

## THE ALEPPINE OTTOMAN 'AJAMI ROOMS, DESTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Rami Alafandi

Kulliyyah of Architecture & Environmental Design (KAED)

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Email: ramiaf7@hotmail.com

Ar. Asiah Abdul Rahim

Department of Architecture,

Kulliyyah of Architecture & Environmental Design (KAED),

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Email: arasiah@iium.edu.my

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper will exhibit the importance of Aleppine polychrome wooden ('ajami) rooms. Aleppo is the second largest city in Syria (after the capital Damascus) and is the commercial capital of Syria. Aleppo has a long history, extending from the third millennium B.C to the Islamic era. The remains and monuments are evidence from those great civilizations. Through the ages, Aleppo ruled as a significant station on the Silk Road. Later, Aleppo became a part of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to 1918, and the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo. Due to growth in population the Ottomans expanded the city, provided facilities, and established neighborhoods outside of the walls. These neighborhoods were mostly for the affluent and contained the greatest treasure of 'ajami rooms. The motifs forming the 'Ajami have rich symbolic backgrounds, originating from the house owners, artists, their native culture, and religion. Since 2012 much of Aleppo's architectural heritage has been destroyed and damaged including some traditional houses with 'ajami interior rooms. This research employs a historical and observational approach to explore the situation of Aleppine Ottoman rooms before and during the conflict to identify the damages and highlight some recommendations to protect and restore the traditional houses in Aleppo for future use.*

Key words: Ottoman cities, Aleppo Heritage, 'ajami Rooms, Syrian conflict

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### Introduction

Ottoman style houses in Syria have become the icon of Ottoman Syrian art and architecture due to their unique design and decorations. The decorative art found in these houses includes several geometric designs, floral motifs, and inscriptions. Impressive polychrome wood panels ('ajami) dating from the 17th to the 19th century have been preserved in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama (in Syria). The academic field has not studied this subject enough, especially the 'ajami rooms of Aleppo. Since 2012 the conflict in Syria has destroyed much of Aleppo's architectural heritage. The losses in both the ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous. Old Aleppo city has been bombed many times and many of the 'ajami rooms of the houses have been destroyed, burned or stolen. It has become urgent to bring awareness to this subject and cover it scientifically. The objectives of this paper, first to document the houses with the 'ajami rooms, second to describe the architectural design and finally to document the damage of each house. In the following sections, this paper will elaborate Aleppo heritage, Ottoman houses in Aleppo, the history of houses and describe the architecture and interiors of five houses in Aleppo, by using the photos that were shot before the war and the data collected exclusively for this research.

### Aleppo Heritage

Aleppo is the largest city in Syria and serves as the capital of Aleppo Governorate (Figure 1), the most populous Syrian governorate. It is located in northwest Syria, 310 kilometers (193 miles) from Damascus. With an official population of 2,132,100 (2004 census), it is also one of the largest cities in the Levant. Consequently, Aleppo flourished and became a very important station on the Silk Road: the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo [1].

Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world; it has been inhabited since perhaps as early as the 6th millennium B.C. Excavations at Tell as-Sawda and Tell al-Ansari, just south of the old city of Aleppo, show that the area was occupied by at least the latter part of the 3rd millennium B.C. Cuneiform tablets unearthed in Ebla and Mesopotamia noted Aleppo's commercial and military proficiency, due to its strategic trading point midway between the Mediterranean Sea and Mesopotamia [2].

Figure 1: Aleppo Map 1912 (wikipedia.org)

## Ottoman Houses In Aleppo

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Fig. 2. Alley, old Aleppo city, Rami. 2006

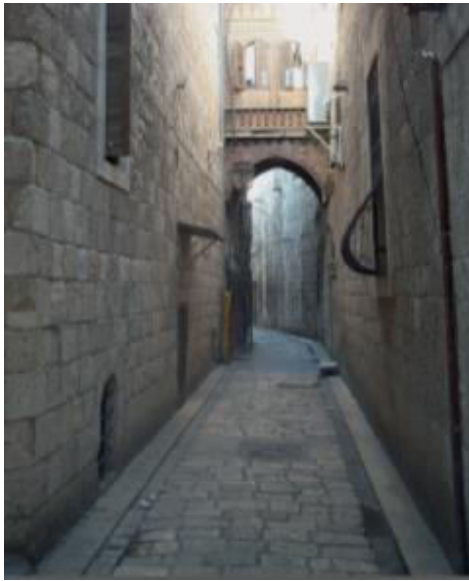


Fig. 3. Courtyard, Ajek-Pash, Rami. 2006



### Aleppine 'Ajami Rooms

Houses of the *Aljdayda* district belong to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were the houses of the Aleppine bourgeoisie, who creatively decorated their houses. This paper will focus on five houses of the *Aljdayda* district (Ghazaleh, Kuba, Ajek-Pash, Zamria and Basil) that date back to the Ottoman period and have unique examples of 'ajami, which were documented in 2006 by the first author.

### Ghazaleh House

This 17th century building [12] is located in the extramural *Aljdayda* Quarter [13] and was built by *Khajadour Bin Murad Bali* in 1691 A.D./1102 A.H., as inscribed in the northern room ceiling (Figure 4). Later, the Christian family *Saba 'Aidaa* lived in this house in 1737 A.D./1150 A.H. (Figure 5), followed by the Ghazaleh family [14] (also Christian); there were more than 45 people living in the house in 1834 A.D./1250 A.H. (Figure 6). In 1880AD, the upper floor was built which was dated on the carving stone (figure 7). Since 1914, the Ghazaleh House was used as a public school; first converted into a German and then an Armenian school (Haigazian Varjaran). By 2007, the Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate had refurbished the Ghazaleh House, transforming it into a historical museum for the City of Aleppo. In conjunction with this endeavor, from 2009 to 2011, they restored its 'ajami panels.

Figure 2: Northern room ceiling (1691AD/1102AH), Rami, 2006



Figure 3: qa'a wall (1737AD/1150AH), Rami, 2006





Figure 4: Northern room wall cornice (1834AD/1250AH), Rami, 2006



Figure 7: Upper floor, carving stone date 1880, Rami, 2006



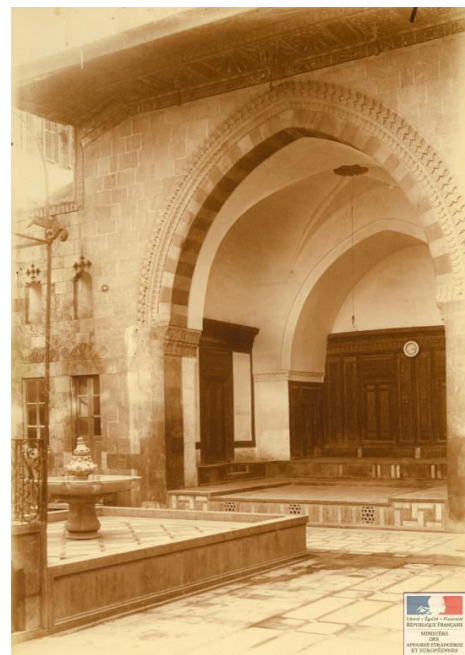
### Ghazaleh House: Architectural Descriptive

The current plan of the house (1000m<sup>2</sup>) contains three courtyards surrounded by two levels of rooms (ground and upper floors) and underground facilities (Figure 8): cellar and cave for keeping food, and the upper floor, *haramlek*, specified for women, which was built later. The size of the biggest courtyard, *selamlık*, is 260m<sup>2</sup> and has an *iwan* and *qa'a* (Figure 9). The second courtyard is 80m<sup>2</sup> and was used to supply food to the kitchen, while the third courtyard, of 25m<sup>2</sup>, was used to service the bathhouse. The Ghazaleh House is the only house in old Aleppo city which has a bath.

The *qa'a* consists of three *tazars* with one *'ataba* forming the shape of the letter "T". All nine walls and three ceilings have '*ajami*' panels with floral and geometrical motifs and inscriptions of poetry and proverbs. There is a fountain in the center of the '*ataba*'. The *iwan* is located in the south part of the main courtyard. It has an '*ajami*' ceiling with cornice. The northern hall is a rectangular room, the walls and ceilings are covered by '*ajami*' panels, which are dated by the names of the owners.

Figure 8: Ghazaleh plan, Burabeh.

Figure 9: The *iwan* of Ghazaleh, Archives Paris Collection, Maybe 1920



### Ghazaleh House: The Damages

In 2013, Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate (AAMD) reported [14] to Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) and UNESCO that the '*ajami*' panels were stolen from the Ghazaleh House [15], but neither (Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums) nor UNESCO published the full reports or the photos of the Ghazaleh House after the damages.

### Ajek-Pash House

Located in the Jasmine gate in the *Aljdayda* Quarter. According to the inscription (Figure 10), this house was built in 1757 A.D./1171 A.H. by the grandfather of *Yousef-Karaly* [16]. And then, owned by *Ajek-pash*. Later, the Syriac Catholic Church owned the house and used it as a hostel for the poor. In 1967, the Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate transformed it into a traditional museum for the city of Aleppo.

Figure 5: inscription date, Rami, 2006



Figure 11: Ajek-pash House, post card early 20<sup>th</sup> century, delcampe.com



#### Ajek-Pash House: Architectural Descriptive

The house contains five levels: the ground level, the mezzanine, the upper floor, and the underground floor which contains the cellar and cave with a cistern. The courtyard (Figure 11) is surrounded by an *iwān* with four rooms for *selamlık*, which also contains the kitchen and facilities (Figure 12). On the upper floor are the rooms for *haramlek*.

The decoration: European influence is evident in this house, as many houses in Aleppo in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the windows are framed with carved stone of baroque and rococo style. The *qa'a* is a rectangular space with one *tazar* and an *'ataba* decorated with ornate '*ajami*' panels on the ceiling and walls (Figure 13). The other three rooms on ground floor and *iwān* are also adorned with '*ajami*' panels.

Figure 12: Ajek-Pash plan, Burabeh

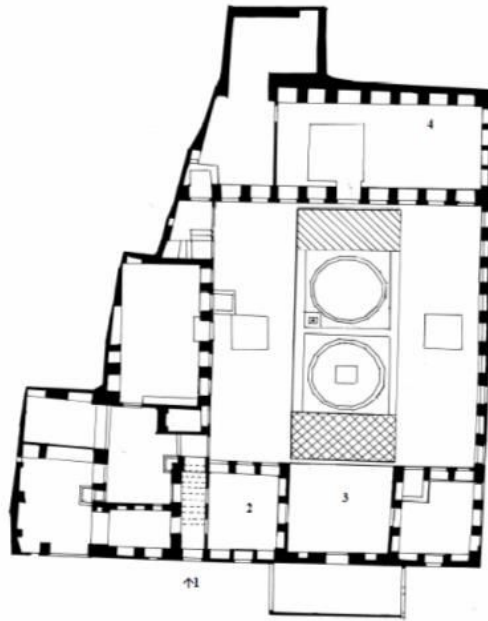
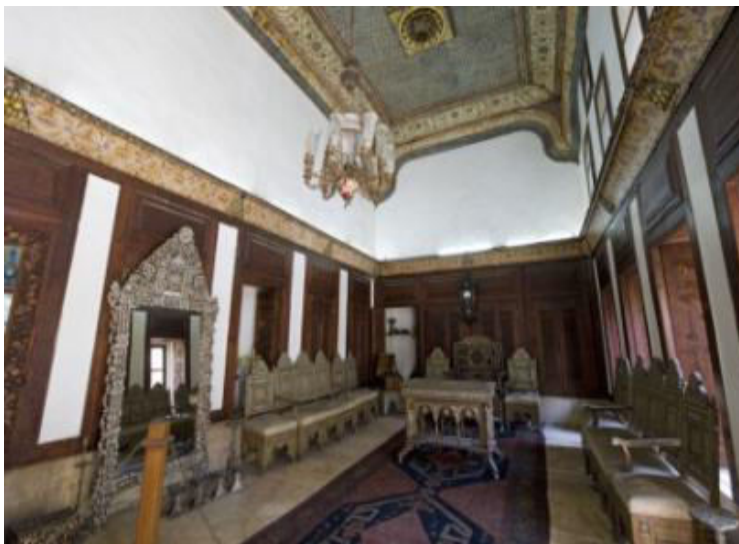


Figure 136: qa'a of Ajek-Pash, Rami, 2006



#### Ajek-Pash House: The Damages

On April 04, 2013 AAMD [17] reported: “The thieves took advantage of the fact that the museum was closed, and the employees and guards were not present because of violent clashes in the region. Hence, the thieves made use of one of the houses adjacent to the museum, made a hole (of around one meter in diameter) in one of its walls and sneaked into the museum. The thieves managed to get in secretly, break the locks and steal some traditional pieces of art such as glassware, Baghdadi daggers, six spears and some garments.” Furthermore, the report mentioned “The Directorate of Antiquities in Aleppo was informed by a number of citizens about some unusual activities as they noticed that some traditional pieces of art were sold on market stalls. They added that those pieces were similar to the ones displayed in the Museum of Folklore – which prompted those in charge of the directorate to visit the museum again despite all difficulties. Unfortunately, it was apparent that the museum was plundered, and some of its holdings were sold on sidewalks due to the looters' ignorance of their value.”

On May 05, 2014 a team from AAMD visited the house and reported [18]: “the major situation of the building structure is good, but there is some cracks in the wooden ceilings of the rooms and the internal facades. Some of the internal walls destroyed by IED. The wooden shutters of the doors and the windows glass were stolen. The wooden wall and ‘ajami cornice panels were stolen also”. The same report mentioned that AAMD in previous had prior to the museum looting disassembled the shutters of the cupboards and saved them in a safe place.

On February 07, 2015 MEDMAK [19] posted two photos of the house:



Figure 14: Bullet marks, Norhten façade, MEDMAK, 2015



Figure 15: Before conflict, Norhten façade, Rami, 2006



The first photo (Figure 14) shows bullet marks on the norhten façade, and the second photo (Figure 16) of the south-west room shows that all the wooden panels with the ‘ajami cornice were stolen.

Figure 16: South-west room, MEDMAK, 2015



Figure 17: before conflict, South-west room, 3dmekanlar.com, 2009

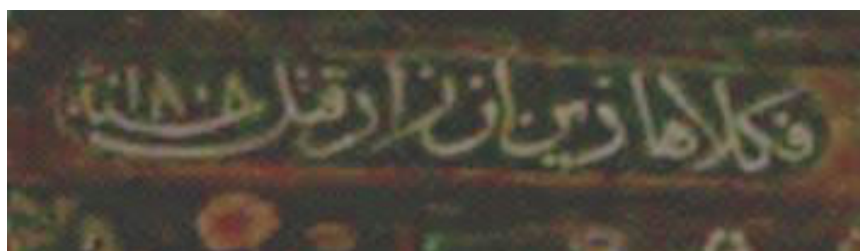


On May 10, 2015 AAMD reported [20]: “only the southern facade of Ajek-pash, have been minorly damaged during the explosion that happened in the last days and the building’s structure system has not been damaged’.

### Zamria House

This is located in the *Aljdayda* Quarter and was built in 1733 A.D./1145 A.H. [21] by *Khazdar Osmani* [22]. In 1808 A.D./1223 A.H., the *Zamria* family owned the house (Figure 18). In 1997, Martini Co. converted the house into a traditional hotel and restaurant [23]. During the conflict in Syria (2012-2013), the *Zamria* House was shelled many times, and the house was partly damaged, then completely burnt and destroying many parts.

Figure 18: inscription date, Rami, 2006

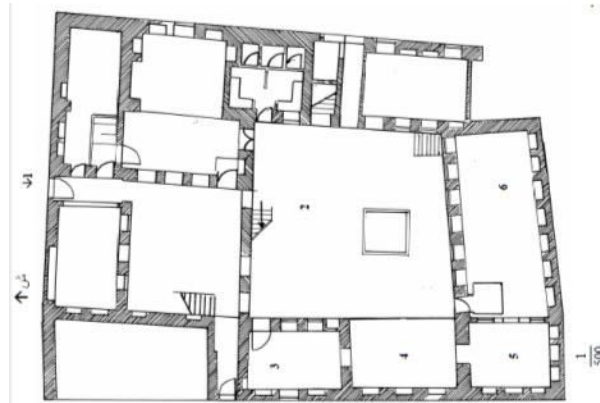


### Zamria House: Architectural Descriptive

The *Zamaria* House contains two levels: the ground floor and the underground floor, which has a cellar and a cave with a cistern. The courtyard is square with a small fountain and is surrounded by an *iwan* (Figure 19) and two rooms with *qa'a*. The room on

the right of the *iwan* is for *selamlık*, and the one on the left is for *haramlek* (Figure 20). The ground floor also contains a kitchen and facilities.

Figure 19: Zamria plan, Burabeh



The *qa'a* is a rectangular space without an *'ataba* and is decorated with *'ajami* panels on the ceiling and walls. The *iwan's* ceiling and walls are decorated with *'ajami* panels with a sunshade. The Zamaria House also has two rooms and a *qa'a* (Figure 21).

Figure 20: *haramlek* ceiling, Rami, 2006

Figure 21: Zamria courtyard, Rami, 2006



### Zamria House: The Damages

On September 29, 2012 the photo shows damage and destruction to the Zamaria House which was shelled many times (Figure 22). The house was burned completely and many parts were destroyed (Figure 23). The greatest loss in the Zamria House was the original polychrome wooden decorations from Ottoman era which covered all the walls and ceiling inside the rooms. All polychrome wooden decoration were burned and none of the pieces remains have been found.



Figure 22: Zamria courtyard after fire, darzamaria.com



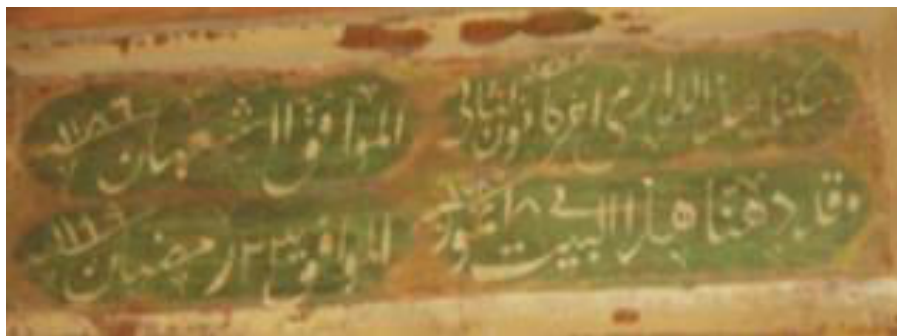
Figure 23: Zamria courtyard after destruction, darzamaria.com



### Basil House

This building is located in *Bahira* Monk lane in *Aljdayda* quarter and, according to the inscription on its '*ajami*'. The family was dwelled in the house early in 1772 A.D./1186 A.H .and decorated in 1785 A.D./1199 A.H. (Figure 24) by the Basil family [24]. In 2002, the house was converted into an institute for languages and art [25].

Figure 24: inscription date, Rami, 2006



### Basil House: Architectural Descriptive

The house comprises three levels: the ground floor, the upper floor, and the underground floor, which contains the cellar. The courtyard is square with a fountain, is surrounded by an *iwān*, four *selamlık* rooms, a *qa'a*, and a kitchen and facilities (Figure 25). The upper floor contains *haramlek* rooms.

The *qa'a*: consists of three *tazars* with an '*ataba*' forming the shape of a "T". All nine walls and three ceilings have '*ajami*' panels with floral and geometrical motifs, and inscriptions of poetry and proverbs (Figure 26). The ceiling and walls of the *iwān* and its sunshade, the four rooms, and the *qa'a* are adorned with '*ajami*' panels.

Figure 25: Basil plan, Burabeh

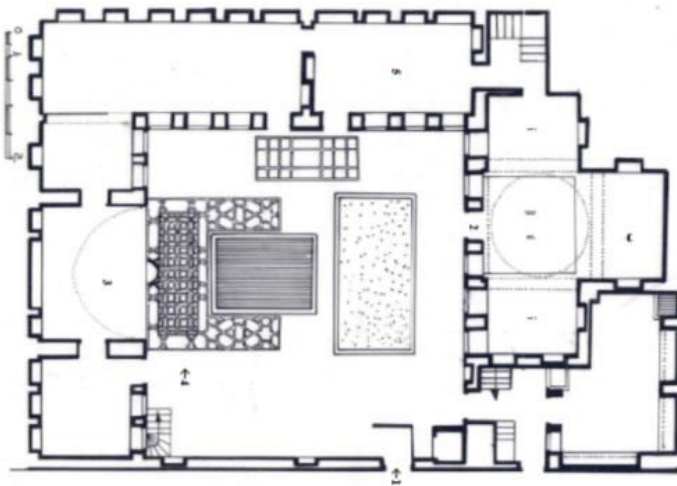


Figure 26: one of the qa'a ceiling, Rami, 2006



### Basil House: The Damages

On March 14, 2016 in a private message with Thierry Grandin, stated: "It should be fine, the houses are in areas still under the control of the regime. The house has been vandalized during the conflict, but until now, it seems that no fixed items have disappeared".

### Kuba House

Located near *Farhat* Square in the *Aljdayda* Quarter, Kuba House was built in 1718 A.D./1130 A.H., according to the inscription in '*ajami*' on the ceiling of the upper room (Figure 27). The owner was *Fateh-Allah Kuba* [26] and, in 2004, this house was left by the inheritor who emigrated to America.

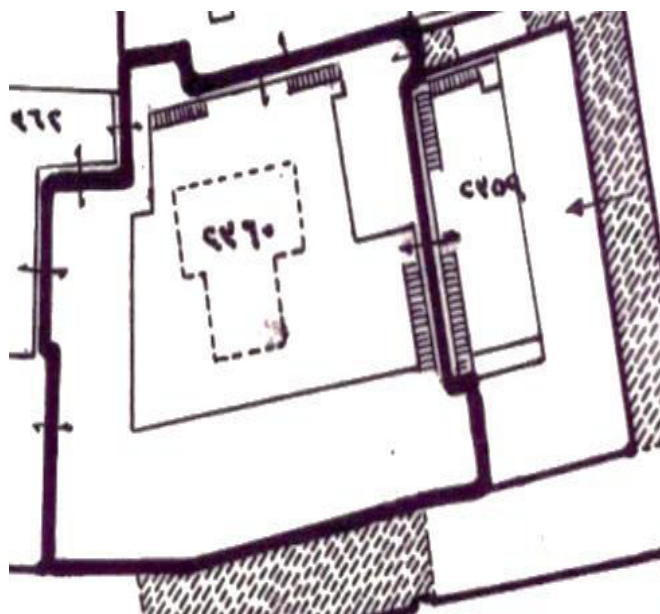
Figure 27: Inscription date, Rami, 2006



### Kuba House: Architectural Descriptive

The house contains four levels: the ground, two upper floors, and the underground floor which has a cellar and cave. The courtyard is surrounded by an *iwān* with three rooms for *selamlik*, service rooms, a kitchen and facilities (Figure 9). On the upper floor are the *haramlek* and the mezzanine floor for the maids. The decoration: there is a fabulous marble fountain in the courtyard, the *iwān* has a sunshade made of '*ajami*' panels, and the guest room is decorated by '*ajami*' on the walls and ceiling. Also, there is one room in the upper has an '*ajami*' ceiling.

Figure 28: Kuba plan, Burabeh



### Kuba House: The Damages

On March 13, 2016 in a private message with Thierry Grandin, stated: "The house should be fine, it is in areas still under the control of the regime. Meanwhile, the house has been partially looted prior to the conflict. The wooden frieze in the room up of the entrance, with painted glass, have been stolen by an Armenian person".

### Analysis And Recommendations

1- The objective of documenting the houses is achieved in this paper and the date of each house of the five studied houses are found on the 'ajami panels. The oldest is Ghazaleh House (1691 A.D./1102 A.H.), then Kuba (1718 A.D./1130 A.H.), Zamria (1733 A.D./1145 A.H.), Ajek-pash (1757 A.D./1171 A.H.), and finally Basil (1772 A.D./1186 A.H.).

2- The photos and house plans made the second objective is possible to describe the architectural design and 'ajami panels of each house:

- Ghazaleh and Basil are the only houses with triple qa'a (the qa'a with three tazars).
- The artist who applied the decorations to the wood and stones was influenced by the environment of the Middle East, whose artists used local floral motifs on the wood. Some of these motifs did not originate in Syria but came to the Middle East via the Silk Road from Asia and Europe. The Ottomans adopted, developed, and used some motifs which came from Europe. Ottoman art and architecture were also directly impacted by Rococo and Baroque styles from Europe.
- The Ottomans synthesized all the previous skills and knowledge of craftsmen and artists from the Islamic world and other cultures. The geometrical motifs developed through the Islamic civilization and Ottoman art were the conclusion of the development of the Islamic geometrical art.
- The inscriptions on the 'ajami panels indicated that the owners were intellectuals or at least sufficiently well educated to use poetry, wisdom, and proverbs in the inscriptions to entertain their guests.
- Whether the owner was Muslim or Christian, there are no differences in the design or the decorations, especially in the houses studied above.

3. The data and photos that collected from many websites and experts gave the third objective close vision on the real situation of the houses:

- Three of the house were looted; Ghazaleh, Ajek-pash, and Kuba, Zamaria completely destroyed and Kuba supposedly fine.
- It can be assumed that Ghazlaeh house panels were stolen at the same time as the Ajek-Pash's panels, probably from the same thieves. Apparently they didn't steal the ceiling due to the height of the ceilings (5-7 meters). So far, no photos have been posted from Ghazlaeh House after destruction.
- The MEDMAK photo of Ajek-pash House (Figure: 16), was taken through the mutual window between the room and the iwan. Due to the possibility of the destruction in the iwan the height of the supposed rubble made it easy to reach this window. This theory is supported by a report on May 10, 2015 that declared damage to the southern facade where the iwan is located.

4. The efforts to restore and renovate the houses and the 'ajami panels cannot succeed unless the fighting stops. However, some efforts have been made even in dangerous situations. In the meantime, a plan for restoration and renovation can be prepared. This requires doing the following:



- Accurately monitoring all the physical, social, and economic damages to estimate the cost of restoration and renovation.
- Using the digital technology to document the physical damages in the houses such as: 3D scanning, drones, and satellite.
- Monitoring the auctions that may sell stolen Syrian artifacts, particularly, the 'ajami panels and reporting these items to UNESCO and Interpol to claim them.
- Determining who will finance this project and how much funding will be needed.
- Finding competent consultants and experts who will participate.
- Learning from the previous local and global experiences.

## Conclusion

'Ajami is one of Islamic art application which flourished in the Middle East especially Syria, Turkey and Iran from 16<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century with significant influences from Central Asia, China, India and Mongolia. This study is one of a very few studies which have investigated the 'ajami rooms. Aleppine house' decoration have been eroded and in some cases destroyed, especially in the last five years during the conflict in Syria. These designs and the decoration of Aleppine houses not only show the owner's aesthetic taste but represent the evolution of Islamic art and architecture during the Ottoman rule in Syria. Even though no current effort can succeed until the fighting stops. This study documented and preserved the Aleppine houses and 'ajami before and after the destruction. The documentation of the houses in this paper can be helpful to restore the damaged houses. 'Ajami art was fabulous artistic achievement in the Ottoman period, and the significant of this study is to expose this art to all the Islamic world again.

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