildings) and population density differ according to their geographical location. The settlements in the northern part are considered to be more urbanised and those in the eastern more rural (Hammal et al. 2005). Additionally, the predominant industries differ according to the geographical location of informal settlements. The northern part has a high concentration of tanneries and car repair workshops as well as the city's main waste dump sites. The eastern part has many unregulated workshops between houses, while the southern has numerous industries, such as cement plants, in addition to the main sewer outlet of the whole city (Hammal et al. 2005). In general, informal settlements in Aleppo and overall in Syria are not true slums as it is the case in most African or Asian slums (see picture 1.1). Regulations in the 1980s stipulated that informal areas must be provided with basic services and public utilities. Many informal areas of Aleppo are provided with public utilities such as electricity, water, sewerage, telecommunications and limited collection of refuse, and an increasing number of residents of these areas pay a service tax to the municipality (Lavinal 2008).

Picture 1.1: Main Road of an Informal Settlement, Northern Aleppo



Source: Photograph by Balsam Ahmad, 2007.

There are several factors to which the proliferation of informal areas in Syria has been attributed. These could be classified under demographic, legal and policy factors. Demographic factors include mass rural-urban migration to major urban centres, especially Damascus and Aleppo; a high rate of overall population growth (officially estimated at 2.37% between 2006 and 2010); and a large influx of refugees from neighbouring countries (Lavalin 2008). The refugee problem started with Palestinians, who fled to Syria in 1948 and 1967; then came the Lebanese between 1975 and 2006; and in 2003 and thereafter 1.5-2 million Iraqis were estimated to have taken refuge in Syria (Lavalin 2008). Among policy and legal factors is the failure of the national legal planning system and housing policies to take into account the growing housing needs of the urban poor. Under-investment in rural areas and environmental challenges, such as water shortages and increased salinisation of agricultural land, are factors that might have sustained the rural-urban migration. Conflicting laws and policies in dealing with the problem of informal settlements and a lack of coherent strategies and actions in preventing their growth have also been cited as factors that have contributed to the proliferation of informal

settlements in Syria (Fernardes 2008; Lavinal 2008). The last few months of political turmoil in Syria have witnessed an acceleration in illegal building activities, especially in informal settlements (author's observation; personal conversation). In the absence of any documentation, it is impossible to give precise figures of this recent growth in informal settlements. However, it is likely that informal housing would become the norm if this observed growth continued unabated.

Method

My PhD study uses an explanatory sequential design whereby the qualitative part builds on the quantitative part to explain some of the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). The qualitative fieldwork was carried out in Aleppo in April-May 2011, a month after civil unrest in Syria had started. It involved semi-structured interviews with 27 married women and 10 key informants, including service providers in informal areas and urban planners. This paper reports findings from the key informant interviews.⁵

The key informants were purposively chosen for their professional role. They include actors who have detailed knowledge about the individual and structural factors that bring about health inequalities between formal and informal areas, especially those that disadvantage low income women in informal areas. The aim was to achieve in the sample of participants a mix of those working with the informal communities at the grass roots level, such as service providers, and those whose job implies a more strategic overview of the various neighbourhoods and communities, such as urban planners. Because of the volatility of the political situation, and wariness towards researchers linked to western institutions, a judgment was made to maintain a lower profile than usually is the case. This meant that all key informants were approached informally through personal contacts of either the lead researcher's social network or the supervisory team. In total, 14 key informants were approached for an interview, two declined and two were conducted but were interrupted and very brief. Therefore, I only draw on the findings from interviews with ten key informants. Table 1.1 shows the characteristics of these key informants. Of the ten key informants interviewed, five worked with low income/informal communities at the grass-roots level as service providers in either education or health. Questions focused on the conceptions of the key

problems facing poor women in general and how these problems vary according to area of residence, especially for the married women living in informal neighbourhoods. Interviews varied in length from approximately 30 minutes to one hour, partly dependent on the availability of the participants. Interviews were conducted in colloquial Arabic. Detailed notes were taken in all interviews apart from one which was recorded. During the time of the fieldwork, I kept a reflective diary in which I recorded daily notes on encounters, informal discussions and observations related to the topic of the research.

Table 1.1: Characteristics of the Key Informant Participant Sample

KI-1 – Female; midwife, private/public employment
KI-2 – Female; counsellor and midwife, NGO
KI-3 - Female doctor (gynaecologist), private clinic in an informal area
KI-4 - Male, Kurdish doctor, private clinic in the most deprived location of an informal area
KI-5 - Female, teacher at a middle school in a Palestinian informal area
KI-6 - Male, primary health care, public sector
KI-7 - Male, priest, charity in a low income formal area
KI-8 - Male, urban planner, NGO and international donor
KI-9 - Female, urban planner, private and public sectors and NGO
KI-10 - Male, public sector (municipality and academia)

Interviews were analysed thematically, applying a coding frame that built on an *a priori* framework. The same coding frame was used to analyse the field notes in the reflective diary. Themes were generated both from the research questions and literature, and through iterative reading of the data (Lewis et al. 2003). The

findings from the interviews with key informants will be triangulated with the findings from the interviews with 27 women living in formal and informal areas, sampled from across the socioeconomic spectrum, and ultimately with a multilevel analysis of quantitative data undertaken in 2010.

Findings

Here I present the main themes that resulted from the analysis of the interviews with key informants. These themes shed light on the mechanisms behind gender and geographical health inequalities. I classified these into two main categories, namely, neighbourhood and individual characteristics.

Neighbourhood Characteristics

The narratives of key informants were rich in details about neighbourhood characteristics that influence health. The most prominent among those mentioned were neighbourhood socioeconomic characteristics, neighbourhood environmental profiles and neighbourhood resources. I describe each below.

Differences in Neighbourhood Socioeconomic Characteristics between and within Neighbourhoods

A number of key informants noted that neighbourhoods were not homogenous in their socioeconomic characteristics but there were differences between and within neighbourhoods. Knowledge of the perceived causes and nature of such differences can be helpful in understanding geographical health inequalities. Aspects of these differences and how they influence health are discussed below.

Differences of socioeconomic characteristics between neighbourhoods
A number of key informants noted a difference in the social characteristics of neighbourhoods, especially the informal areas, based on the place of origin of their residents. Two urban planners (KI-8 and KI-9) classified informal settlements into categories based on the origin of the people who lived there. The first type includes those areas that attracted desperate social groups "*united in poverty*"(KI-9) and who came from rural or urban areas with different social norms.⁶ According to these key informants, such areas within the informal zone can be found in the southern part of the

city, for example al-Ansāri and Tal al-Zarāzīr. The latter is usually home to poor people who work as cleaners or in menial government jobs (KI-9). The second type of informal areas is that which received large groups from the same ethnicity originating in one or two areas with similar social norms. An example is Shaykh Maqsūd, an area in northern Aleppo with a majority of Kurds. This division into two categories was contested by another key informant, also an urban planner, who said:

"No, I do not entirely agree with this classification. The reason for migration to a certain area does not come from nowhere. Usually you find that people come together on the basis of clan, tribe or their belonging to a certain rural area. For example, in the eastern areas, you find a majority of people from Idlib and its countryside. Generally, no one chooses a certain area randomly. There is always a reason, mostly family, relatives or friends" (KI-10).

The narratives of the key informants included many references to the effect of different areas' social norms on social and health problems, especially those facing women. For example, consanguineous marriages are very prevalent in certain areas and as a result genetic deformities are more common.

"In some neighbourhood consanguineous marriages are more prominent than others and some have become isolated areas where only one extended family is present. In some informal areas, one can see first degree consanguineous marriages representing 36-40% of marriages and up to 70% second degree consanguineous marriages. This has given rise to many genetic defects especially male linked" (KI-9).

Many key informants pointed out to differences in neighbourhoods' social norms that impacted individual determinants of health, such as the number of children a woman bore:

"I noticed that in Afrīn [Kurdish] villages⁷ women have more awareness of family planning.... whereas villages that are linked to al-Bāb, al-Safīreh or Manbej and their suburbs have a tribal system, and in such societies there is a culture of having a large number of children. The more children, the more power a man has" (KI-2).

A key informant doctor working in an informal area with a majority Kurdish population, many of whom came originally from Afrīn villages, confirmed what KI-2 said: "*Compared to other low income poor areas women in this area do not have many kids*" (KI-3). Social

norms not only influence the number of children women bear but also their health seeking behaviour, especially in some communities. One key informant from the health service pointed out how religious conservatism influences health seeking behaviour of women and how, combined with poverty, this can influence health outcomes:

"There are poor neighbourhoods in which women would not utilise the medical services and prefer to use an unqualified midwife if a female doctor is not available. In many areas residents are conservative and even if a male doctor has the highest specialisation women will not use his services" (KI-6).

Differences of socioeconomic characteristics within neighbourhoods

Key informants who worked at the grass-roots community level noted differences in the social composition and social norms among residents of small geographical localities within the same neighbourhood. All examples given were from informal areas. One key informant, who works in an informal area inhabited by Palestinian refugees, noted that residents of a relatively new development housing project in this area differ in their social norms from the "indigenous" residents of the area:

"You can see that the houses from the outside are very nice; all have a Chalet style but from the inside there are social illnesses and problems. Even the children I teach come and tell me 'teacher, this child is from the "project" ...he does not care about study'" (KI-5).

This key informant then went on to compare the social norms of residents of the project with those of the original residents of the area, who are religiously more conservative Muslims. The key informant emphasised that despite being conservative Muslims, the culture of the original residents places more value on the education of women:

"The original people of (name of area) refugee camp are more conservative. They have been in it for a long time.the families are all related to each other one way or another as they originally came to the refugee area from one area. They are conservative Muslims and mostly educated, even the women" (KI-5).

In another example, two health service providers working in different parts of the same informal area alluded to socioeconomic inequalities within the area. A doctor working in a majority Kurdish informal area (KI-4) and in its most deprived street noted that almost all the residents in the locality were very poor. In this account, the key informant made clear that this particular locality's socioeconomic position was lower than other localities within the same neighbourhood:

"There are differences between this area and other areas in (name) in all aspects. (The locality) is characterised by extreme poverty, low education and very few services.... in people's minds this is a different area from (name of informal area)" (KI-4).

Differences in Environmental Health Profiles Between Informal Neighbourhoods

Several key informants noted that residents of informal settlements suffered from a double burden of disease with high prevalence of both communicable and non-communicable diseases. However, according to these key informants, the pattern of certain diseases differs between neighbourhoods. In many cases, it is the most common type of industrial workshops within the area that determines the type of environmental disease prevalent in a certain neighbourhood. In most informal neighbourhoods, industrial workshops exist between houses and are unregulated. For example, some informal neighbourhoods such as al-Ḥaydarīyah or Shaykh Fāres have a high concentration of unregulated shoe-making workshops.

It was mostly the interviewed urban planners who noted the differing environmental disease patterns between informal areas and the many factors that interplay to cause this. One urban planner noted the high prevalence of lead poisoning in some informal areas which have a high concentration of battery workshops. According to this key informant (KI10), lead poisoning was particularly prevalent among children aged 10-12 due to uncontrolled child labour in those workshops and the particular vulnerability of children to lead. Another urban planner interviewed (KI9) noted different community health profiles between informal areas naming some neighbourhoods where certain environmental diseases are highly prevalent:

"Asthma and respiratory infections among women and children are very common in Shaykh Sa'īd, which has a cement factor. Shaykh Najjār is another area which is severely infected. There is mental retardation and high prevalence of congenital deformities in the area. This is an industrial area with men usually working in unregulated industries as well as high levels of consanguineous marriages and high levels of illiteracy..... Tuberculosis is now highly prevalent in al-Ḥaydarīyah. There are many industrial workshops underground in this area and it is usually the working men that get infected first and infect their family. Housing is also very crowded making it easy for tuberculosis or any infectious disease to spread fast". (KI-9)

Differences of Neighbourhood Resources between and within Neighbourhoods

Key informants noted differences in the presence and quality of health services and educational facilities between neighbourhoods, especially between formal and informal areas. Two health service providers made reference to the inequalities between formal and informal neighbourhoods in the availability of public health services (non-fee-paying). Even when the services were available in poor neighbourhoods, the quality of the service was reportedly worse in poor areas. One key informant (KI-6) noted that even fee-paying private health services are of a questionable quality in poor areas, as they mostly rely on unspecialised doctors and midwives. Despite the poor quality of health services in poor neighbourhoods they are in particularly high demand. According to this key informant: "*A government health centre in a deprived area will usually receive many times the number of patients as a similar one in a wealthy area, hence stretching its resources further*"(KI-6).

Inequality in the availability of services was also noted within neighbourhoods. For example, one deprived locality within a large informal neighbourhood had reportedly very few private medical services compared to other parts of the informal area. The hardly passable alleyways, especially in winter, and unavailability of public transport in some parts of the neighbourhood, mean that residents have limited access to basic health services (KI-4). Some key informants identified lack of educational facilities, such as schools, in informal neighbourhoods, as a constraint to educational attainment. Some reported the poor quality of teaching even if schools were present. References were made to the decline of government funding in state education and the increased reliance

on private tuition to compensate for poor tutoring in state schools. One key informant noted:

"The schools are bad quality in formal areas so how about informal areas or low income areas that suffer from crowdedness. This is more severe now as there have been no new state schools been built for a long time in many areas...." (KI-1).

The impact of this is profound, especially in terms of upward social mobility and increased life chances for the disadvantaged in poor areas. Key informants indirectly pointed to the impact of neoliberal policies that rely on the private sector to expand the education sector at the expense of the state funding for free education in public schools. This means an increased difficulty for the more socioeconomically disadvantaged groups to improve their life chances and get out of poverty through education. As one key informant put it:

"Usually education is a method for climbing the social ladder and for social upgrading. However, in this area, there is very low level of education and the proportion of those who go to university is very low" (KI-4).

Individual Characteristics

According to key informants two individual characteristics namely educational attainment and family income have profound impacts on gender related social and health inequalities. In this account, I focus on these two individual characteristics as they featured most in the narratives of key informants as factors explaining gender and health inequalities.

Income

The Relationship between Income and Educational Attainment

In their accounts, many key informants explained the strong interconnectedness of family income, early age of marriage, illiteracy or low educational attainment and women's health. As one female key informant health service provider put it:

"In low income Aleppo society, parents marry off their daughters young so that they get rid of her living expenses. This means that

many girls leave school early and do not continue with their education" (KI-2).

Some key informants pointed out the effect of lower socioeconomic status during the life course, which results in limited opportunities for educational attainment for children of disadvantaged families. As was already mentioned above, for many key informants the prevailing culture of private tuition and the deteriorating quality of state schools are perceived as barriers to educational attainment, especially for the socioeconomically disadvantaged. A key informant in a very low income Christian area bordering a large informal settlement commented on the limited opportunities for educational attainment that children of poor families have:

"Education now is very much interlinked to financial strength. If you are poor, there are very few opportunities to get tutors to teach private lessons voluntarily and private tuition is usually very expensive...The families here would like their children to receive better education but to provide them with this opportunity they usually need financial resources. Therefore we had cases when the parents took their kids out of school as they could not afford it" (KI-7).

The Relationship between Income and Health Service Utilisation

For key informants working in the health service, poverty was seen as limiting factor to health service utilisation:

"Some poor women get very ill until they consult the doctor in order to save the medical fees and be able to put food on the table. Since we started introducing minimal consultation fees in the association seven years ago, the number of low income women coming here declined. In their minds, women calculate the cost of getting to the association plus the fees and it becomes too expensive for them to come" (KI-2).

However, another health service provider did not agree with poverty being a barrier to health service utilisation, especially among certain age groups. A private gynaecologist in a low income informal area mentioned that women in the area usually consult for the slightest of problems especially when they are pregnant. When I asked her what she thought the reason behind this was, she stated: "*It is not because of better awareness or education or because they have time, but fear from the unknown*" (KI-3). She explained further that low income women were aware that if anything

happened to their fertility their position and status with the husband, his family and the society would be in danger. This in turn she saw as explanation for their fear and high consultation of medical services whilst pregnant. Other service providers also referred to cases of young uneducated low income married women who could not go to the doctor when ill because they cannot leave the house alone and the husband or his family refused to accompany them.

Educational Attainment

Key informants stressed the importance of educational attainment as the number one individual determinant impacting the health of women. Key informants linked better educational attainment of women to increased social status, improved decision making and better health for the women and their families.

Educational Attainment as a Source of Power and Social Status for Women

Only female key informants commented on the relationship between higher educational attainment of low income women and improved social status in their families. A number of female key informants linked better educational attainment with employment opportunities, which in turn they saw as generating income and hence giving women more power in the family especially in times of financial need. Some illustrated their point with observations comparing educated and non-educated low income women. One female teacher in a school in an informal area with a Palestinian majority talked about education, especially of women, being more embedded in the culture of what she termed "*the original people*" in the camp who are mostly Palestinians. The key informant described the implication of increased education of women among the original residents in the camp:

"As a result of their education, women are more independent and many choose to help their husbands out financially through their work, especially if they are experiencing a difficult economic situation" (KI-5).

The increased social status of women as a result of better education was echoed in the views of a female key informant doctor with a private clinic in another informal area. She said that in this area

there are many illiterate women and a minority of women in the area have gone to college: "*These educated women have power among their families especially among women who listen to their opinion*" (KI-3).

Another female key informant described the reasons for the powerlessness of many low income women who she has come across through the course of her work in family planning. Many girls leave school early to get married young and many of those have no control over their lives:

"Because many poor women marry very young, they have no decision and usually the decisions involving their life are taken by the husband, the mother in law or the mother" (KI-2).

The Relationship between Educational Attainment and Women's Health

In the view of a key informant in the government primary health directorate in Aleppo, higher educational attainment is synonymous with a higher age of marriage and hence avoiding the health repercussions associated with teenage pregnancies:

"Educated women have better decision making. Because of the higher level of education, the age of marriage is higher. As you know there are many harmful effects associated with teenage pregnancy. We see this all the time" (KI-6)

Whilst waiting in the private gynaecology hospital to interview a key informant, I observed an example that illustrates the interconnection of factors that influence the health of low income women. Poverty, early age of marriage, low educational attainment, partner violence and self-harm are all facets of this one case. This observation (an extract from my fieldwork research diary) is presented in box 1.1.

**Box 1.1: Extract from Fieldwork Observation Diary:
in the Waiting Room of a Private Women's Hospital, 28 April 2011**

I waited for my interview with the midwife in a small consultation room. From it, I could see through the partially open door scores of women entering and leaving the large waiting area of this small yet very busy private gynaecology hospital in this formal yet poor neighbourhood in Aleppo. I could see that the midwife was busy with a patient in the consultation room next door. I was taking some notes when a middle aged woman seemingly in her late forties came and sat opposite me. She wore a black scarf and a long black dress. Her eyes looked tired and her expression was tense. A seven year old boy kept peeping through the slightly open door from the larger linked waiting room. I knew later that he was her son. I was writing in my research diary when she approached me and asked what I did for a living. I said that I was a health researcher and I was here to do an interview with the midwife. She came and sat next to me and said "I am waiting for my daughter. She could have killed herself and her baby. Earlier today she took 20 pills after a fight with her mother in law". She asked me "do you know whether these pills will harm her and the foetus? She is 4 months pregnant". I asked her if she knew the name of the medicine or whether she could describe it to me. She could only tell me that the colour of its packaging was red. I tried to assure her "I am sure she will be fine. It is good that you have managed to come here in time". She replied "She is foolish. She is taking revenge of her mother in law and husband by trying to harm herself and her baby". She then told me that she had been a widow for four years and that Huda⁸ is her eldest amongst ten children, the youngest was the 7 years old boy who kept peeping through the door. It was at this minute when the midwife came out of the consultation room with Huda, the daughter who was completely veiled but had her Niqāb off her face. She was pretty and looked so young and vulnerable. The midwife wrote her a prescription and told her with an authoritative tone never to repeat what she did again as by doing this she might cause irreversible damage to her uterus and then she would be useless to her husband, who would marry another woman and disregard her. Huda kept saying that she had no idea that this medicine would harm her or her foetus and that she had done this to take revenge of her husband and her mother in law. She said that "both have beaten me and I wanted to show them that I can also do something". She started recalling what others told her about the danger of what she had done. She looked very childlike in

her manners and talk. The midwife later told me that Huda was only 17 year old and already had a 1.5 year old son which made her 15 when she first married her husband, 12 years her senior. She told me that Huda had less than 6 years of formal education. This experienced midwife who was the first key informant I interviewed. She commented: "You see illiteracy is the cause of many problems, social, health and otherwise. When a woman is illiterate she does not care about others, herself or the environment around her". She commented that Huda had been lucky as she could get to the hospital in time. She went on to say "we see all the time poor uneducated women who cannot leave the house. Sometimes they are locked in by the husband or mother in law and are not allowed to leave the house".

Conclusions of Findings

The aim of this paper is to explore how key informants of different positions in Aleppo perceived social determinants of health, especially gender and neighbourhood health inequalities. The findings point to a society increasingly divided into winners and losers with poor women in deprived informal neighbourhoods being the most disadvantaged. These confirm findings from previous studies in Aleppo which identified low income married women as bearing a disproportionate burden of ill health and disability (Asfar et al. 2007; Fouad et al. 2006; Maziak et al. 2002; Maziak 2009).

The findings showed key informants' accounts of the social determinants of health of married women to be rich in detail and included references to both "compositional" and "contextual" features. Therefore, in their explanation of health inequalities between neighbourhoods, key informants placed equal emphasis on compositional and contextual social determinants of health, especially the interplay between upstream socioeconomic policies, neighbourhood resources, social composition and individual characteristics such as education and individual socioeconomic position. The interviews with key informants revealed the interweaving of a multitude of social determinants that influenced health outcomes, especially of women in informal settlements. Examples of those mentioned include, but are not restricted to, poverty, low educational attainment, marriage at an early age, partner violence, gender restrictions on access to healthcare, proximity of housing to industry, poor housing quality, lack of

educational facilities and health services in informal areas, and the socioeconomic inequalities created by neoliberal policies, especially in education.

Studies on place and health have distinguished between contextual and compositional factors and their relative importance in explaining health inequalities between areas. This applies to both conceptual and empirical studies. The findings from this study suggest that the characteristics of individuals (compositional features) and the contextual characteristics of neighbourhoods in which they live are highly interrelated, and in some cases it is difficult to distinguish them from each other. Such findings are in line with work by Sally Macintyre and her colleagues, who pointed to the difficulties of disentangling compositional and contextual effects in empirical studies (Macintyre et al. 2002). The most quoted example used to illustrate this point is that from research exploring the relationship between features of ethnic density (neighbourhood concentration of people belonging to a particular minority group) and health. I find the questions asked initially by (Curtis and Rees Jones 1998) highly relevant. Do we interpret ethnic concentration as a compositional characteristic resulting from aggregation and related to a certain ethnicity or race? Or is it better to interpret it as a contextual social characteristic associated with a certain community? The narratives of key informants in this study are rich in examples of cases of health inequalities between similarly poor informal areas. In most cases they based their perception of these differences on the social composition and its influence on the social norms of an area. But, is the reportedly better educational attainment of Palestinian women in Palestinian informal areas a compositional feature resulting from the clustering of Palestinians, who are relatively better off financially and who place more value on education of women, or is it a contextual feature related to the presence of better schools in Palestinian areas such as those funded by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)? And how have upstream contextual factors such as neoliberal policies adopted by the Syrian state in the last ten years interacted with both compositional and neighbourhood contextual characteristics to influence social determinants of health? There is some evidence that neoliberal policies in Syria have deepened socioeconomic and health inequalities and hence further marginalised the urban poor, particularly women (El Laithy & Abulsmail 2005). Indeed, key informants in this study alluded to the effects of such policies on public education and hence the disproportionate negative impacts

on the urban poor, especially in informal and poor formal neighbourhoods.

Without exception, all key informants cited illiteracy and low educational attainment as the main challenge facing poor women not only in informal areas but also in many low income formal areas. This confirms the findings from interviews with 27 women living in informal areas. All of the participants from informal areas had very low educational attainment (less than 6 years of schooling). This was also true for more than half of those from the formal areas, especially those living in the poor formal areas of Aleppo. It is also in line with previous studies in Aleppo. In their survey of a representative sample of 1,021 adults in informal areas of Aleppo (46% males, mean age 34±12, age range 18–65 years), Maziak and colleagues showed that 79.7% of women in informal areas were illiterate or had a formal education of 6 years or less (Maziak et al. 2005).

Key informants associated better education of women with empowerment through increased independence and employability, better use of health services, particularly family planning and vaccination programmes for children - all factors mentioned in the literature to explain the positive relationship between women's education and better health outcomes (Adler et al. 2002; Al Riyami et al. 2004; Basu et al. 2005; Caldwell and McDonald 1982; Cleland et al. 1988; Nankabirwa et al. 2010). Additionally, many studies show the strong association between maternal education and child mortality (Boyle et al. 2006; Gakidou et al. 2010; Levine et al. 2009; Ozaltin et al. 2010). Evidence suggests that a 1-year increment in the mother's education is associated with a 7–9% reduction in mortality in under 5s (Cleland et al. 1988). The WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health emphasised the importance of increasing educational attainment to reduce disparities in health (Marmot et al. 2008). The importance of the role of education was also stressed by the UN Millennium Development Goals, with Goal 2 calling for universal primary education (UN 2010).

Neighbourhood based measures of socioeconomic status are not available in Syria. However, even if these data existed, using neighbourhood measures of deprivation would usually mask significant inequalities within the area and in turn could be the basis for unsuitable policies targeting these areas. Hence, key informants' accounts of socioeconomic and environmental differences between and within neighbourhoods are useful to elucidate the mechanisms for health inequalities between and within what appears to be

homogenous neighbourhoods. Understanding these differences as well as neighbourhood characteristics that can influence health will be useful for planning and policy. Macintyre & Ellaway distinguish five neighbourhood features that form what they call the "opportunity structures" that might directly promote or damage health. These include physical characteristics of areas (e.g. air quality); the presence of environments at home, work and play that support a healthy lifestyle (e.g. play areas or housing quality); the presence of and proximity to quality services available to all (e.g. schools and transport); socio-cultural features (e.g. social fabric) and the area reputation as determined by the views of residents and outsiders (Macintyre & Ellaway 2003). With the exception of two urban planners, other key informants did not comment on the physical contextual features of places (e.g. pollution or poor quality housing). But these issues came up prominently in previous interviews with health service providers and lay people in informal settlements in Aleppo (Hammal et al. 2005). This is in line with earlier studies on lay understanding of social inequalities in health. For example, in their study using both quantitative and qualitative methods and exploring and comparing the views of people living in contrasting socio-economic neighbourhoods, Popay et al. found that features of areas, such as pollution and housing quality, were twice as likely to be highlighted as explanatory factors of health inequalities than individual features, especially those related to health behaviours such as smoking or drinking. However, the authors rightly pointed out that the questions asked about the perceived causes of health inequalities with their focus on features of places might have influenced people's responses (Popay et al. 1998). This was not the case in the present study since the questions asked were relatively open and hence respondents were free to focus on any compositional or contextual features that they deemed more important for the generation of inequalities in women's health between formal and informal areas.

This paper explored the views of ten key informants in Aleppo of the compositional and contextual features that might result in health inequalities between or within areas. The findings illustrate the interconnectedness of compositional and contextual features when trying to explain health inequalities among married women living in formal and informal areas in Aleppo. The main limitations of this study are the relatively small number of key informants interviewed and the brevity of the interviews. Besides, the fieldwork was conducted at a turbulent time in Syria when people might have

understandably felt more nervous to participate in research studies, especially those linked to Western academic institutions. This might be the reason why two of those approached to be interviewed refused to participate in this study despite agreeing initially. However, despite the limited number of key informants interviewed, there was diversity in their representation, organisational affiliation and gender. This has shown itself in the different and sometimes contrasting views on a number of themes, for example in the classification of informal areas. In a country like Syria, with a weak tradition of using qualitative inquiry in public health, this brief qualitative study undertaken at a time of crisis offers a rare in-depth glimpse of what an exploration of compositional and contextual factors looks like and how they interact to disadvantage poor women, especially those living in informal neighbourhood. The findings from the key informant interviews will be triangulated with those from interviews with married women in formal and informal areas as well as findings from a multilevel analysis of survey data in order to provide more nuanced understanding of urban and health inequalities in Aleppo. Together these findings will contribute to an evidence base for policies aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of residents, especially women in informal settlements and poor neighbourhoods in Syria. Clearly, the findings from this study underscore the urgent need to focus on education. The conditions of the urban poor, especially uneducated low income married women, as a disempowered and marginalised group can only deepen the crises of health and urban injustice.

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¹ The original paper on which this one is based was presented in the 1st Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS) Postgraduate Conference on Syria, St. Andrews, 1-2 September 2011.

² World Health Organisation. Glossary of terms. <http://www.who.int/hia/about/glos/en/index1.html> (accessed 9 January 2011).

³ In the Romanisation of Arabic words, I have followed the Library of Congress system: www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/arabic.pdf.

⁴ A presentation in Arabic "Informal settlements in Aleppo: facts and directions". Project on Urban Modernisation; Aleppo municipality and GTZ.

⁵ Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Newcastle University Medical School and the Institutional Review Board of the Syrian Society against Cancer in Aleppo.

⁶ There is little agreement on the definition of social norms which vary within and across disciplines. The online sociology guide defines them as "rules developed by a group of people that specify how people must, should, may, should not, and must not behave in various situations". Violation of the norms attracts different sanctions according to which norm is violated. (<<http://www.sociologyguide.com/basic-concepts/Social-Norms.php>>).

⁷ Afrīn villages in the North West of Aleppo are mainly inhabited by Kurds.

⁸ Pseudonym.

2

Contested Heritage? Gentrification and Authoritarian Resilience in Damascus

Yannick Sudermann

Introduction

On 20th December 2008 both *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times* devoted articles to boutique hotels in the old city of Damascus, Syria. The opening of small five-star hotels in formerly declining neighbourhoods was celebrated by officials, members of the local middle classes and tourists alike. *Boutique hotels*, small luxury hotels situated in opulently renovated courtyard houses and targeted at international business travellers and moneyed tourists, seem to be the continuation of the advancing branding of Old Damascus. Since the mid-1990s theme-restaurants for the country's new middle-classes and tourists have mushroomed throughout the old city (Salamandra 2004). Additionally, after 2002, some sections of the historic suq, most prominently Suq al-Hamidiyya, were given a facelift. In their search for 'authenticity' and heritage, parts of the country's new middle classes now return to Old Damascus, often just temporarily for dining and other leisure activities. Furthermore, more recently and so far on a small scale, some individuals consider living in the old town to be in fashion, and push into historic neighbourhoods mostly inhabited by poor migrants of rural origin or their descendants. *Sham al-qadima* is now the Damascene middle classes' 'place to be' which can be read as an expression of evolving gentrification.

In Old Damascus the political starting point for gentrification which Hackworth (2002: 815) defines as 'the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users' and which produces and results in realignments of urban policies, is the effort of Syria's

formerly 'populist authoritarian state' (Hinnebusch 1995) under Bashar al-Asad to survive by adapting to new conditions through what has been called "authoritarian upgrading;" this practice 'combines tried-and-true strategies of the past—coercion, surveillance, patronage, corruption, and personalism—with innovations' (Heydemann 2007: 3)¹ e.g. by modifying mechanisms of co-optation. It also is associated with a shift in the social base of the state from its former "populist coalition" of lower social strata toward upper strata on which the regime's "post-populist" political-economy strategy comes to depend.

Focusing on Old Damascus – which since 1979 is listed as a World Heritage Site – the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how granting preferential access to profitable businesses sectors like tourism and real estate can be seen as one such innovative means of authoritarian upgrading. By examining in detail a hotspot of gentrification within the old city this paper addresses the overarching question: to what extent does gentrification in Old Damascus contribute to authoritarian upgrading? Furthermore, it will investigate how different stakeholders like investors, former residents, gentrifiers or the local administration lay claim to Damascus' contested urban heritage.

The first section aims at reviewing relevant literature and presenting the employed key concepts, namely gentrification and authoritarian resilience. The second section is devoted to the geopolitical and domestic conditions and focuses on the reasons for and timing of gentrification in Old Damascus. Section three investigates the production of gentrification with a focus on the actors and the process as well as common conflicts between the different stakeholders. Section four deals with the interplay of the process of gentrification and privileges conferred to members of the ruling class and carefully selected supporters. Thereby, it is shown how gentrification functions both as an investment opportunity and a part of an exclusive, consumption-orientated way of life for the country's ascending classes. Finally, the last section summarizes the findings and concludes with a short outlook on prospects of future gentrification in Old Damascus particularly regarding the current uprising.

The presented data is part of my PhD research,² which investigates the interplay of gentrification and authoritarian resilience in the Syrian capital based on several historic neighbourhoods within and beyond the city walls (intra and extra muros). This paper deals with gentrification in one of these case

studies, al-Qaymariya, a neighbourhood *intra muros* which is located west of the Christian quarter Bab Tuma in the Northeast of the walled old town of Damascus where most Old Damascene cafes, restaurants and boutique hotels can be found.

Gentrification and Regime Resilience in the Middle Eastern City

Gentrification

Since the 19th century, western-style quarters were built outside the historic centres of many Middle Eastern cities. Therefore, research on the dualism between the historic old city and the formerly colonial new town was undertaken (Heineberg 2006: 288-295). Dettmann (1969), bases his model of the 'Islamic-oriental city'³ on research in Damascus. He identifies the construction of a French commercial quarter west of the old city as the starting point for 'bi-polarity' between the traditional old town and a modern new town. Likewise, Seger 1975 emphasises the existence of two cores within the centre of Teheran, first the suq in the old city; and second, the modern CBD (Central Business District) and Ehlers (1993) points out the breaking up of the traditional oriental city caused by new city extensions. "The "old city" stood for "tradition" and "local" life' while in the new city 'the new public buildings, commercial centers, and residential neighbourhoods created an urban iconography of the imported "modern"' (Shechter and Yacobi 2005: 183). However, modern lifestyles have pervaded historic old towns throughout the Middle East, facilitated by various state-led gentrification strategies.

Early definitions of gentrification emphasise its direct impact on a residential neighbourhood's class character and referred to the taking-over of working-class housing by middle-class residents (Glass 1964; Smith 1982). Lees, Slater and Wyly (2008: xv) mention the commercial use of an area by members of the middle class as alternative or an addition to a purely residential use of former working-class neighbourhoods. Including 'commercial use' into definitions of gentrification facilitates the use of gentrification theory in contexts in which commercialization rather than residential upgrading unfolds, and has a substantial impact on both the social and the built environment of a neighbourhood, as is the case in the Syrian capital, Damascus.

At first gentrification became known as a 'sporadic, quaint, and local anomaly in the housing markets of some command-center cities' (Smith 2002: 427). Over the last two decades, however, gentrification, now a 'thoroughly generalized' (ibid: 336) global urban strategy, 'has been reminiscent of earlier waves of colonial and mercantile expansion' (Atkinson and Bridge 2005: 2). Worldwide, centrally-located neighbourhoods are literally conquered by members of the middle and upper class. Therefore, Neil Smith (1996) compares the advance of gentrification with the advance of the frontier in 19th century's American West (189). In addition, due to their 'new class' occupations and their cosmopolitanism, gentrifiers are described as a colonial elite (Atkinson and Bridge 2005: 3).

Much scholarly attention had been paid to an apparent shift in consumer preferences celebrated as urban renaissance or 'back to the city' movement (Laska and Spain 1980). Neil Smith (1979) refuted the neoclassical consumer sovereignty explanations of gentrification as these assume that 'suburbanization reflects the preference for space' and that gentrification 'is explained as the result of an alteration of preferences and/or a change in the constraints determining which preferences will or can be implemented' (539). Supported by empirical evidence from three gentrifying neighbourhoods in different US cities, the author was able to show that hardly 30 percent of the gentrifiers had been suburbanites, whereas the majority had been inner-city dwellers (539f). He further warns that explanations of gentrification which basically focus on gentrifiers' actions and thereby ignore the role of other actors are fundamentally flawed (Smith 1979: 540). Smith therefore advocates a broader theory of gentrification which incorporates the roles of both, consumers and producers. 'And when this is done, it appears that the needs of production- in particular the need to earn profit- are a more decisive initiative behind gentrification than consumer preference' (540).

Until the late 1980s, causes of gentrification were at the centre of scholarly attention and this was, as Slater (2006) emphasises 'often in response to the clear injustice of the displacement of working-class residents' (740). During the following years, however, the focus of many researchers shifted from the working class to the gentrifiers. Gentrification was reinterpreted as symbolic resistance to faceless suburbia (Caulfield 1989), and the aestheticization of a bohemian lifestyle was of high academic interest (Ley 2003). Other authors praised gentrification as the appropriate strategy to counter

urban poverty and to 'regenerate' declining neighbourhoods (e.g. Byrne 2003). Consequently, scholarly and public attention was diverted from the negative effects of gentrification, such as social inequality and the displacement of low-income residents towards gentrifying individuals, mostly members of the middle and upper class, and their individualistic cosmopolitan lifestyle(s) (Slater 2006). In this regard Neil Smith warned as early as 1979:

'To explain gentrification according to the gentrifier's actions alone, while ignoring the role of builders, developers, landlords, mortgage lenders, government agencies, real estate agents, and tenants, is excessively narrow' (540).

In post-colonial Damascus affluent inhabitants had voluntarily left the old city to live in one of the newer quarters, which were considered to be the symbol of a modern, Western lifestyle – Old Damascus' narrow streets and traditional courtyard house being the antithesis (Dettmann 1969: 100ff). Using the term gentrification for one of the first times in the Damascene context, Pfaffenbach (2004: 67) noticed an increasing back-to-the-[old]-city movement⁴ of elite Damascenes which started already during the 1970s. The author explained gentrification in Old Damascus based on changing consumer preferences of mostly Christian Damascenes. Salamandra (2004: 3-4) observed the chiefly temporary character of elite's return to the old city and identified dining, shopping and an increasing search for heritage possible reasons. This, however, contrasts with Smith (1979), who is convinced that gentrification is 'a back to the city movement all right, but of capital rather than people' (547), a position shared and corroborated by several interviewees in spring 2011 as will be shown below. In Damascus signs of this capital-driven back-to-the-city-movement can be noted in both, the modern 'pericentral areas of the agglomeration' (Vignal 2010: 1), namely the CBD and, as demonstrated in this article, in the historic old city *intra muros*.

Authoritarianism and Authoritarian Resilience

Since Linz's (1964 [2000]) systematic analysis of authoritarian regimes, stagnation in research on the topic was noticeable until the late 1980s. However, with the end of the Cold War in particular, research on authoritarianism experienced a substantial renaissance, especially in connection with the transition of formerly communist

states into democracies, what Huntington (1991) describes as the 'Third Wave' of democratization. Moreover, the supposed transition of authoritarian regimes was celebrated by US officials and numerous NGOs dedicated to democracy promotion. 'Confronted with the initial parts of the third wave—democratization in Southern Europe, Latin America, and a few countries in Asia [...] — the U.S. democracy community rapidly embraced an analytic model of democratic transition' (Carothers 2002: 6). From this perspective which Carothers (2002) calls the 'transition paradigm', all states were seen as situated on a continuum somewhere between authoritarianism and democracy; those situated around the centre of the continuum were further considered to be 'qualified democracies' undergoing the transition 'towards full democracy' (Snyder 2006: 219). However, until the onset of the 'Arab Spring' in early 2011, authoritarian regimes across the globe seemed to recover a capacity of resistance to democratization, and especially so in the Middle East and North Africa (e.g. Bellin 2004). Due to this "authoritarian resilience" Carothers (2002: 6) emphasises: 'it is time to recognize that the transition paradigm has outlived its usefulness and to look for a better lens'. Following this appeal, Snyder (2006) argued that too much research on authoritarianism was devoted to the role of elections. He therefore urged research on 'extra-electoral' aspects of authoritarianism.

At the same time, authoritarian regimes, including those in the Middle East, were exposed to external pressures for economic liberalization and political reform which pushed them to develop strategies to cope with such demands and, build up new forms of power solidification. Recently, this became a central focus of authoritarianism research (e.g. Pratt 2007; Posusney 2004; King 2009). Additionally, forms of authoritarian control, which from an authoritarian regime's perspective could be termed *approved*⁵, aim at responding 'aggressively to the triple threat of globalization, markets, and democratization' (Heydemann 2007: 3). One such response is co-opting new clients. In Syria for example, the al-Asad regime broadens its power base by embedding in its networks businessmen instead of workers and peasants who formerly were crucial as its constituency (Hinnebusch 1995). The involvement of domestic capitalists means offering them new business opportunities and creating an investor-friendly environment. This includes – as Sener (2008) illustrates for Turkey – the creation of urban spaces for a transnational capitalist lifestyle, a process that will be demonstrated for Old Damascus in the following.

Why not earlier? – (Pre)Conditions of Gentrification in Damascus on the Geopolitical, National and Urban Scale

This section will address the forging of a cross-social alliance under Ba’thist rule and how the actions and preferences of both the regime and the ‘new classes’ translate into the context of Old Damascus. Therefore, the introductory historical overview goes back to the time of colonial rule when the course for later changes in Syria’s elite structure was set. It follows the investigation of power relations and gentrification from a historic point of view, shedding light on the question: why did gentrification in Old Damascus start around the millennium?

After World War I Syria came under colonial rule and was governed as a French Mandate between 1920 and 1946. Due to their preferred recruitment first into the French colonial army and after independence into the Syrian army, members of the rural ethnic and religious minorities (Kurds, Alawites or Druzes) came to be over-represented in the country’s military (Van Dam 1978: 15-18). Regional, ideological and sectarian conflicts resulted in internal instability and a series of military coups which ended 1970 in the takeover of Hafiz al-Asad (e.g. Darwisha 1978: 341). Al-Asad and his regime based their power on several pillars: First, consolidation and exertion ‘of control over key levers of power’, including the Ba’th Party as a means of ‘popular incorporation’ and ‘the crafting of an “army-party-symbiosis”’ (Rabinovich 1972: 212); second, al-Asad created a centralized and personalized presidency; third, the power has been protected by multiple counter-balanced security services and a state of emergency that – put in place in 1963 – (Seale 1988: 169-184) only has been lifted in 2011; and, finally, the creation of a broad social foundation to safeguard his power. The latter strategy included a populist agenda aiming at mobilizing additional constituencies, mostly among rural and urban populations bypassing the traditional urban ruling class. This is an important aspect of what Hinnebusch describes as characteristic for populist authoritarian regimes. Those are, ‘first of all, vehicles of a ‘new middle class’ radicalised by the perceived incompatibility between the oligarchic order and the satisfaction of its demands for modern careers and a share of power’ (Hinnebusch 2001: 3).

From the Ba’th revolution onwards enhanced upward social mobility resulted in accelerated rural-urban migration: Syria’s political capital Damascus as well as the country’s second city and economic centre Aleppo were the preferred destinations. These

rural newcomers acquired access to political power and wealth and subsequently underwent a process of *embourgeoisement*, meanwhile displacing the old elites. The political marginalization of the old ruling class involved, first, changes in Damascus' demographic composition which 'aimed at making it possible for the party to entrench itself in Syria's hostile urban environments' (Hinnebusch 2001: 53 referring to Delvin 1983: 23, 121), and, second, translated into a changing urban landscape.

During the late Ottoman period, members of the Damascene elites had started to consider living outside the old town as an expression of a modern lifestyle: based on new preferences families who could afford it left the old city and moved to comfortable houses in one of the modern, western style neighbourhoods. Many leased their abandoned houses to rural migrants, who on their part considered the old city as an interstation. This represents a time of suburbanization and the successive transformation of Old Damascus into a heavily populated, disinvested lower-class area. This creeping process continued during the French Mandate and even accelerated after Syria's independence (Pfaffenbach 2004; Salamandra 2004). Housing became more than simply a home; it now served as an expression of lifestyle, and when the new Ba'th-generated bourgeoisie later ascended to power, '[t]hey tried to emulate the lifestyles of the old bourgeoisie, but more ostentatiously' (Perthes 1991: 34). For most fractions of the bourgeoisie, living in prestigious modern neighbourhoods such as Malki or Abu Roumaneh was the epitome of a modern Syria. The old town by contrast became endangered by decay and a widespread extension of modern infrastructure such as streets and motorways. Despite a returning awareness for the old city's cultural heritage among intellectuals (Escher 2001) and officials, the decay of Old Damascus continued until the 1990s as did the migration towards modern neighborhoods.

During the 1970s, Syria's economy went through a period of boom and saw the influx of foreign aid and remittances of Syrian nationals living abroad (Winckler 1999). The conditions of potential gentrification came about, first, by the existence of potential investment capital, second, the availability of centrally located (disinvested) historic housing stocks, and, third, a growing awareness of the architectural heritage in terms of both economic and ideational value. However, the process did not gather momentum at that time. Asked for a possible explanation for the absence of gentrification during the 1970s a Damascene political

analyst mentioned that on the urban scale the Baath regime's power had not yet been entirely consolidated:

At a certain time gentrification was not allowed because it would have meant the rise of the urban Sunnis and... a kind of a, you know, political opposition of the business society against the regime.⁶

Throughout the 1970s opposition to the regime was strong and gave rise to sporadic upheavals. Many Syrians considered the regime 'as a revanchist minority conspiracy [...] against the majority Sunnis' (Drysdale 1982: 3). Opposition from traditional fractions of the urban population who were deprived from their political and economic power – i.e. the suq and the old elites – was manifold and escalated between 1979 and 1982 into what later became known as the Muslim Brethren Revolt peaking in the massacre of Hama. A business consultant reported that whilst the situation in Damascus remained comparatively calm, the revolt's consequences were perceivable in the capital, too:

Speaking about Damascus during the 70s, actually, and then in the 80s, Damascus turned to be a closed city during the Muslim Brotherhood... trouble. [...] the people used to stay at home, not to go out. It was a difficult time. In this time a lot of cafes closed. [...] During the 1980s also we suffered from economic crises for about 10 years.⁷

The reasons for the economic crisis during the 1980s were manifold: Despite massive public investment, production did not expand accordingly: 'statist development failed to create a self-sustaining industrial base' (Hinnebusch 2001: 129). Furthermore, Syria's 'overdependence on external resources' (ibid.) resulted in foreign debts and inflation. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bi-polar world order of the Cold War posed another challenge for the Ba'th regime. The country did not only lose its long-standing patron in the confrontation with Israel but also its major donor. The regime realized the necessity of an economic and ideological realignment, which was initiated, first, by hesitantly approaching the West on the international stage and, second, by controlled economic liberalization, the latter being crowned by Law 10 of 1991 (Seifan 2010: 5f).

At that time also, the structure of the society started to change: [...] The majority of the Syrian society during the 70s was middle class. During the 80s and then through the 90s started the diversification of the society. This means during the economic crisis big parts of the middle class went down to be poor and some small elites jumped to be rich.⁸

Apart from growing social cleavages which found their expression in the ascent of a new oligarchy consisting of regime cronies and their offspring (Ismail 2009: 18), another societal phenomenon can be noticed: the production and consumption of a 'return to the old' (*awda lil-qadim*) going along with an increasing awareness of cultural heritage which started hesitantly in the 1970s and has gained momentum since the mid-1990s (Salamandra 2004). In 1977, five years after the UN adopted the UNESCO-drafted World Heritage Convention this found its expression in the foundation of an NGO called The Association of Friends of Damascus, which is dedicated to the protection and 'beautification' of Damascus and its historical heritage through cooperation with governmental authorities.⁹ In 1979 the Ancient City of Damascus, meaning primarily the old city *intra muros*, was listed as a World Heritage site (Wirth 2000). 'By signing the Convention, each country pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage sites situated on its territory, but also to protect its national heritage'.¹⁰ However, as it is '[t]raditionally controlled by the well-born and well-off, heritage remains more an elite than a folk domain' (Lowenthal 1998: 14) and this can be observed when it comes to Old Damascus' urban fabric and issues of architectural design, too. Jager 1986 points out the built environment's centrality vis-à-vis the process of class formation, and thus gentrification, 'as both a container and expression of social relations' (153). How Jager's conclusion gains momentum in terms of an expanding leisure sector in the old city is described by a business consultant during an interview as follows: *When you have elite, rich people, actually they have demand for entertaining. So, here the demand comes for cafes, for restaurants.*¹¹ A European city planner charged with giving advice to the local administration regarding urban renewal speculated that Western tourists and their tastes, preferences and aesthetic sensations might have had their share in the set of causes for the increased interest by Damascenes in their (old) city:

It might have been increasing international tourism, backpackers, younger people. And it was perceived as being attractive. If it is

attracting young Europeans then we should find it attractive as well, talking about young Damascenes, particularly wealthier ones. But I don't know.¹²

An investor who opened one of the first boutique hotels in Damascus argues that the transfer of power to Bashar al-Asad in 2000 had a direct impact on the trend to renovate and commercialize houses since the millennium:

Before 2000 the country was completely closed. In 2000 president Bashar al-Asad took over. A young president, young wife, young blood and he started to open up the country, slowly, slowly to... For tourism and this is how it started.¹³

The revival of the *hamam*, the traditional Turkish bath, is another manifestation of a correlation between tourism, external influences and an increasing awareness for the own cultural heritage. An architect working in the local administration gave a vivid account of how interaction with an external other can directly influence the perception of one's own heritage, in this case the traditional *hamam*:

I never tried to go to a hamam. It was something out of thought. Nobody would think of this even as we saw it on TV and we used to consider it as something back in history which did not exist. Maybe we didn't dare to see how it really is or to try it and see how it is nowadays.[...] The first time I had to go there because I was asked to do it by a friend visiting from Europe. And for me it was a big sacrifice I was doing because nobody did go to a hamam. But after the first time I did really like it. It is something nice and it began to become a habit. But still it is an experience, you are treated like a sultan [laughter] well, we need this sometimes!¹⁴

However, the growing interest in Damascene heritage has by far not been limited to restoring architectural artefacts like hamams, restaurants and hotels. Moreover it involves many real and imagined aspects of traditional everyday life and finds its expression inter alia in popular TV series (*musalsalat*) like *Ayyam Shamiyya* (Damascene Days) and *Bab al-Hara* (The Gate of the Neighbourhood) which are set in late-Ottoman Damascus (see Salamandra 1998; 2004). Regarding *Bab al-Hara* an investor involved in several hotel projects *intra* and *extra muros* reports the following:

Je me rappelle à des Jordaniens qui sont venus et ils m'ont demandés: "où est Bab al Hara?" Jusque le nom...ça fait rêver!

[...]Ces films ont poussé les gens vers la nostalgie et ont fait aiguïser le sentiment d'aller à Damas, de voir, etc.¹⁵

Nostalgia becomes part of the national identity orchestrated by the regime in cooperation with the private film industry and thus a commodity ready for consumption not alone in Syria but throughout the Arab world. These TV series not only show late Ottoman life: They rather produce an uncritical enshrinement of the traditions, the costumes and the architecture of that specific historic era. Professionals involved in renovation projects within the old city already warn of the dangers for the urban fabric due to an imaginary past which – at least for some – became the blueprint for renovation.¹⁶

As noted above, the start of gentrification in Damascus had been restrained until the 1990s. This can be retraced to manifold political, economic and social reasons such as, first, the regime's priority to consolidate its power domestically (i.e. by suppressing any form of opposition and the creating of jobs in an inflated public sector), second, a severe economic crises during the 1980s, third, suburbanization and, finally, a widespread hostile attitude vis-à-vis the city's neglected urban heritage. As the author could observe during several stays in Damascus, it was not before 2001/ 2002 that the old town became a popular evening destination and thus a hotspot of gentrification. Possible triggers for the late start of gentrification in Old Damascus are diverse and include inter alia:

- the political will to facilitate private investment and, as component of economic opening (infitah) since the 1990s, legislative changes in the field of real estate (e.g. the possibility to commercialize historic residential property);
- the expansion of international tourism as a consequence of globalization which is said to have played a pivotal role in stimulating gentrification; this is especially the case in the historic centre of the Syrian capital;
- the success of 'pioneers', individuals who went ahead with innovative ideas such as the transformation of traditional courtyard houses into boutique restaurants, boutique hotels or art galleries which is not to be underestimated, and finally
- the traditional rivalry between Damascus and Aleppo which possibly did have an impact on the timing of gentrification as the owner of a guesthouse and former inhabitant of Old Damascus states regarding the opening of boutique hotels:

It started first in Aleppo, not in Damascus, the idea of having boutique hotels in the old city. Now, the decision-makers [...], the local government, is responsible for one particular city. Usually the decisions are in their hands. So the local government of Aleppo started very fast, Damascus has always rejected that idea but later on, I was somehow surprised that they agreed.¹⁷

Producing Gentrification

As explained above gentrifiers and their consumption patterns seem to take the centre stage in much newer studies on gentrification. This often criticised approach does not only ignore the concerns of a neighbourhood's original population but also obscures aspects of the production of gentrification, i.e. actors' intentions. Whereas globalization makes regional particularities of middle or upper class' lifestyles fade away, the local contexts in which gentrification is produced differ substantially. As was illustrated above, Syria's domestic politics caused a delay relative to the start of gentrification elsewhere but was later facilitated by its incorporation into regional and international networks under Bashar al-Asad. By investigating producers of gentrification's actions, their motivations and perceptions this section sheds light on the particularities of gentrification in Damascus as well as links between gentrification and authoritarian resilience.

Gentrification unfolds on different geographic scales, with the neighbourhood scale and individual buildings being the focus of this paper. Regarding Old Damascus as a whole, the decisions of "official producers of gentrification", meaning civil servants, employees of international organizations and consultants dealing with urban change, are most decisive. By contrast, "private producers of gentrification" such as investors, architects and craftsmen star on the scale of individual houses. The social background of the investors is very diverse: some of them inherited their family's home and now look for a new use. Many belong to the Damascene bourgeoisie whereas others, often bureaucrats and regime cronies, have no direct personal link to Old Damascus at all. Also, huge enterprises both from Syria as well as from abroad now try to get possession of historic buildings. As property prices in Old Damascus exploded, investing in boutique hotels became a fashion.¹⁸

Until the 1990s there were no restaurants within the old city apart from '*small restaurants which just sold hommous and foul [...] with just two or three tables*'¹⁹. Two or three restaurants, which had

opened in former commercial buildings situated in the heart of the Christian quarter Bab Tuma, were the exception. This happened at a time when members of the middle and upper middle class started to give up their hostile attitude vis-à-vis the old city which they up to then had considered to be the embodiment of the country's backwardness (Salamandra 2004). The trend of renovating traditional Damascene courtyard houses and their transformation into cafés and restaurants followed the initial and pioneering renovation of Beit Jabri and its transformation into the first boutique restaurant, which opened in 1999:

The house was inherited by the actual owner of the restaurant. [...] Of course, finding yourself in front of a treasure like this and not having enough means to do whatever – it was a way to find a financing.²⁰

Beit Jabri Café and Restaurant turned out to be a successful business model which was copied myriad times. For 2005 an architect at Maktab al-Anbar puts the number of boutique restaurants within the walled old town at 65, three years later their number reached 99. According to the same interviewee demand for boutique restaurants is the expression of an increasing awareness regarding cultural heritage and the national past (see below) going along with a substantial change of leisure practices of the middle and upper classes:

'So, gradually, the old city has suddenly changed into a commercial venue, for touristic reasons obviously. And people, whether we are talking about Syrians or non-Syrians, Europeans or other non-Syrians, were interested in having exotic dinners in an old house which has history, a background and a fountain in the middle. So people who live in the modern part of Damascus, let's say, in the evening they were interested to come to an exciting place for dinner or to smoke an arghile...'²¹

Syria's economic recovery and the government's attempts to create a business friendly investment climate contributed to the acceleration of gentrification in Old Damascus, too. However, these developments have a severe impact on the social and environmental conditions of life in the old city:

[Especially restaurants] place a demand in terms of [...] levels, in terms of infrastructure. Washing up after 100 meals takes a lot

more in terms of resources than it does to wash up after eight meals as it had been when a family was living there. So there are pressures on resources, on infrastructure. There are also issues to do with good neighbourliness because a restaurant is a much poorer neighbour for most people than an ordinary house. So there are ways in which you have to manipulate change to ensure that you get the right benefits.²²

Traffic caused by guests and social behaviour not meeting residents' traditional values are further sources of conflict. In 2007 the local authorities implemented an integrated masterplan for the old city aiming at an acceptable solution for residents and businesses alike. The masterplan sets out a number of different zones and allots to them specific functions. Its main achievement is formally banning the construction of new restaurants in residential areas and all locations except the main touristic axes. Beside the Strait Street these axes include Qaymariya Street, which runs between Noufara Café and Bab Tuma and until recently was a minor commercial and residential street. An architect who was involved in drafting the master plan for the old city explains this as follows:

Even before that masterplan many of the houses were already bought and transferred into other activities because of the location close to Bab Tuma. [...] And being a very residential area it was cheaper to buy houses there as [they] are not on the main axis. At the end we had to face the reality: It is already an axis.²³

When the local administration tightened the licensing conditions for further restaurants, investors started searching for new investment opportunities and as a result boutique hotels sprang up throughout Old Damascus. Beit Mamlouka, the first boutique hotel in Old Damascus opened in spring 2005. The former owner, who renovated the place into the prototype of this new kind of business, recalls:

By 2005 when I finished the Mamlouka, and I still remember people saying: oh, nobody will come and stay in those houses, no, no foreigner will come to those houses. So of course when I opened I was maybe slightly ahead of the people [...] You see, whenever somebody says in Beit Mamlouka they did like that or Beit Mamlouka has done like this, it is really a trend I [...]. This is why if you go from hotel to hotel (you can see) that they all followed the fact that all rooms are decorated differently, they followed to give every room a specific name...²⁴

Straight after its launch the international travel press celebrated Beit Mamlouka as the new insider destination for authentic upmarket city breaks. This attracted the attention of potential investors and the prospect of high profits accelerated the demand for houses suitable for being transformed into boutique hotels. Since heritage in Damascus, as elsewhere, 'customarily bends to market forces' (Lowenthal 1996: 97), investors, as the owner of a boutique hotel confesses, literally reuse historic buildings to squeeze profit from heritage: *Tourists pay for authenticity and therefore we make it as authentic as possible. And there needn't many changes to be done – these houses are already marvellous.*²⁵

Asked about the origin of the investors a consultant involved in one of the old city's biggest restoration projects states:

They just discovered that it is good business and then they came to the old city. O.K. some are from the old city. They have big houses. They turned the house to either a restaurant or boutique hotel. Some of them discovered it's profitable so tried to purchase a house to start that business. Some of them are not from the area and not the old city at all, they are just rich people actually.²⁶

According to an architect employed at Maktab al-Anbar all houses with a courtyard of at least 25 square meters and a minimum of nine rooms qualify for transformation into a boutique hotel.²⁷ Owners of smaller houses can apply for being licensed as a *motel* (guesthouse). There is no policy restricting boutique hotels to specific areas, e.g. locations outside residential quarters. However, as soon as a hotel offers hot meals the zoning rules for restaurants apply. *The masterplan doesn't give any limits to the hotels yet, only for restaurants*²⁸. Many investors took advantage of the situation and boutique hotels were opened throughout the old city. Consequently, their number rose from 10 in 2005 to 65 in 2008 and Maktab al-Anbar estimated it will reach 100 by spring 2012.²⁹

Picture 2.1: Pre-gentrification – Everyday life in the courtyard of a Damascene house in the old city.



Picture 2.2: Post-gentrification – The same house after its 'revitalization' and transformation into a boutique hotel.



Source: Both photographs by Yannick Sudermann, 2001; 2011.

Another common though illegal practice was merging smaller buildings in order to qualify as boutique hotel. This status means more stars, more services, and more pressure on the old city. Again, as with the unpredictable spread of restaurants, which one architect compared to cancer cells, the local administration was taken by surprise regarding the success of boutique hotels. Instead of implementing policies that guide the opening of boutique hotels from the beginning, the authorities only have been reacting on facts dictated by the market.³⁰

The spread of boutique hotels all over Old Damascus involves a further massive rise in property prices.³¹ This has already started to induce a shortage of affordable housing and the change from a traditional residential area into a tourist destination (see pictures 2.1 and 2.2). Both put what Peter Marcuse (1986) terms “pressures of displacement”³² on the remaining residents.

These changes resulted in the fact that gradually people started either to be tempted to sell their properties or to be bothered by the commercial places and its disadvantages. Then they wanted to get rid of living in the old city as soon as possible. And I know cases. I know a lot of cases of people who didn't like the changes; and that's why they sold their houses, not only from temptation of money.³³

Since investing in boutique hotels became a fashion, trendsetters such as the former owner of Beit Mamlouka are already on the lookout for new investment opportunities within Old Damascus. ‘Boutique offices’ upmarket housing and luxury holiday homes are starting to become options for people intending to invest in historic property. It appears that the local administration is aware of this problem and its negative impact on affected neighbourhoods. An architect working at for the local administration expresses the view that:

This is also dangerous, this is very risky because it affects the prices of the houses and changes the image of the city. We know about other cities with many homeowners not living (permanently) in that city only visiting once or twice a year for a little vacation [...] And it pushes up the prices to a level where locals would no more be able to afford to buy and invest. And I wouldn't like the city to be [...] owned by non-locals or non-Syrians. It would be [a] fake place at the end...³⁴

The Bourgeoisie, Gentrification and Authoritarian Resilience

'Weber argues that, as ideology inevitably declines, new regimes must consolidate power through provision of routine and economic benefits and opportunities, in the first place to core followers, but also to broader constituencies' (Hinnebusch 2009: 7). This is what happened in Syria in the aftermath of the Baath revolution. The regime encouraged the embourgeoisement of fractions of its formerly revolutionary constituency by redistribution and thus allowed for the rise of a new class, the state bourgeoisie, which increasingly 'became receptive to the use of wealth by privileged groups to buy political influence at the expense of the plebeian constituency' (Hinnebusch 2009: 9). During the economic crisis of the 1980s, the regime found itself incapable of dealing with the challenges and made attempts to broaden its power base by co-opting parts of the old bourgeoisie.³⁵ This had, for example, been happening in the form of state contracts, which brought regime cronies into the position of representatives of international enterprises or middle-men, or by granting privileged access to new business sectors e.g. the fast-growing tourism industry and real estate. Both practices had a direct impact on gentrification in Old Damascus.

For instance, opening hotels and restaurants before obtaining the necessary licenses has become a widespread strategy and has enabled owners of gentrified property to raise profits as soon as possible. Thus, they are in a position to establish their businesses on the market and to build up a client base – often among well-connected decision-makers – which means in practice creating a *fait accompli*. By contrast, an architect supervising the construction works for a boutique hotel managed by a wealthy but non-crony investor describes how the local authorities delayed connecting his client to the public power and sewage grid for several years. Asked about the future course of action he clarifies: *They do not start before they get these facilities. So they are not going to open before they get it. They cannot open.*³⁶ This demonstrates that the 'fait accompli strategy' only pays off for those close enough to the regime.

For reasons of monument protection the local authorities banned the installation of central heating systems in traditional Damascene houses as the vibrations caused by diesel powered boilers put walls made of wood and clay in jeopardy. However, the owner of a guesthouse recalls *everybody is violating this rule*,³⁷

usually without being punished. Due to the informalization of rules well-connected investors obtained ex post permissions despite violations of construction or license regulations and thus privileged access to business opportunities. *So the [local] government found itself eventually forced more or less to license those places. [...] Their existence became a reality.*³⁸

In other cases investors put pressure on local authorities. One urban planner, who works in the public sector, describes his experiences dealing with members of the new bourgeoisie:

Now, we have a big problem with this class [...] because this kind of people doesn't need to learn. And you cannot teach them anything because at the same time they have money... Big money... *Tammam* [okay]? And they sometimes have authority; have a capacity, a big company working here in Syria or outside of Syria. What counts is "I can pay!" [...]. They – maybe – do not know any borders. Do you know, the money is sometimes blind.³⁹

Parts of the new bourgeoisie are bound to the regime by kinship or family ties, Rami Makhoulf, a cousin of Bashar al-Asad, being the most prominent example. His diverse business activities include e.g. the country's biggest mobile phone company, the country's only private airline, construction firms, real estate, several restaurant chains and the touristic services provider Talisman Group, which runs two boutique hotels of the same name, both situated in Old Damascus. Other members of the Makhoulf family invested in the tourism industry, too: Khaldoun Makhoulf's Julia Dumna Group which aims to be 'the precious stone in the necklace of Syrian tourism services',⁴⁰ has the monopoly for taxi travel from Damascus International Airport to the city centre and owns the boutique hotel Shahbandar Palace at the Eastern end of Qaymariya Street. The sons of Mustafa Tlas, the former Minister of Defence, have real-estate interests and assets (e.g. Palmyra Real Estate) and also invested in a boutique hotel and restaurants (Ismail 2009: 19; Schmidt 2009: 29-32; own internet searches).

Between 2006 and 2008 a number of amendments to the legal framework for real estate investment have been made;⁴¹ however, some aspects remain unregulated and favour practices Krijnen and Fawas labelled 'exception as the rule', including the informalization of urban policy, which can be defined as decision-making 'by mutual agreement, on an ad hoc basis, at multiple levels of the public hierarchies' (Krijnen and Fawas 2010: 245). Regarding real estate

markets in authoritarian states such as Syria this provides the regime with a set of additional tools for binding further wealthy constituencies closer to the state and thus assuring their loyalty – a fact detected through the lens of authoritarian upgrading.

The state-controlled deregulation of Syria's real estate market means that domestic investors have now to compete with international actors who 'identified Syria as the next frontier where to export their capital and their knowhow' (Vignal 2010: 5). Numerous billboards in the Syrian capital suggest that global players such as Invest Group Overseas (UAE), Wahoud Group (Saudi Arabia) or Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Co (Qatar) focus especially on tourism-related projects in New Damascus (see picture 2.3) as well as along the county's Mediterranean coast.⁴² Meanwhile, foreign investors also discovered the high profitability of investment in Old Damascus. As illustrated above, however, doing business in Syria remains complicated. Therefore, foreign investors depend on middle-men who are often members of the new bourgeoisie with good connections to the regime. Regarding these brokers' activities, an architect who consults on permissions for the renovation projects in Old Damascus explains:

And maybe [the broker] has [...] contact with the High Council of Tourism for example and he plans sensitive projects for sensitive areas. You know, here in Damascus Holiday Inn, outside the walls – it's a sensitive area! And it's an international company... You need to play. [...]But for all problems there will be a solution at the end [sounds really frustrated].⁴³

Picture 2.3: Construction site of the Holiday Inn Hotel on Thawra Street in direct proximity to the old city.



Source: Photograph by Yannick Sudermann, 2010.

Conclusion

By facilitating upward social mobility alongside intense rural-urban migration – which resulted in the ascent of a new urban class – the populist state of the 1960s and 1970s created the preconditions for gentrification in the country's major cities: Among the “new urbanites” members of religious minorities were overrepresented, most prominently members of the formerly marginalized Alawite sect who initially gained political power through preferred recruitment into the Syrian military. Being the country's new dominant political class and in order to legitimate the power gained since the Ba'th revolution, the newcomers strived for acquiring an urban as well as Damascene identity. This went along with displacing the old-established predominantly Sunni urban elites. Though credited to economic imperatives from the late 1970s onwards, it was the shift from populism towards post-populism which, by reducing social benefits for the masses and simultaneously granting advantages to those closest to the regime, brought these individuals into the position of getting access to the

very core of Damascus – the old city *intra muros* – which is now one of the city's hot spots of gentrification.

When the Syrian government eased previous restrictions regarding private investment in Old Damascene real estate selected producers of gentrification – especially those sympathetic to the regime – were able to gain access to investment in a profitable property market. For consumers of gentrified urban space the commodification of Old Damascus signifies the creation of both a consumable urban 'leisure-scape' and an arena for class distinction. Whether producers or consumers of gentrification, access to a gentrified Old Damascus has become an opportunity to acquire both an urban Damascene identity and prestige, particularly for non-Damascene members of the new classes. Therefore, recent years have seen increasing numbers of stakeholders exploiting the old city's urban heritage, thereby contributing to the transformation of formerly neglected quarters into contested neighbourhoods. Accordingly, access to Old Damascus and its opening for gentrification has been providing the regime with manifold tools to co-opt the new middle and upper classes: as shown above, granting licences (or declining to do so) for transforming residential into commercial property i.e. boutique hotels and restaurants; ex post permissions for previously illicitly commercialized residential property; or the selective provision of infrastructure facilities. Allowing foreign investment creates further potential earnings for well-connected middle-men. The creation of private sector jobs in both the production of a gentrified Old Damascus and in the new leisure industry attach many Syrians to the businesses of regime cronies and consequently to the regime.

Based on the study of Qaymariya, one of Damascus' the historic neighbourhoods, this article revealed how gentrification to some extent enables authoritarian regimes to solidify their rule on the urban scale, thereby linking gentrification theory and the concept of authoritarian upgrading. It demonstrated how the regime, following its own (security) interests and despite increasing neoliberal influences, remains the only powerful player when it comes to granting or refusing access to gentrifying neighbourhoods. Adding to Hackworth's definition of gentrification "authoritarian gentrification" is 'the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users' (2002: 815) by actors close to and approved by the regime. As was shown in this article gentrification has thus become a tool for authoritarian upgrading that is further characterized by the lack of legal certainty, the informalization of

urban policy as well as the provision of protection and privileges for loyal market participants through networks of clientelism and patronage.

Since March 2011 when the current uprising against the al-Asad regime gained momentum and as a reaction to the violent government crackdown on the opposition movement, Syria's economy and a number of influential personalities close to the regime have been targeted by a set of international sanctions. Investors, international and Syrian alike, withdrew capital from previous investments in the country, meaning that the production of gentrification as investigated in this paper has largely come to a halt. However, the relative lack of enthusiasm for the uprising and a looking the other way regarding regime repression of it by substantial fractions of the Damascene upper and middle classes convey the impression that strategies of co-optation such as the creation of a gentrified Old Damascus turned out to be successful tools of authoritarian upgrading.

¹ "Five features stand out as defining elements of authoritarian upgrading. All of these elements are evident in varying combinations in major Arab states, including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Indeed, elements of these features are ubiquitous throughout the Arab world, although the particular mix differs from case to case. The five features are: 1. Appropriating and containing civil societies; 2. Managing political contestation; 3. Capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms; 4. Controlling new communications technologies; 5. Diversifying international linkages" (Heydemann 2007: 5).

² This paper is based on qualitative interviews with producers of gentrification and (former) residents conducted in spring 2010 and spring 2011. In order to distinguish the participants and meanwhile granting a maximum of confidentiality only the month of the interview encounters are mentioned. The author would like to thank Tom Slater for feedback on earlier drafts. Fieldwork in spring 2011 would not have been possible without a grant from the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL) and the support of the *Atelier du Vieux Damas at the Institut français du Proche Orient* (IfPO) in Damascus.

³ Translated from German *Islamisch orientalische Stadt*.

⁴ From German "Zurück-in-die Altstadt-Bewegung".

⁵ inter alia surveillance, clientelism and on occasion violence.

⁶ Author's interview February 2011.

⁷ Author's interview April 2011.

⁸ Author's interview April 2011.

⁹ <http://damascus-friends.com/friends-of-damascus-32.damas>, last accessed 28.07.2011

¹⁰ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/>, last accessed 28.07.2011

¹¹ Author's interview April 2011.

¹² Author's interview April 2011.

¹³ Author's interview April 2011.

¹⁴ Author's interview April 2011.

¹⁵ Author's interview April 2011.

¹⁶ Author's interviews in May 2010 and April 2011.

¹⁷ Author's interview May 2010.

¹⁸ Author's interviews April 2011.

¹⁹ Author's interview April 2011.

²⁰ Author's interview April 2011.

²¹ Author's interview April 2011.

²² Author's interview April 2011.

²³ Author's interview April 2011.

²⁴ Author's interview April 2011.

²⁵ Author's interview April 2011.

²⁶ Author's interview April 2011.

²⁷ Author's interview May 2010.

²⁸ Author's interview April 2011.

²⁹ However, it is not clear if this estimate remains realistic during the current government crackdown on the Syrian opposition movement.

³⁰ Author's interview April 2011.

³¹ Author's interview April 2011.

³² When a family sees its neighbourhood changing dramatically, when all their friends are leaving, when stores are going out of business and new stores for other clientele are taking their place (or non at all replacing them), when changes in public transportation patterns, support services, are all clearly making the area less and less liveable, then the pressure of displacement is already severe, and its actuality only a matter of time. Families under such circumstances may even move as soon as they can...' (Markuse 1986: 157).

³³ Author's interview April 2011.

³⁴ Author's interview April 2011.

³⁵ Regarding the differentiation between "old" and "new" bourgeoisie Perthes (1991: 33) mentioned the year 1963 as dividing point. However, this distinction has become less important, as a certain amalgamation of formerly inimical elites took place due to economic liberalisation. Among Damascene elites, sharing a common lifestyle and level of wealth helped to overcome formerly dividing categories such as religion or regional origin. Inter-marriages between members of the old and the new bourgeoisie seem to be more widespread than expected (Salamandra 2004: 53, 70).

³⁶ Author's interview April 2011.

³⁷ Author's interview April 2011.

³⁸ Author's interview April 2011.

³⁹ Author's interview April 2011.

⁴⁰ <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/power500/entry/385701> (last accessed 10.01.2012).

⁴¹ The Syria Report 2009: Real Estate, pp. 8-9.

⁴² For an overview of important development projects in Syria see The Syria Report (2009: 13-20) and Oxford Business Group (2010: 117).

⁴³ Author's interview April 2011.

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