

# THE LEGACY OF ALEPPINE OTTOMAN HOUSES

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to show the importance of the architectural and interior design of Aleppine houses. Aleppo is the second largest city in Syria (after the capital Damascus) and is also its commercial capital. Aleppo has a long history, extending from the third millennium B.C. to the Islamic era. Islamic rulers made Aleppo great by re-building its walls, gates, towers and citadel. The Muslims also built mosques, schools, houses, inns, markets, hospitals, bathrooms and public facilities. 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. Aleppo was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to 1918. As part of this empire, local Aleppine architects and craftsmen combined their techniques and cultural heritage with Ottoman architecture and design. Due to growth in population, the Ottomans expanded the city, provided facilities and established neighbourhoods outside the walls. These neighbourhoods outside the walls were mostly for the affluent and contained the greatest treasure of decoration and materials. This research employs a historical and descriptive approach to explore the history, design and decoration of the traditional houses during the Ottoman period. In 1986, UNESCO added Old Aleppo City to the World Heritage List. Since 2012 much of Syria's architectural heritage has been destroyed due to internal war. In Aleppo, the losses in both ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous. Some traditional houses have been damaged. This article will highlight some recommendations to protect and restore the traditional houses in Aleppo for future use.

*Keywords: Aleppine houses, Aleppo City, Aleppo Heritage, Ottoman architecture.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Ottoman style houses in Syria have become the icon of Ottoman Syrian art due to their unique design and decoration. The decorative art includes several geometric designs, floral motifs and inscriptions. These motifs have rich symbolic backgrounds, originating from house owners, artists, their native culture, the environment and religion. Impressive wooden interiors dating from the 17th to the 19th century have been preserved in Damascus, Aleppo and Hama (in Syria). This research will document the history of and describe the architecture and interiors of five houses in Aleppo.

## 2 BACKGROUND RESEARCH

### 2.1 Aleppo's Heritage

Aleppo is the largest city in Syria and serves as the capital of Aleppo Governorate (Fig. 1), the most populous Syrian governorate. It is located in northwest Syria, 310 km (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 as an important station on the Silk Road: the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo [1].



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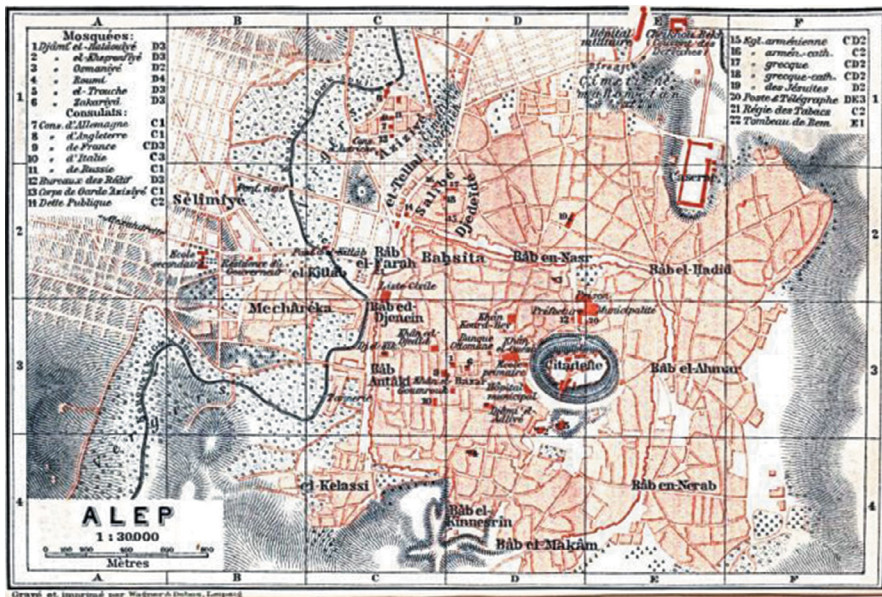


Figure 1: Aleppo map 1912 (wikipedia.org).

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].

The significance of the city in history has been its location at the end of the Silk Road, which passed through central Asia and Mesopotamia. When the Suez Canal was inaugurated in 1869, trade was diverted to the sea, and Aleppo began its slow decline. At the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Aleppo ceded its northern hinterland to modern Turkey, as well as the important railway connecting it to Mosul in Iraq. Then, in the 1940s, it lost its main access to the sea, Antioch and Alexandretta, also to Turkey. Finally, the isolation of Syria in the past few decades further exacerbated the situation. Possibly it is this very decline that has helped to preserve the Old City of Aleppo, its medieval architecture and traditional heritage. In 1986, UNESCO added Old Aleppo City to the World Heritage List [3]. In 2006, Aleppo won the title of the 'Islamic Capital of Culture 2006' and also witnessed a wave of successful restorations of its historic landmarks [4]. Since 2012 internal war has destroyed much of Syria's architectural heritage. The losses in both the ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous.

## 2.2 Ottoman Houses in Aleppo

Syrians always tried to make their houses like a heaven, and oriental design helped them [5]. The design of Aleppine house depends on the description of paradise found in the Quran:

But those who feared their Lord will be driven to Paradise in groups until, when they reach it while its gates have been opened and its keepers say, 'Peace be upon you; you have become pure; so enter it to abide eternally therein' [they will enter]. [6]

Following is another description:

Those will have gardens of perpetual residence; beneath them rivers will flow. They will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of fine silk and brocade, reclining therein on adorned couches. Excellent is the reward, and good is the resting place [6].

Just as walls and gates surround Syrian cities, Aleppine houses also have walls and a gate, replicating the walls and gates of heaven. When walking through the alleys (Fig. 2), one sees only simple walls and doors. But, upon entering the gate through an indirect corridor, one will reach the courtyard, an earthly paradise, adorned with plants, trees and a water fountain [7]. The most important feature of the courtyard (Fig. 3) is the *iwan*, a room with an open wall facing the courtyard, sometimes as tall as two stories. The family prefers to sit here, with its open view of the courtyard and its moderate temperature, especially during the summer. Surrounding the courtyard are the ground floor rooms, *selamlık*, customized to receive men, and the upper rooms, *haramlek*, for private use of the family. All the rooms open onto the courtyard with large windows, which rarely face the outside [7]. The house also includes a kitchen, service rooms, a toilet and a cellar to preserve food. The house rarely includes a bath. Due to the importance of hospitality in Islamic and Arabic culture, guest rooms (*qa'a*) are more carefully decorated and furnished. Such rooms consist of one or three *tazars* (raised seating area of a room) and one *'ataba* (low entry space of a room) [7]. Ottoman *tazars*, containing the largest treasure of polychrome wooden decorations (*'ajami*), have become the icon of Ottoman Syrian art. The *'ajami* includes several geometric designs, floral motifs and inscriptions. These motifs have rich symbolic backgrounds, originating from house owners, artists, their native culture, the environment and religion. All traditional Aleppo houses are courtyard houses built of white limestone, whose colour changes over the years into light grey. The most obvious feature of the living quarters is the windowless and undecorated appearance of the house's outer facade, noted by almost all the travellers who visit Aleppo [8].

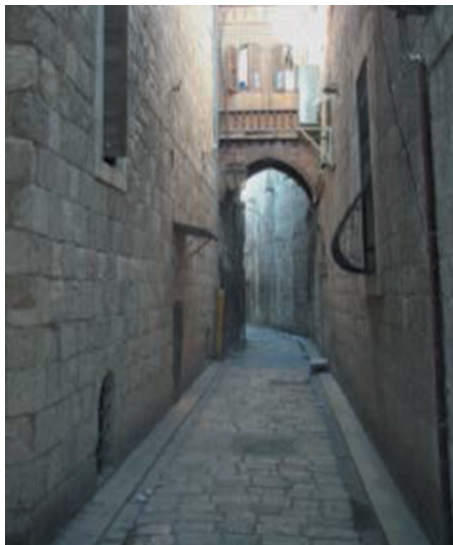


Figure 2: Alley, Old Aleppo City, Rami (2005).



Figure 3: Courtyard, Ajek-Pash, Rami (2005).

### 3 ALEPPINE HOUSES WITH DECORATION

Houses of the *Aljdayda* district belong to the 16th and 17th centuries. They were the houses of the Aleppine bourgeoisie, who creatively decorated their houses. This article will focus on five houses (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.

#### 3.1 Ghazaleh House

This 17th-century building [9] is located in the extramural *Aljdayda* Quarter [10] and was built by *Khajadour Bin Murad Bali* in 1691 A.D./1102 A.H., as inscribed in the northern room ceiling (Fig. 4). Later, the Christian family *Saba 'Aidaa* lived in this house in 1737 A.D./1150 A.H. (Fig. 5), followed by the Ghazaleh family [11] (also Christian); there were more than 45 people living in the house in 1834 A.D./1250 A.H. (Fig. 6). In the early 20th century, the house was converted into a school for Arminians. By 2007, the Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate refurbished the Ghazaleh House, transforming it into a historical museum for the City of Aleppo. In conjunction with this endeavour, from 2009 to 2011, they restored its '*ajami*' panels. In 2013, the '*ajami*' panels were stolen during the war in Old Aleppo City.

##### 3.1.1 Architectural descriptive

The current plan of the house (1,000 m<sup>2</sup>) contains three courtyards surrounded by two levels of rooms (ground and upper floors) and underground facilities (Fig. 7): cellar and cave for preserving food, and the upper floor, *haramlek*, specified for women, which was built later. The size of the biggest courtyard, *selamlık*, is 260 m<sup>2</sup> and has an *iwan* and *qa'a*. The second courtyard is 80 m<sup>2</sup> and was used to supply food to the kitchen, while the third courtyard, of



Figure 4: Northern room ceiling (1691 A.D./1102 A.H.), Rami (2006).



Figure 5: *Qa'a* wall (1737 A.D./1150 A.H.), Rami (2006).



Figure 6: Northern room wall cornice (1834 A.D./1250 A.H.), Rami (2006).

25 m<sup>2</sup>, was used to service the bathhouse. 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 centre of the *'ataba*. The *iwana* 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.

### 3.2 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 (Fig. 8). The owner was *Fateh-Allah Kuba* [12] and, in 2004, this house was left by the inheritor who emigrated to America.

#### 3.2.1 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 *iwana* with three rooms for



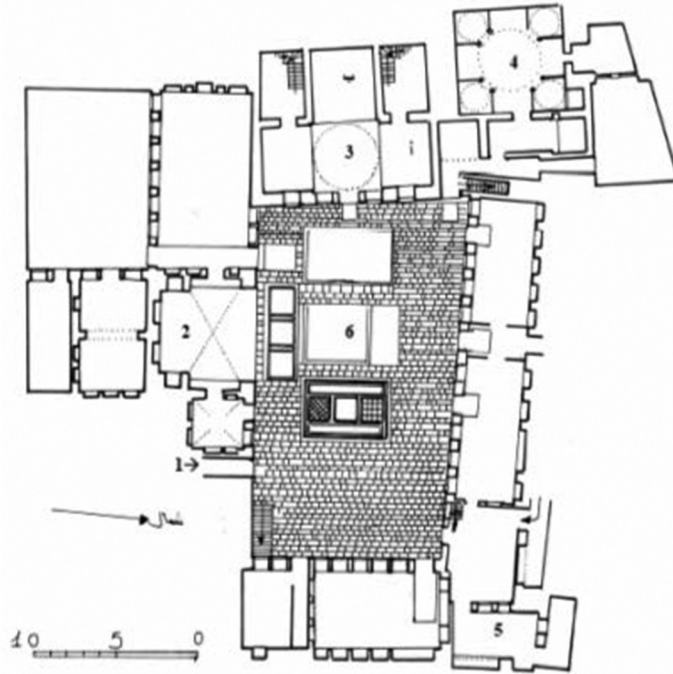


Figure 7: Ghazaleh plan, Burabeh [14].



Figure 8: Inscription date, Rami (2006).

*selamlık*, service rooms, a kitchen and facilities (Fig. 9). On the upper floor are the *haramlek* and the mezzanine floor is for the maids. There is a fabulous marble fountain in the courtyard, the *iwan* 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 floor which has an 'ajami ceiling.

### 3.3 Ajek-Pash House

Located near the Jasmine gate in the *Aljdayda* Quarter, according to the inscription (Fig. 10), this house was built in 1757 A.D./1171 A.H. by the grandfather of *Yousef-Karaly* [12] (also known as *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 Aleppo City. In 2013, the polychrome wooden panels were stolen during the war in Old Aleppo City.

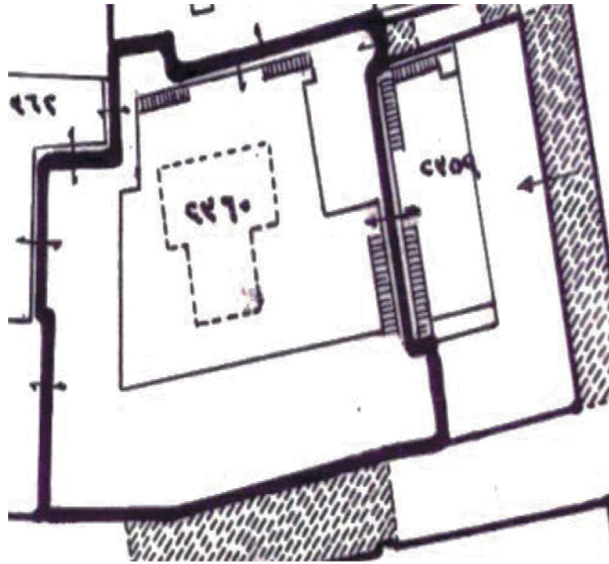


Figure 9: Kuba plan, Burabeh [14].



Figure 10: Inscription date, Rami (2006).

### 3.3.1 Architectural descriptive

The house contains five levels: the ground, mezzanine, an upper floor and the underground floor which has the cellar and cave with cistern. The courtyard (Fig. 11) is surrounded by an *iwan* with four rooms for *selamlik*, which also hold the kitchen and facilities. On the upper floor are the rooms for *haramlek*. European influence is evident in this house, as are many houses in Aleppo in the 18th century; the windows are framed with carved stone of baroque and rococo styles. The *qa'a* is a rectangular space with one *tazar* and an '*ataba* decorated by ornate '*ajami* panels on the ceiling and walls (Fig. 12). The other three rooms on ground floor and *iwan* are also adorned with '*ajami* panels.

### 3.4 Zamria House

This is located in the *Aljdayda* Quarter and was built in 1733 A.D./1145 A.H. [13] by Khazdar Osmani [14]. In 1808 A.D./1223 A.H., the Zamria family owned the house (Fig. 13). In 1997, Martini Co. converted the house into a traditional hotel and restaurant [14]. During the internal war in Syria (2012–2013), Zamria House was shelled many times, and the house was partly damaged, then completely burnt and many parts were destroyed.

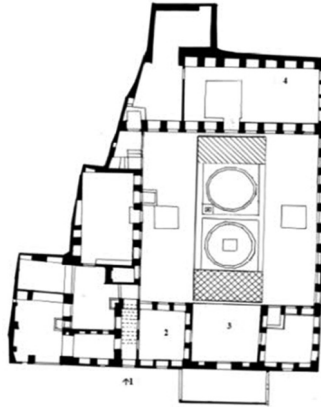


Figure 11: Ajek-Pash plan, Burabeh [14].



Figure 12: *Qa'a* of Ajek-Pash, Rami (2006).

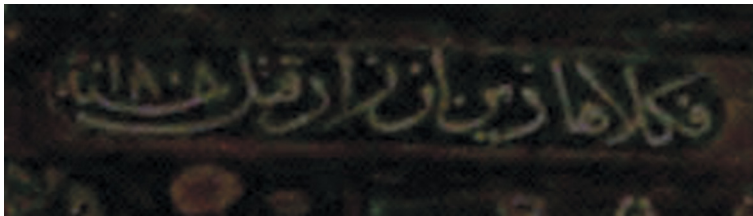


Figure 13: Inscription date, Rami (2006).

#### 3.4.1 Architectural descriptive

The house contains two levels: the ground floor and the underground floor, which has the cellar and cave with a cistern. The courtyard is square with a small fountain and is surrounded by an *iwān* (Fig. 14) and two rooms with *qa'a*. The room on the right of the *iwān* is for *selamlik*, and the one on the left is for *haramlek* (Fig. 15). The ground floor also contains a kitchen and facilities (Fig. 16).



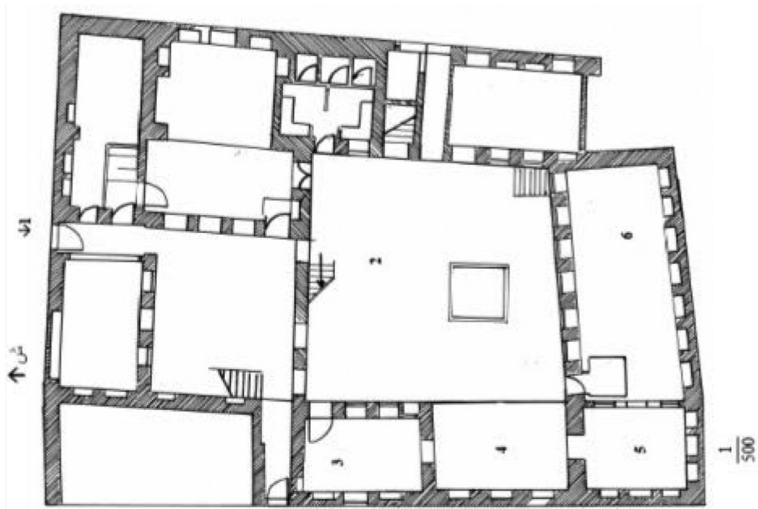


Figure 14: Zamria plan, Burabeh [14].



Figure 15: *Haramlek* ceiling, Rami (2006).



Figure 16: Zamria courtyard, Rami (2006).

The *qa'a* is a rectangular space without an *'ataba* and is decorated with *'ajami* panels on the ceiling and walls. The *iwans*' ceiling and walls are decorated with *'ajami* panels with a sunshade; it also has two rooms and a *qa'a*.

### 3.5 Basil House

This building is located in *Bahira* Monk lane in *Aljdayda* quarter and, according to the inscription on its *'ajami*, the house was built early in 1772 A.D./1186 A.H. and was decorated in 1785 A.D./1199 A.H. (Fig. 17) by the Basil family [14]. In 2002, the house was converted into an institute for languages and art [14].

#### 3.5.1 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 (Fig. 18) and is surrounded by an *iwans*, four *selamlik* rooms, a *qa'a* and a kitchen and facilities (Fig. 19). 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

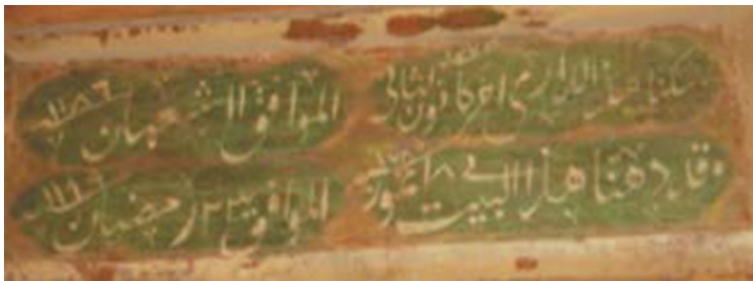


Figure 17: Inscription date, Rami (2006).

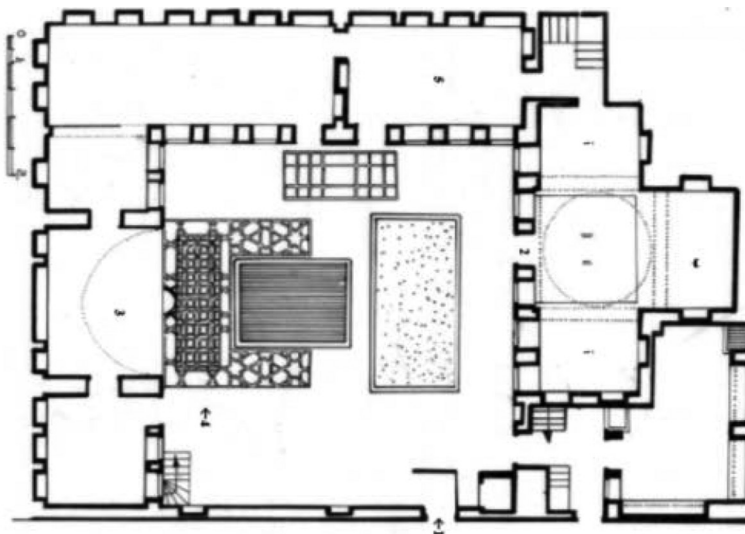


Figure 18: Basil plan, Burabeh [14].



Figure 19: Basil courtyard, Rami (2006).



Figure 20: One of the *qa'a* ceiling, Rami (2006).

poetry and proverbs (Fig. 20). The ceiling and walls of the *iwan* and its sunshade, the four rooms, and the *qa'a* are adorned with '*ajami* panels.

#### 4 ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The five houses studied are dated by the '*ajami* panels. The oldest is the 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.).
- 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 culmination of the development of the geometrical Islamic 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.
- The '*ajami* panels were destroyed in Zamria House and stolen from Ghazaleh and Ajek-Pash Houses. The efforts to restore and renovate them 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:
  - Approximate monitoring of all the physical, social and economic damage. To estimate the cost of the restoration and renovation.
  - Determine who will finance this project and how much funding will be needed.
  - Find competent consultants and experts who will participate.
  - Learn from previous local and global experience.

#### 5 CONCLUSION

This study is one of the very few studies which have investigated Aleppine houses, particularly their decoration, which has been eroded and in some cases destroyed, especially in the last three years during Syria's internal war. These designs and the decoration of Aleppine houses not only show the owner's aesthetic taste but also represent the evolution of Islamic art and architecture during the Ottoman rule in Syria. The documentation of the houses in this study can be helpful to restore the damaged houses.

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