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ARTICLE



# The Unbreakable Link of Syrian State-Business Relationships: Its Impact on Turkey-based Expatriate Syrian Businesspeople

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## ABSTRACT

State-business relationships in pre-2011 Syria were strongly dominated by the Assad regime. Due to the conflict, millions of Syrians, including thousands of businesspeople, were forced to leave Syria. Home countries have been argued to play a crucial role in a diaspora's development. Even though many Syrian businesspeople have emigrated to Turkey, long-term strict state-business relationships continue to affect the interactions of the Syrian businesspeople in Turkey. This paper examines how Syrian state-business ties shape the behaviors of the Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople. The paper argues that, although the activities of the business diaspora might need to be conducted cautiously due to their ties with the home government, and in order to improve economic activity in the host country, the businesspeople have developed specific ways to balance the impact of their home government.

## KEYWORDS

State-business relationships; Syrian Businessmen; Syrian diaspora; transnationalism; Turkey

## 1. Introduction

Since the 2011 Syrian uprising, millions of Syrians have been forced to leave Syria for its neighboring countries. Within the waves of Syrian emigration, thousands belonged to the Syrian business class. The massive emigration of Syrian businesspeople not only indicates a huge drain capital off from the Syrian economy – since the businesspeople brought billions of US dollars out of Syria – but also raises questions regarding the long-term strict state-business relations prior to the 2011 revolution. The state-business relations in the pre-2011 Syria were once considered to be interdependent, where business tycoons would maintain symbiotic ties with the Assad regime.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the massive emigration of Syrian businesspeople has put this relationship into question. As such, how do state-business ties continue to play a role in the emigration and relocation process? This article examines the question as to what

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<sup>1</sup>M. Gray, 'Political transformation, economic reform, and tourism in Syria', in Y. Apostolopoulos, L. Leontidou, and P. Loukissas eds., *Mediterranean Tourism: Facets of Socioeconomic Development and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 139.

extent the relationships between the Assad regime and its former business community continue to shape the behaviors of businesspeople in exile.

Apparently, the daily lives of a people in diaspora continue to be influenced by the people and events in their home country.<sup>2</sup> Even though the Syrian businesspeople have left Syria, their former and current ties with the regime still affect their settlements and interactions. Politically, when the diaspora's homeland faces a certain kind of political dilemma or instability, the diaspora community in the host country may attempt to influence their domestic political issues through lobbying or even protesting in the host country.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, home countries also affect the mobilization of migrants in host countries, as Østergaard-Nielsen contends in the case of Kurds and Turks in Germany, stating that "an integral part of their [migrants'] agency is the perception and reaction of political actors, in both the countries of settlement and origin, to their activities."<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is important to keep this homeland impact in mind while analyzing the development of the Turkey-based Syrian business community.

Since 2011, Syrian businesspeople have spread all over in the Middle East countries, mostly in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. Thousands of Syrian businesspeople have fled from Syria to Turkey since 2011.<sup>5</sup> Out of the five countries, Turkey has the highest number of Syrian capital and businesspeople with over 10,000 Syrian-owned companies registered, with at least \$4 billion reportedly in Turkish banks coming from Syrian migrants and refugees.<sup>6</sup> As such, in order to answer the question of how state-business relations shape the activities of Syrian businesspeople in exile, the situation of Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople is ideal and can, to a certain extent, represent how the Syrian regime influences its businesspeople in exile.

The article first addresses pre-uprising state-business relations in Syria, the civil war and the expatriate Syrian businesspeople activities abroad. This section is followed by an explanation of the methodology of the research. It then discusses the context of settlement of Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople in order to demonstrate the rationales and the activities of Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople. The analysis of how the Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople activities are affected by the Assad regime will be demonstrated, suggesting that fear of further suppression by the regime and concern for their assets as well as their families within Syria serve as primary factors. Finally, a discussion of how Syrian businesspeople have attempted to balance the influence of the regime with the participation in trade fairs and using telecommunication technology will be shown. The paper concludes that, although the activities of Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople are still affected transnationally by the regime, Syrian businesspeople apply specific ways of countering the regime's influence in order to facilitate

<sup>2</sup>N. Al-Ali, R. Black and K. Koser, 'The limits to 'transnationalism': Bosnian and Eritrean refugees in Europe as emerging transnational communities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24(4), (2001), p. 591; A. Lindley, 'The early-morning phone call: remittances from a refugee diaspora perspective', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35(8), (2009), pp. 1326–1328.

<sup>3</sup>I. Ashutosh, 'Immigrant protests in Toronto: diaspora and Sri Lanka's civil war', *Citizenship Studies* 17(2), (2013).

<sup>4</sup>E. Østergaard-Nielsen, *Transnational Politics: Turks and Kurds in Germany* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>D. Amos, 'Syrian financial capital's loss is Turkey's gain', NPR, (29 March 2013), available at: <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/29/175622297/syrian-financial-capitals-loss-is-turkeys-gain>.

<sup>6</sup>'adad al-sharikāt al-Sūriyya fī Turkiyā yatajāwwaz 10 ālaf sharika' [Number of Syrian companies in Turkey exceeds 10,000 companies] *Turk Press*, (4 December 2015), available at: <http://www.turkpress.co/node/12286>; D. Amos, 'Syrian Financial Capital's Loss Is Turkey's Gain.'

their business activities. This demonstrates how the agencies of war-induced business migrants can facilitate the development of economic activities after the businesspeople have relocated to a host country in terms of countering the effects of their home governments.

## 2. Pre-2011 Syrian State-Business Relations

State-business relations play important roles not only in politics, but also in the economy.<sup>7</sup> An effective or collaborative state-business relations can bring positive economic growth to the countries.<sup>8</sup> Under authoritative context, the relationship between the Assad regime and Syrian businesspeople is considered to be antagonistic and that it lacks the element of trust due to the country's social structure originating with the Ba'th party coming into power in the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> With Hafiz al-Assad's seizure of power in 1970, Syria's economic strategy moved from a hard-line socialist Ba'th pattern to a more pragmatic economic orientation.<sup>10</sup> In addition to changing the main economic guiding principle, throughout the rule of Hafiz social and economic pressures forced him to apply two waves of *infitah* (economic opening) at the beginning of the 1970s and in the late 1980s.<sup>11</sup> The *infitah* led to the formation of a so-called 'new class' bourgeoisie in Syria.<sup>12</sup> Political instability at the beginning of Hafiz's rule caused the regime to build selective and informal links with particular business groups or individuals. Although another open economic regulation (Law No. 10) was issued in 1991, the government did not embark on another trend of economic reform for another decade.<sup>13</sup> The unwillingness of the regime to allow a strong private sector in Syria – since it could grow beyond the control of the regime – was another constraint for the businesspeople.<sup>14</sup>

Although the businesspeople needed to be cautious with their investments and interacting with the Assad regime, businesspeople did indeed thrive, as reflected in the active participation of businesspeople in parliamentary elections. Since the parliamentary election of 1990, one-third of the seats have been given to independent candidates, which include businesspeople. This is due to the regime's awareness of the

<sup>7</sup>A. Leftwich, 'Analyzing the politics of state-business relations: a methodological concept note on the historical institutionalist approach', IPPG Discussion Paper 23, 2008, available at: <http://www.ippg.org.uk/papers/dp23a.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>K. Sen and D. W. te Velde, 'State business relationships and economic growth in Sub Saharan Africa', IPPG discussion paper 8, 2007; A. Lemma and D. W. te Velde, 'State-business relations as drivers of economic performance', WIDER Working Paper 2015/098. Helsinki: KOICA/UNU-Wider, 2015; G. Charles et al., 'Firm-level perspectives on state-business relations in Africa: the food-processing sector in Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia', Forum for Development Studies 44(1), (2017).

<sup>9</sup>B. Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup>S.A. Ahsan, 'Economic policy and class structure in Syria: 1958–1980', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16(3), (1984), pp. 301–323.

<sup>11</sup>V. Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997); B. Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>S. Polling, 'Investment Law No. 10: which future for the private sector?' in E. Kienle, ed., *Contemporary Syria: Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), pp. 14–25; V. Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup>V. Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria*; J. Bahout, 'The Syrian Business Community, its Politics and Prospects', in E. Kienle ed., *Contemporary Syria: Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: British Academic Press, 1994); D. Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*.

need for economic consultancy. However, the seats for independent candidates are limited and candidates need strong financial backing to support their election campaigns. Nevertheless, businesspeople comparatively can stand out from other campaigns, especially those of the crony businesspeople.<sup>15</sup> Even though businesspeople have participated in the parliament, they do not really apply any changes of policy. If they did, they might be imprisoned or arrested.<sup>16</sup> Even after Bashar al-Assad succeeded to power in 2000, the lack of trust between the two sides was constraining the private sector's development, leading to a selective development and a high dependency of the private sector on the government (economic reform was not high on the regime's agenda).<sup>17</sup> The performance of the private sector has seen some improvements under Bashar, however, its fragmented structure and the political weaknesses force businesspeople to either ally themselves with the regime or it prevents them from enlarging their businesses.<sup>18</sup>

Research on state-business relations demonstrates the regime's overwhelming domination of the country's economic activities as well as the strong ties, but lack of trust, between the state and businesspeople. However, the state-business relations is not static, rather it is dynamic, and can change slowly due to the social, political and economic conditions in the local and international level.<sup>19</sup> The fact that a large number of Syrian businesspeople left Syria during the current civil war suggests a dramatic change to the pre-conflict state-business relations inside the country. Although the cases of Japan, Korea, Denmark, and Finland demonstrate that 'crises were in motivating business and government to work together,' the impact of the state-business relations on the migrated businesspeople during the crisis has rarely been studied.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the question of how the state-business relations make an impact on its migrated business community is the main focus of this article.

### 3. Methodology

Given that the formation of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople did not start until 2011, and in order to address the scarce data on this topic, this research applies the interview method with the Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople. As such, it is possible to have a deeper understanding of how state-business ties have affected the businesspeople activities after relocation. The data in the case study comes from field research that was conducted between mid-May 2014 and mid-April 2015 in the Turkish cities of Istanbul, Mersin, and Gaziantep. In-depth and open-ended interviews were conducted in Modern Standard Arabic with 129 Syrian businesspeople. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview allows ideas and knowledge that have thus far slipped under the radar to be uncovered. All conversations during the interviews focussed on how

<sup>15</sup>B. Haddad, 'Change and stasis in Syria', *Middle East Report* 213, (1999), pp. 23–27; T. Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup>V. Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad*.

<sup>17</sup>B. Haddad, *Business networks*.

<sup>18</sup>V. Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria*.

<sup>19</sup>A. Leftwich, *Analysing the politics of state-business relations*, 5.

<sup>20</sup>B. R. Schneider, *Designing Industrial Policy in Latin America: Business-State Relations and the New Developmentalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 75.

Syrian businesspeople have developed their investment while living in Turkey as well as their pre-war situation in Syria.

The author raised three main points in the interviews: first, finding out the rationale behind the expatriate moment and how the businesspeople chose where to settle; second, observing interactions between Syrian businesspeople; third, gaining insight into how the Syrian regime affects the minds of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople. These topics are altogether relevant to the research questions that this research attempts to disclose. In addition, the author used direct observation during field research with the Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople. The author personally attended four trade fairs with expatriate Syrian businesspeople, and went to two trade fairs with two separate businesspeople, and two additional separate groups of businesspeople brought me to two other trade fairs as a 'Syrian guest'.<sup>21</sup>

The criteria for choosing informants was that they either had business in the pre-war era or that they had established a business in Turkey after the war began. Since many of the informants tend to be conservative in their investments in Turkey, and since it is difficult to judge the amount company's capital from outside, the author attempted to not ignore medium-sized business activities, for example, a dessert shop owner who had used to work in gold trading.

Finally, although the interviews were conducted between mid-2014 and mid-2015, the data collected from that period does not have a great effect on the arguments or results of this research. Since there is no great change either on the Turkey-based Syrian business community or the Syrian regime, rather, the situations of Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople remain and continue to thrive after the period and the Assad regime remains in power. Moreover, various news and reports indicate that the numbers of the Syrian-established companies are keeping on growing even after the mid-2015.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the analysis based on the field research data remains effective for reaching the arguments for the research regarding the impact of state-business relations on the Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople.

#### **4. The Formation and Current Situation of the Syrian Businesspeople in Turkey**

Many news agencies and reports indicate that many Syrian businesspeople fled to Turkey with a large amount of capital. The capital of the Syrian businesspeople grew to \$6.5 billion by the end of 2013.<sup>23</sup> 'The number is even higher than that now,' said

<sup>21</sup>Observations, Istanbul, Bursa, Adana, and Gaziantep, mid-2014 and mid-2015.

<sup>22</sup>T. Kaymaz and O. Kadkoy, 'Syrians in Turkey – The Economics of Integration', Alsharq Forum, 6 September 2016, available at: <https://www.sharqforum.org/2016/09/06/syrians-in-turkey-the-economics-of-integration/>; O. Karasapan, 'Syrian businesses in Turkey: the pathway to refugee integration?' Brookings, 3 October 2017, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/10/03/syrian-businesses-in-turkey-the-pathway-to-refugee-integration/>; Yeni Şafak, 'Over 8,000 Syrian companies established in Turkey', 20 October 2017, available at: <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/economy/over-8000-syrian-companies-established-in-turkey-2796339/>; 'Turkish-Syrian Business Partnerships', June 2018, available at: [https://buildingmarkets.org/sites/default/files/pdm\\_reports/20180612\\_syrian-turkishbusiness\\_partnerships\\_en\\_1.pdf](https://buildingmarkets.org/sites/default/files/pdm_reports/20180612_syrian-turkishbusiness_partnerships_en_1.pdf); H. Boyacıoğlu, 'Syrian businesses thrive across Turkey: Report', 8 November 2018, available at: [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-businesses-thrive-across-turkey-report-138699](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-businesses-thrive-across-turkey-report-138699).

<sup>23</sup>M. Al Omar, 'liqā'āt ṣarīha ḥawl rijāl al-a'māl wa-ḥaqqāt da'mi-him li-l-sha'b al-Sūrī', [Frank meetings about businessmen and the fact that they support the Syrian people] YouTube, (22 December 2013), available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vxlr8sJQ2Uk>.

an Aleppan businessman in Gaziantep who is working in machine trading.<sup>24</sup> Most Syrian businesspeople live in Istanbul, Bursa, Mersin, Hatay, Gaziantep, and Kilis, as well as the south-central region of Turkey. The intensity of the Syrian business activities is comparatively high, especially in Gaziantep. For instance, there are more than fifteen Syrian stores, including restaurants, coffee shops, and gold stores on İnönü Street alone.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.1. Context of Emigration

The reason for the exodus of businesspeople from Syria is self-evident. However, from the interviews, the decisive factor to depart cannot be attributed to one reason alone. Security concerns were most frequently cited as reasons for departure. 'We heard and saw many horrible stories that happened to our friends and relatives; we didn't know when the bad things would come to us,' said one Aleppan businessman.<sup>26</sup> Some described how bad the economy was for them inside Syria. 'In the beginning we were bearing the worsening economy and expecting the end of war; however, we could not afford the loss anymore. We had families to feed and workers to pay. There was no business for us in Syria. Goods became three times more expensive, and the rent for houses eight times!' stated a Damascene general trade businessman no1.<sup>27</sup> Also, the political threat from both the Assad regime and the rebels seemed to be another reason to flee the country. 'I was participating in the protest, then the *mukhabarat* came and imprisoned me, I knew I could no longer stay there,' says an Aleppo businessman.<sup>28</sup>

Most Syrian businesspeople arrived in Turkey before the end of 2013, although the immigration is still on-going. In July 2012, the civil war spread and worsened in Aleppo due to the opposition group's capture of the eastern half of the city. 'When the war started in 2011, life in Aleppo was not significantly affected' says an Aleppo businessman.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, July 2012 was the critical point that resulted in a greater wave of Aleppan business immigration to Turkey.

#### 4.2. Reason for Choosing Turkey

The reasons Syrian businesspeople settle in Turkey can be ascribed to the physical closeness of the two countries, the ease of conducting business and social legislation in Turkey, the political and economic stability in Turkey, and certain pre-existing personal connections that some Syrian businesspeople had. One Syrian businessman stated: 'Saudi Arabia prohibits Syrians from traveling into and out of its country unless they have a residence permit; Egypt is ousting our people out of their lands; Jordan [is] afraid our arrival may impact their local economy. You can see how the other Arab

<sup>24</sup> Aleppan machines trading businessmen, interview, Gaziantep, 13 December 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Observation, Gaziantep, 2014. On the İnönü Street approximately one-fifth of the shops are Syrian owned, which opened after their arrival in 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Aleppan furniture industrialist no33, interview, Gaziantep, May 22, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Damascene general trade businessman no1, interview, Istanbul, 18 May 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Aleppan glasses industrialist, Gaziantep, Turkey, 29 May 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Aleppan plastic industrialist, interview, Istanbul, 12 May 2014.



countries hate Syrians because of this war. It is the Turks who are helping us now – such a shame for the Arabs.’

The short distance and the ease of crossing the border are one of the main reasons that Turkey is attractive to Syrians. The businesspeople from Damascus stated that, ‘it is easy for the Aleppo people to travel to Turkey, since the border is controlled by the rebels and it is less than 100 km between Aleppo and Gaziantep; but as Damascenes, we can only travel by plane through Beirut to Istanbul, since there are no flights from Damascus to Turkey and traveling from Damascus to Aleppo is too dangerous.’<sup>30</sup> In addition, it appears that the distance between Aleppo and the south-central cities of Turkey is the main reason why Aleppans are the predominant Syrian population in the country. Since many of their relatives and properties are still in Aleppo, it only takes a few hours for them to travel between the two countries. ‘The Aleppo youths here even called a Turkish local market ‘Souk Tlal,’<sup>31</sup> said one restaurant owner in Gaziantep. During field research in Gaziantep, almost all the interviewees and Syrians I met on streets were from Aleppo. There were at least three restaurants with names that demonstrated that the owners were from Aleppo in Gaziantep, for example, Original Halabi Restaurant, a restaurant that opened after the 2011 Syrian war. This shows the predominantly Aleppan population in Turkey.

In addition, it is easier to conduct business in Turkey while also having social legislation applicable to Syrian merchants. This is widely known among Syrian businesspeople. For example, Turkey has simple regulations for registering a company, transparent commercial instructions to follow, and convenience in applying for residence permits. The political and economic stability of Turkey is another reason that Syrian businesspeople chose Turkey. One Syrian factory owner stated being in Turkey makes it easier for him to do business with both European and Middle Eastern countries.

Political safety is another important motive for Syrian businesspeople settling in Turkey. For people who lived under a repressive and authoritative rule for more than forty years, the freedom of political participation and lack of political coercion is valuable. One Syrian businessman expressed his happiness that ‘the Turkish government knows everything, and it will not permit Bashar’s henchmen to come here. That is why we are safe in Turkey.’

Finally, pre-existing connections between Syrian businesspeople in Turkey is another factor. Turkey plays an important role in Syria’s international trade. For instance, Turkey was Syria’s seventh-largest exporter and third largest importer in 2011.<sup>32</sup> Because of this, some Syrian businesspeople either held Turkish nationality or already had Turkish business partners in Turkey before the war started. At least two of the 31 interviewees held Turkish nationality due to their long-term pre-war business activities in Turkey. Another example is one Syrian investor who moved to Turkey because his family business had once had a Turkish business partner, so he sought

<sup>30</sup>Damascene clothes industrialist, interview, Istanbul, 13 March 2015.

<sup>31</sup>Souk Tlal is considered as the most important market in Aleppo. ‘«shār‘ al-tll» āhd āhm m‘ālm mdyna ḥlb al-swrya’, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 October 2010, available at: <http://classicaawsat.com/details.asp?section=67&article=590073&issueno=11638#.VAGIFvRDuSo>.

<sup>32</sup>Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, ‘Imports and Exports by Countries 2006-2011’, (2011), available at: <http://www.cbssy.sy/trade/Foreign-Trade/2011/Trade-State2.htm>.



refuge with him. These kinds of previous economic and personal ties are bridges for bringing Syrian businesspeople from Syria to Turkey.

### 4.3. Types of Investment in Turkey

Syrian businesspeople have invested in almost all economic sectors in Turkey spanning industrial, commercial and service sectors. Businesses range from grocery stores to trading companies and factories with more than 600 workers.<sup>33</sup> Currently there are at least six business tycoons from families listed in the 2009 list of *One Hundred Prominent Syrian Businessmen*.<sup>34</sup> In addition to these three main sectors, there are other private educational institutes as well as business-related newspapers established by Syrians. The private educational institutes provide language courses, preparation courses to access university, and software certificates for Syrian students who want to improve in their specific field of study.

The investment environment cannot be generalized easily. However, one reason for choosing a city to resettle is the relationship between the sector in which they want to invest and a city's economic characteristics. For example, Gaziantep is famous for its industrial sector such that in 2013 Gaziantep's exports surpassed Istanbul's.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Istanbul is the political and economic center. As a result, many Syrian industrialists have chosen Gaziantep, while many Syrian commercialists have chosen Istanbul. As for Mersin, one Aleppan merchant, described it as 'the weather there is comfortable, and the beach is beautiful. So the businesspeople you see there are just relaxing and waiting to return.

The massive emigration of Syrian businesspeople who have embarked on new careers in the host country contradicts what previous studies have suggested about state-business ties being interdependent since it is not only owners of small and medium-sized business that have left the country, but also some top-level business tycoons.

## 5. The Impact of the Regime on Turkey-Based Syrian Businesspeople

After Syrian businesspeople relocated to Turkey, they embarked on various activities in various fields including business, charities, and politics. Even though they are physically away from the Assad regime, to a certain extent, their activities in Turkey are still affected by the regime. This is mainly attributed to the fear of the regime's suppression as well as still having many assets and relatives inside Syria. There is a real fear that the regime can and will damage property and family, which has accompanied the people from Syria to Turkey.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Personal observations, Istanbul, Mersin, and Gaziantep between May 2014 and April 2015.

<sup>34</sup>abraz 100 rajul a'māl Suri', [100 prominent Syrian businessmen], Aliqtisadi, 2009.

<sup>35</sup>Aleppan machines trading businessmen.

<sup>36</sup>Seven out of 31 interviewees between mid-May and mid-June 2014's field research have been imprisoned before, and 4 of them are wanted by the regime.

### 5.1. The Fear of the Regime – the Walls Have Ears

Interviewees usually treated me more cautiously at the beginning of interviews. They rarely shared important information with me unless and until they felt that I was trustworthy, or if we had been introduced by mutual reliable friends. I would ask why they did not trust me at first, and many would reply, 'My brother, you don't know? In Syria, we say "the walls have ears" because we believe that even if we're speaking in a private room, there might be someone next door writing down what you say and sending it to intelligence.' The origin of this fear is not unfounded. After some expatriate Syrian activists protested in the US and the UK, they stated that they still received transnational suppression from the Assad regime.<sup>37</sup>

Syrian businesspeople had long dreaded the regime. This fear created distrust such that anyone might be from the *mukhabarat* or might be sent by them. Although most of the interviewees complained about the Assad regime's unjust and corrupt rule in Syria, only a few had the courage to criticize the regime directly. 'They may have Syrian *mukhabarat* around us in Turkey, which is why we still need to keep our mouths shut,' said one businessman.<sup>38</sup>

Getting far away from the regime has not helped in overcoming this fear. Rather, it has stayed in their minds and continually limits their networking, even in a strictly economic setting. For example, one Syrian businessman was kidnapped in August 2014 in Gaziantep, and some Syrian businesspeople believed it was directly linked to the *mukhabarat*, even though there was no further information about who had done the kidnapping.<sup>39</sup> The power of the Syrian *mukhabarat* in the minds of Syrian businesspeople has reached a level of 'omnipresence.' The Damascene general trade businessman no2 in Istanbul explained that he was looking for a business investment opportunity in Turkey. I gave him the names of a few businesspeople who might be willing to participate, but he immediately rejected them. The reason was 'They are anti-regime businesspeople. Even though I personally do not like the regime, I need to think about my family who are still in Syria. The regime has informers all over the world, and they know who we are in touch with.'<sup>40</sup> Different political views on the conflict in Syria have divided the businesspeople into various groups based on their political ideas.<sup>41</sup> This further affects the ways in which the expatriate Syrian businesspeople interact with each other.

The fear of the regime is not merely imaginary because they do occasionally threaten businesspeople who are physically distant, even in Turkey, a country whose government is strongly anti-regime. 'Some businesspeople participated in a trade fair in Istanbul, and a pro-regime businessman came to them and asked why they did business in Turkey and he told them that they should do business in Syria to support

<sup>37</sup>D. Moss, 'Transnational repression, diaspora mobilization, and the case of the Arab Spring', *Social Problems* 63(4), (2016).

<sup>38</sup>Aleppan textile industrialist no1, interview, Mersin, 5 February 2015.

<sup>39</sup>'ikhtitāf rajul a'māl Halabī fī Ghāzī 'Antāb .. wa al-khāṭifūn yutālibūn bi-fidya', [The kidnap of an Aleppan businessman in Gaziantep .. and the kidnappers demand a ransom] Aksalser, 31 August 2014, available at: [http://3ksalser.com/?page=view\\_articles&id=499a24e670155406b280bd02703d4736](http://3ksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=499a24e670155406b280bd02703d4736).

<sup>40</sup>Damascene general trade businessman no2, interview, Istanbul, 2 April 2015.

<sup>41</sup>C. Chang, 'The expatriate Syrian businessmen in anti-Assad political organizations', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 41(3), (2018).

their country,' stated the Damascene clothes industrialist.<sup>42</sup> 'Even though we are in Turkey, we still need to be careful about what we say and who we meet. Since our houses and relatives are all in Syria, if we criticize the regime or meet with opposition groups here, then all our possessions and relatives may be put in danger,' said another Aleppan textile businessman.<sup>43</sup>

## ***5.2. Transnational Bonds of Family and Immovable Property***

At the beginning of the exile, many Syrian businesspeople thought the uprising would end within a few months and, therefore, did not consider carefully what they should bring with them. The majority departed and left their businesses and elderly family members in Syria. As one Aleppan interior design businessman who was in his early thirties stated, 'I drove to Turkey in the summer of 2012. At first, I thought it was just a short holiday for my wife, my son, and me. The only luggage I had was just summer clothes and some cash. I did not bring my parents with me, nor the expensive printing machines I bought from Europe since I never imagined the war would last so long. If I had known the war would continue, I would have spent a few more weeks transporting all my family and machines out of Syria.'<sup>44</sup> As a result, most expatriate Syrian businesspeople would later suffer the consequences for having transnational ties.

Transnational bonds affected the daily lives of the forced migrants. For example, supporting family members in the home countries was their responsibility due to social pressure, and could also lead to repercussions for people living abroad when sending money back home.<sup>45</sup> Transnational bonds which restricted the activities of expatriate Syrian businesspeople is also evident in their daily lives. The bonds made a serious impact and people needed to be cautious about possible further harm they might encounter at the hands of the regime. Even though Syrian businesspeople have been in exile for a few years, the mental burden of being separated from relatives and material assets has significantly preoccupied them and interfered with their daily lives. A 60-year-old Aleppan art trading businessman left his interview to answer a phone call. It was clear from his eyes that he had been crying. He explained, 'My wife just called me from Aleppo. When I answered the phone, I said 'hello' to her, but she did not answer. I said 'hello' again and she just started to cry without saying anything. I did not know what to do, so I just cried with her. She was with me in Turkey last month, but because she wanted to take care of our daughter who is still in Aleppo, she went back to Syria. But now she cannot return because the border between Turkey and Syria was shut down since ISIS is getting closer to the border.'<sup>46</sup>

The separation and uncertainty has caused the businesspeople to suffer. Many have received phone calls from family members still in Syria, sometimes asking for money,

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<sup>42</sup>Damascene clothes industrialist, interview, Istanbul, 13 March 2015.

<sup>43</sup>Aleppan textile businessman no2, interview, Istanbul, 30 March 2015.

<sup>44</sup>Aleppan interior design businessman, interview, Gaziantep, 5 January 2015.

<sup>45</sup>N. Al-Ali, R. Black and K. Koser, 'The limits to 'transnationalism,' p. 591; A. Lindley, 'The early-morning phonecall', pp. 1326–1328.

<sup>46</sup>Aleppan art trading businessman, interview, Bursa, 7 April 2015.

sometimes giving news about the loss or disappearance of another relative. This emotional stress has limited ability of many Syrian businesspeople to devote themselves to their work in the host countries.

In addition to family ties, most Syrian businesspeople still own houses, villas, companies, and factories in Syria. Some factories and companies still work, but just barely. It was not easy for some Syrian businesspeople who had worked for more than 20 years to give up their assets so quickly. Some left behind a few family members to protect the assets since if the property were left vacant it could be taken by either side, or by the armed gangs which emerged during the war. 'Some of my relatives are still in Syria, and I want to visit them. My house is still there. If I do anything which could anger the regime here, then my relatives and house may be in trouble,' stated one Aleppo money-transfer businessman.<sup>47</sup>

Seven out of 31 businesspeople interviewed during the mid-May to mid-June 2014 pilot fieldwork admitted to having been imprisoned, and four were wanted by the regime.<sup>48</sup> Transnational suppressions, such as physical threats and warnings from the Syrian intelligence service, make it difficult for businesspeople to build trust with each other or even to gather socially. 'A businessman in Turkey told me that a few weeks previously the *mukhabarat* had gone to his house in Aleppo and asked for him. His parents told them that he was in Turkey. They told his parents to warn their son not to criticize the regime on his Facebook page,' stated Aleppo food industrialist.<sup>49</sup> 'If we gather here, the regime might think that we are planning to overthrow them. Even though we claim that we are gathering only for the sake of our investment,' said Damascene household cleaning industrialist.<sup>50</sup> Syrian businesspeople are required to be cautious and even secretive about their activities in Turkey. This suggests that the pre-2011 interdependent state-business ties in Syria has risen into a transitional level. The effects of these relationships not only impact the Syrian businesspeople in Syria, but also the ways in which they conduct business in the host countries.

## 6. Methods of Balancing the Influences from the Regime

Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople activities could not be conducted without considering the potential consequences from the Assad regime. Rather, they have needed to be cautious about their behavior due to their ties with the Assad regime. Nevertheless, they have developed two specific ways for countering the effects of the Assad regime: participating in trade fairs and using telecommunication technology. These two methods help to lower the risk of the Assad regime's intervention since they can be used as safe places for connecting and building up new networks with each other.

<sup>47</sup> Aleppo money transfer businessman, interview, Gaziantep, 16 January 2015.

<sup>48</sup> The 31 interviews with the Syrian business people were conducted by the author in Istanbul and Gaziantep, between mid-May and mid-June 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Aleppo food industrialist, interview, Gaziantep, 2 February 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Damascene household cleaning industrialist, interview, Mersin, 8 February 2015.

### 6.1. Trade Fairs

Participating in trade fairs has been an indispensable part of the Syrian businesspeople careers. Almost all Syrian businesspeople who owned companies or factories would attend trade fairs related to their investments.

The primary reason why businesspeople participate in trade fairs is to improve their business. Syrian businesspeople might not only benefit from the knowledge of markets but could also enlarge their business networks. They might attend the event as a visitor or rent a booth for their companies. As a visitor, they would learn about new products on the market, see who else was working in the field, and meet potential competitors and customers. As an exhibitor, they aim to sell their products and promote their companies' names in the market. In addition to economic motives, this approach can be considered a safe way to avoid the attention of the Assad regime.

Syrian businesspeople were afraid of the *mukhabarat*. Trade fairs are a social venue where Syrian businesspeople could perfectly justify attendance. Even in the pre-war era, it was easy to participate in exhibitions in Syria or overseas. Due to the war, trade fairs turned into social venues where expatriate Syrian businesspeople can gather. They have the chance to understand the investments in other countries' and to make international friendships.

More importantly, trade fairs can be used by the Syrian businesspeople as a place for organizing other business-related events among them. For example, some businesspeople who intended to form an expatriate Syrian business organization used the event to discuss their idea. They were usually otherwise either too busy to have these people meet or too afraid to meet in another place. One case from a fair with around 30 Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople confirms this where during leisure time, the businesspeople gathered to discuss the idea and on-going project of establishing an expatriate Syrian business association. Due to the high rate of frequency of attending trade fairs, in less than a year, a business association was established, with around 200 Turkey-based Syrian companies registered in the association.<sup>51</sup>

Even though the trade fairs are a much safer place to conduct economic activities, the fear of transnational suppressions still affected their activities since no one was completely convinced the gathering would not be reported back to the regime. 'We were prohibited from gathering in Syria like this. We needed to apply for permission first to the government, and then the government might send another person from the public sector to supervise our meeting,' stated an Aleppo medicine industrialist.<sup>52</sup>

Although fear and distrust was still evident in the minds of the Syrian businesspeople, a trade fair was not merely a place for economic business. It also provided a place for old friends who had been separated to discuss their new investments and possibly establish an organization for expatriate businesspeople. More importantly, it was considered safer to gather and discuss other forms of 'businesses,' since that would avoid the attention of the omnipresent *mukhabarat*.

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Aleppo medicine industrialist, interview, Gaziantep, 20 January 2015.

## 6.2. Communication Applications (Apps) – a Tool for Bridging Long Distances

In addition to participating in trade fairs, using cell phone apps is another way for businesspeople not only to create a more secured space and avoid the Assad regime's intervention, but also to ease communication among businesspeople in various places. Expatriate Syrian businesspeople are living in different cities and countries. To maintain friendships and to stay in touch, the most common way was through mobile phones. Mobile phone software such as Viber and WhatsApp were the crucial means for expatriate Syrian businesspeople to keep in touch. Syrian businesspeople also used these softwares' 'chat room' functions to set up group chats for up to 40 Syrian businesspeople living in different countries. Often, members of these groups were from the same field or had the same objectives for improving their investments. These chat room groups are also as a secret location for other information.

Businesspeople might also send messages to the groups for suggestions about their projects, such as making inquiries about a customer's reputation or finding cheaper raw materials, etc. Furthermore, they also used the chat room groups to arrange meetings. For example, one individual was responsible for arranging the trade fairs. He set up a chat room where other businesspeople who were willing to participate in the trade fair could talk to each other.<sup>53</sup> This was for sorting out arrangements about the trade fair, but also to allow discussion on the establishment of an overseas Syrian businesspeople organization which they were planning to exhibit.

This means of connection was in a restricted space – only the members of the group could access its information. Since the information might be confidential, they did not want to attract other businesspeople who might become a threat or the *mukhabarat* who might question them about the conversations. Thus, people who were allowed in these chat groups were considered highly trustworthy and were cautious about adding new members.

Participating in trade fairs and using mobile phone groups were the two means for Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople not only to sustain and reinforce their limited networking during their expatriation, but also for balancing with the monitor or potential effects from the regime back home. Since the same suspicion and dread of the Syrian regime's monitoring and suppression continued to constrain business activities, these two methods become better options for reducing the risk of the regime's influence.

## 7. The Agencies of War-Driven Business Migrants

Although pre-revolution state-business ties in Syria were once interdependent – with the business tycoons maintaining symbiotic ties with the regime – the escalation of conflict has weakened the ties between the Syrian regime and its business community. Nevertheless, the relationship continues to affect the ways in which the businesspeople conduct their activities abroad.

Due to the fear described previously, Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople must behave to avoid attracting the attention of the regime or risk becoming targets of the regime. This suggests that the impact of the state-business ties has risen to a

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<sup>53</sup> Aleppan construction businessman, observation, Gaziantep, 25 January 2015.

transnational level and their influence goes beyond those who have not left Syria. The transnational effects from the Assad regime (home government) to the Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople has created a certain impediment regarding their networking or investments.

Nevertheless, once the businesspeople settle in Turkey and start establishing and growing their business networks and investments, in order to avoid the regime's attention and to reduce potential consequences, businesspeople apply their two methods for strengthening their abilities to countering the regime's influence. The trade fairs and cell phone apps became the most secured places for businesspeople to conduct their business. This strategy has provided the businesspeople a platform for operating their economic investments.

This article has demonstrated that although Syrian businesspeople have left Syria for Turkey, their previous ties with the Assad regime continue to affect the ways in which they conduct their business in Turkey. Even though the effect from the regime has, to a certain extent, restricted their activities, from their strategies of securing their safeties for business operation, this demonstrates the agencies among the war-induced business migrants which they have learned from their professions and usage of modern technology for countering their home government's influence.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.