

Syrian economies: a temporary boom?

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Some displaced people and their host communities have benefited economically from the consequences of conflict in Syria's Raqqa province. Others need support – and the type of support needed will change as circumstances change.

When civil war erupted in 2011, Raqqa in northeastern Syria was not directly engaged in the conflict, and thus many Syrians from other provinces – such as Deir Az Zor, Homs and Hama – fled to Raqqa. They mainly settled in Raqqa city, where the pre-war population of some 220,000 nearly doubled in 2012 with the influx of internally displaced people (IDPs). This created huge pressures on Raqqa's fragile infrastructure but also created job opportunities for many people. When Raqqa was captured by the so-called Islamic State group – ISIS – in 2014, the city enjoyed a boom in commercial activity for a short time, because of two main factors: firstly, Raqqa became the capital of a very large area of Syria and Iraq controlled by ISIS and, secondly, ISIS did not enforce a specific price for goods, nor did they enforce payment of taxes (except *zakat*¹).

But the city's commercial boom was of short duration. Because of increasing air raids, many civilians were forced to leave the city. Some moved to Lebanon or Turkey but many travelled to nearby towns and villages to stay with relatives. Towns like Al-Mansoura, Al-Rashid, Al-Qahtaniyah and Al-Jurnia took on the economic roles that Raqqa city had previously played. Towns' populations expanded, bazaars proliferated, small shops enjoyed increased sales, and new shops were built. Some families gained a new source of income by renting rooms to displaced people.

People took advantage not only of the new economic opportunities created by the presence of those who had been displaced but also of the lack of strong authority in the area. For decades, people had had to ask permission from the central government in Damascus even to build a small shop on their own land, and getting that permission had been neither easy nor cheap. People, particularly those in rural areas of Raqqa, took advantage of the removal of these obstacles to build homes and shops.

As well as winners, there were of course losers. Many people had their sources of income cut off by the war, people such as those who conducted trade between the rural areas and the city and those who were dependent on renting land and property, while thousands had to flee Raqqa with little more than the clothes they were wearing. Little assistance gets through. Displaced families in Al-Jurnia, as in other towns in Raqqa, have received a small amount of financial support only twice in one year. As a result, children in these families have been forced to sell vegetables and bread in the street. Women who have lost their husbands are particularly affected, since this also usually means the loss of the household's breadwinner, and many widows have been obliged to remarry.

Since the withdrawal of ISIS from Raqqa in late 2017, the short-lived boom is over and the circumstances have changed once again for everyone. The biggest mistake that the international community has made concerning the humanitarian situation in Raqqa now is that the aid provided usually consists of food and a small amount of money. This kind of aid is rapidly consumed. Support should rather concentrate on rebuilding the infrastructure: roads, irrigation systems, hospitals and schools (and, eventually, clearing the landmines planted in Raqqa city by ISIS). Then people will be better able to produce what they need and once more establish livelihoods, rather than be dependent on external assistance.

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1. *Zakat* is a form of alms-giving treated in Islam as a religious obligation or tax.