The Resilience of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh in the Face of Geopolitical Ambitions and Demographic Change Plans

Aleppo and the Conflict of Geopolitical Identities

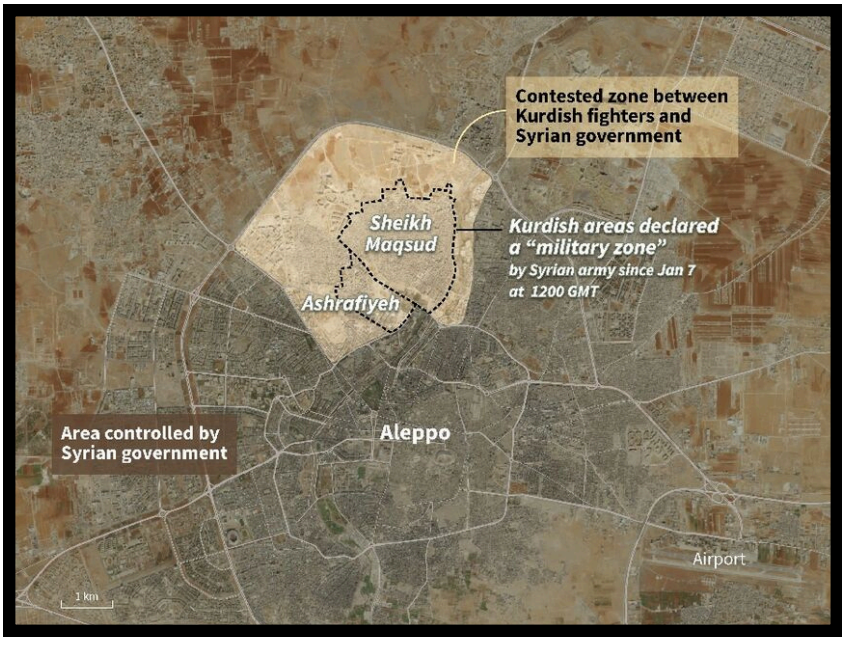
In the Syrian political and geographical consciousness, the city of Aleppo is more than just an economic center or a historical metropolis; it represents the "tipping point" whose inclination disrupts the balance of the entire Syrian North. Since the dawn of history, Aleppo has derived its essence from its position as an indispensable strategic link between the Anatolian plateau to the north, the Arab depth to the south, and the Mediterranean sphere to the west. This made it a city of transcendent identities, where Arab, Kurdish, Armenian, and Turkmen components melted into a single economic and social fabric characterized by flexibility and pragmatism. However, the stormy shifts of the last decade did not merely destabilize it; they redrew the city's geography along sharp ethnic, political, and field lines. During this period, the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh emerged as independent actors possessing a unique administrative and demographic specificity within the Aleppine body, making them a true laboratory for understanding identity and influence conflicts in the region.

Topographically and geopolitically, the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood sits atop a strategic hill, considered the highest and most commanding point in the northern part of Aleppo. This provided a military advantage that enabled it to endure as a semi-independent enclave for many years, offering visual and fire control over vast areas of the city and its countryside. As for the Ashrafieh neighborhood, it represents the natural and vital extension of this high ground toward the city's heart and commercial core. The geopolitical importance of this location lies in its role as a buffer zone separating conflicting forces, or a bridge of communication—as dictated by political circumstances and field alliances—between the force controlling the city center and those present in the northern countryside. Controlling these northern heights effectively means controlling the main gateway to the city, which explains the continuous pressure from regional powers to destabilize this self-sustained stability.

Population Dynamics and Identity Shifts

The residential structure of Aleppo has faced a demographic shock, the most violent in its modern history. Before 2011, the province's population exceeded 4.6 million; however, the war led to waves of forced displacement that shrank the human mass within the city and distributed it among refugee camps and areas of internal displacement. Today, as the city attempts to gradually recover its population—ranging between 2 to 2.5 million residents—a sharp contrast emerges between the eastern neighborhoods groaning under the weight of destruction, the western neighborhoods, and the model of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, which maintained and even increased their human density. Sheikh Maqsoud is a unique model of concentrated population density, as it was historically a primary destination for Kurds coming from Afrin and Kobani to work in industrial facilities. Today, Syrian Kurds form the demographic backbone of the neighborhood at a rate ranging between 75% to 85%, alongside an integrated Arab minority that has historically coexisted within this fabric. The year 2018 marked a pivotal turning point following the Turkish takeover of the Afrin region, as the neighborhood received massive waves of displaced persons who preferred seeking refuge in a familiar social and cultural environment. This pushed the population to exceed 100,000 in a narrow geographical area, transforming the neighborhood from a mere residential area into a "demographic haven" protecting cultural identity.

As for the Ashrafieh neighborhood, it differs in its structure by being more diverse and open, housing an ethnic and religious mix that includes Kurds, Arabs, and Christians (Armenians and Syriacs), in addition to middle-class families. Its population is currently estimated between 80,000 to 120,000. Despite being affected by previous military operations, its central location made the return movement faster, as residents view it as an indispensable vital center. The survival and growth of the population in these two neighborhoods are linked to three structural pillars: first, the self-security and community security provided by local institutions; second, the local economy based on sewing workshops and manual crafts, which have become a true lifeline feeding Aleppo’s markets and providing income for the youth; and third, the doctrine of attachment to the land, which has transformed these neighborhoods in the collective consciousness into "strongholds of identity," explaining the resilience of the population mass despite intermittent blockades and living crises.



Aleppo in Turkish Strategy: Between Ottoman Heritage and Geopolitical Ambitions

Moving to the regional dimension, the reality of northern Aleppo's neighborhoods cannot be analyzed without understanding the Turkish strategy, which blends historical nostalgia with geopolitical interests. For Turkey, Aleppo is not just a neighboring city, but the "lost province" that represented the third center of the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo. This connection today feeds the "Neo-Ottoman" discourse and invokes the image of Aleppo as a city of "Turkish inclination" in the imagination of the Turkish nationalist movement. These ambitions are based on the "Misak-ı Millî" (National Pact) of 1920—the map drawn by the last Ottoman parliament placing Aleppo and northern Syria within the borders of the Turkish nation, considering that ceding it in the Treaty of Lausanne was a historical necessity that must be corrected. This explains the repeated political references considering Aleppo a lost province or an extension of Turkish national security.

The contemporary political employment of these ambitions manifests on two levels: first, economic, as Turkey sees Aleppo as the only competitor to southern Turkish cities like Gaziantep; thus, controlling it ensures the economic dependency of northern Syria on Turkey. Second, demographic and geopolitical, where Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh stand as a major obstacle to the Turkish "security belt" project. The presence of a strong and organized Kurdish influence in the heart of Aleppo aborts the dream of linking Turkish-controlled areas in the countryside to the city center, making these neighborhoods a constant target for military and political pressure. The repeated description of Aleppo in Ankara’s discourse as the "82nd province" is not a slip of the tongue, but an expression of a doctrine that believes the stability of southern Turkey is only achieved by dominating Aleppo, invoking ethnic and sectarian ties to legitimize this intervention and portray Turkey as the natural protector of Aleppo's Ottoman heritage.

The Record of Resilience (2011–2026): Shifts of Existence and Resistance

Amidst these stormy transformations, community organization in Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh manifested through the activation of the model of Democratic Self-Administration. This was not merely an administrative structure to fill a vacuum but a reflection of the "Democratic Nation" concept based on grassroots organization. Local councils succeeded in transforming into miniature parliaments managing the affairs of a quarter-million people, overcoming the complexities of the blockade through the "commune" system that linked every alley to a service and security decision center. At the heart of this system, the role of women emerged—not just as a supporting element, but as a leading force and primary engine for women's councils and organizational committees. Through their own organizations, women formulated strategies for administrative and field resilience, supervised resource distribution, and ensured social justice amidst scarcity, making women’s participation the fortified pillar that prevented the collapse of the social structure against the pressures of war and displacement.

Aleppo, and at its heart Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, represents a unique geopolitical model that has transformed over a decade and a half into an funnel of resilience and an existential trench facing strategies of genocide and displacement. The history of resistance in these two neighborhoods is tied by a bloody and organic bond to the Afrin region. Since its Turkish occupation in 2018 through "Operation Olive Branch," the features of a "Turkification" strategy and sharp demographic change began to crystallize, pushing hundreds of thousands of indigenous inhabitants toward Aleppo.

Approximately 15,000 families from Afrin settled in the two neighborhoods in the first wave of displacement, transforming them from mere residential areas into reservoirs of resistance carrying Afrin’s heritage and identity. With the political earthquake that hit the region in late 2024 and early 2025 and the fall of the Syrian regime, the Shahba region was subjected to forced emptying, pushing tens of thousands in a second wave of displacement toward Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh. The population density in a geographical area not exceeding 4 square kilometers rose to critical levels, surpassing 250,000 people living in a state of demographic strangulation under the threat of permanent siege.

The survival of these neighborhoods was not a historical coincidence, but the result of the "Essence Protection" (HPC) doctrine formulated by the residents in coordination with the People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ). The two neighborhoods fought fierce battles against various exclusionary and radical forces. From 2012 to 2016, residents repelled fierce attacks from organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. The peak was in the spring of 2016 when the area was subjected to a violent chemical attack with chlorine gas and indiscriminate shells known as "Hell Cannons." Attempts by ISIS to infiltrate and turn the northern neighborhoods into centers for an extremist emirate were also foiled. In parallel, residents resisted government strangulation policies and the intermittent siege by the 4th Division aimed at starving the population to pressure the Self-Administration, especially in 2022 and 2023. Documented figures reflect the magnitude of this legendary sacrifice: approximately 28,300 shells and rockets fell on the two neighborhoods, destroying about 42% of the infrastructure. The neighborhoods paid a heavy human price of more than 1,310 martyrs and over 4,250 wounded, many of whom suffer permanent disabilities as a result of indiscriminate shelling.

With the accelerating military collapse of the Assad regime in early 2025, Aleppo entered a state of absolute security fluidity, and the two neighborhoods stood as an isolated demographic mass amidst major shifts. At that critical moment, the leadership of the neighborhoods took a strategic decision for "Essential Defense" and closed the entrances to prevent the infiltration of radical cells accompanying the wave of chaos.

Under pressure from international powers and local mediators, the "April 1st Agreement" of 2025 was concluded. This agreement stipulated the evacuation of military presence and the withdrawal of YPG/YPJ units with their heavy and medium weapons toward North and East Syria via an internationally monitored safe corridor, in exchange for the neighborhoods remaining under the administration of local civil councils and the handing over of security tasks exclusively to the "Asayish" forces as a local police force, with an explicit provision preventing Turkey-aligned factions from entering the neighborhoods.

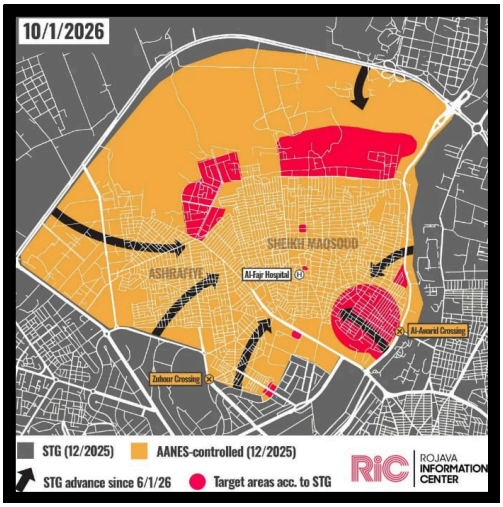
The implementation of this agreement took place in April 2025, as thousands of trucks carrying fighters and civilians who feared revenge departed, leading to the loss of about 20% of the neighborhoods' young cadres. In light of this new reality and the absence of centralized military protection, the residents applied the model of the "Moral and Political Society." Essential Protection Committees (HPC) were formed from local volunteers to protect the alleys, and the commune system was activated to manage economic resources and distribute bread via local cards at symbolic prices despite the cut-off of supply routes. The Martyr Khaled Fajr Hospital continued as the only health center serving a quarter-million people through purely voluntary efforts.

Until early 2026, Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh continue to represent an obstacle to Turkish ambitions, which view the April 1st Agreement as a temporary arrangement. Media and military pressures persist to legitimize an attack on them, describing them as "terrorist enclaves." However, popular resilience and the close bond between the residents and the displaced from Afrin and Shahba have created a unity of destiny, making it difficult to break these neighborhoods without a high political and military cost. Thus, the two neighborhoods remain in the heart of Aleppo as a living model of existential resistance in the face of ongoing Turkification and displacement attempts.

Political Reality and Complexity

The geopolitical landscape of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh in Aleppo forms a unique and complex model of what could be called "mini-political units." These neighborhoods are subject to a shifting structural status switching between formal dependency on the Syrian state and an administratively, securely, and socially independent Self-Administration via the Neighborhoods Council. This reality has produced a pattern of "hybrid political economy" that relies on the intertwining of interests and services with the state on one hand, and self-management of daily life on the other. This has made the area a sensitive pivot in the power balance between Damascus and North and East Syria, and an open arena for the reflections of regional and international tensions that determine the future of a comprehensive Syrian political solution.

In light of this complexity, the "geopolitics of crossings" emerges as a strategic pressure tool. Crossings such as "Al-Awarid" and "Al-Maghsala" represent the coronary arteries that feed the neighborhoods and control their fate. Controlling forces have pursued a policy of "intermittent siege" as a political tool to blackmail the Self-Administration, linking the situation in Aleppo to field tensions in North and East Syria, thereby turning civilian residents into hostages of great power tugs-of-war.



Despite this strangulation, a type of "distorted economic integration" continued, as the two neighborhoods remained vital industrial centers—particularly in the textile and garment sectors—with their products flowing to Aleppo’s markets and other provinces, creating a state of mutual interdependence that prevented the total collapse of economic and social relations with the surroundings.

Regarding infrastructure, the security and political reality imposed a state of "forced self-sufficiency," where the local administration developed parallel service networks to face the repercussions of the siege and destruction. In the energy sector, reliance became almost entirely on the private generator system (amperes), which secures its fuel via complex supply routes from East of the Euphrates, linking the cost of living to the fluctuations of crossings and the political climate. In the education and health sectors, a dual system emerged combining Self-Administration curricula and official curricula, amidst extreme poverty in specialized medical facilities. This forced residents to face immense security risks when crossing checkpoints to reach central hospitals in the city, under the supervision of international organizations and local initiatives that filled the gap left by the absence of central municipal budgets.

By early 2026, the city of Aleppo witnessed a dramatic shift toward military and political escalation. The "Transitional Government" overturned all previous understandings, starting an exclusionary path that led to the collapse of the April 1st Agreement and the March 10th negotiation track, which were relied upon for post-regime stability in Aleppo. This coup manifested in systematic practices starting with a media war aimed at manufacturing hatred by "demonizing" the Kurdish component and the displaced from Afrin, using provocative terms describing them as "separatist cells." This prepared a popular environment conducive to committing violations based on national and sectarian identity, portraying the two neighborhoods as security islands hostile to the principles of the revolution.

The matter did not stop at media discourse but moved to field violations documented by human rights committees; more than 45 grave violations were documented in the last quarter of 2025 alone. These breaches included the arrest of 12 medical personnel and 7 service engineers while they were leaving the neighborhoods for humanitarian needs, in clear violation of the "freedom of movement for civilians" clause. Furthermore, the "weapon of starvation" was used, where trade exchange clauses were breached through the confiscation of more than 20 food shipments (flour, baby milk, and medicine) at the neighborhood crossings, claiming they were "materials to support military forces," which exacerbated the humanitarian disaster.

At the peak of military escalation in January 2026, the Transitional Government abandoned all its commitments, directing its tank barrels and heavy artillery toward the chests of civilians in residential neighborhoods. It did not stop at remote shelling; the alleys turned into arenas for gruesome field executions that spared neither child nor elder. This systematic attack not only claimed lives but tore the social fabric through a policy of forced displacement, turning thousands of families into refugees within hours under the weight of fire. The "April 1st Agreement" was dealt a fatal blow through an attempt to militarily storm the Ashrafieh neighborhood, leading to horrific massacres against the displaced who believed the agreement protected them.

These shifts reveal the ideological backgrounds and organic links of the factions operating under the umbrella of the "National Army" affiliated with the Transitional Government. This reflects the penetration of regional ambitions, particularly Turkish ones, in empowering jihadist and exclusionary currents within Aleppo, threatening a complete collapse of humanitarian covenants in the last strongholds of civil resilience.

Radical Roots and Regional Dependency

Northern Syria, and specifically the heart of Aleppo in early 2026, is witnessing deep structural shifts that transcend traditional military conflict to reach the core of Syrian national identity. The Turkish state relies on a military arm known as the "Syrian National Army" to implement its expansionist project. However, the foundational structure of these factions reveals deep-seated "jihadist and radical" ideological backgrounds, which have undergone no fundamental change except for being rebranded under new names consistent with the Turkish "Misak-ı Millî" agenda. The solid core of these forces besieging Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh consists of groups carrying Salafi-jihadist and ultra-nationalist ideologies. The so-called "Thairoon Committee" includes factions formerly from "Ahrar al-Sham," carrying a Salafi legacy historically linked to Al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra. Despite their formal inclusion under the Transitional Government, their doctrine still rejects pluralism and classifies other components, especially the Kurds, as enemies of the faith and existence.

In the same context, the "Sultan Murad Division" emerges as a pivotal Turkmen arm ideologically linked to the "Grey Wolves" ultra-nationalist organization in Turkey. It plays the role of the spearhead in systematic demographic change operations, repeating in Aleppo the same violations it previously practiced in Afrin. This scene is complemented by the role of "Faylaq al-Sham," which represents the military wing of the "Muslim Brotherhood" and is closest to Turkish intelligence. It is tasked with providing "legal cover" for attacks through fatwas that permit fighting Syrian components under the pretext of combating separatism. This composition is topped by factions like "Ahrar al-Sharqiya" and "Jayish al-Sharqiya," composed of former Jabhat al-Nusra fighters and others who previously pledged allegiance to "ISIS." They are known for their criminal behavior and extreme radicalism, and today they lead heavy field operations against civilians in Ashrafieh.

The Turkish strategy in strengthening this radical current in Aleppo stems from clear strategic goals, primarily aimed at creating a "demographic and political alternative" that replaces the moderate and pluralistic Syrian fabric with a jihadist mass that owes absolute loyalty to Ankara, facilitating the transformation of the city into a de facto "Turkish province." These factions are also used as a tool to carry out ethnic cleansing against Kurds and Christians to give the false impression that the confrontation is an "internal Syrian conflict" rather than a direct occupation, as well as using the "jihad" card to blackmail the international community and claim that Ankara is the only party capable of controlling these groups. This mentality was translated on the ground in early 2026 by transforming mosques and educational centers in Aleppo into hubs for spreading extremist thought and practicing behaviors copied from terrorist organizations, such as imposing disguised "jizya" (tribute) and kidnapping for ransom.

On the political level, the Transitional Government's adoption of this factional mentality has struck all negotiation paths, foremost of which is the "March 10th Agreement" aimed at integrating local administration within a decentralized national structure. The disruption of this path came at regional bidding, viewing the stability of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh as a threat to its ambitions, pushing the region toward total war and an unprecedented humanitarian disaster. Analyses indicate the existence of "secret international and regional deals" to hand over full influence in Aleppo to Ankara in exchange for concessions in other files, amidst a suspicious international silence interpreted as acceptance of bartering the rights of a quarter-million people for regional security.

The repercussions of this scene are manifested today in a tight siege preventing the entry of flour and fuel for the third week, leading to the stoppage of bakeries, the collapse of the health sector, and the targeting of field hospitals with tanks. This tragic reality places the trapped residents, including those displaced from Afrin and Shahba, in an "open prison" with no escape. This proves that the behavior of the authority in the North in early 2026, in assassinating the "April 1st" and "March 10th" agreements, was a deliberate decision to consolidate mono-color rule and external dependency. This not only threatens the besieged neighborhoods but deals a fatal blow to the territorial integrity of Syria and paves the way for extended ethnic and sectarian conflicts, placing all Syrian components—from Aleppo to Suwayda and the coast—under the risk of total political and field genocide.

Aleppo 2026 – The "Brinkmanship" Strategy and the Assassination of Civil Peace

Careful readings of the military and political scene in early 2026 confirm that the escalation targeting Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, and the use of armored reinforcements in densely populated areas, cannot be considered a mere desire for geographical control.

Rather, it represents a strategic shift toward a "brinkmanship" policy aimed at undermining the Syrian national contract. This escalatory behavior by the Transitional Government and its allied radical factional forces indicates the adoption of a "maximum provocation" tactic by breaching de-escalation understandings, particularly the April 1st Agreement, and committing violations against civilians. The goal is to push the Syrian Democratic Forces into a broad military reaction starting from North and East Syria. This deliberate entrapment seeks to create an international and regional pretext to legitimize an all-out war, allowing for direct external interventions that abort emerging political tracks—foremost the March 10th track—and push the country toward a zero-sum conflict that serves regional agendas at the expense of the supreme national interest.

The targeting of neighborhoods with specific ethnic characteristics in Aleppo is inseparable from a comprehensive context whose impact extends across the entire Syrian geography, where the same exclusionary tools and discourses are used by the dominant factional mentality. The logic that accuses components in Aleppo of treason is the same used to demonize civil movements in Jaramana and Suwayda when they demand local administration or the protection of cultural identity. It is the same provocative discourse targeting residents of the Syrian coast to deepen sectarian and social rifts. This repetition of patterns of repression proves that the controlling forces lack a unifying national model and use accusations of external dependency as a "peg" to justify their political failure. This places all Syrian components—Kurds, Druze, Alawites, Christians, and others—in the face of an existential threat resulting from the absence of a true concept of citizenship, replaced by factional or ethnic loyalty.

The control of this mentality over decision-making within the Transitional Government has turned Syrian aspirations for freedom into a project for mutual exclusion, where the national fabric is fragmented by striking at negotiation tracks and depending on foreign ambitions—specifically regional agendas that see Aleppo as a space for partitioning influence. This dependency drags the region toward catastrophic repercussions that transcend the military dimension to hit the humanitarian depth. The tight siege and the use of heavy weaponry against the
displaced and civilians do not stop at creating new waves of displacement but establish famine and massive security chaos that shatter the chances of a diplomatic solution for years to come. This portrays the scene of 2026 as an attempt to impose a new dictatorship in factional garb, where targeting social diversity in Aleppo becomes a test of the Syrians' ability to protect their pluralism in the face of an exclusionary vision seeking to destroy Syrian society for the sake of suspicious deals. This makes today’s battle a pivotal one between the project of a decentralized, pluralistic Syria that guarantees everyone's rights, and the project of fragmentation and proxy wars.

The Resilience of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh: An Icon of Freedom

The resistance of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh throughout a decade and a half remains one of the greatest epics of popular resilience in contemporary Syrian history. At a time when cities and fortresses collapsed under the weight of international balances, these two neighborhoods stood firm as an "icon of rejection," defying storms of fire, siege, and systematic starvation policies. It is a resistance measured not only by the number of shells repelled but by the will of a quarter-million people who decided that dignity is more precious than bread dipped in humiliation.
Despite the tragedy of permanent forced displacement—which began from the wounded olives of Afrin in 2018, leading to the afflicted tents of Shahba—these displaced people did not kneel. Instead, they turned the narrow alleys of Sheikh Maqsoud into trenches to defend an authentic existence.
This legendary resilience, renewed today in early 2026 against tanks and a tight siege, proves to the whole world that the factional mentality and regional ambitions may possess the weapons, but they do not possess the will. The residents of the two neighborhoods have proven to be a school of Essential Protection, where the civilian, the displaced, the woman, and the elder have turned into an impenetrable barrier, confirming with their blood and patience that true fortresses are not built of stone, but of the bodies of people who believed that the land is honor and that bowing is extinction. Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh have not and will not kneel, because they are, quite simply, the pulse of Aleppo that refuses to stop.

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