

Insights from the Fall of Aleppo

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The images are often too desolate to comprehend: towering buildings reduced to rubble; empty, forgotten streets; desperate, freezing survivors; children coated in dust and blood no longer able to express fear, joy, sadness. The world has watched for months as war-torn Aleppo, Syria — the country's largest city — has quite literally been erased from the map.

Then came the news this week that “military operations in Eastern Aleppo have concluded.” A ceasefire. After a more than four-year battle between government and rebel forces that transformed a once-thriving economic center of 3 million people to ruins, Aleppo has now fallen under complete control of the Syrian government. A mass evacuation of some 25,000 civilians and rebels still inside city borders nears completion.

Like so many of us, Philip Nichols, a Wharton professor of legal studies and business ethics who researches, among other things, emerging economies (emerging economy) and international trade, has closely followed the catastrophic events in Aleppo. And while he in no way wants to minimize its horror or trivialize the human suffering by turning it into a lesson, he does believe “there are insights to be drawn from this human-made disaster.”

Here, Nichols shares three such insights from Aleppo's fall with Knowledge@Wharton High School.

1. From an international perspective, Aleppo is part of Syria, which is considered a sovereign country equal to all others. The Levant [A region on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea north of the Arabian Peninsula and south of Turkey] is an ancient place and is home to some of the oldest known cultures. The country of Syria, however, is as much a product of outside powers as it is of people actually living there. The borders of modern Syria are the product of negotiations between France and the United Kingdom as they carved up the remains of the Ottoman Empire, which itself had drawn lines based on administrative convenience. Thus, several different peoples have claims to parts of Syria, and these peoples have longstanding, in some cases ancient, disputes with one another. International economics for the most part uses countries as the reference point for measurement and comparison. The Syrian GDP [an economic indicator that measures the products and services that a country produces], for example, is roughly the same as Honduras's and is slightly larger than Pakistan's. To say that, however, is to say very little, since the people who live in the territory of Syria have divided themselves into different functional networks. The civil war in Syria and the fall of Aleppo is a searing reminder that we should pay attention to the meaningfulness of our units of measurement.
2. From an internal perspective, Syria symbolizes in an extreme way the constant argument about liberalization. Liberalization is the creation of “space” in which people can interact and form relationships, including business relationships. The opposite of liberalization is control, perhaps through laws and rules, perhaps just through force. Almost everyone agrees that markets require rules, and almost everyone agrees that markets require freedom. The debate is about how much of each produces the best results. After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, businesses operated with very few rules and the market worked very poorly. Businesses in Russia now feel that they have too little freedom. In the United States most people agree that the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 was due in large part to too much loosening of the rules over banks, and now banks are vigorously attempting to relax the rules that were put into place as a reaction to the crisis. In Syria, the Ba'ath party has exerted control over almost everything for almost half of a century. Many, many people have not been able to act the way that they have wanted to, and have not been able to create the kinds of relationships that they desire or that they think would be fruitful. This includes business relationships. The Ba'ath Party would not listen to other people's arguments for more space, for liberalization – it could not, because as a dictatorship its power stemmed from

exercising control rather than from accounting for the wishes of the people. And a large number of people decided that they would no longer ask the government for space but instead would simply take it. Debates over liberalization exist everywhere in the world, and hopefully few places will devolve into civil war. Nonetheless, the civil war in Syria and the fall of Aleppo are blood-filled reminders of the importance of these debates.

3. Economics provides very useful insights into many human activities, but like any other tool it does not do everything. Perhaps there are other tools that provide more insight into the horror occurring in Aleppo. People are killing other people for what they believe. People are dying for what they believe. Children are dying because they are trapped. Families are dying because they would not leave one another. And as I write this people in white helmets are risking their own lives to save the lives of others, because they believe that is the right thing to do. Why the people of Aleppo act the way they act might be better understood through the tools of normative ethics [the study of ethical action; what is right and wrong], or behavioral psychology, or cultural anthropology. In any case, the people of Aleppo deserve our sympathy and our respect.