



Bayt al-'Aqqad

*The History and Restoration
of a House in Old Damascus*

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The 'Aqqad Family and Houses in the Late 19th and the 20th Centuries

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Introduction

The old city of Damascus – both inside and outside the city walls – preserves large residential quarters that not only contain a puzzle of isolated monuments, but also a complete historical urban fabric. In 1900, when the house was owned by the 'Aqqad family and underwent a major reconstruction, the Ottoman yearbook (*sal-name*) for the province of Damascus listed 16,832 houses, of which approximately half are still standing. Usually houses in Damascus date to the 18th and 19th centuries and some of them are outstanding and richly decorated examples of Middle Eastern architecture. In all the eastern Mediterranean – from Egypt to Greece – the Syrian towns of Damascus and Aleppo are the only large cities which preserve domestic architecture on such a scale. Other important cities, such as Cairo and Istanbul, have lost practically most of their residential architecture and preserved only those buildings considered historical monuments (mosques, schools etc., and some major residences).

Damascus has preserved a unique heritage of an urban society during the Ottoman period – but this heritage is an unknown one. Thousands of houses represent the stories of the many more people who lived there and left their traces in the long centuries of Damascene history. People built their houses according to their practical needs, cultural traditions, available materials and wishes of architectural (self-) representation. Changing socioeconomic circumstances and needs of families with different social patterns, the availability of material and techniques due to changing markets and knowledge or cultural traditions, influences and orientation are reflected directly in the layout, decoration and furnishing of houses. In this way the surviving houses preserve aspects of a society's history.

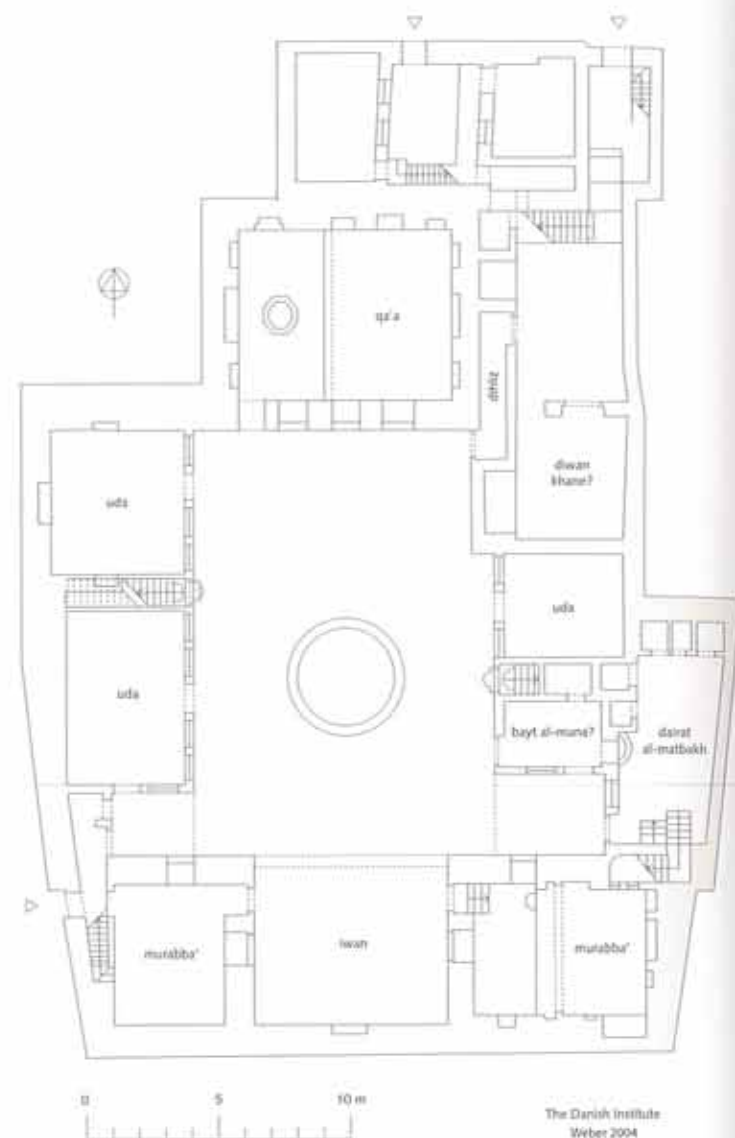
Today the history of the people and the houses is forgotten: the houses themselves are barely known, and their history virtually forgotten. As such it is not easy to trace the history of the Bayt al-'Aqqad in the late 19th and the 20th centuries, as this article will show.¹

What kind of material do we possess, then, to write the history of a Damascene house? Generally speaking the building itself is our main source since we do not have any architectural plans or drawings of houses by the planning architects in Damascus from Ottoman times. A Cadastral Office that informs us about the in-

habitants and history of buying and selling was introduced during the French Mandate period, at which time the first detailed cadastral map was drawn. With regard to the last major changes of the Bayt al-'Aqqad around the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, and its usage in the 20th century, written sources are very scattered or simply do not exist. Abd al-Qadir al-'Aqqad, who was responsible for the last major rebuilding, was a wealthy but not particularly important merchant who would not have been prominent enough to have been included in written sources such as the biographical lexica (*tarajim*) or historiographies (*yaumiyyat*) that normally contain a great deal of information on the history of Damascus. On the other hand, we have a source that historians for Roman, Mamluk or early Ottoman times do not have: oral history – people's memories. But this 'material' will only go back to the beginning of the 20th century, and for this period it must be used with caution. People's memories are often mixed up with their knowledge of general history and later values and attitudes. Nevertheless, it is an important source which, when cross-checked with other sources, may provide information on many aspects of family and social life normally beyond the interests of other sources. But since the Bayt al-'Aqqad is an important source in itself, it will help us here to understand some of the main characteristics of courtyard houses in Damascus.

A Unit of Units: the Courtyard House and its Flexibility

The traditional house form in cities of the Levant is the courtyard house. Most of the rooms are grouped around a courtyard that serves as the distributor of space and gives access to the single rooms (Fig. 277). Apart from a special room for receiving guests (*madafa*), one must first come into the courtyard from which one can then enter the individual rooms. To move from one room to the other it is necessary to cross the courtyard, which is the centre of communication. Before the late 19th century the house as such was always 'inverted'. The main internal façades are orientated towards the courtyard, while the street façades remain normally unstructured and without many windows. Thus the rooms get light from the many windows of the courtyard façade. The importance of the courtyard is underlined by its generally rich decoration. The main elements of the ground floor are the *iwan*, the fountain and a main reception hall (*qa'a*) arranged with additional rooms in an unfixed but very standardized manner around the courtyard. Only very few rooms or spaces are defined as having an exclusive function. Known in records as *uda*, *murabba'* or *qasr*, rooms are usually multi-functional and their names only give an indication of size and location. Other rooms, or groups of rooms, like *dairat al-matbakh* (kitchen) or *bayt al-muna* (storerooms), have specified functions (for Bayt al-'Aqqad see Fig. 277).²



277. Bayt al-'Aqqad: names and functions of rooms (s.w. 2004).

The houses are normally divided into specific spatial units. Next to the division between housekeeping/wet cells (kitchen, storerooms, toilets etc) and the proper living area, the main structuring element is the division between a more private and a semi-public space inside the house. If there is only one courtyard, certain sections in the house are used to receive guests. Apart from the guestroom (today called *madafa*) with an extra entrance from the corridor (*dihliz*), or the most representative room (*qa'a*), no architectural pattern gives us evidence of how the rooms were utilized by their inhabitants on a daily basis. The usage of additional rooms could change according to need. For special occasions, important guests would enter the courtyard or the main reception room only after the family had prepared itself for the visit. In houses of rich families different courtyards often took over these functions. The smaller, 'outer' one, the so-called *barrani*, would function as a semi-public space, while the 'inner', the *juwwani*, would be the more private one, which was only opened for special guests or for special occasions. This distinction between the two, the *barrani* and the *juwwani*, is by no means strict, however. It may differ from house to house. In some cases other courtyards were used for the services and servants.

The layout of houses was highly flexible. As long as certain main elements, such as the courtyard, the *iwān*, the fountain and some rooms exist, other rooms or even courtyards can be added or removed: it is a unit of units. Throughout the centuries many houses had their layout changed without being totally rebuilt. Such changes might be due to a change of owner, inheritance, or the changing financial resources of the owner. The patterns can vary a lot. The easiest way is to add or to cut out single rooms and to connect them to a new house complex. But there may be even more dramatic change. Whole courtyards may be disconnected from the house, added to another one, or form a new house entity like the north-western *barrani* of Bayt al-'Aqqad, which was once most probably part of the Mamluk structure (see Weber and Mortensen above: p. 255 f.). A nice example of a rearrangement of courtyards is provided by the Bayt Nizam (Fig. 278). In the 19th century this was actually two different houses: Nusuh Pasha al-Azm lived in the western part of the house in the late 18th century, while in the eastern part Ali Agha Khazina Katibi had built (or better rebuilt) his house in the early 19th century. During the following decades the house was split up, and in 1927 the Nizam family connected the 'inner' courtyards (*juwwani*) of the two old houses and rearranged them into a new house by connecting both of them through a small side *iwān*. Here, in the case of the Bayt Nizam, the rearrangement of the house took place because of a very complicated mixture of inheritance, *waqf*-law, buying and selling.³

Given the flexible and organic character of the layout of individual houses, we may ask what kind of transformations the Bayt al-'Aqqad has experienced. In con-

trast to the Bayt Nizam, the courtyard of the Bayt al-'Aqqad was always the centre of the house. Its two splendid courtyard façades dating from the 15th century were framing (only slightly changed) the same courtyard for several hundreds of years – an exceptional case. A recent addition is the front house to the north, which was connected to the Bayt al-'Aqqad during the restoration in the 1990s. As discussed elsewhere in this book, up to the 18th century other elements once belonged to this courtyard (see *Weber and Mortensen* above: p. 255). The two large side wings were added later to the main courtyard. These are very different in shape and style from the rest of the house and, as such, an interesting example of a dramatic change in the understanding of space and living that took place around the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Late 19th and the Early 20th Centuries: Modernizing Damascus

After its heyday in the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire – to which Damascus belonged from 1516 – experienced upturns and downturns in social, economic, and political matters. However, these reoccurring crises did not preclude cultural booms in different parts of the Empire during the 17th or 18th century. The period of the 'Azm governors (1724–1808) in Damascus, to which numerous buildings in the neighbourhood of Bayt al-'Aqqad belong, saw such a boom.⁴ But continuing economic, political and military crises and heavy losses of territory to the European states, demanded reforms in all sectors of the Ottoman state and society. With the return of Ottoman central power, following the efforts of Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839) and the celebrated ministers and viziers of the Tanzimat period (1839–1876), an ambitious and wide-ranging programme of reforms was launched by the Ottoman state. During the short Egyptian interregnum (1832–1840), and after the reintegration into the Ottoman Empire, the first – but inefficient – reforms were carried out in the Arab provinces. This picture changed dramatically, however, after the massacres in the Christian quarter of Damascus in 1860. In the aftermath of this major crisis in the Ottoman history of Damascus, the provincial reforms of 1864 introduced a complex and new body of urban and provincial administration covering education, public health, and the administration of justice and the military. Damascus was declared a model province, and many of the ambitious plans were realized. The urban texture of Damascus was significantly modified in the wake of these reforms.

With the establishment of the Marja-Square and its numerous administration buildings a new public centre was founded. By contrast, the Ottoman suq was remodelled in the last decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Starting in the east of the Marja Square many new or renewed suqs were added to



278. Above: Nizam-house in 1840: houses of (1) Ali Khazina-Katibi (x111/2-334) and (2) Nusuh Pasha al-Azm (x111/2-314,315; western part of x111/2-313). Below: Nizam-house, situation after 1927: houses of (1) al-Sawwan (x111/2-334 north), (2) Nizam (x111/2-314, 334 south), (3) Jawwad and Sulayman Bek al-Azm (x111/2-315), and (4) al-Halal (x111/2-313 west) (s.w. 2000).

the mercantile centre inside the walls. New or modernized wide bazaar-streets, like the famous Suq al-Hamidiyya, ran through the commercial heart of the city. One of these modern *suqs* is the Suq Midhat Pasha, which was constructed in 1878, parallel to the Suq al-Suf and close to the Bayt al-'Aqqad. Hundreds of public buildings were set up, including some seventy schools, eight hospitals and sanatoriums, three railway stations, electric lights, a tramway system and dozens of streets.

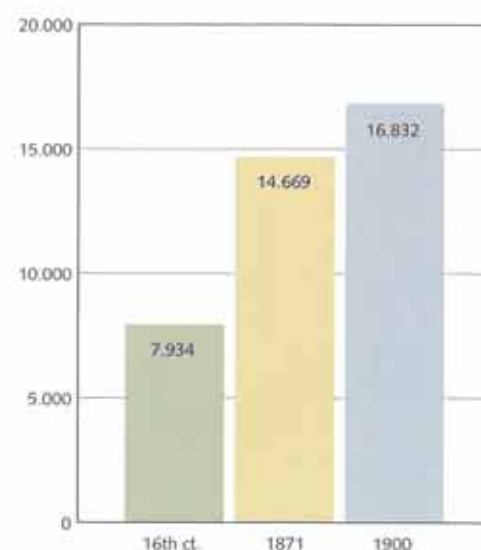
A modern urban institution, the municipality, was introduced to Damascus in the 1860s, and had a great effect on the urban developments during the last five decades of Ottoman Damascus: On the basis of a new corpus of engineering and building codes, this new municipality – a council of yearly elected city residents – had control over many private construction activities and launched an extensive programme of public building, including infrastructure modernization and developments in the commercial, health and education sectors. Members of the Azma family, like Isma'il Efendi and Muhammad Bek al-Azma, who lived during the 19th century close to Bayt al-'Aqqad, were elected to the municipality in the 1880s and 90s. Not everything that was planned was realized, but at the turn of the century Damascus had become adorned with municipal parks. The public square al-Marja, containing the municipality building, was framed by privately built coffee houses, shopping streets (*suqs*) and a theatre. The new office of engineers at the municipality conducted and supervised public building activities (mainly new streets and street enlargements) and made sure that they were complying with the new building codes. Private investment in commercial or residential architecture was registered too, and partially supervised by the municipal engineers. The private sector played an important role during this process of reshaping an Ottoman provincial capital. Apart from residential houses, several huge trade buildings were constructed by local individuals; especially privately founded 'modern' schools evinced a new understanding of state, city, society and the self. But private houses formed by far the largest number of building undertakings in the period of Ottoman reform.

The sheer number of renewed or completely new houses is impressive (Fig. 279). One reason was the continuous demographic growth in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after the 1870s. According to the Ottoman yearbook, the *salname*, which counted only part of the inhabitants (only adults?), the population of Damascus grew between 1306/1888–89 and 1318/1900–01 from 120,557 to 143,321 inhabitants. That means 18.9% in only 12 years (Salname 1306/1888–89: 150; 1318/1900–01: 365). Thus, it is not surprising that we can register a strong increase of new houses in the town. After yet another *salname*, 14,669 houses were counted in the city in the year 1287–88/1870–72. Some 29 years later in 1318/1900–01, the figure of 16,832 houses was officially registered (Salname 1288/1871–72: 129; 1318/1900–01: 376).⁵ This meant a 15% increase in the number of

houses in just 30 years. For the first two decades of the 20th century we do not have any official numbers, but the building boom must have been similar. Large new urban quarters were settled outside the walls in the north and west of the old city. The urban fabric of Muhajirin, Hijaz, Qasa', parts of 'Amara, and all along the Salihiyya Street, originate from that time.

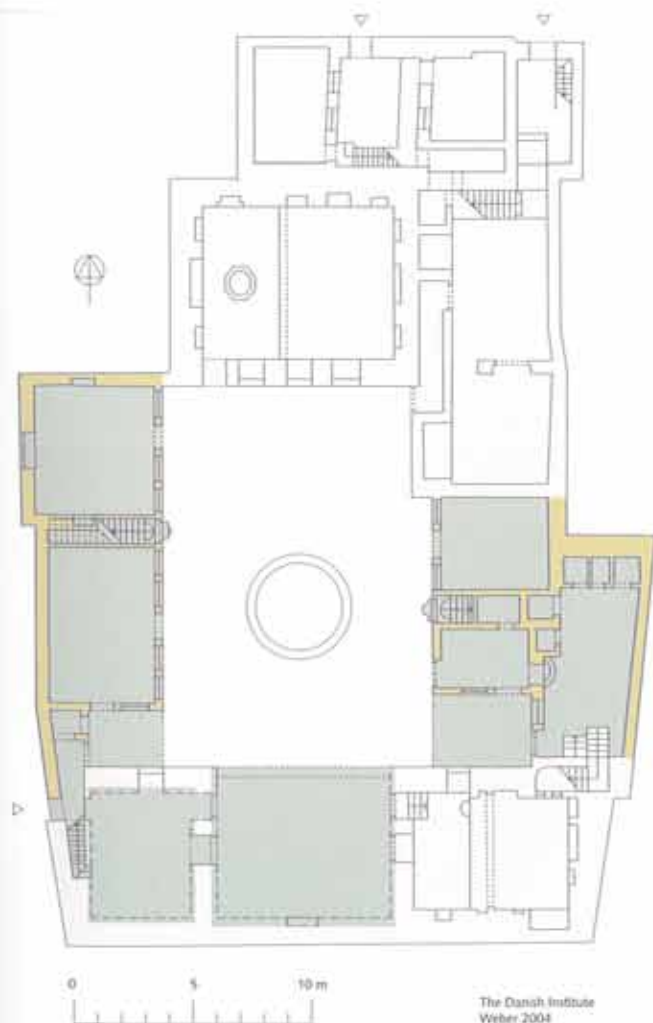
In observing the official numbers above, however, one will notice that the increase in houses is not quite as great as the demographic growth. It seems that many houses were divided to make room for more individuals. In many cases the pressure on living units due to demographic growth also led to a splitting up of older dwellings or the addition of new constructions in gardens and courtyards. This can be observed in the 'Aqqad House. In order to enlarge the old covered living space of c 169 square meters on the ground floor, around the year 1900 the 'Aqqad Family added two wings of c 103.5 square meters in the courtyard, which meant the house became 61% larger. The rebuilding of a house and the adding of extra living units to it was a very normal process. Again official numbers can give us some hints on that. For instance, the *salname* informs us that 417 houses were rebuilt in 1893 and two years later 527 houses (*Salname* 1312–13/1895–96: 264; 1313–14/1896–97: 243 f). This represents 3% of all houses in one year. More than three-quarters of all the houses in the old city *intra* and *extra muros* originate from the late 19th and early 20th centuries or were rebuilt at that time.

One reason for this high percentage of rebuilding is the unstable brick/timber architecture. Damascene courtyard houses are in need of continuous repair and often some sections need to be renewed after one or two generations. But this is not the whole picture. Even in other towns in the region, like Aleppo, Tripoli or Sidon, where houses were built from solid stone, one can rarely find houses dating back to before the 18th century. This is also true for cities in Anatolia like Diyarbakir or Urfa. It seems that in the eastern Mediterranean it was quite normal to invest in a house and to change its structure according to the taste of the owner. Often houses were not completely torn down, but sections were added or replaced, but unfortunately this rebuilding process was not always mindful of the older structures. In this regard it would seem to have been different in the 18th century, but the 19th century was often ignorant or paid little attention to older techniques and forms of construction and decoration. To merge the two elements (to redesign the old structure up to the latest fashion or to incorporate elements of the old decoration in the new design) was not even aimed at. Therefore, houses often appear as a patchwork of different styles. The last major changes to Bayt al-'Aqqad took place in the period of modernization: thus, the new style differed quite strongly from the previous way of building residential units. This rebuilding of the house resulted from a change of ownership.



279. The number of houses in
Damascus (s.w. 2000).

280. Bayt al-'Aqqad: major changes
of c. 1905 highlighted (s.w. 2004).



Abd al-Qadir al-'Aqqad and the 20th Century Rebuilding of the House

Although the Danish Institute is known as the Bayt al-'Aqqad, it does not appear to have been in the possession of the 'Aqqad family for a long time. It seems clear that it was acquired by Abd al-Qadir ibn Ahmad al-'Aqqad (1850–1908), a trader in silk and linen, at some point close to the turn of the 19th century. In the Ottoman register of the *mukhtar* of the district of Shaghrur, other names of inhabitants are registered for the property in the 1880s, and although this register was closed as late as 1903 (1321 H), the name of Abd al-Qadir has not been inserted. According to later biographies by his grandson, Abd al-Qadir al-'Aqqad was a devout Muslim who had performed the pilgrimage.

How Abd al-Qadir acquired his wealth is not known in any detail, but it must have been substantial. Apart from the house, he also bought land, and in 1904 he expanded his acquisitions around the village of Jadaidat al-Wadi on the old road to Beirut, north-east of Damascus. It is impossible to reconstruct the nature of his business dealings. According to family sources, he owned a dye-house and a silk mill and was trading as far away as in China and Lyon. This may well be true, but it has not been possible to substantiate. In the Sharia Court registers he is barely mentioned, but on one or two occasions he has been vouching for a loan, and he is also registered once for buying a shipment of French linen. What makes it difficult to trace is his name; al-'Aqqad means a 'possementier' (the maker of trimmings, tassels, fringes, etc.), and is thus the name of a trade related to his business. There are thus numerous families by the name of al-'Aqqad, and they are not related to one another. It is quite possible, for instance, that his father or grandfather may have been practising possementiers and therefore known by the name of the trade, whereupon the family expanded into wholesale trading of cloth and materials.

Abd al-Qadir's most important acquisition, however, was the house itself, whatever it was called at the time. Most probably in the first decade of the 20th century the house was augmented with the two huge eastern and western side wings and thus took the form by which it is known today (Fig. 280). The wings are quite different in style from the rest of the house; no serious effort has been made to make them fit to the older structure. The decorative panels on the southern *iwan* façade were not covered to make something new, nor were they saved as a decorative unit. They were simply left on the wall and hacked into by the new structure (as one can see upon opening the kitchen cupboard on the first floor, Fig. 281, or on the courtyard façade). It is most likely that Abd al-Qadir was making room for his children, five sons and one daughter, who had been born in the period from 1870 to 1886 and now, after 20 years, were having children themselves.

The family of Abd al-Qadir and their commissioned workshop simply chose a



281. Bayt al-'Aqqad, kitchen on the 1st floor (2.4); the addition of c. 1905 cuts the 15th century iwan façade (J.L. 2000).

style of interior decoration and arrangement for the house that was common and fashionable at the time and which corresponded to the new way of living that developed during the period of modernization in the 19th century. This is quite obvious with the two added side wings. Rooms here were not subdivided anymore into an entrance section (*'ataba*) and a higher living section (*tazar*) divided by a step and high arch, as known and applied in the house from the 15th to the early 19th century. Starting around the 1830s furniture from Europe was imported and soon manufactured in Damascus itself. In the second half of the 19th century furniture became predominant and was the normal pattern at the turn of the century. Low benches on the *tazars*, cushions, removable mattresses and tables were no longer used by the family. Now large tables, chairs and bedsteads were put into rooms, and the *tazar*, as a consequence, became very unpractical. In new rooms *tazars* were not built anymore, or were removed as we see in the *iwan* and in the lower *murabba*' in the west (1.13) and the upper *murabba*' in the east (1.11). In both *murabba*'s the floor tiling of the old *'ataba* is still visible, while the ground of the replaced *tazar* was paved with scattered material that had become available during the rearrangement of that time (Fig. 282).

These changes can be explained by the new way of living in the late 19th and early 20th century and are an adjustment to the new practices of daily life. Where rooms before were multifunctional, they now contained a large bed or dining table – they became bedrooms or dining rooms. People now changed rooms to match their function instead of the changing needs of the family throughout the day, i.e., replacing tables with mattresses at night. But the family of Abd al-Qadir also wanted to adapt their house to the latest fashion of interior decoration. The traditional techniques of colour paste and *'ajami* wood painting were already replaced by wall painting and wood carving in the course of the 19th century (see Weber above: p. 340 f.). But these effusive patterns of Ottoman rococo were again out of fashion by the late 19th century, and from around 1880 people in Damascus preferred a plainer style (Figs. 283–284). Consequently the rich ornamentation of the 18th-century *qa'a* or the early 19th-century Blue Room was covered with a plain blue painting, giving the room a more quiet appearance. All the inner walls of the *iwan* were literally rebuilt, replacing the old stones with colour paste, plastered in plain white, and endowed with the same new large and fashionable doors and windows that we can see in the new wings. These windows and doors are much taller and have well-rounded arches. Also the niches inside the *qa'a* were placed a little higher, fitting the new “height” of living, after the introduction of chairs (see Lange above, for this remaking of older rooms: p. 42 ff.). The new style was also applied to ceilings. They were not made in the traditional *'ajami* technique of wood painting anymore (see Haase above: p. 306) or with canvas fixed under the beams and painted with oil colours as was usual from the 1820s to late 19th century (see Weber



282. *Bayt al-'Aqqad, western murabba' (1.13): floor tiling of the 18th century 'ataba (s.w. 2002).*

283. *Bayt al-'Aqqad, East Wing: the hall (2.3) in the Director's apartment (J.L. 2001).*





284. *Bayt al-'Aqqad: the Director's livingroom (3.3) east of the iwan (J.L. 2001).*

285. *Bayt al-'Aqqad, West Wing: the ceiling in room 1.17 (R.F. 2001).*



above: p. 337). Now in the spirit of the plain style, quite simple ceilings of long, c 20cm wide wooden panels were preferred (*Fig. 57*). Sometimes these panels were organised like rays, centred in the middle of the ceiling. A very nice example can be found in room 1.17 (*Fig. 285*), which is quite close to those in contemporary houses of Ahmad al-Diyab/Dbyan (II-245); Ahmad al-'Azm, (IV-335) in the new urban quarters, or those of Bashir al-Khanji (IX-272) and al-Sabbagh (IX-284) in the old city quarters, to name just a few. This remaking of the house around 1905 was quite complete, and not only was the courtyard totally different from its 18th and 19th century appearance with regard to space and façade decoration, but most of the room interiors were also different. After the main construction periods of the 15th and 18th centuries this was the last major adjustment carried out to meet the changing needs and tastes of the inhabitants of Bayt al-'Aqqad.

The Era of the 'Aqqad Family, 1908–1947

Abd al-Qadir al-'Aqqad died in 1908, and his wife, Hanifa bint Salih Afra, in 1930. They left five sons and one daughter. According to the family, the daughter, Fatima (b. 1885), never got married, and one of the sons never had children. But the other four sons all had between six and nine children. Each of the sons acquired his part of the house.

All five sons are said to have been involved in the silk and cotton trade. Abd al-Qadir's eldest son, Ahmad, died however, already around the outbreak of World War I. The second son, Muhammad (b. 1874), settled in Egypt, but according to the family he was still involved in the family business. Muhammad took two wives, one of them, Suraya, an Egyptian with whom he had a son, Taysir, who became a major general in the Egyptian army in the 1950s. The third son, Muhammad Hashim (b. 1876), is identified on his ID card from 1928 as a silk merchant. The fourth son, Muhammad Arif (b. 1880) got married late and had no children. It was the fifth son, however, Mustafa (b. 1886), also a merchant, who succeeded in buying out his brothers, but this was as late as around 1940.

It is difficult to establish the exact number of inhabitants of the house at any particular point. We assume that around the time of Abd al-Qadir's death, when his sons had begun to get married – and especially in the 1920s when all their children were growing up – the number must have been substantial, and domestic life must have undergone some changes as a result. Even after Ahmad's death and Muhammad's settling in Egypt, the number of people living in the house must have been around 35. According to Muhammad Hassan al-'Aqqad (b. 1918), a son of Mustafa who grew up in the house, each of the brothers retained his part of the house, with the sister, Fatima, living alone in the so-called Blue Room. Next to her in the western wing Muhammad Hashim lived with his eight children, as well as

Muhammad before he left for Egypt. The eastern wing was inhabited by Muhammad Arif; and Mustafa, who had six children, lived in the three rooms on top of each other in the western part of the *ivan*. The two eldest sons of Ahmad (the eldest brother who had died), Salih and Abd al-Wahhab, had now established their own families. Salih lived in the decorated (red) room to the west, whilst Abd al-Wahhab lived in the small room over the stairs at the entrance.

Hence, in the early 20th century, the house was effectively transformed from being the home of a nuclear family into an overall framework for a very extended family. Mutual facilities were retained, however, such as the kitchen where each family could cook for itself, or they would cook and eat altogether. Likewise, the *qa'a* was still used as the visiting room where all the families could serve their guests. Indeed, it was sometimes lent out for weddings and the like to people from the alley.

It is interesting to note that during the 90 years between Abd al-Qadir al-'Aqqad's additions and the restoration by the Danish Institute, the house had not changed very much but rather adjusted to serve the changing needs. More than anything else, this may reflect changing economic circumstances. An indication of the need for new sources of income was the production and industry that also took place in the house. Home industry, so important to many Syrian families at the time, was introduced in the Bayt al-'Aqqad when Mustafa's wife, Faida Kiwan (b. 1902) installed a sewing machine in the top room west of the *ivan*. Somewhat later, the front room, today the secretary's office, was turned into a medical clinic by Said (b. 1917), who had attended medical school at the university. This in effect made the whole entrance of the house a public venue, and the narrow corridor between the first courtyard and the big courtyard now became the real gate of the house, being locked most of the time. The small front house, which now forms a part of the Institute, was also part of the property at the time, but was rented out to generate an income for the family, and it had its own separate entrance from the street.

Two Generations, Their Education and the Move Outside the Old City

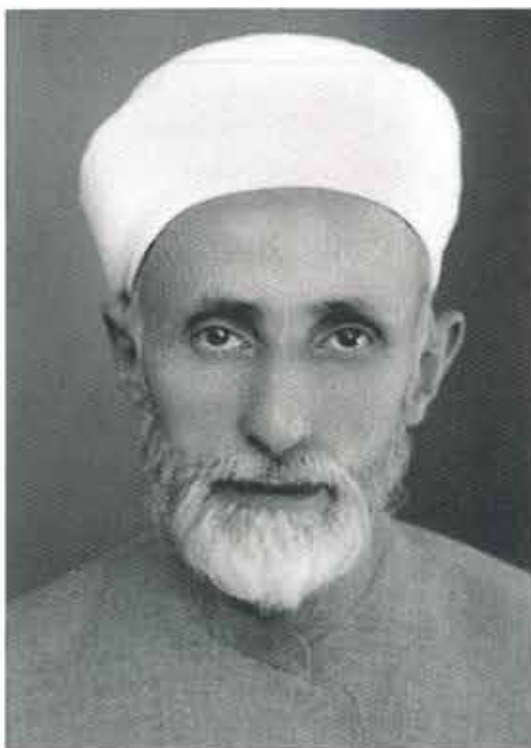
Nothing is known about the life in the house during the First World War, which was a horrendous experience for Syria, taking a toll of life that was higher than anywhere else in Europe. Nor do we know of events related to the house in the Faysali era, 1918–20. Although the population of the district, Shaghur, was highly restive and mobilized, no member of the family appears to have been directly involved in the political events. During the French Mandate, the 'Aqqad family sometimes withdrew to its land in Jadaidat al-Wadi. And during the insurrection in 1925, when the district to the north known as Hariqa was bombed by the French

army, it had taken refuge in Beirut where the children went to school for a time. Also at the time of the second French bombardment, in 1944, they moved to Beirut.

By the 1930s, space in the house had become sparse, and some of the members started moving out. Ahmad's children left, Muhammad Arif moved to the new district of al-Muhajirin, and Fatima died. In 1940, the family decided to realize its assets and split up. Hashim sold the land in Jadaidat al-Wadi to the French Société de Tramway, which built a power station there. With this money he bought himself a home in the modern and fashionable Malki district. And he sold his part of the house to Mustafa, who now resided there alone with his wife and children who had grown up. It was at this time that Said opened his clinic in the front house. By 1947, Mustafa, too, decided to move out. He spent the rest of his days in the western part of Damascus. And the family rented the house to the Ministry of Education. The Bayt al-'Aqqad was to become a school.

Thus Bayt al-'Aqqad shared the same fate as so many houses in the old city: in the 1920s/30s the tradition of Arab courtyard houses stopped and especially during the 1940s and 1950s many families moved from the old city to quarters in the new city, such as Muhajirin, Abu Ruman, Malki, or around Baghdad Street. They chose to live in houses which were quite different from the traditional ones, the centre of the house was no more the courtyard but larger halls (*sofa* – central hall), while the material and the façades of these houses followed Western patterns of free-standing apartment houses. Accessibility and representation to the outside world were new demands on houses. The changing family patterns: nuclear families instead of extended families and the employment of women, made the large courtyard houses that were difficult to maintain rather inconvenient. Those who could afford to do so sold their houses in the old city and moved to the new fashionable districts. Thus houses in the old city fell into disrepair and were often used for storage for the growing bazaar district, or served as a cheap living space for the massive migration to the city. The demise of the old city houses mirrored profound social changes.

In the approximately fifty years of 'Aqqad residence in the house, the three generations of the family tell a story that in certain respects reflects the general patterns of development in Damascene society. From the great merchant who is able to expand his business to wider markets with the opening up of the Syrian trade in cloth, to his sons who strive to keep up the trade in very difficult times of war and occupation, and to a new generation that is given very different educational opportunities and thus can assert themselves as professionals in the independent Syrian state which emerges after the Second World War. The difference in educational outlook and patterns is well illustrated if we compare the career of Abd al-Qadir's first grandson, Salih, and his later grandsons who went to school in the 1920s.



286. Shaykh Salih ibn Ahmad al-'Aqqad
(By courtesy of Mazen al-'Aqqad).

Salih ibn Ahmad was born in 1890 (Fig. 286).⁶ At the age of five he was sent to the Jaqmaqiya School (today the Museum of Epigraphy) north of the Umayyad Mosque, where he learned to memorize the Qur'an and was introduced to the Islamic sciences. At the age of ten he decided to leave the school to study *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) privately with its headmaster, Shaykh Id as-Safarjalani (b. 1838), a well-known scholar of *fiqh* according to the school of al-Shafi'i.⁷ For two years, they would get up at dawn and go to the gardens of Rabwa outside Damascus to study, just the two of them. Thereupon, Salih was introduced to other teachers, each of them with his speciality. Gradually, he was recognized as an able and knowledgeable jurist himself, who was often consulted for *fatwas*, and he earned the nickname "the Little Shafi'i." Notwithstanding these achievements in learning, as the eldest son of the family Salih was meant to practice the trade of manufacturing and trading in silk and cloth, the business of his father. He worked in his grandfather's spinning mill for silk. But students of *fiqh* began to approach him even in the factory. And according to his biographers, he began to feel uncomfortable with the interest-based business dealings of the profession. According to his son Tamim, he was around thirty when he eventually decided to leave the silk trade and concentrate on studying and teaching, his only income being the rent from some shops he had inherited from his father. He is also said to have rejected the office of Mufti, but for all practical purposes he was acting as an unofficial Mufti of the Shafi'i school, being consulted from all over Syria.

Shaykh Salih retained his connections to the business community, however. He was an occasional, but popular preacher in the Mosque of Nur ad-Din, right in the middle of the nearby Suq al-Khayyatin. And he kept on living in the western (red) room of the Bayt al-'Aqqad together with his family. Some time around 1930 he was called to become preacher at the Mosque of Muhyi ad-Din ibn Arabi in the district of that name, and moved up there with his family. He died in 1970.

Even by the standards of his day, Shaykh Salih received a very traditional, individual and personal education – concentrating on building up his knowledge, but also his morals and personality – through being together with his teachers every day for several years. By the time of the 1920s, this kind of education had become exceedingly rare, even in religious studies, and its economic foundations had withered away. So what the sons of Hashim, Muhammad and Mustafa – and indeed Salih himself – received was a much more standardized schooling which had now become the first part of a full educational system.

Beginning with a boys' school and secondary school, the prestigious Maktab Anbar, many of them proceeded to higher education at the newly founded colleges west of the old city. The two sons of Mustafa studied law and medicine, respectively. The elder brother, Muhammad Hassan, studied law at the newly established Law Faculty and went on to work with land registration in Suweida at the border to

Jordan. Later on, his office was transferred to the Sijill Aqqari in Damascus. He is the author of a book on the Palestinian refugee problem. Also Hashim's sons had formal education in engineering and chemistry. Even Shaykh Salih's own sons acquired a modern education; the eldest, Yasin (b. 1930) taught technical drawing in a technical school and went on to become an employee of the Ministry of Education. As yet another reflection of general tendencies in Syrian social history, most of Yasin's sons and daughters have emigrated and are today living abroad.

The Zaynab Fawwaz School

In 1947, the family left the house, and Bayt al-'Aqqad was turned into a government school for girls. At the time, the new government of independence was concentrating its efforts on raising the level of education and providing schooling for the whole population. The head of this campaign was a well-known Iraqi Arab nationalist and pedagogue, Sati' al-Husri, whose modernist agenda was distrusted, however, especially by the Islamist current which held some clout with the government. After demonstrations shouting "There is no God but God, and al-Husri is an enemy of God" in 1947 (?), al-Husri resigned and left for Cairo.

Although there is no documentary evidence to prove it, it is not unlikely that the school set up in Bayt al-'Aqqad formed part of Husri's project, not only because of the timing, but also because of the school's name. The school was named after an early Arab feminist writer, Zaynab al-Fawwaz, who was a symbol of the Arab woman's emancipation.

Zaynab Fawwaz (1860–1914) was born in Tibnin, Lebanon, but received her education in Alexandria, where her family settled in 1870. One of her teachers, Hasan Husni, founded the *al-Nil* newspaper where she began writing in 1891. Writing also for other Egyptian magazines and newspapers, including *al-Fatat*, the first women's magazine founded by a woman, Zaynab Fawwaz argued for a public and cultural role for women, and demanded female political rights.⁸ Apart from these political, and very often polemical, articles, she also published three novels and, in 1895, a highly interesting biographical dictionary of famous women, both European and Arab, *al-Durr al-manthur fi tabaqat rabbat al-khudur*. In the preface, she announces the intention to demonstrate the strength and capabilities of these women to actually rule and engage in politics, and she rejects the argument that woman by nature must be concerned with the household and the upbringing of children.

Zaynab Fawwaz was at some point married to a Syrian and lived in Damascus, but she got divorced and settled in Cairo where she died. Given the highly politicized debates in Syria of the 1930s and 40s, on precisely these issues of women's political participation and educational rights, neither her views nor her personal

life appear to have been uncontroversial at the time. Naming a school after her, therefore, seems to indicate a decidedly modernist agenda.

As a primary school for girls, the Zaynab Fawwaz school formed part of a network of schools set up within the old city in these years, most of them in similar old houses whose owners had moved to the new, more airy districts, with houses or flats with modern amenities. To turn the house into a school, toilettes were installed in the kitchen, and taps were inserted on the fountain. The teachers' room and the administration were set up in the blue room. The room underneath, which had been a clinic, was turned into a storeroom. The courtyard became the schoolyard, complete with a table tennis board in front of the *iwan*, and the rooms directly adjacent to it became classrooms, reserved for the youngest classes. Tables and benches for three were moved in, each classroom comprising some 35–40 seats. On the first floor in both wings were the classrooms for the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, with what is now the upper terrace divided into two classrooms with a corridor in between, which led into a further two rooms in what is today the western (red) room and its sleeping room. The big northern hall of the courtyard, the *qa'a*, was being used for gymnastics with a number of wooden gymnastic appliances permanently placed on the floor.

The school had about 800 pupils and some 15–20 teachers. Classes began at 7.30 a.m. and ran until 11.30 a.m. On Saturdays, Mondays and Wednesdays, there was a break of one-and-a-half hours whereupon teaching continued for another two hours. Most girls would go home in the break, but those who came from afar stayed to eat at the school and read in the school library – which was installed by the staircase – in what is today the computer room. Few of the girls would continue from the school to the secondary level. According to former pupil Wafa al-Sabi'i who went to the Zaynab Fawwaz school in the 1960s, many of the girls would instead begin working as seamstresses, or would marry. Wafa remembers when she, a pupil of the fourth grade, had to recite a poem for the whole school on the occasion of Mother's Day. Before the recital she was called up to the teachers' room where a portrait of Zaynab Fawwaz was hanging on the wall. This was the only time in her six years at school that she was let into the teachers' room.

The Ahmad Mreiwid School

By this time, in the late 1960s, the buildings were in a state of disrepair. Much the same happened to the other schools in the old city where former pupils remember how they could push coins and caps through the flooring planks to the children in the classrooms below. A nearby school for boys, the Ahmad Mreiwid in the Suq al-Shamma'in in the Buzuriya Suq, was closed down after a major rainfall had destroyed the roof and walls. As an emergency measure, this school was moved



287. Old photograph showing pupils from the Ahmad Mreiwid School on excursion to the Azm Palace (By courtesy of Muhammad al-Tubji, former headmaster of the school).

288. Bayt al-'Aqqad: basketball-net at the façade of the qa'a (P.M. 1996).

into the Bayt al-'Aqqad (Fig. 287). The precise dates of these events have been difficult to ascertain, but most probably the Ahmad Mreiwid school moved there in 1973, but both schools had to move out in 1976 because of the condition of the buildings.

Obviously, it was very difficult to find space for all these pupils. A system was arranged, whereby the Zaynab Fawwaz school and the girls came in the morning until 11 a.m. and the boys came from 11.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., and every other week they switched. The Ahmad Mreiwid administration moved into the Blue Room, whereas the Zaynab Fawwaz administration had to move into the corner room of the ground floor in the Western Wing, which now houses the seminar room. The main *qa'a*, which had been used for gymnastics, was now the general storeroom of the two schools. Now gymnastics was confined to the courtyard, where the upper grades in the boys' school could play football. Ma'mun Tarbush, teacher of gymnastics, remembers having installed a basketball hoop in the mosaic of the *qa'a*. It was still there when restoration of the house began in the late 1990s (Fig. 288). He also recalls selecting and training special groups for city-wide competitions, and proudly remembers how one of the pupils from the school, Munib 'Allush, became Syrian champion of wrestling.

These were the years of intense propagation of Baath ideology, and the Day of the Revolution, on March 8, was perhaps the most important yearly event with speeches, songs and lectures. Other political red-letter days of the time included the commemorations of Martyr's Day (1916), the Balfour Declaration (1917), the Secession of Alexandretta (1936), founding of the Arab League (1946), and the union between Egypt and Syria (1958). The headmaster of the Ahmad Mreiwid School, Muhammad al-Tubji, recalls that he had to give speeches and explain the significance of these events every year. In the *iwan*, a slogan of the Baath party ran "We will live and die for the Baath."

Notes

- 1) We would like to thank Mukhtar Umar Khadim al-Surujī, Akram al-'Ulabi, Dr. Da'd Hakim, Mazen al-'Aqqad and all the members of the 'Aqqad family, and the teachers and pupils of the Zaynab Fawwaz school quoted in the chapter.
- 2) For the functional division of houses see Marino 1997: 236 f.; Weber 2001: chapter III.5.1.
- 3) This plan was published with more information in: Weber 2002.
- 4) For the 'Azm-Family see Barbir 1980; Rafeq 1966; Shamir 1963; Schatkowski Schilcher 1985: 27 ff. There is no publication on the architecture of Damascus or the Bilad al-Sham in the 18th century, and for some aspects of interior decoration see Weber 2004b; ~2004. For the *waqf* of one governor see Marino 2000.
- 5) After Pascual, 7,934 houses were counted at the end of the 16th century. 2,439 were inside the walls (like the Bayt al-'Aqqad) and 5,281 were located *extra muros* (Pascual 1983: 27). *Extra muros* Damascus in the 19th century was most probably not double the size of 16th-century Damascus, which means that the number of houses *intra muros* also became much greater at that time.
- 6) Printed sources for the life of Salih al-'Aqqad: Farfur 1987: 279–80; Majallat al-Tamaddun al-Islami 1970: 537–40; Majallat Hadarat al-Islam 1970: 83–93.
- 7) On Shaykh Id al-Safarjalani, see al-Shallah 1992: 305–07.
- 8) These articles were collected in a book, *al-Rasa'il al-Zaynabiya*. On Zaynab Fawwaz in general, see Zirikli 1999:67; Badran / Cooke 1990: 220–25.
- 9) We would like to thank Yasmine Barriane and Rebecca Sonntag for their critical reading.

Hence, for some two or three years, the Bayt al-'Aqqad had to house two schools with approximately 1,600 pupils combined. It is thus no wonder that pupils and teachers alike remember the house as being completely run down. By 1976, the schools were moved to new premises, with Zaynab Fawwaz being transferred to outside Bab Sharqi. The house was completely abandoned and fell into further disrepair. Fortunately, however, there was a small, but growing, appreciation of its uniqueness. Already in 1960, the Bayt al-'Aqqad had been registered as a heritage building. Between 1982 and 1986, after the ceiling and walls of the main *qa'a* had been severely damaged by water, the Governorate of Damascus tried to confiscate the building and began looking for funds to restore it. But nothing had happened when, in 1996, the board of the Danish Institute made a request to the Syrian Ministry of Culture to look for a building to house a Danish Institute of Culture and Science.⁹



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