Civil Society and the State in Syria:

The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility

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Foreword
Welfare Privatization as Authoritarian Upgrading

Raymond Hinnebusch

Two cutting edge studies in this St Andrews Papers series by Laura Ruiz de Elvira and Tina Zintl uncover the contributions of both regime-controlled and regime-sponsored civil society to "authoritarian upgrading" in Syria. Across the region, projects to "upgrade" authoritarianism took very similar forms, amply documented in the literature. The underlying deep change was a movement from an originally populist form of authoritarianism to "post-populist" or neo-liberal versions (Hinnebusch 2000, Pripstein-Posusney 1997, Ehteshami/Murphy 1996, Guazzone/Pioppi 2009). Authoritarian power was now used to pursue economic liberalization and privatization that shifted public assets to "networks of privilege" (Heydemann 2004). Authoritarian persistence cannot be explained by coercion alone and, indeed, the logic of authoritarian rule is to *include* some social forces in order to *exclude* others. Stephen King (2009) and Bradley Glasser (2001) showed how post-populist regimes used pressure from international institutions for privatization of state assets to enrich presidential families and ministers and to generate crony capitalist support bases substituting for the old populist coalition. In parallel, regimes manipulated institutions to incorporate these new elements while demobilizing those who stood to lose, workers and peasants. This dynamic prevented the emergence of democratic coalitions uniting elements of the bourgeoisie and working class.

The parallel literature on hybrid regimes and electoral authoritarianism stressed how limited political liberalization and manipulated elections facilitated authoritarian persistence. Thus, Lust-Okar (2004) and Kassem (2004) demonstrated how regimes were able to divide and rule the opposition by selectively including and excluding political groups. King (2009) and Glasser (2001) showed how, in

parallel, regimes fostered social forces supportive of economic liberalization by encouraging pro-business parties. Steven Heydemann's (2007) idea of "authoritarian upgrading" particularly denoted the *techniques* by which post-populist regimes tried to compensate for the risks of abandoning their mass constituencies: they tapped new resources from investors, diversified their constituencies (to the business class and the ulama), and deployed cooptation and divide and rule strategies; they also offloaded welfare responsibilities to private forces and civil society while, in parallel, re-regulating state-society relations so as to keep control over these newly empowered forces.

The study by Laura Ruiz de Elvira uncovers a particular form of this re-regulation. She details how the regime sought to both offload its welfare responsibilities to civil society, while yet not allowing these functions to escape regulation and, indeed, keeping some control over the considerable resources collected under the aegis of *zakat*. As she makes clear, charities rapidly expanded under Bashar al-Asad, filling real needs, especially as state provision declined under fiscal constraints; simultaneously, the state both promoted their activities and co-opted their patrons, notably Muslim religious leaders. An example of the latter was the re-privatization of charities nationalized during the regime's early 1980s struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood. As Ruiz de Elvira shows also, however, state control became more intrusive as, for example, it moved to control appointments to the boards of Muslim charities.

Tina Zintl's study exposes a particular dimension of authoritarian upgrading in Syria: the Asad regime's effort to divest part of the development functions of a state over-stretched, financially and in terms of administrative capabilities, to civil society, by fostering a plethora of development-oriented NGOs under its control. This also enabled it to encourage a secular and regime-friendly alternative to the growing power of a less-trusted Islamic civil society. For a while, this strategy, especially as promoted by an attractive and able First Lady, also diffused a modernizing and reforming image for the Asad regime both in the West and among returning Western-educated businessmen and technocrats whose engagement in Syria's development was deemed crucial to the country's move to a market economy and to the modernization of the human resources "software" of its infrastructure. This promotion and control of secular (and in parallel also of Christian) civil society also made it less dangerous for the regime to pursue its simultaneous cooptation of Islamic charities and associations thorough a similar process of outsourcing social responsibilities, and, in some ways,

to stand above these two wings of civil society as broker, ruling by dividing.

Finally, it is worth observing that, while the literature on authoritarian upgrading exaggerated the stability of authoritarian regimes and neglected the hidden costs of upgrading techniques, failing, hence, to anticipate the 2011 Uprising, the literature did, if inadvertently, nevertheless expose many of the seeds of the Uprising. The root problem was arguably the fiscal crisis of the state, which forced it to divest itself of welfare and development responsibilities to the private sector and to civil society. But, to avoid possible threats to its rule from these empowered sectors, it sought, at the same time, to control them in a more intrusive way, as well as playing "divide and rule" politics among them. This, in inevitably causing resentment, had its hidden costs, which, together with the abandonment of the poor to their provision, generated some of the disaffected leadership and followings of the 2011 Uprising. Also important in understanding the uneven concentration of the Uprising in periphery areas as opposed to the two main city centres, was that, parallel to the urban/middle class-centered fostering and re-regulation of civil society detailed in these studies, the regime simultaneously, as Zintl noted, allowed the debilitation of the former populist corporatist structures--workers unions, peasant unions--that used to incorporate its former mass constituency.

1
State-Charities Relations in Syria: Between Reinforcement, Control and Coercion

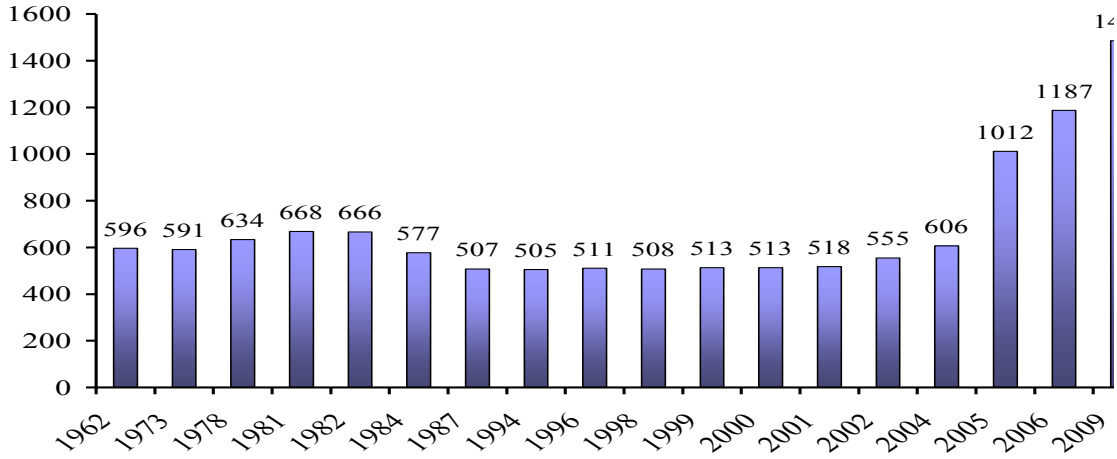
Laura Ruiz de Elvira

Introduction[1]

Like other policy areas, the field of Syrian associations experienced several important changes during Bashar al-Asad's first decade in power (2000-2010). In only five years the number of organisations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL) almost tripled,[2] going up from 555 in 2002 to 1,485 in 2009 (see Graphic 1). The first lady herself announced in 2010 an increase of 300% in a few years.[3] A "new generation" of NGOs emerged,[4] tackling different areas: development, environment protection, culture and, in a few cases, even advocacy (Le Saux 2006). All these elements pointed to a real rebirth of the associative sector (Ruiz de Elvira 2010), while, by comparison, in the period between 1963 (the year of the Baathist coup d'état) and the year 2000 no more than fifty organisations had been authorized by the MoSAL.[5]

From our point of view, the revitalization and renewal of civil society in Syria – civil society understood as the constellation of associational forms that occupy the terrain between individuals and the state (Wiktorowicz 2000) – reflects a clear restructuring of the previous politics of the Baathist regime towards non-state actors: while during several decades the latter had been oppressed, from 2000 onwards they have been promoted. In the 21st century Syria has entered a "post-populist" era, characterized by a reconfiguration of actors and lasting transformations (e.g. Picard 2005, Heydemann 2000), of which this is one.

Graph 1: Number of associations registered with MOSAL



Source: Statistical Abstract, Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus and statement of the former Minister of Social Affairs and Labour.

The transformation of the associative sector has indeed taken place in the context of a readjusting state. This evolution is clearly in keeping with a broader process of economic and social change in which old paradigms and policies have been partly modified.[6] Actually, the state's support for civil society projects – and for charitable projects, more precisely – has taken place in a context whereby public institutions could no longer meet the needs of the population despite a real increase in their budgets[7]. This difficulty has been exacerbated by population growth and a corresponding increase in the demand for social services.[8]

In this context, the number of charities increased,[9] especially in Damascus and Aleppo, but not exclusively, where rich merchants and businessmen finance countless philanthropic projects.[10] According to official numbers, they represented in the year 2008 more than 60% of the whole associative sector (Barout: without year), while in other countries of the region they are far less numerous.[11] Likewise, the volume of these associations' services strongly increased in this period. The Sunduq al-'Afieh (the Health Fund) for instance, a charitable project of the Damascus Charities Union,[12] experienced a spectacular evolution: the number of beneficiaries increased from 536 in 1997 to 4,455 in 2006. Because of this initiative, during one decade 29,823 sick people had their medical care paid for (with 60,000 surgical treatments carried out), at a total cost of 953 million Syrian pounds (some 17 million USD).[13] In the same way, the number of beneficiaries of the Sunduq al-Mouwwada wa-l-Rahma (the Love and Mercy Fund), a fund that also depends on the Damascus Charities Union, increased from 44 in 1999 to more than 550 in 2007.[14] Hence, these charitable structures have become key actors both within the Syrian civil society and within the field of social welfare provision during the last ten years.

The aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of the state-charities relation in Syria during Bashar al-Asad's first decade. In order to do so, this paper will be divided into four parts. In the first part it will be briefly defined what the term "charities" means in the Syrian context. In the second part it will be shown how between 2000 and 2010 these charities have been actively encouraged, through different mechanisms (registration facilities, land donations, official visits, etc.) by the Syrian authorities, who conceived these social structures as an efficient way for the state to "off-load" at least a part of its welfare responsibilities. Notwithstanding, it will be argued, the state-charities relation during this period has not limited itself to the reinforcement of these organizations owing to the contraction of the public administration of welfare services. In the third part it will be thus demonstrated that the expansion of this sector has been accompanied by the attempt to

redeploy the state and to upgrade the mechanisms that permit it to control and discipline these activities (registration of previous non-registered charities, creation of GO-NGOs,[15] etc.). Finally, in the fourth part, some examples will be given of the repressive and the coercive measures that, in extraordinary cases, have been undertaken against charities (banning religious leaders from the boards of directors, dissolution of boards of directors, etc.).

The ethnographic data analysed here is based on two years of fieldwork, consisting of almost a hundred interviews and "participant observation" sessions undertaken between November 2007 and November 2009. The paper covers practices observed mainly in Damascus and Aleppo, where two thirds of the registered organisations deploy their activities. However, we have also paid attention to the associative sector in smaller cities such as Homs, Tartous and Palmyra, or villages such as Maaloula. This material is part of a larger research project to understand the role of the Syrian charities in the context of a readjusting state characterized by the reconfiguration of social policies.

What does the term "charities" mean in Syria?[16]

In Syria, charities have traditionally been the mainstay of associative life. Their roots date back to the Ottoman period. The allegedly first Muslim charity to see the light of day in the *Bilad al-Sham* region, Jam'iyyat al-Makassed al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Charitable Works Association), was founded in Beirut in 1878 and has today branches in several Syrian cities.[17] However, it post-dated the first Christian Syrian charity, the Association Saint Vincent de Paul, founded in Damascus in 1863.[18] Later on, other charities were created in the country at the start of the twentieth century. In Damascus these included the Jam'iyyat al-Is'af al-Khayriyya (the Relief Charitable Association, 1907), an organisation for 6 to 13-year-old orphans that provided, and still provides today, housing and a teaching centre accredited by the Ministry of Education;[19] the Orthodox Association Saint Grégoire (1912) which, as well as housing and educating orphaned children gave material support to those who needed it most;[20] and the Jam'iyyat al-Ihsan al-Islamiyya (the Beneficent Islamic Association), a Shia organisation that looked after poor families from the Shia community and today runs a training centre for women. Most of these ancient associations are still active today although, in many cases, have extended their field of operations.

However, the fabric of Syrian charities only really began to be woven under the French mandate (1920-1946). Organisations such as al-Tammadun al-Islami (the Islamic Civilisation, 1932) – which distinguished itself by not only being active in the charity sector but giving itself an intellectual mission as well – date from this period. As its former president puts it, its founding was part of a vast Islamic association movement, which emerged in the mid-1920s as a direct result of French colonisation (al-Khatib 2008/2009). It was at this point that numerous organisations were created as vehicles to put political demands to the Western occupier. This phenomenon was, however, also accompanied by the creation of less politicised charities, such as al-Maytam al-Islami bi-Haleb (the Islamic Orphanage in Aleppo, 1920) or the Jam'iyyat Nuqtat al-Halib (the Drop of Milk Association) in Damascus (1922). Founded by a group of women, Nuqtat al-Halib was chiefly intended to procure milk for poor women unable to breastfeed their infants. Besides, Christian charities developed in parallel to this in the 1930s and 1940s, linked to religious institutions (Boukhaima 2002). Among them was the charity al-Qadis Lawndius al-Khayriyya, founded in 1944, or the Damascus clinic al-Moustawsaf al-Khayri (the Charitable Clinic, 1946), which was created on the initiative of a group of physicians wishing to give free medical care to the underprivileged.[21]

The golden age for charities, however, was the 1950s. Between January 1952 and April 1954, the number of charities registered in the country rose from 73 to 203 (Pierret 2009). This expansion was due to a more favourable environment characterised by flexible legislation, a liberal economic system and new religious leaders asserting their authority (ibid.). Some of the expansion consisted of charities, such as the Dar al-Hadith al-Nabawi al-Sharif (1953),[22] which provided for the needs of religious schools. However, the majority were neighbourhood organisations that restricted themselves to distributing financial and material aid once or several times a month. An example of this is the Shaykh Mahhi al-Din association, which opens its doors only on Fridays before prayers. Generally, these charities were linked to the mosque in the neighbourhood where they were based. In other words, they were strongly localised organisations based on neighbourhood solidarity, a solidarity which in fact corresponded to a clientele relationship in the form of redistributing wealth. Their antecedents were the *lajnat kibar al-hara*, or committees of a neighbourhood's notables (*zuama*).[23] Many of these charities are still working today, but as they have not evolved since being founded, they lag behind new MoSAL trends. Finally, it was also in the 1950s that the first charities with a wider scope, such as the networks Jam'iyyat al-Nahda al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Awakening

Association, 1954) and Jam'iyyat al-Birr wa-l-Khidmat al-Ijtima'iyya (the Charitable Works and the Social Services Association, 1955), were created.

When the Baath Party took power and declared a state of emergency in 1963, the new regime began a process of bringing civil society "into line" (Seurat 1980: 122). In this context, civil-society initiatives were no longer welcome inasmuch as they were likely to contribute to challenges to established authority. The associative sector was penetrated and led by "popular organisations", a means of controlling popular mobilisation. Hence, very few charities were founded during this period. Government control reached its peak at the end of the 1970s and start of the 1980s, when Islamist protests endangered Hafez al-Asad's regime. Between 1962 and 2000, the number of charities dropped from 596 to 513 (see Graphic 1).

At the same time, the almost systematic refusal to authorise the founding of new charities led to "informal" organisations being developed, organisations that were not declared and were active behind the scenes, either through informal networks linked to charismatic individuals, or under the protection of Christian religious institutions, or else under the aegis of already registered charities, which functioned as umbrella organisations. It was only at the very end of the 1990s that the associative sector finally saw restrictions relatively loosened (Sottimano 2009: 25).

Therefore, the charities that have proliferated during the last ten years are only the prolongation of a long tradition of both Muslim and Christian beneficence. Their ideological, historical, sociological and political foundations – strongly linked, as Amy Singer shows, to religious beliefs and practices (Singer 2008) – are essentially based on a denominational, political-geographic and often clientele-orientated structure (Karam 2002). Their evolution, as we have just exposed, is intrinsically linked to the country's political and social history. As in Jordan and Lebanon, they typically rely upon the urban, professional middle class for voluntarism and donations (Baylouny 2010; Clark 2004).

Today the charity sector is characterised by heterogeneity. Its fields of activities are extremely varied. To traditional charitable activities – looking after orphans and the elderly, supporting poor families, providing medical care or financing religious education – have been added projects of a new kind seeking to integrate a "development" dimension. Among the latter are assistance for young couples wishing to marry; countering unemployment through training courses and launching for-profit activities; attempts to eradicate begging using

centres to help people get back into the job market; literacy and IT courses for illiterate mothers; and more recently the granting of micro-credits. Clearly, charities have tried to adapt and seize the zeitgeist. The line between charity and development has thus become increasingly blurred and given way to new hybrid organisations.[24] Under MoSAL pressure, their role has in many cases evolved from simply collecting and redistributing money to the poor within a community or neighbourhood, to a more sophisticated and diverse specialised activity. According to those interviewed, these organisations no longer seek to "give fish to the poor to feed them for a day, but rather to teach them how to fish."

Above all, these structures respond to real needs of the population. They are the manifestation of a still-fragile civil society that has been shaped by its difficult relationship with the government and the Baathist regime. By no means are they inactive empty shells intended merely to collect funds from international sponsors or the Syrian state.[25] Actually, through a complex and permanent process of negotiation punctuated by intermittent repression, the social activists who now constitute this sector have profited from several years of relative tolerance (mainly between 2004 and 2008) by deploying their own strategies (involving notables, religion, socialisation, etc.), either through founding new charities or through developing already existing ones. Whilst trying to escape, circumvent or use to their own profit the disciplinary mechanisms established by the Baathist regime, Syrian charities have succeeded in creating leeway within a very restrictive political system. Their significant contribution to social welfare together with their "apolitical" approach and their great popularity has been their main asset to do so. Furthermore, they are far from being puppets of the government. The Hefth al-Ni'me association (Preservation of Grace), for instance, established in 2002 and registered with MoSAL in 2006, has become one of the main charities in the country even if (or, rather, thanks to the fact that) its founder, Shaykh Sariya al-Rifa'i, a leader of the powerful Zayd movement,[26] is not a regime-friendly religious leader[27] as the Syrian revolt of 2011 has proved.

Yet, although the charity sector in Syria (and in the Arab world, more generally) is a stimulating subject for analysis, studies of this kind of associations are rare.[28] From our point of view, the interest of this topic in the Syrian case is twofold. First, it constitutes an empirical approach to analyze the transformations that have taken place during the last ten years in the associative field itself, in terms of the renewal of actors, new balances of power, revision of strategies and approaches, introduction of new methods and new rhetoric, etc. Secondly, it

represents a good method to grasp the real impact of the switch from a centralised economy to a "social market" model in which the previous social politics of the Baathist regime have been reconsidered by the Syrian authorities.[29]

The reinforcement "from above"

Seeking to guarantee economic growth and social welfare provision, Syria's successive governments have undertaken since the eighties a series of liberalization efforts, with one major wave occurring between 1986-1991, and others following at various intervals ever since. As Raymond Hinnebusch explains:

> *"*the rent-driven expansion of the state during the seventies exceeded Syria's economic base and when rent and growth declined in the eighties, patronage dried up and the state began to shed some of its economic responsibilities. Private business had to be given concessions to fill the economic gap, notably by the curbing of state intervention and widening of space for the market*"*
> (Hinnebusch 1995: 231).

The most recent of these efforts took place in 2005 with the introduction of the term "social market economy" at the Tenth Regional Congress of the Baath party. However, whilst in the previous periods the liberalization had only benefited the private sector,[30] Bashar al-Asad's liberalization policies have equally targeted civil society and the associative sector.[31]

Thus, in the 21st century's Syria, responsibility has officially become, more than ever before, "multilateral". Indeed, as the Tenth Five Year Plan emphasized:

> *"*Social market economy entails that development process responsibilities should not be limited to the central government with the burden put on the state for plan implementation tasks. Responsibility must be multilateral and will have to include the private sector, provincial governments, NGOs and civil society groups*."*[32]

Non-state actors have been urged by the public authorities to play a new role and to strongly contribute to the national development process. The purpose, the government has argued, is to

> *"*encourage civil society organizations' contribution to local development efforts, and provide incentives to the development

> processes based upon collective efforts, and offer them financial, technical and human resources.*"*[33]

Moreover, as it can be perceived in the following passage of the same document, that notions of "participation" and "partnership" have become keywords in the renewed governmental discourse:

> *"*Transition to a social market economy adopted by the state, with the FYP undertaking the task of providing a conducive environment for its successful launch, will certainly require forging a new social contract among the vital forces in the Syrian society. These are comprised of the state, private sector, and civil society organizations bounded through healthy dialogue and interactive participation in formulating and implementing the Plan. Such partnership is the only route to win the societal transformation and meet the associated challenges.*"*[34]

In this context, although the governmental authorities have repeatedly declared their wish to see the traditional charities evolve toward "more developmental structures",[35] charities have been *de facto* particularly favoured as compared to developmental, cultural and, obviously, advocacy organizations. We can thus address the following two questions: why and how charities have been favoured during Bashar al-Asad's first decade?

Why have charities been favoured?

During the last ten years, the charity sector has gradually become a "partner" of the state. The principle of cooperation with civil society, on which the Tenth Five Year Plan (2006-2010) was supposed to be based, has gone from words to deeds, via the *'uqud tasharukiyye* (association agreements). Through these agreements, the maintenance, management and often financing of certain public institutions – such as schools, health centres and other welfare structures – have passed into the hands of certain charities in order "to better guarantee a good service to the population and share welfare responsibilities between the public and the private sector."[36] There is no shortage of examples – they have been held up as the key to success in the development process.

The Qaws Quzah association (Rainbow, in English), for instance, founded in 2002,[37] signed several years ago an agreement with the MoSAL according to which the management of the only public Damascene orphanage, the Dar Zayd Ben Haretha which hosts around 160 orphans,[38] became its responsibility. The magazine Syria Today gave some details of this partnership in one of its articles:

> "Rainbow's 'sponsor a child' programme was launched in 2003. By paying SYP 300 (USD 6,50) monthly, sponsors can visit Zayd bin Haretha's orphans and take them out on trips, under the supervision of Rainbow staff. Before the exhibition, Rainbow had around 100 sponsors. At the DIF [Damascus International Fair], the charity recruited an extra 15 sponsors, as well as a number of volunteers".[39]

Thanks to this agreement, the MoSAL managed to outsource for several years the financing, administration and management of this public institution that has remained nevertheless "public". Moreover, in 2009, for reasons that we cannot detail here, the management of the Dar Zayd Ben Haretha passed into the hands of a new association, the Jam'iyyat Sunduq al-Raja' (the Fund of Hope Association), founded in 1970 and registered with MoSAL in 2004. At the present moment this association runs simultaneously two public institutions: the orphanage Dar Zayd Ben Haretha, on the one hand, and the center Rawdat al-Sum wa-l-Bukum (the Oasis of Deaf and Dumbness), for the deaf and dumb persons, on the other hand.[40]

Likewise, the Jam'iyyat al-Khayriyya bi-Haleb (the Charitable Association in Aleppo) signed in 2009 an agreement with the Ministry of Religious Endowments.[41] According to it, the administration and the management of the institution, Moubarra al-Awqaf al-Islamiyya (the Charitable Institution for the Islamic Religious Endowments) in Aleppo, founded in 1961 as a specialized center for the elder, became the responsibility of this private charity. In addition to it, the Charitable Association from Aleppo agreed to restore the existing premises, provide and train the new medical staff and, finally, pay the employees.[42] In exchange for these services, the Ministry of Religious Endowments (to which the above-mentioned institution belongs) committed itself both to grant the charity every year a certain amount of money and to give it the required permission to raise funds in the mosques of Aleppo.

As for the charity Jam'iyyat al-Bustan al-Khayriyya (the Garden Charitable Association, 1999), founded by Rami Makhlouf – first cousin of Bashar al-Asad and probably the richest man in Syria – in the city of Latakia, it too has signed several *'uqud tasharukiyye* with the Syrian state, with the Ministry of Health to be specific. One of these agreements consisted in restoring the public hospital of Jable as well as other medical centers in the Latakia governorate. Another one consisted in financing the entire construction of the hospital al-Shahid Ibrahim Ni'ma al-Watani al-Jadid, of which the first stone was placed by the Minister of Health himself.[43] On that occasion the Minister underlined

the great importance of these agreements in improving the public services and infrastructures in all the regions of the country.[44] Indeed, according to SANA, Syria's official press agency, al-Bustan al-Khayriyya paid out more than 90 million Syrian pounds in only two years in order to develop and improve the existing health centers in Latakia's region.[45] Moreover, in 2010 this charity was planning to spend about 160 million Syrian pounds in the coming period.[46] Lastly, in 2011, once the Syrian revolt had started, Rami Makhlouf, who was the first target of the protesters, promised to increase its charitable activity *via* its association al-Bustan al-Khayriyya. Nevertheless, this promise didn't convince the opposition, who accused him of being the family banker and, above all, highly corrupt.[47]

In a context of increasing economic difficulties, it is clear that thanks to this kind of agreements the Syrian state has partially outsourced the spending and the management of several public institutions whilst they have supposedly remained state-owned. Therefore, these contracts are, from our point of view, the evidence of the implementation of a strategy that follows a logic of partial "off-loading" by the state ("décharge de l'Etat" in the French literature), a formula at work in many countries.[48] According to Béatrice Hibou, one of the main characteristics of this logic is the alteration of the relations between the "public" and the "private" as well as between the "political" and the "economical" (Hibou 1999: 7f). The example of al-Bustan al-Khayriyya is particularly clear in this respect. In fact, while al-Bustan is a private charity, it has been supporting and financing numerous public institutions and projects in the last years. Moreover, while most of the funds of this charity have been provided by Rami Makhlouf, that is a private entrepreneur, the fortune of this man has been built thanks to his links with the regime and the Syrian state itself.

Finally, besides the financial and utilitarian reasons, the reinforcement "from above" of the Syrian charities during Bashar al-Asad's first decade has probably also been motivated both by the desire to co-opt the powerful religious leaders who, until late 2008, were at the head of these initiatives, as well as by an attempt to attract the foreign funds meant for civil society-promotion programs in the Middle East. Likewise, it is worth pointing out that the period in which these structures have been promoted the most (between the years 2004 and 2008) coincides with a moment of major international isolation of Syria due to its positioning against the Iraq war and to the assassination of Rafiq Hariri.[49] Hence, by giving some leeway to domestic civil society actors the regime intended most likely to find at home the support that it had lost abroad.

How have they been promoted? Through which mechanisms?

Among the different channels that the Syrian state has been employing during the last ten years in order to support and promote charities we will point out five here: the media campaign, the presidential couple's and government officials' personal visits to associations, the normalization process undertaken by the MoSAL so as to register "informal" structures, the privatization of former public structures and, finally, the sale or the rent of public land to charities at preferential prices.

First, mostly since the year 2004, state-run newspapers – such as *Tishreen* or *Al-Thawra* – and newly created "independent" magazines – such as *Syria Today* – have carried on an effective campaigns to support Syrian charities. Through focused articles these newspapers and magazines have underlined the important role of these organisations in providing social welfare, in fighting poverty or in carrying out developmental projects. These articles have greatly contributed to make Syrian charities known by announcing the newly created ones or by covering public events organized by them. The following paragraph, extracted from *Syria Today*, constitutes a typical example:

> "Like a growing number of Syrians, Mohammad Fathy Qawadri has turned to a third source of life-saving help: the newly created NGOs and charities that provide free care, medicine and social support for the needy. "Without these charities, my family and I would not be able to cope," he said. […] A number of NGOs that specialise in health care and drug provision are now running in Damascus. One of them is Sunduq al- Afieh, the "health fund", a Syrian charity established by Damascene philanthropists. It uses a flexible and efficient system to help poor patients requiring fast treatment – something the state-run system cannot easily provide. Rather than stand in month-long queues at a government-owned hospital, the patient can drop in at the charity's headquarters in Midan, a Damascus suburb, and fill in an application for help."[50]

Second, the First Lady as well as some governmental personalities and local figures have directly supported charities by paying them official visits. These visits have, first, contributed to legitimize these structures and, second, increased their symbolic and media visibility. These visits have generally been broadcasted in official TV channels and newspapers, thus publicizing their work. The fact that pictures of these official visits are generally visibly displayed in the headquarters of these associations illustrates the importance of this kind of support in the eyes of the social actors. Likewise, some associations highlight these visits on

their websites. Hefth al-Ni'me, for instance, had in 2008 an entire section on its website where pictures of the official visits that it had received were displayed.[51] Among them there were three pictures with the Minister of Religious Endowments, with the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour and with the Governor of Damascus, respectively. Furthermore, these same pictures were equally exhibited in some of the leaflets of this association (see Picture 1).

Picture 1: Official visits to Hefth al-Ni'me

Source: Leaflet of Hefth al-Ni'me, without year.

But the state support for charities has gone well beyond media articles and official visits. In fact, and this is the third channel the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has encouraged, especially around the years 2004 and 2005, the normalization and formalization of pre-existing informal networks committed to social works. In this context, letters were sent to non-registered charities asking them to normalize their situation by registering with this ministry. The al-Safine association (the Ark), for example, a Christian charity that supports young handicapped

people and operates under the patronage of the Latin Church, received one of these letters from the MoSAL several years ago.[52] Likewise, several Christian religious leaders were contacted in order to discuss the same issue regarding other associations. In addition, the accreditation procedure for new associations became more flexible from 2004 onwards. As a result, non-authorized charities – that had been working during several years, or even decades, without being registered with the MoSAL – were finally allowed to "formalize" their legal status. All this led many to affirm that "they opened the door to create new associations" (*fatahu bab ta'sis al-jam'iyyat*),[53] "they" referring to the MoSAL and, ultimately, to the regime.

Indeed, either willing to grab this opportunity or, in some cases, feeling obliged to do so, most informal charities decided to register. Only some associations, most of them Christian, preferred and were tacitly permitted not to do so. In the case of Christian structures, this decision has sometimes been motivated by the conviction that remaining under the sponsorship of the religious institutions will preserve the autonomy of the association. This was the case of al-Safine, for instance. In other cases, this decision has rather been the consequence of internal conflicts: while the secular administrators of these associations wanted to "legalize" them, the religious "patrons" – who desire to preserve their centrality and their authority in them – refused.[54]

As for the fourth channel used to promote charities, we can mention the privatization (or more precisely, de-nationalization) of several formerly state-managed structures. As Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvick remark:

> "In Hama, for instance, the Maktab al-Ri´aya al-Ijtima´iyya (Social Care Bureau), that was born from the 1983 nationalization of Al-Nahda al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Awakening), the city's most powerful charitable association, was turned into a private body in 2003 and became Al-Jam´iyya al-Khayriyya li-l-Ri´aya al-Ijtima´iyya (Charitable Association for Social Care), which opened several sections in the villages of Hama's countryside" (Pierret/Selvik 2009: 602). Likewise, two years earlier, "the former Jam´iyyat A´mal al-Birr al-Islamiyya (Islamic Association for Charitable Works), the oldest organization of its kind in the city (1925), had been re-established as a private body under the name Jam´iyyat A´mal al-Birr" (ibid.).

Thus, some associations which had been nationalized in the 1980s (the worst period for the Syrian civil society) have recovered their legal autonomy during the last decade.

Finally, the state's support for charities has sometimes been channelled through the sale or the transfer of public land to charities at preferential prices. Even if this kind of transfer is not new – the Jam'iyyat al-Moubarra al-Nisa'iyya (the Feminine Charitable Works Association), for instance, received a big piece of land from Damascus governorate in the 1970s[55] – it has become more frequent since the arrival of Bashar al-Asad into the presidency in the year 2000. There are many examples. Among them, the Jam´iyyat al-Birr (the Association for Charitable Works) in Palmyra was granted a 3,000 m² piece of land by the local administration for which it only paid 5 Syrian pounds per square meter.[56] Similarly, in 2005, the Damascus Charities Union received a huge piece of land from Damascus governorate in order to build its charitable al-'Afie hospital; the transaction was determined by a presidential decree. The total cost of the sale was 990,000 Syrian pounds,[57] a symbolic price for a big ground located in the neighbourhood of Midan, in the very center of Damascus.[58]

These five examples are evidence of an active reinforcement of charitable associations "from above". Furthermore, they give a sense of the mechanisms through which the Syrian state has been promoting these charities in recent years. At the end of the day, we can say that the regime has favoured developing this "primary" kind of organisation over other bodies which are less easy to control and potentially cause more political activism, such as lobbying organisations.

The redeployment of the Syrian state: control and disciplinarization

Notwithstanding, the state-charities relation does not limit itself to the reinforcement of these organizations "from above". Actually, the expansion of this sector has been accompanied by the attempt to upgrade the mechanisms that permit the state institutions and the regime to regulate, control and disciplinarize these activities. Therefore, we argue, the strengthening of the charities "from above" during the last ten years should not be interpreted as a sign of the retreat of the state, as some analysts have considered it,[59] but rather as a sign of its redeployment. In the following section we will point out three of these mechanisms: the above-mentioned normalization process, the strengthening of the role of the MoSAL and, finally, the creation of GO-NGOs.

The first of these mechanisms is the normalization or formalization process of pre-existing "informal" networks. As mentioned above, by this process dozens (and probably hundreds) of previous "informal" associations, most of them charities, have indeed registered with the

Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour during the last decade. This arguably results from the desire to eliminate spaces that are not under the state's surveillance. In fact, once those activities are registered with the MoSAL, the security apparatus together with the employees of the MoSAL can more easily control/direct them as they become visible structures. Manipulation and influencing becomes likewise possible, as by being legalized, they also tacitly accept the rules of the game. Quintan Wiktorowicz has observed the same mechanism of what he calls "social control" in Jordan. He describes how organizations, once they were legally registered in this country, found themselves "*embedded in a web of bureaucratic practices and legal codes which allows those in power to monitor and regulate collective activities*" (Wiktorowicz 2000: 43). In Syria, these "bureaucratic practices" can be permissions needed to organize an excursion or an activity, or to collect donations, as well as regular visits made by the employees of the MoSAL. Along the same lines but from a different perspective, Steven Heydemann has interpreted the opening of the civic sector in several countries of the Arab world as a mark of a broader process of "authoritarian upgrading". According to him:

> "the hallmark of authoritarian upgrading is the ability of Arab regimes to exploit rather than resist broad social, political, and economic trends […]. Rather than shut down civil societies entirely, however, regimes gradually adopted a range of complex strategies to reassert state control over burgeoning civic sectors" (Heydemann 2007).

Thus, the strategy of easing the restrictions on the authorization process is one that ultimately aims at and permits to better co-opt, monitor and regulate these associations via the MoSAL.

Linked to the preceding idea, the second of these mechanisms is the strengthening of the role of the MoSAL, which has become a central institution in the daily life of Syrian associations. This ministry opened several years ago a new section which is exclusively in charge of dealing with the associations' affairs. According to Diala al-Hajj Aref, former Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, the role of this ministry is not to give material or financial support to associations but rather to plan and dictate the general lines that must be followed by them and to coordinate and harmonize the different projects they undertake; it is a role of *ishraf* (supervising) and *moutaba'a* (monitoring), she says.[60] Besides having a clear function of political marketing (so as to improve the public image of the MoSAL and, ultimately, of the regime in the eyes of the Syrian population and of the foreign actors), these

declarations by Diala al-Hajj Aref seem especially interesting since they underline at once not only the central role which the MoSAL claims to play but also the determination to set up new tools and principles for the social action of the public agencies and structures. Furthermore, in order to preserve its centrality, the MoSAL has monopolized all the information regarding the associative sector. Since 2008, for instance, the statistics concerning the number of the registered associations in the country have not been disclosed by the MoSAL and are, consequently, unavailable in the Central Bureau of Statistics. Finally, besides reinforcing the role of the charities it has created new social institutions like the National Social Aid Fund or the High Institution for the Integration of Handicapped People.

The former, the National Social Aid Fund, is active only since January 2011,[61] although the project was launched jointly by UNDP, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and UNFPA already in 2007 based on the available statistics in 2004's "Income and Expenditure Survey."[62] As officially exposed, its main purposes are: to "protect and nurture targeted individuals and families through providing regular or emergency aid", "enable the beneficiaries economically, socially, and in the fields of health and education", and "promote development and investment in human capital."[63] In order to do so, the National Social Aid Fund is meant to implement its own programmes as well as to network with private and associative institutions. In principle, funds can be collected from any of the 167 government distribution centres – mostly post offices – countrywide. Speaking at the fund's launch in January, the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, Diala Hajj Aref, said that "in 2011, 10 to 12 billions Syrian Pounds (213m to 256m USD) will be distributed to 420,000 households eligible for benefits."[64]

Finally, the third mechanism of control and disciplinarization we will highlight here is the creation of several GO-NGOs.[65] These organizations, which have rapidly developed in the last years, are intimately linked to the First Lady although other governmental figures, such as Diala al-Hajj Aref, have created their own GO-NGO as well. They represent the societal project of President al-Asad and his wife, which is supposed to be based on the idea of "partnership" with and "responsibility" of citizens. GO-NGOs have succeeded in monopolizing certain activities and networks in a quasi-corporatist fashion through a *de facto* monopoly of representation, thereby reproducing old patterns of authoritarian rule at the same time that the regime officially pretends to endorse civic pluralism. They can actually be considered as real centres of power or, using the terminology of Philippe Droz-Vincent, as "lieux du regime",[66] since they are used as mechanisms of control,

disciplinarization and patronage. Through them the regime has aimed at shaping the civil society. At the same time, they have served as useful channels to co-opt social actors, coordinate projects and depoliticize the civil society. The Syria Trust for Development in particular, the biggest GO-NGO launched by the First lady in 2007, describes itself as being

> "at the forefront of the emerging NGO sector in Syria, at a time when the country is actively pursuing a substantial agenda for change. We are setting standards, encouraging professional development, and fostering effective collaboration between NGOs, government and the private sector."[67]

By organizing "The first international development confererence in Syria" in 2010 or by launching an NGO network, the Trust has aimed to emerge as the pioneer of the associative sector in Syria, a sector that it has tried to control and manipulate according to its needs. Finally, GO-NGOs have had a privileged access to the state's resources and to foreign actors, an access they have tried to monopolize. They have participated in most of the workshops and projects managed by foreign institutions. By doing so, they have prevented independent associations from participating in these kind of activities. Hence, the tactic of creating GO-NGOs has been an effective method to perpetuate the regime's power and to control the associative sector.

Finally, the *'uqud tasharukiyye* – that we mentioned before both as a way for the state to outsource the spending and the management of some of the public institutions and as a way of reinforcing the role of the charities – can also be considered as an instrument of control of these associations and as a channel for the state to redeploy itself via new channels.

These few examples confirm from our point of view that the state-charities relation during Bashar al-Asad's first decade has not limited itself to the reinforcement of the latter by the authorities. They show as well how the Syrian state has tried to redeploy itself throw new mechanisms such as the partnership with the private charities or the strengthening of the role of the MoSAL.

Repressive and coercive measures

This fourth and last part aims at providing some examples of the repressive and coercive measures that have been taken against charities in the last years. This sort of measures has aimed ultimately at strengthening the state's control over charitable activities as well as over

Islamic movements and, in some cases, at punishing actors who have crossed "red lines." We will point out very briefly three of them: the prohibition of the *mawa'id al-rahme* ("Tables of Mercy", that is, public fast-breaking where food is provided for the poor), the removal of religious individuals from the charities' boards and, finally, the dissolution of boards.

In August 2008, the recently appointed Minister of Religious Endowments Muhammad Abd al-Sattar al-Sayyid announced the end of "the era of anarchy" (Pierret/Selvik 2009: 609). In this framework, he took two important decisions regarding the charitable activities in Syria:

First, he forbade charities and mosques to hold the *mawa'id al-rahme* during Ramadan. These events – which had become very successful in previous years in Syria as in other countries of the region, e.g. Lebanon or Egypt,[68] – were financed by rich merchants and famous charities. In 2006, for instance, the Hefth al-Ni´me association had offered the *iftar* (fast-breaking) to 10,000 people in the Omayyad mosque *via* the project *iftar al-sa'im*. The reasons the Ministry of Religious Endowments gave for prohibiting these events were the desire of protecting the mosques from being dirtied and profaned with this kind of practices. Furthermore, the authorities argued both that the people benefiting from these tables were not "poor people" but rather profiteers and that the *zakat* (alms giving) and *sadaqa* (voluntary giving) were meant to be paid in secret and not publicly.[69] Yet, in reality this decision resulted mainly from the determination to prevent merchants, rich businessmen and religious men from using these public celebrations for their own benefit (in terms of notability, visibility, publicity, etc.) as well as from the will to stop collective mass gatherings. That is the reason why, although the *mawa'id al-rahme* were indeed forbidden, charities were actually allowed to keep on distributing *iftar* individually. Instead of eating the *iftar* collectively in a public space (mosque, square or street), the beneficiaries were given food parcels to take home. During the Ramadan of the year 2010, for instance, the charity Hefth al-Ni´me distributed more than 22,000 meals per day to the destitute families of Damascus.[70]

Second, at the end of 2008 anyone working in a clerical role – such as imams or prayer leaders at mosques and teachers at religious institutions – was compelled to step down from any official post he might hold in a charitable institution. In fact, as Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik describe,

> "on September 27, a car-bombing killing seventeen in a suburb of Damascus provided the Ministry with the opportunity to widen the

> scope of its plan by imposing complete ministerial control over private Shari´a institutes and dismissing the country's Muslim clerics, including Sariya and Osama al-Rifa´i, from the charitable associations' boards of directors. Substitutes were chosen by the authorities from lists of three candidates that each of the concerned ´ulama' was asked to provide" (Pierret/Selvik 2009: 609).

These candidates, chosen by the clerics among their loyal clients, had to be secular. Thus, while historically clerics had always been heads of charitable initiatives in Syria, in 2008 they found themselves suddenly banned from practicing this activity, at least legally. Salah Kaftaro, for instance, the former administrator of the Shaykh Ahmad Kaftaro Foundation, chose the engineer Mouhannad Alloush, married to his niece, to replace him at the head of the Jam'iyyat al-Ansar al-Khayriyya (the Supporters Charitable Association), which belongs to that foundation. Furthermore, while Muslim religious men were then dismissed from their positions at the head of Muslim charities, Christian associations were still allowed to remain legally under the patronage of the Church and some of them are even presided over by Christian religious leaders. The reasons of this decision, from which the government never backed down, were clearly linked to the regime's desire to prevent Sunni religious men from increasing their social capital, their influence and their visibility *via* those charities.

Finally, we can mention another measure that has been taken by the MoSAL from time to time: the decision to dissolve a charity's board of directors. This practice is authorised by the Law number 93 of 1958 (that is, the Law of Associations), which establishes that the MoSAL can dissolve the board of any charity at any moment.[71] In June 2009, for instance, the board of directors of the Aleppo Charities Union (founded in 1961) was dissolved by the MoSAL one day before its re-election; it was replaced by a "temporary" board nominated by the minister Diala al-Hajj Aref.[72] By this decision the MoSAL actually cancelled the annual meeting of this union, thus preventing it from choosing a new "independent" board. The members of the new board, who were still on duty in 2011, were chosen by the MoSAL among regime-friendly candidates.

These three examples prove from our point of view that besides reinforcing the work and the role of the charities, the Syrian regime has equally tried to limit the autonomy and the strengthening of this sector by putting important restrictions to its activities and, in some occasions, by side-lining regime-hostile personalities.

Conclusion

This paper has provided some analytical keys to understanding state-charities relations in Syria since the arrival of Bashar al-Asad at the presidency. In the first place it has been shown how the revitalization of this sector has been significantly promoted "from above" by the Syrian authorities through different methods. In the second place it has been demonstrated that the expansion of this sector has been accompanied by the attempt to redeploy the state and to upgrade the mechanisms that permit it to control and disciplinarize these activities. By new legislation, by dictating red lines and domains of action, by normalizing previous informal structures, by adopting the role of an arbiter, by selecting the projects that are authorized to flourish, and finally by developing partnerships with charities and NGOs, the Syrian leadership has attempted to reorganize the state while increasing social control over non-state actors. Furthermore, it has been evidenced here that this strategy follows a logic of partial outsourcing by the state. Finally, some examples have been provided of the repressive and the coercive measures that have been taken against charities in order to restrict their activities and their autonomy. In conclusion, the state-charities relation in Bashar al-Asad's Syria is one that has been characterized by a double dialectic: on the one hand, the need to promote non-state actors because of their important contribution to development and welfare; on the other hand, the need to restrict and control these actors in order to preserve the supremacy of the regime. Therefore, periods of relative openness and relaxation towards charitable organizations have been interrupted by repressive measures whenever needed.

All these changes reflect, from our point of view, the renegotiation and redefinition of the tacit and inclusive "social pact" that, five decades ago, had been concluded between the Syrian regime and the different social forces.[73] Although the state has certainly remained the dominant agent of redistribution and the main provider of social welfare, non-state actors – that is, the private sector and the associative sector – have become increasingly important in ensuring economic growth and social welfare provision to a rising and impoverishing population. In the short term, Bashar al-Asad's policies generated a new situation of interdependence between the public sector and social actors in which new patron-client networks developed. We have been able to observe in the field a gradual shift of state / society relations and resources in which the Syrian regime has been forced to find some accommodation with successful and well-rooted players, such as al-Rifa'i's network, even if they were not totally politically pliant. Furthermore, by outsourcing part

of its former responsibilities the Syrian state and, ultimately, the regime, have lost much of their legitimacy and credibility. In the medium-term, with the aid of the spark of the "Arab Spring", the new balance of power has degenerated into a popular revolt whose end is still unknown.

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[1] I would like to thank Raymond Hinnebusch, Thomas Pierret and Tina Zintl for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

[2] These figures include all kind of organisations: cultural, charitable, developmental, environmental etc.

[3] Participant observation, Damascus, January 2010.

[4] On the idea of generations of NGOs see Korten (1990), Nefissa (2002).

[5] Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour bulletins, consulted at the Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus.

[6] On this process see Álvarez-Ossorio (2009) and Donati (2009). See also the previous Saint Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria: Sottimano/Selvik (2009); Abboud/ Arslanian (2009); Hinnebusch/ Schmidt (2009); Seifan (2010); Hinnebusch/ El-Hindi/ Khaddam/ Ababsa (2010).

[7] The official estimated expenditure in "social welfare" has increased from 7 thousand million in 2004 to 9 thousand million in 2009; as for the official estimated expenditure in "education", it has increased from 23 thousand million in 2004 to 53 thousand million in 2009. Central Bureau of Statistics (2009).

[8] 1970: 6,3 million; 1993: 14 million; 2011: estimated at 23 million.

[9] By charities we mean all kinds of organizations established to help the needy.

[10] Syria does not have a monopoly on this resurgent charity. Studies show other countries in the region have equally seen a revival of their charity sectors. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the rapid growth in the number of charities has taken place within the framework of the "National Strategy for Remedying Poverty", which, instead of bringing about the creation of new state aid programs, has led to the establishment of charitable foundations, financed in particular by members of the royal family, see Le Renard (2008). In this regard, Jonathan Benthall asserts that at the regional level "even the most ardent defenders of state intervention in a society's activities increasingly seem to recognize the legitimacy and necessity of the complementary role played by private charity" (Benthall 2004 : 183).

[11] According to Amani Kandil's study, at the beginning of the 1990s the percentage of charities comparing to the global number of NGOs was: 9,7% in Tunisia, 68% in Kuwait, and 30% to 50% in the rest of the countries. See Kandil (1995). Since then these percentages have probably decreased given the significant creation of "new generation" NGOs.

[12] There are two unions of charities in Syria: one in Aleppo and one in Damascus. Both of them are private initiatives.

[13] Annual report of the Damascus Charities Union, 2007.

[14] Idem.

[15] Governmental Operated – Non Governmental Organisation.

[16] Some passages of this section are based on Ruiz de Elvira (forthcoming in 2012).

[17] For more information see its website: http://www.makassed.org.lb/home.html.

[18] Association Saint Vincent de Paul's brochures.

[19] For more information see its website: http://eko-sy.org/.

[20] For more information see its website: http://www.st-gos.com/.

[21] Author's interview, May 2008.

[22] For more information see its website: http://www.daralhadith.com/index.htm.

[23] Author's interview with an associative leader, November 2009.

[24] This new sector is called "charity +" by the European Commission delegation in Syria.

[25] The aid provided by foreign donors is extremely controlled by the MoSAL and the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As for the aid given by the Syrian state, it is insignificant and unequally distributed.

[26] On the charitable activities of this movement see Pierret/ Selvik (2009).

[27] Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik (2009: 608) point out that, in the aftermath of the Islamists' confrontation with the Baathist regime (1979-1981), Shaykh Sariya al-Rifa'i and his brother, Shaykh Osama al-Rifa'i, were forced into exile in Saudi Arabia, where they remained until the 1990s.

[28] For the case of Saudi Arabia see Le Renard (2008); for the Palestinian case see Challand (2008); for a general overview see either Benthall (2002) or Bonner/ Ener/ Singer (2003).

[29] Resembling the Chinese model, the "Social Market Economy" aims at economic reforms at the same time that it rejects political changes. According to Samer Abboud (forthcoming), "the 'social market economy' strategy is one that is aimed at shifting underlying economic structures to foster greater accumulation through the marketization of the economy. At the same time, despite the rhetoric of social protections, this strategy has resulted in the withdrawal of the state in key areas of social welfare provision, aggravating already existing socio-economic problems."

[30] On this topic see, for example, Bahout (1994).

[31] See also Tina Zintl's article in this volume.

[32] The Tenth Five Year Plan (2006-2010), http://www.planning.gov.sy/files/file/FypChapter1En.pdf.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Declarations of Diala al-Hajj Aref, former Minister of Social Affairs and Labour.

[36] Ministry of Health's website, 18th April 2010, http://www.moh.gov.sy/ar/%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1/tabid/258/smid/461/ArticleID/150/reftab/258/Default.aspx. (dead link, last accessed in September 2010).

[37] For more information on this organisation see its website: http://www.rainbowculturalpr.com/.

[38] For more information on this structure see its website: http://www.darzaid.com/.

[39] *Syria Today*, July 2009.

[40] See the association's website: http://alrajaa-fund.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49&Itemid=70.

[41] *Al-Thawra*, 24th November 2009, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=27738600720091124005230.

[42] *Syria News*, 24th November 2009.

[43] *All4Syria*, http://all4syria.info/content/view/35138/113/, (dead link, last accessed in September 2010).

[44] Sana News Agency, 19th April 2010, http://www.sana.sy/ara/2/2010/04/18/283533.htm.

[45] Idem.

[46] Idem.

[47] "Syria's richest man promises massive charity giveaway", *The Guardian*, 17th June 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/17/syria-richest-man-promises-giveaway.

[48] On this idea, see Hibou (1999); and Hibou (2004).

[49] For a comparison between foreign and domestic policies in Bashar al-Asad's Syria see Wieland(2010).

[50] *Syria Today*, March 2008.

[51] The address of this website was: http://www.hifz.org/, but since then it has been shut down.

[52] Author's interview with one of the members of this association, April 2008.

[53] Author's interviews, 2007-2009.

[54] For more details on this topic see Ruiz de Elvira (forthcoming).

[55] Author's interview with the president of the board, October 2009.

[56] Author's interview with the secretary of this charity, November 2009.

[57] About 17,700 USD at the rate of January 2012.

[58] Annual report of the Damascus Charities Union, 2007.

[59] The Syrian journalist Abdelrizaq Diyyab is one of them. See Diyyab, "750 charities registered between 2004 and 2006, but…", *Al Hiwar al-watani*, available at the following website: http://alhiwar-sy.org (in Arabic).

[60] Diala al-Hajj Aref's declarations, participant observation, Damascus, June 2009.

[61] Although the National Social Aid Fund has been in the pipeline for years, its implementation has been clearly accelerated after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.

[62] See the United Nations Population Fund in Syria's website: http://www.unfpa.org.sy/en/newsd.aspx?n=83 .

[63] See the National Social Aid Fund's website: http://www.nsaf.gov.sy/forms/cms/viewPage.php?id=40.

[64] *Syria Today*, March 2011.

[65] On this topic see also Tina Zintl's article in this volume.

[66] On this notion see Droz-Vincent (2004) quoted in Fioroni (2010).

[67] See the Syria Trust for Development's website: http://www.syriatrust.org/site/.

[68] For an analysis of the Egyptian *mawa'id al-rahme* see Farag (2007).

[69] *Akhbar al-Sharq*, 3rd September 2008.

[70] *Champress*, 7th September 2010, http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=ar/Article/view/70932.

[71] Article number 36 defines the framework in which the decision of dissolving a board can be taken.

[72] *Suriyya al-Hurra,* www.free-syria.com/loadarticle.php?articleid=35066 (dead link, last accessed in September 2010).

[73] For the idea of the Social Pact see Heydemann (1999).

2
Modernization Theory II: Western-Educated Syrians and the Authoritarian Upgrading of Civil Society

Tina Zintl

While talk about civil society and NGOs was almost non-existent in Syria under Hafiz al-Asad's rule, the 2000s not only saw a significant rise of these activities *per se* but also of speeches and news coverage on them. A far-reaching media campaign on the achievements of the Syria Trust for Development and other developmental agencies pervaded the latter half of the 2000s, with a large share of it published in perfect English on professionally designed web pages or in high-gloss magazines.

This article will highlight how, among the different Syrian social actors, the regime particularly encouraged foreign-educated professionals and businessmen to engage in developmental and societal activities and will show what kind of intended effects this had on the authoritarian regime's image and legitimacy. It aims to add to the existing literature on authoritarian regimes' civil society promotion (e.g. Heydemann 2007) by going into more detail about one key group amongst its main players. The focus is on "cosmopolitan" actors and how they helped the Syrian regime to meet two – only on first glance contradictory – goals: development and authoritarian power maintenance.

To do so, this article first gives a brief overview of the theoretical notions of authoritarian upgrading and Modernization Theory and, in particular, overlaps and linkages between these very different two strands of literature. The second part looks at Syria's civil society activism during the 2000s and at the regime as an actor both against *and*

for – or even instead of – civil society. The significant role of Western-trained professionals in this regime-assisted surge of civil society will be detailed in the third section. This group of actors frequently stems from a younger generation of crony businessmen, whose recently growing interest in philanthropy and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) will be discussed in section four. The then following section on Western "indirect" actors and Islamic "marginalized" actors illustrates how Western-educated returnees and successful businessmen fit, unknowingly, into authoritarian regimes' divide-and-rule-tactics. The sixth section will investigate how the protests in 2011 have had a twofold impact with, on one hand, the regime stepping up its "modernizing project", which, on the other hand, has been rendered less convincing by the rising bloodshed and the ensuing economic crisis brought on by the revolt, repression and resulting sanctions. Finally, the conclusion will sum up the main points of this authoritarian upgrading via regime tailor-made civil society and ask what, if any, long-term legacies it has left. The main sources for this article were, in addition to available literature and print or online media, interviews with foreign-educated Syrian returnees and their colleagues, which were conducted during two periods of fieldwork in Damascus in 2010 and 2011.

It has to be emphasized that, despite its focus on some negative aspects, this article does not wish to criticize or deprecate the achievements and positive developments in Syria's associative civil society since 2000, which are owed to numerous active and engaged individuals.[1] It rather intends to draw attention to the fact that these successes had side-effects that not only helped to gloss over authoritarian realities but were intended and refined to do so.

Syria's Authoritarian Upgrading: a Revival of Modernization Theory?

In recent years – till abruptly eclipsed by the Arab Spring in 2011 – research on authoritarianism, and especially its steadfastness or resilience, has thrived. The fact that several states, and particularly in the Middle East, did not follow what had been celebrated in the 1990s as the "Third Wave" of democratization (Huntington 1991) enabled this growing body of literature on modernized authoritarian or hybrid regimes to supersede in the 2000s period the hitherto dominant literature on democratic transitions.

In comparison to older research paradigms dealing with the nature and development of political systems, notably Modernization Theory and the democratization literature, research focusing on authoritarianism

was intended to be less normative as well as less teleological and linear (e.g. King 2009, Albrecht/Schlumberger 2004). Instead it allowed for, and sought to explain, steps 'back' into more un-free systems. In hindsight, i.e. after the popular uprisings in several Arab countries in 2011, it became clear that this literature had been rather too concerned with explaining the enduring status quo or 'setbacks', thereby ignoring the small probability of large-scale, quick changes.[2]

At its core, the research on hybrid regimes was concerned with showing how autocrats attempted to modernize or 'democratize' their rule while remaining vague about how much power they intended to hand over to whom and when. By exposing this paradox, research on authoritarian upgrading demonstrated that authoritarian regimes not only wanted to *be* but, especially, to *remain* in transition to a 'modern' political system.

It showed how, by employing sophisticated upgrading measures, autocrats sought to mimic the Western democratic mainstream. In this sense, authoritarian upgrading goes beyond IT-based measures of surveillance or other instances of technological 'upgrading' but concentrates on conveying a 'modern' image of the authoritarian state to both local and international audiences. Mechanisms include staging and rigging allegedly democratic elections[3] and, as is the main concern of this article, licensing modern-style NGOs versed in the latest developmental jargon but monitored if not infiltrated by regime loyalists: "coercion has been supplemented by additional strategies through which regimes exploit the rhetoric and organizational frameworks of civil society to generate political resources that can be appropriated and used to their advantage" (Heydemann 2007: 8). In addition to these two instruments, Heydemann lists three more defining features of authoritarian upgrading: the appropriation of gains from selective economic liberalization; the surveillance of new communication technologies; and the diversification of international linkages (ibid.: 5).

Another common upgrading technique, political liberalization by widening the scope of elections, only to severely rig them in the process, seems to have been considered too risky by the Syrian regime. In contrast, the other four ways of authoritarian upgrading may have appeared more manageable. Especially "upgrading" civil society lent itself as a particularly useful strategy because civil society is considered the epitome of pluralism, one of the most important preconditions of democracy. To stay in power, the regime must, however, also ensure that civil society develops only into a pluralist façade or at least one amenable to control within regime defined 'red lines'. It can do so by

"deploy[ing] such still viable substitutes for pluralism as clientalism and corporatism" (Hinnebusch 1993: 244); tools which were thoroughly refined and upgraded over the last years as will be detailed in the remainder of this paper.

Authoritarian upgrading thus concentrates on producing a discourse that provides regimes not only with a more quiescent domestic balance of power but also with an entry ticket to the international community. These regimes claim to be – if maybe as a latecomer and incomplete – striving towards universal slogans like democracy and economic growth. In essence, authoritarian upgrading re-clothes authoritarian rule in a way that follows the logics of Western transitology and, as this article shows, displays the mindset of Modernization Theory.

While Modernization Theory's glory days are certainly gone[4] and deservedly so,[5] its spirit lives on and can help explain why authoritarian upgrading has, for a long time, worked so remarkably well.[6] This applies especially to Modernization Theory's elitist notion – focusing on those who 'already' know how to develop their society and thus are expected to be prime agents of change –, its firm belief that development follows a rational and scientific process, and its – not necessarily materializing – promise that economic reforms will be dovetailed by political liberalization. Furthermore, the difficulty to define "modernity", resulting in the perception of steady progress towards an ultimate aim which, however, is never reached, caters well to the logic of authoritarian upgrading.

Concentrating on these three elements, a combination of both theories, Modernization Theory and authoritarian upgrading, shows why and how, at the regime's discretion, some actors were invited to participate in political or civil society activities while others were not. In doing so, the paper aims to go beyond the often overstated loyal-oppositional divide, instead mapping out *why* some actors behave 'more' or 'less' loyal to the regime than others: what makes them do so and what possibly makes them change their mind; why some are agents of change and others, in turn, 'agents of non-change'. Taking persons' education, family background, and – most significantly – alternative choices into account contributes a better or more nuanced understanding of their (re-)positioning between political stances, and what consequences this has for authoritarian stability. This article tries to make more explicit who was allowed – or commissioned – to play a role in civil society and to interpret the rationale behind these recruitment processes.

Another Revolution from Above: the Regime's Promotion of a 'Modern' Civil Society

Over the last decade, the Syrian regime has quite successfully created a "model" civil society: Aiming at elitist monopolization under the auspices of Syria's First Lady, this could be termed a 'second revolution from above' as the following paragraphs will show.

With the Baathist revolution of 1963 – though slightly lessened through Hafiz al-Asad's Corrective Movement in 1970 – Syria embarked on a socialist path of development. This was devised and implemented "from above" (Hinnebusch 2001), despite ruling officers' and party bureaucrats' claims to act in the name of workers and peasants. Socialist ideology was further diluted through pragmatic policy choices and, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, 'socialism' deteriorated into an empty label that had lost its credibility altogether. Yet, for fear of instability, both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad refrained from restructuring or renaming the Arab Socialist Baath Party, but introduced non-socialist policies nonetheless. Liberalizing economic reforms increased from the 1990s[7] but the major shift came 2005 with the 10th Five Year Plan, which proclaimed a 'social market economy' and called upon the active support of both private sector and civil society, while not even mentioning old 'socialist' constituencies like workers and peasants.[8]

This necessitated an 'upgrading' of civil society's organizations: While existing organizations like the Peasants', Workers', or Women's Unions as well as diverse Baath party organizations had been the early populist authoritarian state's tools for mass mobilization and control, by the 2000s they were joined by a quickly growing – equally loyal but more autonomous – new generation of organizations, which are an expression of the post-populist authoritarian state's turn to neoliberalism.

> "This [new] elite civil society […] is given a certain freedom. Because one major problem in our society is that […] nobody is able to communicate between society and the state. Party, official civil society: out of function!"[9]

In its scope and significance for Syrian politics the regime's guided promotion of civil society constitutes another revolution from above. Over the 2000s it has simultaneously encouraged as well as increasingly appropriated and 'tailor-made' Syria's associative field: Immediately after Bashar al-Asad's rise to power in 2000, which incited expectations and hopes about liberalization, the non-state-orchestrated Damascus Spring movement was clamped down upon.[10] Around the same time, in

2001, the first regime-supported development project FIRDOS,[11] working for rural development, was initiated by First Lady Asma al-Asad (yet, the first NGO initiated by the very top was the Syrian Computer Society (SCS), founded by Basel al-Asad[12] in 1989). While existing charities were closely monitored[13] and politically independent organizations remained successfully marginalized, the next years saw a rise in loyalist and regime-supported NGOs: the Syrian Organization for the Disabled, AAMAL (Arabic: 'hope') was founded in 2002 on the First Lady's initiative, too, as was MAWRED[14] in 2003. Two entrepreneur-skills-focused NGOs SYEA and JCI were established in 2004, as was later BIDAYA,[15] which provides young entrepreneurs with microfinance grants and mentoring. SHABAB and MASSAR[16] for youth and children's education respectively, were both founded in 2005, again under the patronage of the First Lady; in the same year BASMA (Arabic: "smile!"), a charity and lobby group for children affected by cancer, started operating – while it was not initiated directly by Asma al-Asad, she provided generous start-up financial and moral support. In fall 2005, the Damascus Declaration re-started from where the Damascus Spring had left and, in contrast to it, managed to combine several oppositional groups within and outside Syria and to institutionalize itself with the election of a national council and a secretariat (see Ghadbian forthcoming; Pace/Landis 2009). However, the Damascus Declaration eventually met the same fate as the Damascus Spring: a clampdown and series of detentions pushed most of its activists into exile. In 2007, two high-impact but, as will be shown, both elitist and loyalist NGOs were founded: the Syria Business Council (SBC), which is an association of some of the richest Syrian businesspeople, and the Syria Trust for Development (in the following: STD), which combined FIRDOS, SHABAB and MASSAR as well as two new divisions RAWAFED, on cultural development, and the Syrian Development Research Centre (SDRC). This brief overview illustrates that, over the last decade, a new loyalist civil society emerged and became better organized, possibly spurred and accelerated by two waves of oppositional activities.

The dichotomy between loyalist and oppositional civil society was reinforced by associating the most-used Arabic term for civil society, *mudjtama al-madani,* with subversive and oppositional activities, effectively substituting it by the expression *mudjtama al-ahli*, 'communal' society (see e.g. Sawah 2009:5, Ruiz de Elvira 2010). Even though the critique of the first term was not much voiced in public[17] the latter term, *mudjtama al-ahli,* is still preferred by loyalist NGOs as well as by other NGOs and charities, which feel they would attract negative

attention by using *mudjtama al-madani*. A discussion about how political civil society can and should operate followed suit:

> "Some Syrian intellectuals believe that the civil society movement which began in 2000 made a mistake when it mixed civil society activities with political endeavors that should have been left to the politicians and political parties of the country. […] Civil society's mission is to defend values that are political in their core, such as democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights, but with non-political tools and methods." (Sawah 2009)

This caveat however seems not to apply to the "semi-official sector",[18] i.e. NGOs on the other side of the political spectrum, which are affiliated with the government and to some extent follow a loyalist agenda. Organizations initiated by Syria's First Lady have been accused of undermining the very defining feature of NGOs and thus been called 'government-organized non-governmental organizations', or GONGOs. They could be subdivided into openly government-organized NGOs like STD and covertly government-organized NGOs like NOSSTIA.[19] Furthermore, NGOs which were either established *via proxy* or heavily government-influenced at a later point might be called government-accredited NGOs or GANGOs (though other authors have assigned other acronyms for NGOs that suffer from this kind of government interference[20]). Syrian examples are mostly from the business world, e.g. SYEA, SBC, but not exclusively so.[21] Proxies are selected for their loyalty and their willingness to follow 'official advice', mostly from amongst those who have demonstrated their closeness to the regime over a longer period or seem trustworthy because of their family ties (see section 4). Thus being 'government-accredited' means more than having received an operating license or permit of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL)[22] – though both characteristics are closely interrelated. Yet other organizations operate like NGOs but formally are part of a governmental or government-influences institution.[23]

The amount of money and professional advertising that went into 'official' new initiatives, and especially into STD, was disproportionately large. As a former managerial employee at STD complained: "It is like killing mosquito with a canon: They should leave the smaller things for smaller NGOs!" He had hoped that STD would facilitate the establishment of "*real* NGOs but unfortunately this did not come about. Instead, they founded all NGOs themselves. […] They shaped the image of the perfect NGO [that] all other institutions now want to imitate but lack sufficient funding for."[24] The image campaign around STD

culminated in early 2010 with the 1st International Development Conference. For instance, both Syrian English-language magazines – mostly targeted at the diplomatic community in Damascus as well as Syrian expatriates – devoted large sections on the "Civil society empowerment 2010" (Forward Magazine: cover) and the process of "Unlocking Civil Society" (Syria Today: cover).[25]

Not only STD's size but, especially, the image and position of the First Lady set these ventures apart from more grassroots organizations. The First Lady remains the chairwoman of both, STD and AAMAL, and seems to be involved in their day-to-day work to a considerable degree, as becomes clear in the following statement by an STD employee:

> "She [the First Lady] definitely had the vision, the *large* vision. And when we *meet* with her and we present what we've prepared and worked on: She would *highlight* whether we really are on the right track or not. She's not involved in the details, but she would pick up any missing elements so that we make sure we actually are covering […everything and that] we are bringing something that speaks to the Syrians and yet speaks to the world."[26]

Interviewees generally held positive opinions about the First Lady and her initiatives. Those complaining about negative side effects did not do so without acknowledging her efforts' merits:

> "She is determined, she is trying to do something very important, but… there is a certain negative side in what she is doing, which is a bit of a snobbist benevolence."[27]

Asma al-Asad's intimate affiliation with the centre of power brings a significant advantage in the implementation of development work: "Who wants to say no to the First Lady?"[28] But exactly this impeccability makes it difficult to criticise even technical project details, effectively precluding any real partnership or cooperation between the Trust and more independent NGOs. For instance, one interviewee recounted that his organization had tried to cooperate with FIRDOS on a project but had given up after his concerns on the project matter were not taken into account. Frustrated, he concluded that "the official NGOs take all the money, but do fake projects."[29]

This corroborates the impression that the trilateral partnership between public sector, private sector, and civil society, as demanded in the 10th FYP, is meant to rest on their loyalist factions. Effectively this means that many government operations are outsourced from the public sector to hand-picked NGOs or pliable private sector companies.

> "As an NGO, we very much work on a wider development agenda. Reform is happening by empowering the civil society to play a larger role in supporting and developing the country. The government can no longer afford, or do the job on its own. Nor can only the private sector do that."[30]

A senior employee at STD described the Trust's relations with the public sector in the following words:

> "We're working quite a bit with the public sector. And our new strategy very much involves a *very* close partnership with the government. *Without* melding ourselves into government; we are *not* [the] government […] This is something that has changed over the last two years: instead of having the idea that we do a good pilot and then somehow the government is supposed to take it over, we are working now from the very beginning *with* the government to decide programs that are relevant to their needs."[31]

Asked whether this constitutes an outsourcing of government functions, he refuted the suggestion:

> "Well, not outsourcing. We try to, actually, also sometimes advocate, because a lot of what we do is not *available* in the public sector. So the idea here is to approach the public sector, define the needs with them, and somehow create programs that both meet *their* needs but also our vision for development (ibid.)".

He justified the close cooperation with the public sector by the fact that only the government had the necessary infrastructure for effective programmes:

> "When you are doing development you *need* government resources. You need their infrastructure […] One of the things we try to do in the Trust is sort of advocating a better use of these resources. And the way we do it is we of course embed ourselves in some of their operations, develop good new initiatives and then enlarge these initiatives together (ibid)".

This was echoed and specified by a colleague, who works at MASSAR:

> "In fact, we coordinate and cooperate a lot with the Ministry of Education. Because we wouldn't be able to meet those children if the Ministry of Education would not allow those schools visits, and for us to meet with the schools."[32]

Does this mean that STD lobbies for political decisions? During the above-mentioned conference the "Syria Trust for Development, along with local partners, [… was] planting the seeds for a new NGO law"[33]: In her opening speech, the First Lady herself raised expectations that the current civil society law, dating back to 1958, was to be substituted soon. Yet, this was put on hold or, maybe, discussed behind the scenes. An STD official stated that the Trust had "very limited influence there, though we are expecting to have more of a role *once* the law is ready."[34] He nonetheless added that they have been involved in other policy areas, e.g. commenting on the 11th FYP when it was in preparation:

> "We have done quite a bit of advocacy on certain policy changes. […] But] in general we try not to get involved in the legal issues until the government has built certain initial, let's say, thinking on it. And then we intervene to help them (ibid.)".

In 2007, SDT's Research Division, in cooperation with the UNDP, created an "NGO platform", which aims to support civil society with capacity-building and networking opportunities and hopes to "lead to more inclusive participation in democratic processes and foster better relations between civil society actors and the state."[35]

A case of successful civil society lobbying might be seen in the smoking ban (legislative decree 62), enforced in April 2010. One member of the Syrian Society for Smoking Cessation jubilated: "the president listened to us."[36] Yet, the public perception is that the president did not need much convincing but, rather, that he wanted this ban for polishing his own image: Syria was the first Arab country with non-smoking legislation. Reportedly, Bashar al-Asad pushed it through after a prolonged stand-off with influential bureaucrats – the parliament had rejected the law three times – in a unilateral and unconstitutional way, i.e. while the parliament was in session.[37] Whoever was the lobbyist – eventually the ban has never been effectively implemented. A second and more 'grassroots' case of lobbying was the campaign against the new personal status law in 2009: Though having to withdraw the draft law after a public outcry was, at first, an embarrassment for the government,[38] it later seemed to tacitly endorse this opposition and tolerate admiring reportage about it.[39] Yet, both these campaigns were rather issue-related and "non-political" (Sawah 2009) in that they did not question the basic Syrian power balance.

In conclusion, regime-influenced NGOs are a corporatist "self-disciplining measure" (Wiktorowicz 2000: 55) launched by the Syrian state, which set an example of approved best-practise and then, by

staging cooperative projects, gain information about other NGOs working in Syria.[40] The establishment of closely monitored organizations parallels the mass mobilization during the regime's leftist revolutionary days, only re-labelled and upgraded to meet internationally approved and promoted standards of 'civil society empowerment'.

Furthermore, GONGOs represent a paternalistic – or, in the Syrian case, rather a maternalistic – benevolent authoritarianism, which acts on the state's perceived duty to assist in upbringing and instructing a nascent civil society. It does so by creating a patronizing, almost monopolizing, model which it expects to be emulated by other NGOs.[41] Critically interpreted, this is a self-colonizing version of the post-WWI mandate system, as was also suggested by one interviewee, who compared STD to 19th and early 20th centuries' implementation of politics from above "since the nation was seen as *unable* to do so."[42] Modernization Theory re-emerged in a new guise.

The First Lady, a UK-born and -educated (former) investment banker, is emblematic not only of the top-down nature of Syria's new-born civil society but also for two overlapping recruitment pools of the ideal development workers: the Western-educated and the business society. They will be characterized in the following two sections.

Foreign-Educated Professionals for a 'Modern' Civil Society

Over the last decade, Western-trained Syrian returnees were heavily recruited in several fields like economics and finance, higher education and, to a somewhat lesser degree, media.[43] Yet, their visibility and influence is strongest and most consistent in the 'regime-led' civil society. One explanation for this is that there were only weak older ‘civil society’ structures in existence, so they could – free-riding on the First Lady's efforts – use their international experiences and specialist knowledge to help build up a new sector 'from scratch'. Contrastingly, in other fields they more often have to blend in with or compete against older structures like long-established businesses or Chambers of Industry and Commerce (economics),[44] state newspapers (media) or public universities (higher education).[45]

The First Lady "paved the way for many things to happen, especially in civil society. She brought her experience in, but she adapted it [… to local traditions and values.] She was the example: Many followed her."[46] With her higher UK degree in a 'modern' and hands-on subject[47] Asma al-Asad was not only a role model for Syria's development sector

as such, but also and especially for many expatriates considering a return.

This applies to STD in particular, which "[s]ince its founding a few years back […] has become a magnet for well-achieved Syrians in the Diaspora."[48] All five members on its Board of Trustees have vast international experiences; most hold higher academic degrees from European or US institutions.[49] So there is the impression that mostly "foreigners and foreign-educated"[50] are working for STD. While this is somewhat exaggerated when speaking about its entire workforce,[51] it is certainly characteristic for the – internationally visible – higher managerial levels and its Development Research Centre, which draws on internationally-trained Syrian academics. For instance, STD's first CEO[52] is US-educated architect Omar Hallaj; US-educated and longtime expatriate economist Nader Kabbani heads the research division; and British cultural consultant Robert Cole-Hamilton was director of MASSAR for six years, leaving a vacant position which has not been filled since 2010. Said a senior manager at STD:

> "We were looking closely at the market. It's not about trying to bring people from abroad [but] people who are interested […] The Syrian expatriates are themselves coming back, but we're not only [head-]hunting expatriates."[53]

Also government-accredited charities benefit from foreign-educated returnees: BASMA is headed by UK-educated Mayya Asaad, daughter of an influential businessman; AAMAL's CEO is Chinese-educated engineer Rami Khalil; and the Syrian Deaf Children Society, which is affiliated with AAMAL, was initiated and is lead by the deaf brothers Feras and Wael Moubayed, who both were educated and lived most of their lives in the UK.[54]

Often foreign-educated returnees or Syrian expatriates are recruited out of necessity – many development-relevant degrees are not taught at Syrian universities – and for other practical reasons. Especially English language skills, state-of-the-art expert knowledge, and previous working experience in the development sector's big players, e.g. UNDP, the Aga Khan Foundation, or Western governmental development agencies like the British DFID and Germany's GIZ, are sought-after assets.[55] In addition to these tangible advantages, in Syria, holding a Western degree adds considerably to a person's reputation and prestige.

Many foreign-trained Syrians are also highly motivated to work in developmental organizations: The above-mentioned newness of the sector, which offers an interesting working experience and

comparatively high salaries, is a major incentive. But most interviewees expressed that their main motivation was to 'give something back' to their native country.

> "Definitely, they [the foreign-educated] have been extremely valuable because they have brought a wide experience with them. They are coming back with a very strong and sincere willingness to make the best of it in Syria."[56]

Persons with this background are ideal employees for STD, which seeks to "work on grassroots level with concepts from abroad."[57] One Syrian researcher abroad describes this emulation of Western development agencies in less flattering words:

> "[Critics …] believe that the mistake was to confine the idea of civil society to a tiny image of NGOs that were formed recently in the process of globalization, and which operate in accordance with a western vision of NGOs." (Sawah 2009)

Indeed, the regime tries to follow a global model while appearing not too "Westernized", both on a general political level[58] and in development work more specifically: "We don't need to import foreign ideas but to develop and build ours."[59] Employing foreign-educated repatriates, rather than sub-contracting work to foreign experts, is a way of squaring the circle: with their combination of 'local' and Western experiences they stand for both autonomous local development and for Western-style modernity.

While foreign-trained Syrians are less readily denounced as 'imperialist' than foreign experts they still find themselves accused of being arrogant or detached from the rest of society.[60] They are criticized for not having re-adapted enough to the local system. Even a senior STD manager admits that the overrepresentation of foreign-trained returnees within the Trust constitutes a problem for it as a developmental and 'grassroots' organization:

> "The original recruits of the Syria Trust were *all* foreign educated with very little Syrian experience. […] That created a certain, let's say, *enclave* of like-minded people who were mutually supportive and in many ways they were looking at their experiences in the Syria Trust as an ideal working situation: being in Syria but yet working for an organisation that pretty much was run like an international organisation. It's something we pride ourselves on but at the same time it created a bit of a divide. The organisation itself became pretty much English-language biased, it became a bit dissociated from other

> partners and stakeholders in Syria. One of my greatest difficulties when I started the job here was to convince the team that, really, if you want to expand, if you want this organisation to grow, to be sustained, we can no longer think in this enclave."[61]

In the development sector, foreign-educated employees counter the reproach of being 'too Western' or 'not Syrian enough' by being humble: "Every day is a learning day for me" said one employee at STD before elaborating:

> "I would say a main common criteria among all of us is really, not only having been abroad or not, [it] is our ability to understand the needs of the country. Because what we would *not* like at all is [… that] some of us would project themselves as the *experts* and others would be the locals. That's not *the* attitude at all."[62]

Understatements are, by definition, part of developmental NGOs' professionalism and work ethic since it is their main goal to help other people to help themselves:

> "I would like also to reinforce and stress that people who *haven't* been abroad have been *extremely* receptive and quite fast learners as well, in the last couple of years."[63]

Though several interviewees stressed that STD was not necessarily seen as elitist because "they do good work" and "people on the street trust the First Lady",[64] foreign-educated personnel to a certain degree contributed to these allegations and an image of a detached "enclave". Indeed, STD recently has begun to recruit and train more locally-educated staff.[65]

In some cases, accusations of 'being too Western' come not from the wider public or workmates but from authoritarian hardliners, for political reasons: Though this is less frequent for the developmental sector than for higher political ranks, repatriates' difficulties to re-adapt to the Syrian environment provide a pretext for dismissing overly ambitious foreign-trained returnees. Furthermore – with the exception of crony businessmen or their offspring (see next section) – foreign-educated individuals often lack an effective and protective network of local contacts because they stayed abroad too long. In extreme cases, they might find themselves outright accused of siding with an external enemy:

> "International contacts are harmful if you are quite connected. Because you will face […] accusations that you are recruited as a spy! […] It is

> like ready accusation, okay? They want to resist you, kick you out of this…"[66]

In fact, whether international contacts are welcomed or not depends, first, on the particular job description and its specific requirements for international cooperation and, second, on the respective person's 'trustworthiness' and loyalty to the regime:

> "If you have contact with a senior government official that means you're *vetted* at least. He or she will know that you're above board, so you're ok to deal with. […] Even if you have the education, the local contacts issue will need to be vetted."[67]

It is difficult, if not impossible, to assess to what extent the regime influenced (GO)NGOs' actual recruitment process, e.g. by selecting or double-checking new employees. As for GANGOs, the regime can make its particular approval for certain new ventures known by, e.g., the First Lady's presence at the founding event or by speeding up the process of gaining an official licence. Especially interesting were two different accounts on how BASMA evolved from a grassroots initiative by a group of young volunteers regularly visiting an orphanage: One of the founding members recounted that, before the official launch of BASMA, the First Lady had organized one year of international travel for one of the volunteers, in order to research other countries' experiences in caring for children with cancer. This UK-educated person is now head of the organization.[68] In contrast, one of the original volunteers complained that when "BASMA was created with [… private money], new ideas from abroad, and connections"[69] some people, who had been engaged with it previously, were driven out.[70] This seems to suggest that the authoritarian leadership and its cronies are indeed able to interfere in GANGOs' internal recruitment and that appointees not only need to be highly-skilled but also loyal.

This collusion with the regime does not only take place in recruitment matters but also in terms of actual content. Foreign-educated persons enthusiastically and efficiently contribute to development efforts that fit the 'official' expectation of developmental NGOs: lobbying for and supporting entrepreneurship, rural development, a better care and integration of the disabled, etc. are all areas that the regime had designated appropriate to 'civil society'. There is however little independent policy influence by Western-educated returnees; thus, the above-mentioned example of rather successful lobbying against the personal status law was initiated by Bassam al-Kadi, who had not been

abroad for longer periods.[71] Returnees – like their fellow citizens, but more accentuated – face a trade-off: Either they achieve some positive change within the limits that the authoritarian system has set for developmental initiatives or they remain out of social and political activism altogether. This self-selection is even stricter for foreign-educated Syrians since only those of them who see a viable future in Syria return in the first place, as the following section will illustrate.

Revamping Crony Capitalism: the Second-Generation Bourgeoisie's Corporate Social Responsibility

Compared to other parts of society wealthy businessmen are more capable to send their offspring abroad to acquire higher education. This follows an old tradition from Ottoman times[72] and some interviewees even considered it as nearly part of the etiquette. In recent years, also less affluent owners of smaller businesses try to send at least one son abroad in order to gain knowledge about the newest management techniques.

Descendants of the country's economic elite and those close to the regime in particular not only have more opportunities to go abroad but also more reasons to return than many of their less-connected peers. Many come back to continue the family business, and often they feel obliged to do so since it was their parents, who funded their studies in a foreign country.[73]

While family businesses capitalize on returnees' skills, like new marketing techniques or pricing tools, here, too, readaptation to the Syrian environment is an issue and sometimes leads to controversies between family members. Maybe more often than locally-educated businessmen of the same age group, returnees try to set themselves apart from their parents' generation, either by establishing their own business venture[74] or by becoming active in philanthropy.

Several business-related NGOs were (co-)initiated by foreign-educated Syrians, for example the Syrian Business Council (SBC, *2007), the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association (SYEA, *2004), and – as a local branch of an international NGO – Junior Chamber International Damascus (JCI, *2004). They stemmed mostly from business families on good terms with the regime and these were heavily overrepresented not only amongst their founding members but also in these organizations' boards.[75] SYEA and JCI are clearly developmental NGOs devoted to enhancing young people's business skills; they might have served as model for the Trust's SHABAB, which was created just a year later. In contrast, SBC is an exclusive club of well-connected

businessmen – "we invited in success stories"[76] – and lobbies for economic policies by organizing discussions with high government officials and foreign ambassadors. The above-mentioned BIDAYA, in turn, is a tool for encouraging private companies' and businesspersons' altruism, either in cash or by providing mentoring for business start-ups. Especially the latter greatly benefits from foreign-educated entrepreneurs who are ready to share their knowledge.

Returnees' engagement also spans an increasing number of associations which, by their very nature, are specifically designed for foreign-educated Syrians: the above-mentioned "Network of Syrian Scientists, Technologists, and Innovators Abroad" (NOSSTIA) as well as alumni associations for graduates who studied in the same country, however, rather constitute social clubs than actively contribute to Syria's development.[77]

Motivations for becoming socially engaged vary: First, there is the feeling that one 'needs to give back something to society' which, again, seems to be particularly important to Western-trained returnees. Like the above-mentioned development professionals, interviewed 'philanthropists' were very well aware of their own privileged upbringing and wanted to help less-privileged Syrians through capacity building programmes. Second, donating money for a good cause might be part of a general trend of rich Syrians, who show their wealth more conspicuously than preceding generations (e.g. Salamandra 2004). Third, as anywhere else, CSR entails a high economic incentive since "social life brings a lot of business."[78] Asked whether repatriates were particularly eager to effect positive change, one young entrepreneur responded:

> "Some of the people who return are *generally* working actively to make change. And some of them, they appear to be working but what they want to be is in the spotlight, to be [a] high-profile person, to make their other businesses go."[79]

For those repatriates who, due to their long absence, lack viable business contacts, it also provides a possibility to network. One of SYEA's founding members mused:

> "Collectively, it's a nice nest, let's say, for Syrians who studied abroad, to have a network, to at least talk to colleagues with similar mindset."[80]

Political motives for altruist projects are paradoxical: On the one hand, charitable behaviour helps to polish crony capitalist families' reputation

and to gain a pure conscience. On the other hand, becoming engaged in CSR is a way to demonstrate one's willingness to establish or to maintain privileged relations with the regime, since corporate social responsibility is heavily promoted from above, especially through the 10th FYP (Selvik forthcoming). While Selvik noted that this "so far failed to generate enthusiasm in the private sector" (ibid.), especially among Muslim Sunni businessmen who rather adhere to the Islamic obligation of paying *zakat*,[81] several foreign-educated businessmen indicated that they already support CSR projects or were highly interested to do so in the future. This may be because, due to their own experiences abroad, they hold fewer reservations towards an inherently Western concept. Alternatively, following the regime's call for socially responsible business could be read as a confirmation that these persons are on good terms with the political leadership.

On the part of the regime, the motives are clearer: CSR is a way to outsource public spending for costly social policies. Due to falling oil rents and the regime's inability to generate enough (non-rent) revenues, subsidies have been reduced and, also, co-optation is being restructured in a more "efficient" elitist way towards loyal entrepreneurs and professionals, often those with international credentials and experiences. The regime thus gained both well-resourced and resourceful followers of its economic and developmental reforms.

Hinnebusch's early prediction that gradual economic liberalization would "revive the bourgeoisie" and lead to "a business-centred civil society" (Hinnebusch 1993: 256) came true but not necessarily in terms of a more effective and competitive private sector. Instead, the lobbying function was 'hijacked' by pro-regime organizations like SBC or the Chamber-run binational business councils. And even the private sector's philanthropist activities were steered to cater to the regime's needs.

Divide and Rule: the Showcase of a Secular and Western-Style Civil Society

In Syria's ethnically and religiously diverse society, the regime's promotion of civil society has a distinct secular flavour, which plays into divide and rule politics. This section takes a closer look at this particular side-effect of Syrian civil society's "elitism" and bias towards foreign-educated personnel: the regime's rhetoric aims at marginalizing traditional, mostly religion-based charities[82] in comparison with 'modern' developmental NGOs and this coincides with Western states' image of a modern civil society and productive local partners.

Over recent years, the idea of ranking different "generations"[83] of civil society became increasingly widespread: A "first generation" of charities helped the needy but – as stressed by the state-led civil society – was said to lack a long-term, sustained global vision. A "second generation" of developmental organizations was, instead, presented as essential for solving Syria's problems:

> "Civil society [is] supported with institutions like… not only charity organizations, but *development*. So we're switching […] from the mentality of charity to development, so it's becoming more sustainable. And the Syria Trust is one of the *leading* NGOs that is *enhancing* that kind of NGO role."[84]

In contrast, a "third generation" of advocacy NGOs and lobbying groups has remained rare and severely disadvantaged in Syria, e.g. by being rejected official permission to operate.[85] Moreover, most of the few existing advocacy groups were either initiated by government-supported organizations (e.g. NGO Platform), strongly promoted by government figures (e.g. Syrian Society for Smoking Cessation or BASMA's advocacy work), or became not only tolerated by the regime but increasingly regarded in a favourable light (e.g. Syrian Women Observatory).

Yet, of all three generations, the second "developmental" level of NGOs was celebrated as the epitome of civil society activism, and this model was, as shown above, moulded by STD. In contrast, official discourse dismissed "first generation" charities as laudable but not really professional or 'modern' pre-runners: though developmental NGOs felt in a way proud of Syria's long history of charitable projects they perceived themselves to be a 'higher' and more efficient form of organization.[86] Foreign-educated returnees may have felt that they were particularly well-aware of this distinction:

> "On the semi-official sector, let's say, the NGO sector they [FE returnees] helped a lot. Having understood what an NGO does, what philanthropic work is: it's not charity but developmental. So I think, these Syrians educated abroad did have a positive impact."[87]

Since they would not fit into the ideal of a developmental NGO, newly-established charities with "official" linkages sought to present themselves not just as charities but as "third generation" lobbies: "BASMA is not only a charity but also a pressure group" and was invited to appoint a representative for a working group at the Ministry of Health.[88]

Although the stated goal of STD's conference and particularly Asma al-Asad's speech was to involve all parts of society,[89] it was telling that most key note speakers and session chairs were Syrian officials or high-level (foreign) experts and that the participants, who were listed in the programme, seemed to be from a 'modern', highly-educated and urban background. In that respect, the conference was a showcase of a modern, professional, cosmopolitan and essentially apolitical development sector, which – despite its positive and constructive contents – is at the core of effective authoritarian upgrading. This discourse resembles Modernization Theory's dichotomies of modern versus traditional, secular versus religious, scientific versus underdeveloped.

The charities/ developmental NGOs divide is mirrored in the above-mentioned *zakat*/CSR divide (Selvik forthcoming): The philanthropist trend is certainly not confined to 'secular' businessmen following the CSR model but includes an even larger number of pious businessmen donating in Islamic *zakat* tradition. Though – or because – more donations are collected in the Islamic way "the CSR model may appeal to the rulers of Syria […] because it represents an alternative to the Islamic welfare model" (ibid.). It seems probable that some businessmen donate in both *zakat* and CSR ways in order to sustain rapport with both 'sides' of society.[90]

During Bashar al-Asad's rule, religious charities at first enjoyed more official acknowledgement and freedoms but from 2008 onwards the regime increasingly curtailed their room to manoeuvre (see e.g. Pierret/Selvik 2009). While some Syrian *'Ulama* were successfully co-opted, institutional linkages between government-initiated NGOs and religious charities remained weak. Yet, Christian charities were privileged in comparison to Sunni Muslim ones (see Ruiz del Elvira forthcoming, McCallum 2010): This is due to religious minorities' perception that their rights and interests will be best safeguarded by the secular Baathi and itself minority-based, Alawite regime. Thus, for the regime, religious Sunni parts of society have always been too strong to ignore[91] but at the same time politically suspect. Paradoxically, the 'revolutionary and socialist' internationally isolated Syrian regime draws on Westernised Syrian professionals to bolster its hegemony in the domestic power struggle.[92]

Western observers share not only the Syrian regime's latent distrust of Islamic groups, with whom they rarely cooperate (Donker 2009), but also its positive discrimination in favour of Western-educated returnees: There is a strong overlap between foreign-trained repatriates and what Kawakibi calls "cocktail civil society", i.e. French- or English-speaking Syrian key contacts for foreign embassies in Syria (2009: 243). This is

easily explicable through their fluency in the respective working language as well as their familiarity with Western concepts and project management. They are 'on the same wave length' and the Western media, too, tends to cater to this positive stereotype of modern and secular foreign-educated Arabs.[93]

For authoritarian states, this also entails a material advantage: GONGOs enable notoriously income-needy regimes to successfully apply for donor states' funds for civil society promotion (e.g. Kawakibi 2009:241; similar Heydemann 2007:5f). In contrast, independent Syrian NGOs are very cautious to accept foreign material support at all, for fear of being accused of following foreign "imperialist" agendas.[94] Eventually, large chunks of the available external funding by, for instance, the EU or UNDP are claimed by GONGOs.

When, with the Arab Spring 2011 (see next section), Western states suddenly found themselves accused of close cooperation with autocrats, they realized that the sticks and carrots game they thought they had played so well had been mastered by autocrats, too. Authoritarian regimes had earned Western approval by piecemeal reforms, including the authoritarian upgrading of civil society. Thus, the West had become complicit in authoritarian regimes' actions by 'acting as if' they believed in autocrats' reformist rhetoric.[95]

Stepping up the Modernization Campaign during the Syrian Revolution 2011

In March 2011 first demonstrations shook Syria, inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt. Almost immediately Bashar al-Asad blamed "foreign conspirators"[96] and "armed gangs" for being responsible for the disturbances, while civil activists reported a violent crackdown on mostly peaceful protesters, claiming over 5,000 human lives in the course of 2011.

During the uprising, GONGOs'/GANGOs' role as a "buffer"[97] between the president and critics of his authoritarian rule became more apparent. However, as international and regional pressures continued to rise, they play this role with declining success: the "buffer function" became too obvious while their work was disrupted by the securitization of large parts of the country. Operations of the Trust were largely put on hold, especially those in rural communities away from Damascus. The Second International Development Conference, which had been scheduled for May 2011, was called off.[98] Internal fissures between those STD employees vilifying protesters and those sympathizing with them have been on the rise.[99] The First Lady herself, who not even three

weeks before the outbreak of the protests had been praised as the "Rose of the Desert" in an extremely untimely Vogue article,[100] withdrew almost completely from public view.[101]

But some of the "development policies continue despite the crisis."[102] Many of these activities are results of long-running projects,[103] amongst them a workshop of the above-mentioned 'NGO platform' in June 2011, which "aim[ed] to develop the participants' capacity to review and analyze national legislation in order to participate in the discussion of the new NGO law, which is expected to be publicized soon."[104] However, in comparison to other hurriedly implemented political reforms[105] the new NGO law has, as of the time of writing, not yet been brought forward to the general public.

In an interview, the head of STD's research division pointed out that, though the crisis made development work in Syria more difficult at present, it was "more important than ever […] to help people become more empowered, engaged, and informed, […] encouraging fact-based dialogue, building conflict resolution capacities, and integrating research into policy making."[106] He also defended STD's intense cooperation with international partners.[107] It seems that international linkages and experiences – once an asset, especially for foreign-educated returnees – were now increasingly eyed with suspicion.[108]

The campaign for the "right" form of civil society has been further accentuated but redressed towards advocacy. Massa Mufti-Hamwi, a US-educated director at MASSAR, called for continued "social activism" – as opposed to "political activism"– as the saviour from the current crisis:

> "How [… to adopt] professional dedication and commitment to protect and safeguard what can be saved, despite the growing uncertainties? Isn't this kind of socially-based activism also imperative, though much less promoted, when so much wisdom and persistence are needed at this difficult time? […W]e need the power of actions that nurture active citizenship and bridge differences, fulfil social needs, and replace the use of force with empowerment, advocacy and peace."[109]

In this opinion piece, she also criticized the old Baathist "nationalistic songs" and stated that her work at MASSAR "taught me how primitive the notion of "citizenship" still is in our society" (ibid.). While right in content, her wording echoes Modernization Theory's polarizing discourse.

In another instance of Modernization Theory thinking and in the same edition of *Syria Today*, politics professor Abou Halaweh implies

that the Syrian Uprising is afflicted with sectarianism, claiming that protesters and their social networks form part of a traditional and backward civil society, which needs to be modernized.[110] Interestingly, both contributors to *Syria Today* seek to add authority to their statements by referring to Western personalities.[111] This generates the "cosmopolitan aura" most effectively provided by foreign-educated returnees.

Pushed by the protests, more "third generation" loyalist advocacy groups have been set up. For instance, a new initiative named "I am with Syria" was launched and became highly visible through a billboard and facebook campaign: "[It] demand[s] a new social contract […] shunning chaos, vandalism, and civil disobedience."[112] The same point, i.e. blaming the crisis on violent protesters, was made by the "Syria is the Homeland Movement", which was established in October 2011.[113] Suspecting regime involvement in these campaigns would be mere speculation, but they certainly moved in a regime-friendly direction.

Syrian citizens face three potential reactions to the current uprising: loyalty, voice, or exit.[114] The "loyal" and passive group of fence-sitters has been, so far, the largest, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. As for foreign-educated Syrians, "exit" seems relatively widespread, especially for those who maintained their international contacts or business ventures in the Gulf countries, in the US, or elsewhere. "Voice" has to be understood in two contrary ways: for or against al-Asad's regime. So far, many tended to support the regime and to be amongst those who fight off demands for regime change (see preceding paragraph). Many businessmen not only try to preserve concrete economic privileges but, to some extent, also to safeguard their CSR activities and reputation. The regime's tactic to win to their side 'modern' and secular Syrians, especially those belonging to religious minority groups, by stirring up Islamophobia (see section 5) has, sadly, become more explicit in 2011,[115] not least through spreading fear by comparing the current crisis to the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising in the late 1970s and early 1980s. How many 'cosmopolitan' returnees will chose to openly voice discontent with the current situation remains unclear but improbable as long as Syria is able to keep wealthy and highly-skilled people engaged in the authoritarian upgrading of economy and 'civil society'.

As my interviews showed, many Western-educated repatriates believed both in the advantages of a slow and gradual reform process as well as in Bashar al-Asad as the suitable reformer. The outbreak of massive protests and their ruthless repression must have come as an unwelcome surprise and shock for most of them: The authoritarian upgrading indeed worked so well that involved persons believed in it

and in it had found a good and useful role for themselves. As of the time of writing, they seem not prepared to give up this role any time soon. The reform policies of 2011 are more successful with – and explicitly targeted at – loyal and often cosmopolitan audiences in Damascus and Aleppo than international observers. As Bashar al-Asad said in an interview in December 2011:

> "We never said we are [a] democratic country, but […] we are moving forward in reforms, especially during the last nine month[s …]. It takes a long time, *it takes a lot of maturity to be [a] full-fledge[d] democratic country*, but we are moving that […] direction."[116]

The spirit of Modernization Theory has been 'de-internationalized' and further nurtured since March 2011. Indeed, taking old draft laws out of the drawer and passing them in a rush was meant to demonstrate that Modernization Theory's second stage – political reforms following economic liberalization – had finally begun.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism is all about selectivity and exclusion of "unwanted" political actors, and civil society is no exception. This was demonstrated by showing that foreign-trained professionals not only are very competent and well-suited for invigorating civil society activities, but they also – though often unconsciously – help the Syrian leadership to convey a positive image and gain legitimacy through a 'modern' yet loyal civil society. Involving foreign-educated Syrians was a particularly effective recipe for success because it made use of the young presidential couple's modern and Western-educated image and connected them to a younger generation of businessmen, who readily serve as spokespersons for a gradual and 'controlled' modernization. Co-opting secular segments of Syrian society and downplaying more 'traditional' circles of civil society reinforced both linkages with Western partners and the secular orientation of the regime. This strategy proved fairly effective not only in terms of political power maintenance, but it was also very cost-saving: It helped to tap funds paid by international development agencies *and* outsource parts of the state's social burden to a wealthy bourgeoisie.

As mentioned above, this article does *not* aim to deprecate the positive achievements of Syria's NGO sector, especially in the second half of the 2000s. Quite the contrary, it wishes to emphasize that numerous persons working for (GO/GA)NGOs contributed to positive

development *despite* difficult political circumstances. Yet, in order to be able to do so, they had to play along with a set of political rules closely intertwined with the authoritarian system. The constant shifting of red lines between acceptable and prosecutable reforms are meant to keep politics in limbo – in transition to a "better" political system but never arriving there (see section 2) – but, as the events in 2011 show, co-optation is a process authoritarian regimes cannot rely on indefinitely.

Like the economic side of Syria's authoritarian upgrading, i.e. the switch to a "social market economy", which also benefited a great deal from nationals with foreign degrees and international working experience (see Zintl forthcoming a), the 'social' side of authoritarian upgrading placed more importance on growth and efficacy than on equality. The combination of both, economic and 'social' upgrading measures, seemed to very effectively help to modernize autocratic rule.

This is in line with Modernization Theory's focus on economic modernization and 'scientific' methods implemented by a highly-skilled elite. Its arguing for catch-up development and the trickling down of 'modern' benefits gives a matching blueprint for authoritarian upgrading's modernist discourse. In fact, Modernization Theory has been revived through authoritarian upgrading and the prominent role granted to foreign-trained and other "Westernized" nationals.

Previous research on authoritarian upgrading has mostly focused on political processes and the reforms themselves but left the involved agents under-theorized. However, as this article showed, 'new' agents were solicited by the Syrian regime according to the top-down and economy-centred logic of Modernization Theory: The choice of new "co-optees" was increasingly linked to Western education in order to credibly follow Western models, like Western-style NGOs and a liberalizing economy. By doing so, the regime jumped on the bandwagon of universally promoted paradigms like capitalism or pluralism but took unobtrusive measures to safeguard the existing political system and balance of power.

Even though the mechanisms of authoritarianism upgrading lost much of their credibility during the Arab Spring, they are still operative and a powerful tool to convince fence-sitters. Yet, the most harmful legacy of authoritarian upgrading might be similar to the way US intervention in Iraq under the flag of "democracy" discredited democratization in the eyes of many Arabs and poisoned legitimate demands for a tailor-made version of democracy: Authoritarian upgrading exploited and degraded reform policies that are indeed a necessary first step towards another, freer political system. Potential political newcomers will face more difficulties in fighting off allegations

that their reforms are merely creating a more liberal façade for an authoritarian system.

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[1] I would like to express my gratitude to my respondents, without whose willingness to participate and openness this study would not have been possible, and to University of St Andrews' Russell Trust Award, which supported me with a travel grant. I would also like to thank Laura Ruiz de Elvira for commenting on a draft of this paper.

[2] This resembles the inability of academic research to make sense of, let alone predict, the sudden end of the Cold War in 1990/91.

[3] This was called "electoral authoritarianism". See Schedler 2006 for the main mechanisms how regimes generate pre-determined election outcomes.

[4] Modernization Theory was developed and popular throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Some of its most well-known applications on the Middle East are Lerner (1958) and Issawi (1956).

[55] Especially its normativity and championing of a pre-determined, overly "scientific" and quantifiable development model, moulded on Western (European) history, were criticized.

[6] Modernization Theory maybe even impacted realities in 'developing' countries, effectively materializing into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

[7] For details see for instance previous volumes of St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria, e.g. Sottimano/Selvik (2009) or Seifan (2010).

[8] Though the adjective "social" in the new social market economy was meant to placate these traditional constituencies and other potential losers of the new market system, in reality it evoked more confusion about its exact meaning and content. See own interviews and Abboud (forthcoming).

[9] Author's interview, March 2010.

[10] For detailed information on these events see George (2003) or Ghadbian (forthcoming). Some observers claim that the Damascus Spring and its crackdown was yet another instigated 'show' by the regime: "The Damascus Spring was a temporary, carefully managed political opening engineered by Assad to outmaneuver his rivals and consolidate his grip on power by drawing support from outside the regime." (Gambill 2004; similar author's interview, March 2010).

[11] Firdos, meaning "paradise" in Arabic, is an acronym for "Fund for Integrated Rural Development of Syria."

[12] Bashar al-Asad's elder brother, whom many already saw as the successor of Hafez al-Asad, died in a car accident in 1994.

[13] See Laura Ruiz de Elvira's article in this volume.

[14] Mawred, Arabic for "resource", is an acronym for "Modernising & Activating Women's Role in Economic Development."

[15] Bidaya, Arabic: "beginning", stands for "Boosting Inspiring Dynamic Youth Achievement." It is a joint effort by FIRDOS, SYEA, and MAWRED and affiliated with Youth Business International.

[16] Shabab, Arabic for "youth", abbreviates "Strategy Highlighting And Building Abilities for Business". Massar means "destiny" in Arabic.

[17] STD's CEO Omar Hallaj assured in an interview that both terms are synonymous but himself mostly uses *mudjtama al-ahli*.

From: Al-Rai (2010), "*Al-mudir al-tanfidhi lil-amana al-suriyya lil-tanmiyya Omar Abdul'aziz al-Hallaj li-"l-rai": Al-mudjtama al-ahli mawjud fi suriyya mundhu 4000 'aam."* [STD CEO Omar Abdal'aziz al-Hallaj to "al-Rai": Civil society has been present in Syria since 4000 years.], 20.9.2010, pp. 6f. (Available on: http://www.syriatrust.org/sites/default/files/ في سورية منذ 4000 عام التنفيذي للأمانة السورية للتنمية المجتمع الاهلي موجود.pdf, last accessed 12.12.2011).

[18] Author's interview, April 2010.

[19] The "Network of Syrian Scientists, Technologists, and Innovators Abroad" was founded in 2001 on the initiative of Bashar al-Asad (see flyer by NOSSTIA for the 4th Conference on Scientific Research Outlook & Technology Development in the Arab World, December 2006 in Damascus). Al-Asad had instructed a minister of state and members of the regime-close Syrian Computer Society to explore options of founding such an organization (author's interview in April 2011).

[20] "Similar in content to the GONGO are the GINGO, the government-inspired NGO, and the GRINGO, the government regulated/run and initiated NGO. To a somewhat lesser degree, sub-concepts such as QUANGO (quasi NGO), PANGO (party-affiliated NGO), RONGO (retired officials NGO), DONGO (donor-organized NGO), DINGO (donor international NGO), and CONGO (co-opted NGO) are also closely tied to the sphere of government" (Götz 2008: 232).

[21] The Syrian Society for Smoking Cessation (*Jam'iyya Mukaafahat al-Tadkhin*, established 2006) has over 300 members, several of whom are loyalist, like ex-Minister of Health (1987-2004) Iyad al-Shatti. The Mustafa Ali Foundation, headed by artist Mustafa Ali and located in the old city, would also qualify as a GANGO (own observations and following Miriam Cooke's interpretation (2007: 69f) of his sculptures as "commissioned criticism").

[22] Syrian NGOs need to apply for a permit at MoSAL, yet several organizations prefer 'illegality' to a lengthy application procedure and, possibly, rejection after having disclosed details about their organization and involved personnel to the security apparatus.

[23] E.g. bilateral business councils need to be registered at MoET since they form part of the chamber system, which itself has been monitored throughout the Asads' rule.

[24] Author's interview, April 2010.

[25] The news coverage about the conference was ample but not entirely uncritical, as Forward Magazine's ambiguous article "New directions for Syrian society" (p. 18) or Syria Today's opinion piece "Development Challenges Demand a True Civil Society" (p. 35) showed.
See *Forward Magazine* (March 2010), "New directions for Syrian society." By Stephen Starr. Issue 37, pp. 18-21; *Syria Today* (March 2010), "Access all areas? Unlocking Civil Society." By Dalia Haidar. Issue 59. pp. 27-42.

[26] Author's interview, April 2010.

[27] Author's interview, March 2010.

[28] Author's interview, April 2010.

[29] Author's interview, May 2010.

[30] Author's interview, April 2010.

[31] Author's interview, April 2011.

[32] Author's interview, April 2010.

[33] *Forward Magazine* (March 2010), "New directions for Syrian society." By Stephen Starr. Issue 37, p. 18.

[34] Author's interview, April 2011.

[35] http://www.syriatrust.org/site/subwebsite/windex.php?websiteID=UCZAMk5JYW0=&websiteLang=en&mtree_id=MjA2 (last accessed 3.1.2012).

[36] Author's interview, May 2010.

[37] Author's interview, February 2011.

[38] The new personal status law, which sought to assimilate regulations for all confessions and effectively meant a de-liberalization for women from religious minorities, was leaked to the public by head of the Syrian Women Observatory Bassam al-Kadi, a former Communist activist (Maktabi forthcoming).

[39] *Syria Today* (March 2010), "Access all areas? Unlocking Civil Society." By Dalia Haidar. Issue 59. p. 33.

[40] STD, like the Jordanian General Union of Voluntary Societies, "is registered at the ministry […] like any other organization and is subject to the same rules and regulations. In practice, however, it [the Jordanian Union] is inextricably linked to the administrative apparatus through its regulative and oversight functions" (Wiktorowicz 2000: 55). It is very probable that STD accomplishes similar information-gathering activities for the Syrian MoSAL but it is not clear whether this is institutionalized in any way.

[41] Head of STD Omar Hallaj: "The project "Firdos" […] was the model which was followed, and later numerous activities entered through the doors which it opened" [from Arabic original] al-Rai 2010, see endnote 17.

[42] Author's interview, April 2010.

[43] Author's interviews in 2010 and 2011; see also Zintl (forthcoming b).

[44] Yet, in the economic field, there are obvious exceptions when working in new institutions like private banks (permitted by decree in 2001) or the Damascus Security Exchange (opened in 2009).

[45] While, to some degree, 'new NGOs' compete with existing charities (see Ruiz de Elvira in this volume), they tend to perceive themselves as belonging to a new "superior" generation of NGOs (see section 5).

[46] Author's interview, May 2010.

[47] British-born to Syrian parents, Asma al-Akhras graduated from Kings College, London, with a BSc in computer sciences. She then worked as an investment banker and had been accepted to study for an MBA at Harvard when she married Bashar al-Asad, who came to know her during a 1.5 years' training period in ophthalmology in London. See e.g. Leverett 2005: 74.

[48] *Forward Magazine* (October-November 2011), "The director of the Development Research Center at the Syria Trust for Development. Nader Kabbani: Development policies continue despite the crisis", p. 48.

[49] Besides the UK-educated First Lady they are French- and Danish-educated architect Roudeina al-Khani; US-educated and London-based treasurer Kareem Sakka; US-educated legal expert Emad Tinawi; and Syrian-educated ex-ambassador to Malaysia Lamia Assi. Not only the First Lady enjoys close linkages with the regime but al-Khani is a consultant to

the Ministry of Presidential Affairs and Assi is/was Minister of Tourism (since 2011) resp. of Economics (2010-2011) and is "in charge of [STD's] partnership with the Government sector" (See http://www.syriatrust.org/en/about-trust/trustees, accessed 12.12.2011).

[50] Author's interview, April 2010. Similarly, another interviewee – working for a grassroots' NGO – remarked that the Trust's employees were "selected because of their similarity to the First Lady" (author's interview, March 2010).

[51] At project level, foreign-trained personnel do not constitute the majority (e.g. author's interviews, March/April 2010) but still constitute a much larger share in comparison to most fields in the Syrian private and private sectors.

[52] Until he took office in early 2010, the First Lady was CEO-in-kind but not in name.

[53] Author's interview, April 2010.

[54] To add in passing, artist Mustafa Ali and member of the Syrian Society for Smoking Cessation Iyad al-Shatti (see endnote 21) also attained academic degrees abroad, in Italy and the US, respectively.

[55] For instance, that AAMAL's CEO took a degree from a Chinese university will have mattered less than his vast international working experience in the development sector.

[56] Author's interview, April 2010.

[57] Author's interview, April 2010.

[58] This was for instance stressed in Bashar al-Asad's inaugural speech in summer 2000, in which he made clear that Syria would not follow the Western version of democracy but devise its own.

[59] Then STD's CEO conjures the need for more grassroots activity in that the Trust's work: "It does neither come from above nor from abroad, but from inside and the basis." Both quotes from Arabic original, in al-Rai 2010, see endnote 17.

[60] This issue regularly came up in interviews. See author's interviews March-May 2010, April 2010.

[61] Author's interview, April 2011.

[62] Author's interview, April 2010.

[63] Author's interview, April 2010.

[64] Author's interview, April 2010.

[65] Author's interview, April 2011.

[66] Author's interview, March 2010. Numerous other interviewees shared this opinion about disadvantages of being internationally connected, though in less drastic words. It was stressed that international contacts are an asset only if the regime considers them risk-free.

[67] Author's interview, March 2010.

[68] Author's interview, May 2010.

[69] Author's interview, March 2010.

[70] He complained that BASMA became "untouchable and very prestigious" and that now all volunteers must formally apply in writing, even he who had worked with it before it was licensed (author's interview, March 2010).

[71] Though al-Kadi neither is foreign-trained nor speaks fluent English, his 'modern' and 'secular' opposition to the personal status law serves the same purpose in the regime's campaign for a Modernization-Theory style

societal– not political – activism. Paradoxically, the fact that al-Kadi was imprisoned for political activities and that his organization is not registered at MoSAL makes him and his work even more valuable for the regime's promotion of a non-political civil society:
"I was imprisoned for seven years because of my political work and have been banned from travelling for the past 19 years. Following my release from prison, […] I began to see the importance of separating society from politics, so I left the latter and went into the area of social work"
From: *Syria Today* (November 2009), "Q&A Bassam al-Kadi, Director of the Syrian Women Observatory." By Nadia Muhanna. http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/november-2009/452-society/4282-qaa-bassam-al-kadi-director-of-the-syrian-women-observatory (last accessed 7.1.2012).

[72] Since the 19th century Arab individuals and delegates of government programmes (e.g. under Ottoman sultan Selim III or Egypt's Mohammad Ali) studied at higher education institutes mostly in Istanbul or in Europe. See e.g. Hourani (1983[1962]: chapter 2); Szyliowicz (1996: 297).

[73] Author's interviews, April and May 2010.

[74] As did several interviewees; see also examples in SBC 2008.

[75] For more detailed information on this, see Zintl (forthcoming a).

[76] Author's interview, April 2010.

[77] Author's interviews, April 2010. Most alumni organizations were established in the 2000s, e.g. the Syrian Association of the Soviet and Russian Higher Education Institutions' Alumni (*2002), the Syrian Graduates of German Universities (SADU, *2003), or the Syrian Society of US Graduates (SSUSG, *2005).

[78] Author's interview, May 2010.

[79] Author's interview, May 2010.

[80] Author's interview, April 2010.

[81] *Zakat* is one of Islam's five religious duties. See also Pierret (forthcoming) for the popularity and importance of giving *zakat* amongst Syrian merchants.

[82] Despite of this rhetoric, the regime also needs to support and interact with religious charities, which are more popular and trusted on neighbourhood level (see Ruiz de Elvira in this volume).

[83] The term "generation" has for example been used in *Forward Magazine* (March 2010), "New directions for Syrian society." By Stephen Starr. Issue 37, pp. 20f.

[84] Author's interview, April 2010.

[85] See *Forward Magazine* (March 2010), "New directions for Syrian society." By Stephen Starr. Issue 37, pp. 20f; *Syria Today* (March 2010), "Access all areas? Unlocking Civil Society." By Dalia Haidar. Issue 59. pp. 31, 35.

[86] See interview with STD's CEO: "We must look into Syrian history and say that its civil society is very old [… At that time] this did not exist neither in Europe nor in the US […] 10 years ago, the process of developing a modern civil society started" [from Arabic original]. From al-Rai 2010, see endnote 17.

[87] Author's interview, April 2010.

[88] Author's interview, May 2010.

[89] One STD employee interviewed in April 2010: "We wanted to send a very clear statement: we want to engage more societies [sic]. We want to work on the development in all ways, and engage people, and everyone is implicated. The speech of Her Excellency, the opening speech, was extremely powerful […]: *every person* counts in the society."

[90] Impression from author's interviews, though not corroborated within the defined limits of the current research project.

[91] Like his father, Bashar al-Asad has been making efforts to boost his Muslim credentials, e.g. by ostensibly visiting Friday prayers or celebrating Muslim festive days.

[92] This paradox became also clear from international news coverage on the development conference: "The few Syrians [at the conference] who presented papers were more analytical than propagandistic. Two keynote speakers were from the United States and the United Kingdom – hardly the sort of thing one expects from a country that defines itself as the throbbing heart of Arabism." From *Daily Star* (28.1.2010): "Signals of Change from Syria." By Rami Khouri. Available on: http://all4syria.info/content/view/20680/75/ (last accessed 3.2.2010).

[93] One interviewee (April 2011) illustrated this by complaining that Western media frequently recurred to some well-known foreign-educated reformers in the Syrian cabinet, while ignoring other Western-educated ministers whose politics do not fit into the Western vision of successful neoliberal reforms.

[94] For instance, one interviewee (March 2010) stressed that their NGOs accept only donations "in a strict sense", i.e. without any involvement in terms of contents or lobbying.

[95] This is comparable to subjects in authoritarian systems who, despite potential pangs of conscience, 'act as if' they believed the regime's propaganda. Lisa Wedeen (1999), who also coined the expression "acting as if', aptly describes this for the personal cult surrounding Hafiz al-Asad:

> "[T]he idea […] of uttering patently spurious statements or tired slogans is not the one expressly articulated---Asad is in no meaningful literal sense the "premier pharmacist." Rather, Asad is powerful because his regime can compel people to say the ridiculous and to avow the absurd" (1999: 12).

Bashar al-Asad "updated" his father's strategy by directing a more realistic and 'modern' rhetoric at the international community.

[96] See the president's speech in end-March 2011, available on Syria Comment (http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8917, last accessed 2.5.2011).

[97] Author's interview, November 2011.

[98] It was postponed to autumn 2011 but, at the time of writing, still has not taken place.

[99] Author's interview, November 2011.

[100] *Vogue Daily* (25.2.2011), "Asma al-Assad: A Rose in the Desert." By Joan Juliet Buck.

[101] At first, she was believed to have left to the UK but in October she made Western headlines with failing to comment on her husband's bloody

crackdown in a meeting with aid workers in Damascus and in January 2012 was seen at a pro-government rally in Damascus.
(See *The Independent* (18.10.2011), "So, what do you think of your husband's brutal crackdown, Mrs Assad?" By Beach, Alastair. Avalaible at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/so-what-do-you-think-of-your-husbands-brutal-crackdown-mrs-assad-2372008.html (last accessed 22.10.2011); *Daily Telegraph* (12.1.2012), "Assad's British wife rallies to his side.").

[102] *Forward Magazine* (October-November 2011), "The director of the Development Research Center at the Syria Trust for Development. Nader Kabbani: Development policies continue despite the crisis", p. 48f.

[103] For instance, SYEA and STD's research division, financially supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre, presented the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Syria Report 2009 in late 2011.

[104] http://www.syriatrust.org/site/subwebsite/windex.php?websiteID=UCZAMk5JYW0=&websiteLang=en&pname=YXJ0aWNsZV9kZXRhaWxz&filename=MjAxMTA3MDYxMjMwMTEw&htree_id=MTk0.

[105] These reforms included: cancellation of the state of emergency, which had been in place since 1963; several general amnesties; new laws covering the media, peaceful demonstrations, parties, and elections respectively; as well as establishing a commission for drafting a new constitution (for a collection see Syrian Arab News Agency (1.1.2012), *Decrees, Laws and Decisions Issued in 2011*. Available on: http://sana.sy/eng/361/2012/01/01/391574.htm, last accessed 11.1.2012).Considering the detailed stipulations of all these reforms, it remains unclear to what extent they liberalize or, again, 'upgrade' the authoritarian political field.

[106] *Forward Magazine* (October-November 2011), "The director of the Development Research Center at the Syria Trust for Development. Nader Kabbani: Development policies continue despite the crisis", p. 49.

[107] Forward Magazine directly asked Kabbani whether this "is necessary", showing that this practice has become under attack after the "foreign conspiracy" blame game (see previous endnote, p. 48).

[108] This impression was further corroborated by the fact that, in spring 2011, it proved more difficult to conduct interviews with repatriates than it had been in 2010.

[109] *Syria Today* (November 2011), "What Does "Activism" Mean in Today's Syria?" By Massa Mufti-Hamwi. http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/component/content/article/833-focus/17034-what-does-qactivismq-mean-in-todays-syria- (last accessed 4.12.2011).

[110] Interestingly, he thereby inverses the 'positive' and 'negative' connotations of *mudjtama al-ahli* and *mudjtama al-madani*:

> "In Arab society, there is a conceptual difference between civic and civil societies—a distinction absent in English, which conflates the two in one word. Civil society, according to German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, is based on inherited bonds and organisations that a person is born into, in which freedom of choice is not involved. Civic society, in contrast, refers to voluntary, nongovernmental and non-patrimonial social organisations that enlarge people's capacities to participate in

> public life; relations here are based on freedom, interest, and voluntary affiliation. For historical and cultural reasons, Arab civic society is still essentially more of a civil society, composed mainly of charitable civil associations and NGOs with social and religious solidarity missions. These need to be transformed into advocates of development, with long-term, as opposed to partial, short-term solutions."

(From: *Syria Today* (November 2011), "From Clans to Facebook.*"* By Karim Abou Halaweh. http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/component/content/article/833-focus/17033-from-clans-to-facebook (last accessed 4.12.2011))

[111] Mufti-Hamwi evokes Mother Teresa for social activism's peaceful mission while Abou Halaweh uses a theory by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnis (See articles in Syria Today November 2011, as in previous two endnotes).

[112] *Forward Magazine* (June-July 2011), "A new civil society initiative launched in Syria", p. 20.

[113] Bassam al-Kadi (see endnote 71) is one of the founders: It seems he moved back into politics but this time supporting the status quo.
See Syrian Arab News Agency (2011), *Ittlaq haraka suriyya al-watan. Al-'amal bil-wasail al-madania wa al-dimuqratiyya al-silmiyya lil-khurudj min al-azma* [Arabic: Launch of the Syria is the Homeland Movement. Work with civil, democratic, and peaceful means towards a way out from the crisis]. http://www.sana.sy/ara/2/2011/10/26/377852.htm, (last accessed 25.10.2011).

[114] On these terms see Hirschman 1970.

[115] For instance, government-controlled media claimed in April 2011 that Islamists had announced a Caliphate in Der'aa, then reported that extremists smuggled in weapons from Lebanon, and were quick to blame two bombings in Damascus, in December 2011 and January 2012 respectively, on al-Qaida and fundamentalist Salafi groups.

[116] Author's italics, see *ABC news* (7.12.2011)*: "TRANSCRIPT: ABC's Barbara Walters'[sic] Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad."* Available on: http://abcnews.go.com/International/transcript-abcs-barbara-walters-interview-syrian-president-bashar/story?id=15099152#.TuCrXvJGnG0 (last accessed 8.12.2011).

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Syria News
Syria Today
Al-Thawra
Vogue Daily

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