Aleppo which, following the Muslim conquest, became a “great city” once more, has to this day maintained an upward demographic curve, a few periods of crisis excepted. It remained for almost four centuries within the Ottoman Empire, under a domination at once foreign and close. For a good part of this period it was, with regard to population and economic activity, the third city of the Empire after Istanbul and Cairo. Such continuity doubtless characterizes a metropolis, a city with multiple bents, extended areas of influence, and diverse and complementary territories; one which has not, in consequence, been affected in any lasting or general manner by periodic uncertainty. Its upward curve has been far from undifferentiated; it has rather been sustained by periods of intense activity in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, reflected in building work, spatial extension, growing density of the urban fabric, intensification of commercial exchanges, and the accumulation of financial means that also fed the Ottoman tax revenues. At other times, during part of the seventeenth century, for instance, the city passed through crisis: numerous indicators, like activity in establishing great waqfs and constructing “public” monuments, were negative; there was, rather, continued construction of buildings that were more modest and designed especially for the sphere of private activity: large dwelling houses (where it is possible to date these) and textile qisariyyas. Even in times of crisis the metropolis continued to

1 André Raymond notes a “significant gap in building during the seventeenth century, with 35 monuments built in the sixteenth century, 39 in the eighteenth and only 21 in the seventeenth, with a total absence of significant building for 45 years between 1602 and 1671.” See André Raymond, “Réseaux urbains et mouvements populaires à Alep (fin du XVIIIère-début du XIXère siècles),” Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies (Zaghouan) 3–4 (1991): 278–79.

2 The qisariyyas, sets of textile workshops arranged over two floors around large courtyards, are numerous in the northern suburbs, former Christian quarters. Curiously, they are often accessible not through the main streets that are a part of the public spaces, but from quarter alleyways, sometimes also, through cul-de-sacs that may give access
develop: André Raymond\textsuperscript{3} notes a considerable rise in the seventeenth century population, comparing the consul D’Arvieux’s calculation, in 1683, of 13,854 homes (i.e., an estimated 115,000 inhabitants) with 9,049 homes following the 1584 census (i.e., an estimated 75,000 inhabitants). The increase noted over a century is 53%.

Aleppo was an Ottoman city. It had its part in a project for developing the sultan’s power, being integrated within a particular model of territorial and political organization. Ottoman centralization was fundamentally different from French monarchical and subsequent Jacobin centralism. Diversity of identities was a constituent element of the Empire: co-existence was on an organized basis, and inclinations to openness and to exchange were generally favoured. The way of life in Aleppo was not so very different from that in Istanbul or Damascus; Istanbul disseminated its influence throughout the Empire, though without seeking uniformity. In addition to the political and military systems that were the practical expression of domination and dependence in the region, there was a common city-dwelling identity which went beyond regional identities, and which was enriched from all the regions. In this context, national identity or identities did not exist, even in embryonic form, before the nineteenth century.

More than Damascus, the old and future capital of Syria, Aleppo was characterized by diversity, by tolerance and by a cross-fertilization of cultures; its inclination to all forms of exchange went beyond that of most other cities in the Empire, and marked out its destiny. Aleppo was the earliest and most extensively used point of passage, the one most subtly invested by the rising western powers in their movement towards the East—well before Beirut or Alexandria. Part of its centre was fashioned to fulfil this role as place of call. Far from the sea, the suq of Aleppo was both port and gateway.

At the end of the Ottoman period, Damascus became the focal point for Syrian national identity, with the birth of a nation state enclosed within narrow borders. Aleppo lost its status of metropolis, which was taken over by Damascus when it became capital.

\textsuperscript{3} Raymond, “Réseaux urbains,” 279–80.