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**SYRIAN VOICES FROM PRE-REVOLUTION SYRIA:
CIVIL SOCIETY AGAINST ALL ODDS**

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Cover photo: A special symposium of the Syrian filmmaker, director and activist Halla Al Alabdallah in which she discusses one of her films with eminent Syrian intellectuals and artists in 2009 in Damascus.



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Introduction: Civil Society Against All Odds

Salam Kawakibi en Bassma Kodmani

With mass protests in Syria in full swing, and violence reaching unprecedented levels, it may at first seem peculiar to release a volume of papers that document and analyse the inner workings and fate of Syria's civil society as it manifested itself on the eve of the uprising in early 2011. The current clashes between armed groups and the regime, their sad trail of human casualties and suffering, and the regional and international intrigues affecting Syria's current plight all appear to be deserving our more immediate attention. Yet whatever the outcomes of the current uprising and confrontation may be, the role of Syria's civil society will be crucial. The country's reconstruction, in any possible political scenario, will rely on the nation's brightest, most experienced and engaged citizens who, in one way or another, managed to build a track record of civil engagement and development work. We are confident that the future social and political conditions that may emerge out of the current conflict, whatever their exact nature is, will bring about new opportunities to (re-)build our country. In such a daunting exercise new social actors are bound to present themselves as the current uprising has not only witnessed the proliferation of violence and inflicted scars on Syria's social constitution, but also generated an impressive level of mutual solidarity, new grassroots initiatives and unprecedented forms of collective action to cope under excruciatingly difficult circumstances and to help those most seriously affected by the conflict. Yet new future opportunities should not be confused with a tabula rasa approach wherein everything and everybody will be viewed as constituting a break with the past. Syrians' past experiences in building a civil society of active and participatory citizenship, and their achievements, against all odds and prior to the uprising, will help determine the prospects for and viability of any future effort directed at reconstruction, reconciliation and development. It is against this background that we believe it timely to present our collection of papers on --and written by-- Syrian civil society activists about their experiences, perspectives, dilemmas and achievements. In doing so, we provide a rare but, we think, much needed platform for Syrian voices in the debate on their own country's future. At the same time we contend that the current collection of papers --a civic anthology of sorts-- is testimony to the fact that a Syrian civil society, despite its shortcomings and the many challenges it faces, exists --and will mature if given a genuine chance and a degree of freedom to develop. We of course realise that recently conditions in Syria have changed rapidly, and in some respects dramatically so. Yet the paths and repertoires Syrian civil society activists have chosen and developed in the recent and distant past will, both in a positive and

negative sense, affect our options for the future. Between 2010 and 2011, Syrian participants met at several occasions to share their views on and experiences in civil engagement, many of them meeting for the first time. This resulted in the collection of papers we are now able to present to a Syrian and a wider international readership. We would like to thank Hivos, the Dutch humanist organisation that helped facilitate these meetings and our initiative, for the invaluable support it granted us within the framework of its Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia.

Syrian Civil Society's (Re-)Birth Pangs

Governance and civil society are commonly viewed as forming a pair in support of each other. In a context where civil society is recognised as a legitimate actor by the government, the latter provides the legal framework; the enabling environment with the necessary rules and procedures that allow civil society organisations to develop. In turn, the government relies on civil society to mobilize talents, knowledge, entrepreneurship, and capacities within the country. In short, the former protects the latter and, in turn, civil society organisations generate actors and groups contributing to social development in ways that enhance the quality of governance. In contrast, in an authoritarian system, none of this applies. Such has been the case in Syria for over half a century. In the forty years prior to Bashar Al Assad's ascendance to power, indeed since the early 1960s, the regime dealt with society as a whole as if it was its worst enemy. It sought to contain it, disempower its (political, social and religious) institutions, and strip available social forces of their vitality. It then sought to restructure society in ways that maintained façade institutions with subservient leaders at their helm. Since the year 2000 and the succession of Bashar Al Assad who prolonged this system built by his father in the 1970s, the regime evolved, primarily in two ways. First, it sought to build for itself an image of modernity, and in some but limited cases it introduced genuine measures of reform in order to reap the benefits of globalization. Introducing advanced information technology, for example, was treated as a priority. Yet the strategy was designed to bring as much technology as possible, without meaningfully improving citizens' access to information. The regime then understood that the West was keen to see and promote Syria's civil society, to which the regime responded by seizing the opportunity to strengthen its own image through carefully promoting certain types of NGOs, which ultimately served to strengthen its control over society. This way the Assad regime surfed on the wave of civil society promotion, and basically extended the same rationale it had been applying to perfect its control over society. Rarely have such modern means been deployed to serve the narrow interests of an authoritarian regime, putting liberal clothing on what essentially remained a totalitarian

system. Societal forces, although disempowered for so many years, also sought to take advantage of outside interest in supporting civil society, and simply took the regime up to its word when it declared its intention to allow NGOs to develop. In so doing, civil society actors engaged in genuine efforts to occupy the limited spaces that the regime seemed to open up to them. The result, perhaps predictably, was that on the eve of the uprising in 2011, Syria's civil society still struggled to emerge. Yet, inadvertently or not, the regime's ambivalent approach had allowed civil activists to make some gains and energetically embark on new initiatives which are essential in any future steps to genuinely and decisively turn to society's empowerment. It is their stories that are central to this anthology of Syria's civil society.

Operating Under a Low Ceiling

In the year 2000, Bashar Al Assad was quick to signal that the change of person at the head of the system did not mean a change in the system itself. It was less than three months after his rise to power that he moved to shut down civil society forums and to arrest their most prominent members. Ever since, a whole array of measures have been applied to stunt the emergence of voices, let alone institutions, in society. All activities within society, and these of NGOs in particular, were monitored around the clock. Formal legislation and regulations for civil society organisations prohibited them from engaging in any religious or political activities, but in practice these prohibitions went even further. Restrictions affected even the vocabulary of civil engagement and action. Civil society groups had to negotiate not only a space to operate and exist but also the very words they can and cannot use to describe their activities. For instance, they are banned from using the word 'freedom' even when it is uttered in the context of a cultural event. Expressions such as 'women's rights' are found to be objectionable by licensing bodies, and website editors are asked to avoid them. One of the most disempowering aspects of the regime's strategy pertains to its constant attempts to build on the widespread belief among Syrians in conspiracy theory, and accuse civil society organisations of contributing to a foreign agenda. This feature, while not exclusive to Syria, is one that adds to all the other numerous constraints de-legitimizing and incapacitating civil society, limiting its ability to raise funds and work in sectors that are in dire of its presence and services.

Using Every Opportunity

The last decade has been characterized by the rule of a group of elites who were most interested in controlling national wealth and building partnerships with the business community of Damascus and Aleppo as long as this served their interests. Bashar Al Assad and his entourage appeared to have little inclination, or at least ultimately failed, to effectively promote a balanced development process for the country. They neglected entire regions and sectors,

and organised networks of corruption involving governors, security officers and government employees throughout the country. There was no proper management of agriculture, nor was there any planned investment strategy for the country's industry to improve its productivity, or proper urban planning. This negligence triggered efforts from within society to try and take care of itself. New initiatives such as those by community associations took advantage of the emphasis put on local development by the five-year Plan of 2006-2010 to create the Friends of Salamiyah Society, as described in Mohamed Aldbiyat's contribution. The Society sought to cover a broad area defined as environmental, developmental and cultural, and this way managed to assert its presence in local civil society. The extraordinary expansion of charities is the strongest indicator of Syrian society's dynamism and its ability to take care of itself. They reflect the strong solidarity ties within society as well as efforts to compensate for the failure of the governance system. Civil society grows away from the state as it seeks to protect itself from the nuisance and corruption and tries to carve out some trusted spaces for itself. The notable rise and revitalization of charities particularly in the health sector is described in this volume by Fouad Mohammad Fouad. Yet in the fields of arts and culture, too, citizens have shown remarkable resilience. Next to state neglect, these fields are seen as dangerous because they have a high capacity for dissent while their expression is difficult to control. In the volume, Fadel Kawakibi eloquently describes the alternative society that the cultural field sought to create, mainly in reference to the country's experiences --past and present-- in cinema-making and --watching. A more recent phenomenon has been the perversion of the field of NGOs due to the emergence, in 2007, of Governmental NGOs (GONGOs) or Quasi-Governmental NGOs (QUANGOs), as described by co-editor Salam Kawakibi. The Syrian Trust for Development, which emerged as the key pillar of the government's attempts to design a strategy for social development, hired the best cadre from inside and outside the country, set professional rules for its operations, and was generously endowed by private donors from inside and outside Syria. Its work is undoubtedly of a good quality. Yet it intervenes in areas that are usually the responsibility of ministries and state institutions, and indeed should be part of the government's public policies. Thus the role of the Trust appears to be of a remedial nature, compensating for the government's neglect and the failure of proper governance. In addition, the Trust had a pervasive effect in that it strengthened the control of the ruling family over large financial resources and, consequently, over citizens who depend on it for their income. Rather than allowing a process of devolution of certain functions to civil society, the group around the Assad family this way promoted the de facto privatization of the state. The monstrous expansion of rogue businesses involving members of the ruling family were perhaps the most

shocking outcome of this approach, but the growth in size, scope and budget of the GONGOs were part of the same rationale. The field of gender equality was initially seen as a promising area in which civil society could invest and thrive. Women sought to take advantage of the modernist discourse of Bashar Al Assad in order to foster a discussion of gender-related issues. Yahya Al Aous demonstrates in his contribution that websites were a very convenient and effective tool in this context, as they were supposedly reassuring enough for the regime and its security agencies to tolerate, while they allowed for the dissemination of relevant experiences in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, particularly with regards to family law. However, civil society activism on gender issues also illustrates how weakly embedded the regime is within Syrian society. While it worked to subdue religious institutions and destroy their capacity to organise any activity outside its control, the regime also sought to appease religious forces, especially the most conservative among them. Therefore, while the ruling group cultivated its image as a progressive and secular regime, it appeared unable or unwilling to challenge those forces resisting a progressive family law that genuinely protects women's rights. Unlike Morocco or Tunisia in the days of Bourguiba, the ruling elite in Syria was willing to let the fundamentalist current within the religious establishment draft a reactionary family law, rather than face the resistance of these forces and take the risk of seeing them challenge the regime. In her contribution, Nawal Yaziji describes how it was only after a strong reaction from civil society groups, who mobilized secular intellectuals and activists against the conservative draft law, that the government felt compelled to withdraw it. This enhanced the image of a regime which, although nurturing a culture of fear, seems to fear its own society just as much.

Breaking the Chains

As no independent political party in Syria was allowed to operate, while the regime prevented any attempt at using civil society organisations for any form of public advocacy, social forces were reduced to struggling within the very limited space left for non-political NGOs to operate. An ever lower ceiling led civil society to lower its expectations and reduce the significance of its initiatives, leading to a vicious circle wherein both civil society and society as a whole suffered and suffocated. Yet despite all odds, many Syrians refused to be discouraged. Their engagement in civic action remained motivated by a strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of the home country as a subtle form of patriotism, and of a deeply rooted concern for not leaving the country to its predatory rulers. The evilness of the regime was clear to many Syrians before the uprising, and is now clear to everyone. But there is another dimension that is rarely included in the analysis, namely the incompetence of the current leaders in managing the country, the weakness of their political skills, and their unwillingness to invest time and energy to understand the structures of society, its specificities, and the

needs of its different regions. They inherited a system, invested in improving its façade, but took for granted the continuation of the system and the absence of any challenge to it. For over four decades, the Syrians were reduced to waiting for a sign from the Prince as nothing could be done without the blessing of the regime. Public space was in effect cancelled out. Unable to take action, to build institutions or to organise themselves without being harassed and punished, while suffocating under censorship, citizens were left with little option than signing manifestos, as the cultural and artistic elites did, or draft declarations, as in the case of the Damascus Declaration signed by a coalition of political movements and intellectuals. Such initiatives hinted at a growing sense of political maturity. Yet such written documents became a substitute for the action necessary to allow the country's modest or latent civil society initiatives to thrive and flourish. On the day that the Syrian population decided to challenge the 'low ceiling' under which they had resigned themselves to live, the response from the regime was to crush society and wage a total war against its people. Perhaps for some Western observers of Syria, the behaviour of Bashar the ophthalmologist, whose wife is an electrifying and sophisticated lady reading English newspapers, may have come as a surprise. But for many Syrians who intimately knew the nature of the regime built by Bashar's father, and who knew how little it had changed under Bashar himself, the regime has only been revealing its true nature. From that perspective it was a relief to see the whole world finally discover and admit the ugliness of the Syrian regime, while the latter undoubtedly served to mobilize increasingly large groups across all regions of the country. This volume tells the story at first hand of a society that seeks to survive despite the suffering inflicted by one of the most suppressive regimes left on the planet. It is this sad record that Syrians have now sought to revoke by rebelling against the formidable security apparatus of the Assad regime. The narratives and analyses of several civil society experiences collected in this book offer a rare window through which the reader can get a glimpse of what we believe to be a different and indeed the real Syria. Its contributions are written by Syrians attached to their country, aware of its needs and willing to work in silence. They took part in the very society that today is rising to the surface and voicing its demands. Those who are protesting are paying a very high price, and will not be content with small and gradual change. They had much higher standards when they launched the protests to begin with, and they become more determined by the repeated crimes against society perpetrated by the regime since. As Syrians will be picking up the pieces of a very costly struggle to liberate themselves, the embryo of civil society that somehow managed to grow under the Assad regime will be a precious asset to begin building the bedrock of a more democratic and developed society. Notions of equal citizenship, mutual respect, justice, security and safety for all citizens --as opposed to the national

security touted by the regime-- were all embedded in those small and fragile islands of civic action, as Hassan Abbas describes in the first chapter of this volume. With the uprising, and the violent response it triggered, entering their third year, the determination of ordinary Syrians to break the chains reached a point of no return.

Bassma Kodmani

Bassma Kodmani is a political scientist by training and a professor of International Relations at Paris University. She holds a PhD from Sciences Po Paris. Her main scholarly experience is the analysis of Arab societies, the strategic relations of the Middle East and regional conflicts as well as the Palestinian question. She has vast experience in policy analysis and policy advice through her time working in key international organizations, first within the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) and later with the Collège de France, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the Centre d'études et de relations internationales (CERI). She spent seven years in Cairo as head of the Governance and International Cooperation program of the Ford Foundation Middle East office, from where her main activity was to support Arab research centres and civil society organizations. In 2005, she established the Arab Reform Initiative, a consortium of Arab policy research institutes on reform and democratic transition in the Arab world. In August 2011, Bassma Kodmani participated in the founding of the Syrian National Council and became a member of the Executive Bureau and Head of the Foreign Relations Bureau. She resigned from the Council in August 2012.

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Chapter 1: The Emergence and Evolution of Syria's Civil Society

Salam Kawakibi and Wael Sawah

Introduction

Evidently, the idea of 'civil society' is not a new one. It was touched upon by Aristotle, Hegel, Marx and Gramsci. However, the term was redeployed extensively in the beginning of the 1980s, primarily to contest the hegemony of Soviet-bloc states. Subsequently, the term was directed towards confronting the dictatorships in states of the South where international organisations and Western donors called on citizens to 'liberate' themselves from authoritarianism. Faced with the negative effects of globalisation, and the inability of governments to confront pressure from international organisations, civil society movements emerged as a means of confronting the state, and in an attempt to organise society outside its once predominant framework of state institutions. Often, this development has been considered as the ascent of a 'comprehensive civil society'. Yet the exact meaning of the term, and especially who or what can legitimately claim to be part of it, has suffered as a result. Political authorities and governmental organisations, Islamic movements and their social and cultural organisations, women's movements, professional organisations, organisations for the protection of the environment, consumers' societies, human rights defenders, political parties, non-Islamic opposition groups; all claim to embody a genuine civil society while accusing each other of exploiting the banner to achieve goals incompatible with civil society's real meaning and virtues. Following a brief introduction about the origins and evolution of the notion of civil society, in general and in Syria, this chapter gives an overview of the shifting relevance of civil society as a concept and as a practice in Syrian contemporary history up to the start of the uprising in 2011. Civil society, it is argued, is a relevant concept, and has the potential to contribute to Syria's development. Yet daunting obstacles remain, as next to the state's restrictions confusion remains about civil society's real meaning generally and its relation to political change more specifically.

History and Theoretical Employment of a Dynamic Concept

Some researchers trace back the idea of civil society to Aristotle's 'koinonia politike', or 'political community', where elites aim at achieving welfare and at allowing mankind to fully fulfil its nature as 'political animals'. In this conceptualization civil society contrasts the 'absence of general order' that prevailed in more backward societies surrounding the ancient Greek city, as well as against 'serf groups' or

'deprived communities' that could be found in the city itself. With St. Augustine, the concept of civil society acquired its meaning in referring to an incomplete political system of men juxtaposed to the higher authority of 'the City of God'. This concept dominated throughout the Middle Ages both in the Christian and the Muslim world, capturing the constant tension between community and kings, and between community and the Caliphate in Sunni Islam, and the infallible Imamate of the Shiites. By the end of the Middle Ages, civil society notions began to emerge with more explicit positive connotations, as calls were made to establish political or 'civil' groups that, using rationalist thought and the rule of law, faced absolute monarchies and their parochial outlook.

In parallel with the contractual theories of Hobbs and Rousseau, where civil society identifies its relation with the political community and the state, a new form of the concept of a social contract arose, wherein civil society finds itself facing groups sustaining and perpetuating inequality and relations of domination and submission. Such ideas were in tune with the notion of 'the political nature of man', which endowed the state with a dominant role in defining rights for the sake of advancing 'civilisation'. This concept emerged first in Britain with the theories of philosophers such as Locke and Hume, for whom civil society became the special domain for economic and cultural relations, defining those who have become 'civilised' in the sense of 'achieving one's human potential in a general sense and not restricted to political participation. It is here where the role of the state is thus perceived to be confined to the process of organizing and rationing the conditions of civil society. However, a clear theoretical distinction between civil society and state did not emerge until much later with the writings of Hegel. His approach distinguished between legal citizens, for whom the law is a principle of co-existence, as it determines equality among them, and the vertical relations between the governed and the master, which were to be retained. The conclusion reached was that 'civil society', transcending the family, allows individuals to surpass the inevitable nature of family relations.

The end of the 1970s witnessed the use of term 'civil society' deployed for the purpose of criticising the hegemony of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block, before expanding the term to encompass all dictatorships and authoritative regimes in the South, including countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Consequently, current civil society discourse has tended to juxtapose civil society, as the embodiment of 'Good', to face down the 'Evil' of the state. In other words, no society can advance and play its appropriate role except within the framework of a liberal structure where the role of the state is confined to providing general services at most while giving primacy to civil society. In this approach, civil society henceforth becomes a highly idealistic

concept contrasting the inherently undesirable state, while those who can claim membership attain legitimacy in opposition to those who cannot. It is against this background that religious groups, although they had opposed the idea of civil society due to its association with rights and liberties, embraced the idea and exploited it for their own struggle against the modern state, in an attempt to regain their positions and influence in it.

Position of Syrian Civil Society and the Mechanism of its Development

The short reign of King Faisal (1918-1920) is widely considered to have kick started the establishment of the modern Syrian state. It prompted the emergence of modern political elites who started playing a role in shaping the country's political directions and trends toward a process of modernization built on constitutionalist principles. Accordingly, Syrian intellectuals began to copy forms of political activity from Europe and integrate them into their societies. This was apparent in the establishment of clubs and societies, and in the formation of political parties based on pioneering political thought. However, such new organisations reflected the flavours of Syrian society and its divisions as well. Historically, Syria's societies preceded political parties; an indication of the desire of emerging modern intellectuals to influence the public sphere and to shape it. We can mention here the Young Arab Society (YAS) (*Al Fatah*), which called for full and complete independence of the Arab states, and for achieving this by transforming the Arab nations into a living nation. This way, intellectuals 'hijacked' politics from those who had dominated and inherited it for decades. They began their political activities on the basis of new principles, based on the mechanism of modernity in the West with all its concepts of the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom to form parties, freedom of expression, and many other concepts that shaped political life in the West. Following the arrival of the French in Damascus on the 24th of July 1920, the political elite in Syria split into two groups; one called for seeking an end to the French mandate by peaceful means, the other called for armed resistance. And while the debate went on, the French High Commissioner proposed that the Syrians establish a political party for the purpose of organising their demands, and to negotiate with the French on behalf of the Syrian people. Consequently, a new party, called the People's Party, was established at the end of April 1925. Its programme called for the independence of Syria, the recognition of its national sovereignty, and its right to establish a democratic government. In addition, it demanded the unification of Syria by including all regions within its national borders. Meanwhile, the National Bloc was formed in 1932, with its membership allocated to persons according to religious and regional considerations. The presence of Christian members was a gesture of national reconciliation, although a regional distribution of its leadership according to their governorate was as important. Other new

political parties followed, distinguishing themselves by not exclusively containing landowners and the traditional bourgeoisie, but focusing on those of rural origins as long as they had enjoyed a Western education; parties such as the League of National Labour, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and the Syrian Communist Party. When Syria gained its independence on the 17th of April 1946, the country's political elites were divided in their adherence to ideologically competing parties such as the Baath Party, the Communist Party, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, in addition to parties evolving out of the National Bloc, such as the National Party and the People's Party. However, the latter soon began to witness a decline in its popularity. Equally, ideological parties began to dominate the political scene, including the Baath Party which enjoyed increased popularity after merging with the 'Arab Socialists', led by Akram Al Hourani. The same applied to the Communist Party, though to a lesser extent. The contribution of the Muslim Brotherhood to the country's politics, on the other hand, started with intellectuals who had enjoyed modern education and who considered religion as a main contributor to the culture of Syrian society. The relative ascent of ideological parties emphasised the decline of the symbols of independence and the rise of political elites active in the more ideological parties. However, the chaos resulting from political instability and disagreements over a national contract, encompassing all political parties and parliamentary groups, repeatedly caused the resignation of successive governments. The Palestine war of 1948 added to this volatility, and directly affected political life by pushing it towards ideological thoughts rejecting the status quo. These factors prompted the first military coup led by Hosni Al Zaim on the 30th of March 1949, thus ushering a new era of military intervention at odds with the development of constitutional life. More coups followed, while a growing nationalist, leftist and Nasserite wind heralded the end of liberalism in Syrian political life and the beginning of the hegemony of the "Left". The final curtain fell on traditional liberal politics and its influence on society. After that, governments in Syria came and went, continuously underscoring the country's instability. Consequently, Syrian officers supported by a large section of the intellectuals, and undercut by the rising Egyptian leader Jamal Abdul Nasser, formed a unity, the United Arab Republic (UAR), with Egypt. However, the troublesome nature of this unity soon started to surface, primarily due to increased security controls, and the social and political decline suffered by Syrian political parties, which the unity had dissolved. Syria's political elites, including those adhering to the Baath Party, began to realise they had made a big mistake. The end of the UAR happened in July 1961. The map of political parties in Syria at the time clearly reflected the active movement of ideological political parties, while the influence of independent intellectuals as well as the traditional liberal nationalist parties had waned. The military became even more active, and once again

started considering to play a more vigorous role in reshaping political life. These developments culminated in the Baath-led coup of 8 March 1963. Following this 'March Revolution', the role of the Syrian intellectual became limited to that of servants of the 'revolution', particularly after the new regime abolished first the newspapers and then dismantled the political parties. Henceforth, the state came to embody the 'revolution'. The 'Reformist Movement' followed in 1970 in an attempt to escape from the regime's captivity to its own Baathist mottos. However, and with the establishment of the permanent constitution in 1973 which stated in Article 8 that the "Arab Socialist Baath Party is the leading party in society and the state", a new form of opposition emerged within the nationalist framework, in the form of the Socialist Union Party. The Communist Party itself suffered from deep internal divisions. In the meantime, a number of leftist youth began to hold cultural gatherings that later led to the establishment of extremist leftist organisations. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, led an armed opposition against the regime, in which it suffered devastating defeat. All that remained of Syria's political life was bundled in the "Progressive National Front" (PNF), as all other parties were banned. The PNF failed to reflect the great plurality of parties that historically characterised Syria's political life. As a result, large sections of society had become marginalized or completely excluded, particularly those associated with the Islamist and liberal parties. Under these conditions national political dialogue had become meaningless.

Civil Society's Forces and Institutions

Much has been said about how civil society should be defined, especially whether it should be confined to non-governmental organisations or be expanded to include profit-making private sector actors, or even perhaps even political parties. This debate is a function of the flexibility of the concept itself and of its evolving nature. We opt for an operational definition of civil society, one that is often used in UN terminology. Accordingly, civil society here pertains to the active and voluntary participation of citizens in organisations (outside their families, friends, and work place) where they support their interests, views and ideologies. It therefore does not include activities aimed at achieving profits (i.e. the private sector) or activities aimed at reaching positions of power or government in the state. Accordingly, a large array of Syrian organisations appears to constitute the country's civil society, which can be broadly classified as follows:

1. *Professional and public organisations or unions*, such as the Workers' Unions, the General Sports Association, the General Housing Cooperative Associations, the General Farmers' Union, the Syrian Students' Union, the Women's Union, the Journalists' Union, and other syndicates such as those for lawyers, doctors, engineers, artists, etc. These organisations, however, transformed from

playing an active role as legal advocates of their members toward putting up resistance against political and social change. What is clear here is the need to alter their currently negative roles toward a genuine participatory role in the development process.

2. *Religious, missionary and charitable organisations*. These are often dedicated either to worshipping or to missionary purposes, and include Islamic academies, Christian learning institutions, and faith-based charitable organisations.
3. *Academic societies, the Writers' Unions and research centres*. These include scientists, researchers, intellectuals, and other academics. Theoretically, these centres represent progressive elite circles playing an important role in scientific research. However, legal and institutional obstacles prevent them from becoming future think tanks. In addition to that, their growth and progress requires genuine conditions of freedom.
4. *NGOs offering public benefit services*. These are organisations formed to offer benefits and support to the public, either through providing certain services or through their various activities. Examples of these include environmental and development organisations, voluntary NGOs, human rights organisations, family planning organisations, consumer societies, cooperatives, organisations for combating corruption, and others.
5. *'Invisible' civil activities*. These depend primarily on forms of small gatherings engaged in informal activities such as offering lending services to avoid paying interest.
6. *Waqf societies*. Many of these can bow on a long experience, but are currently semi-dormant. Waqf is a form of indigenous organisation based primarily on the idea of "retention", or where the asset concerned is retained or held for the purpose of bringing general benefits in order to gain God's blessing. It is premised on the religious notion that 'the rights of the collective' is God's right.
7. *Social movements and campaigns networks*. These are public groups that comprise individuals sharing common experiences or interests, and who decide to work together in order to remedy the mistakes they identify. Examples include Syrian exponents of the anti-globalisation movement, women's movements, and some cultural forums.

Civil Society and its Political and Legal Environment

The Syrian government's tenth 5-year plan ambitiously identified certain roles for Syria's civil society in a number of areas:

- helping to achieve goals and aims related to poverty reduction, and contributing to related projects;
- assisting social reforms and training programmes, building public capacities, in addition to advocacy and support programmes for the rights of women, children and special groups;
- helping to implement social mobility programmes, generating new jobs opportunities and improving living conditions in poor areas;
- participating in planning and implementing institutional reform programmes and programmes to improve state institutions' accountability, and facilitating aspects of public expenditure and processes, and reducing administrative and financial corruption;
- implementing market monitoring programmes to look after consumer interests, as well as monitoring state machinery and institutions affecting citizens and their daily life and providing them with social services;
- providing services in remote areas that lack services from either the public or private sectors, and establishing professional and other societies to achieve this.

Legally, the Syrian constitution guarantees the rights of Syrians to assembly and their freedom of expression. Article 38 of the constitution states that every citizen has the right "to express his opinions freely and openly whether through the written media or through any other means of expression" and "to participate in monitoring and engaging in constructive criticism in what guarantees the health of the national structure and support to the socialist system". Article 39 guarantees the rights of the citizen to assembly and to peacefully demonstrate according to legal stipulations. However, the government has continuously resorted to emergency laws and restricted the relevance of existing legislation in order to control activists and constrain their basic rights. In fact, most constitutional rights were made irrelevant following the imposition of Emergency Laws on 8 March 1963, which have been in effect for nearly half a century. Law No. 93 of 1985, dealing with the country's associative life, incorporated an array of restrictive measures that were used during the unification period with Egypt. Law 93 resulted in the dissolution of many civil organisations, and overruled the older law on civil associations, which had enabled

all Syrians to form societies based on "knowledge and experience". It also restricted the freedom to form new societies, while it allowed the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to control the establishment of all civil society organisations, giving it vast powers to interfere in their management. The law also gave the ministry the powers to organise the relation of any local organisation with the international community, including on funding matters. However, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs actually played a limited role in the approval process of new organisations, as applications are sent to the security agencies where they are thoroughly examined, in addition to a detailed investigation focusing on the founding members of the applying organisation. In vain, many legal civil organisations have launched campaigns to modify the Law on associative life, and presented various proposals for a new law easing the conditions imposed on forming new societies, their activities, and their relations internally and externally, such as to facilitate the ease of movement, organisation, and funding, provided all is done in full transparency and according to the letters and spirit of the law.

An Overview of Civil Society

Prior to the onset of the uprising in March 2011, there was a continuous debate between the Syrian government and its critics focusing on the issue of civil society. In essence, it is a manifestation of the deep-rooted dispute between them regarding the concept of reform itself. The government sees reforms as a gradual process achieved in instalments. The critics, on the other hand, consider reforms as comprehensive, in which civil society is to be a core participant. President Bashar Al Assad's inauguration speech in July 2000 was a direct impetus for putting the discussion of the concept of civil society on the table. Syrian intellectuals rushed to accept the invitation implied in that speech. Subsequently, 99 Syrian intellectuals paved the way for other intellectuals and politicians for open action when they signed what became known as the "Manifesto of the 99", which demanded abolishing emergency laws and allowing political freedoms and pluralism, multiculturalism, and freedoms of gathering, the media and expression. Among other initiatives, the Manifesto of the 99 led to the idea of establishing a society for reviving civil heritage and civil society. The Society issued its founding manifesto, called "Declaration of the 1000", in reference to the number of signatories. The phenomenon of cultural forums spread rapidly. These soon acquired political goals, throughout Syria. Although the largest number of forums was in Damascus, many cities and towns in Syria elsewhere witnessed similar phenomena. Meanwhile, another, relatively new phenomenon appeared on the Syrian stage, namely, human rights organisations. The concept of NGOs also expanded and developed from charitable organisations, present in large numbers throughout the country, into a more sophisticated

form, as shown by the establishment of new cultural, environmental and art societies, as well as organisations for combating serious diseases, and combating negative social phenomena more generally. Perhaps one of the most significant political and cultural forums appearing during that time was the National Dialogue Forum, established by MP Riad Seif and hosted at his private home. However, Seif took what many later considered as a hasty move when he announced the foundation of a new political party, the Social Peace Movement. This led to an acceleration of government steps putting a brake on the activities of all forums, and eventually led to suppressing them. Seif's immunity as an MP was lifted, and he was arrested and, along with a number of his forum members, sentenced to five years in prison on the pretext of financial fraud. The National Dialogue Forum was shut down; a fate that befell other forums elsewhere in Syria. The only exception was Jamal Ataasi's Forum in Damascus, which continued to play a focal point for all opposition movements in Syria until 2005, when the authorities decided to also shut this forum down, following an event in which one of its members, Ali Al Abdulla, had read out a contribution of Ali Sa'ad Eldin Al Bayanuni, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Brotherhood. This led to the arrest of Al Abdullah and the forum's closure in 2005. Damascus' short spring had come to a definite end. Would it have been possible for the Damascus Spring to have faced a different destiny? Some Syrian intellectuals believe that the civil society movement made a crucial mistake when it mixed the goals of civil engagement with political agendas. In their view, politics should have been the realm of politicians and political parties. They also pointed out that civil organisations should have focused more on their role as a social instrument whose key task is to focus on cultural, intellectual, educational, and training matters, and this way to promote democratic values and human rights. The same view holds that the chances for civil society to grow and survive could have been better served if civil society organisations had held a distance from politics and political parties.

The Damascus Declaration

The Damascus Declaration, the name given to a broad political coalition established in 2005, was the culmination of political manifestos and sit-ins, and the clear separation between civil and partisan activities. The Declaration itself called for "peaceful democratic change in the country" that would result in a "national democratic system" that would form the basis for a project of political change and reform. The Declaration was signed by the National Democratic Coalition in Syrian (a nationalist, leftist coalition comprising five leftist and nationalist parties), as well as by the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, the Democratic Kurdish Coalition, the Kurdish Democratic Front, and a number of independent national individuals including former MP Riad Seif. Within hours of issuing the declaration, many organisations, groups and individuals abroad rushed to announce their support for the Declaration, most

notably (and controversially) the Muslim Brotherhood. As such, the Damascus Declaration created a momentum for the opposition's political parties. However, it started to face real difficulties due to relentless pressures exerted by the government, but also because of huge discrepancies in the directions of the various elements participating in it, ranging from nationalist, Islamist, leftist and liberal groups. When the Damascus Declaration's National Council was held on 1 December 2007, it adopted a clearly liberal political vision for the coalition at large, as was evident in its newly issued political manifesto and its elections that excluded the nationalist and Marxist movements from the Declaration's leadership. Their failure to be selected in the General Council of the Declaration led them to suspend their membership. This happened just days before the Syrian authority launched its own arrest campaign against the Declaration's members and 12 of its leadership.

Charity Organisations

Charity organisations in Syria generally enjoy a very good reputation. They are perhaps among the oldest forms of civil society organisations in the country. As a result of the historical dispute between consecutive governments in Syria on the one hand and citizens on the other, particularly the well-off and the wealthy, Syrians resorted to charity organisations as expression of social solidarity and as a channel for *zakat* according to Islamic principles demanding that a Muslim spends part of his or her income on the poor and those in need. There are currently 600 registered charity organisations. The majority of funding for these organisations comes from donations of individual Syrians, as well as from various charitable social events and commercial projects.

GONGOS

Syria has a modified version of GONGOs exemplified by NGOs that are licensed to work in business, development, the environment, and matters related to children. Perhaps the most important of these organisations are those grouped under the umbrella of the Syria Trust for Development, which falls under the patronage of the First Lady Asma Al Assad. This organisation enjoys a large degree of external funding and has many branches, including the The Fund for Integrated Rural Development of Syria "FIRDOS", a department for youth and children, and a department for culture and heritage. Chapter 9 deals with these types of organisations. In addition, a number of societies emerged under the patronage of the First Lady that provides these organisations with protection and social prestige. This, in turn, makes them more effective, as more individuals donate to them or put themselves up as volunteer. Among the most effective of these are organisations such as Basma for Children with Cancer, and the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association (SYEA). The latter was established by a group of educated and enthusiastic young entrepreneurs, for the purpose of furthering development in Syria through encouraging

the idea of Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises. The Rainbow Society is another example of these societies and works in the field of caring for children and protecting them from violence, neglect, harm, and any form of exploitation.

Cultural Societies and Forums

According to one theory, civil society advances to occupy every space abandoned by political parties and/or the state. If this is true in other areas in the world, then it has also gained some resonance in Syria. Accordingly, the importance of civil society lies in the fact that its role is not in direct conflict, nor does it stand in the way, of governments and political parties. Historically speaking, many of Syria's cultural civil societies have been established since the 1880s. However, the dwindling role of civil society and its slow disappearance since the Baath coup in 1963 led to the retreat of many of these societies. Of these societies that are still resisting this fate we find the Sakeenah Forum, established in the 1950s by Thuraya Hafez, the Arabic Club, and Social Forum which has recently, and noticeably, resumed its activities. There are also new emerging societies such as the Sada (Echo) Society for Music, the Kawkab (Planet) Nonviolence Forum, and many other youth cultural societies in the capital and other cities.

Human Rights Organisations in Syria

Syria does not have a good human rights record. Indeed, the very concept of human rights is a new concept in Syria. As a result of rapid political developments ravishing the country since the 1960s, political concepts such as socialism, imperialism, nationalism, unity and democracy had been prevalent. The concept of advancing national liberation coincided with a retreat of the concepts of individual freedoms and human rights. Emergency Laws were declared in Syria in 1963, when the Baath party took power. Despite the country's constitution in 1973, Emergency Law has not amended, and remained active continuously throughout the next four decades. The concept of human rights entered the Syrian cultural and political realms much later than it did elsewhere in the world. In fact, the first known human rights organisation was not established until the end of the 1980s, namely the Organisation of Committees for Defending Basic and Human Rights. Due to lack of experience in the field, in addition to the political history of their founders, these committees confused their legal experience with the political parties' experience in terms of organisation and discourse. It indeed became difficult to distinguish between its announcements and that of the political opposition (particularly the leftist ones) during that time, prompting the arrest of most of their activists for a decade.

The concept of human rights did not make a comeback until the new millennium when Bashar Al Assad became president of Syria. Then, some lawyers, politicians and human rights activists began

forming NGOs for defending human rights. Most of these organisations applied for licences, but all were refused. The Organisation of the Committees for Defending Democracy and Human Rights was re-established in 2000. A number of other human rights societies and NGOs were established after that, including the Human Rights Association in Syria, the Arab Organisation for Human Rights (which had a Nasserite flavour), the National Organisation for Human Rights established by a number of Syrian lawyers who had left the Arab Organisation for Human Rights, the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights, from which a splinter organisation was formed called the Syrian League for Human Rights. The Syrian Organisation for Human Rights had among its founders professors and thinkers who enjoyed great respect in Syria. In addition to these organisations, three Kurdish groups became active, the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights in Syria, the Human Rights Organisation in Syria (MAF), and the Organisation for Human Rights and General Freedoms in Syria (DAD). In addition to these, a number of think tanks were established, focusing on raising awareness of human rights in Syria through conducting studies on human rights in Syria. Among the most important of such think tanks were the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies, the Syrian Centre for Legal Studies, the Syrian Centre for Human Rights Training, as well as a number of other human rights organisations abroad. The latter were often close to opposition groups abroad such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian Committee for Human Rights. Even before the uprising in 2011, most human rights activists in Syria felt greatly frustrated. Their work is characterised by great caution, leading to a less momentous effort compared to that seen in Syria between 2000 and 2005. Caution and fear led activists being worried about themselves instead of busying themselves with human right issues. This led, as we have seen earlier, to the fragmentation of these organisations and the increased exchange of accusations among the activists themselves, while the government gleefully looks on. Many lawyer-activists spent long prison sentences as a result of their activities, most prominently perhaps Anwar Al Bunni, Haitham Al Maleh, and Muhanad Al Hassani.

Women Organisations and Societies in Syria

A number of women's organisations in Syria are active in issues related to gender and the rights of women and children. The largest of these organisations is the General Union of Syrian Women, which is a quasi-governmental organisation established in 1967. It covers the entire country and has a number of women activists. Although it is not officially a government body, the government does provide it with its full support. The union has implemented a number of development projects for early childhood and education. In addition, there are a number of non-governmental women groups spread throughout the country. They vary in size and

influence, and include the Syrian Women's League, which has an impressive record in the legal field, the Syrian Women's Observatory, which played an important role in combating honour crimes, the Social Initiative Society, which was penalized for conducting a survey examining views of Syrian women on the issue of the Personal Status Law and on honour crimes, the National Society for Developing the Role of Women, which is a society close to the government and, as a result, was granted the right to oversee the Institute of Social Care for Girls, the first such institute offering refuge to girl victims of violence. Finally, we should mention the Al Thara Group, which is an electronic magazine published by Etana Publishing Group, and which attracted a number of activists and young journalists. Between 2005 and 2011, it trained more than sixty journalists in the art of free media. It was also a partner of a number of other organisations, participating in joint campaigns, such as the campaign against honour killing in partnership with the Syrian Women Observatory, and it was involved in the drafting of the parallel report for the Beijing World Conference on Women in 2010.

A New Generation of Civil Society

Since 2006 and to date, both the political and civil movements in Syria have been through a difficult and complex stage in which they lost a number of distinguished activists who, because of their views and peaceful activities, ended up in prison. While the overlap between political and civil activism weakened both categories, the period following the arrests of 2006 and 2007 was characterised by a necessary separation between political opposition and civil society forces. The establishment of the Damascus Declaration in the country and the Coalition for a National Salvation Front in Syria abroad, pointed to the distinction between pure political activism and other civil activities. A new generation emerged during this period; a generation of civil society activists who did not necessarily have a political history, whether for or against the government, and who were involved in a series of civil activities of a social and economic nature. Their focus started to develop with the national campaign to end honour killings, with the national campaign to abolish amendments to the Personal Status Law, which threatened to take the country back centuries with regard to issues related to the status of women, with the campaign for the right of women to give their nationality to their children, with the campaign to reduce the costs of mobile phone tariffs, and with other campaigns such as the one to defend victims of rape, in particular the case of a girl who was raped by four men in Aleppo forcing the government to interfere at the highest levels and to send the girl for treatment to Britain. All these 'new' civil society activists used new media in their campaigns, including blogs, emails, text messaging, and social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter – for long banned in Syria – and other forms of new media.

Conclusion

The limited number of societies and NGOs in Syria is mainly due to the authorities' political and security obstacles that have been erected under a legal guise. These constrain and limit the establishment of civil organisations and societies regardless of their purpose and mission. The restrictive Law No. 93 of 1985 on civil association is still in force without any meaningful amendments, despite its prejudice and unfairness that are clearly at odds with any notion of modern development. This law puts non-governmental organisations at the mercy of a state administrative agency, giving the latter the right to reject decisions made by the governing bodies of these organisations and societies, and to issue its own replacement decisions. The same regulations insist on submitting establishment and announcement applications, which are then handed over to the security service agents who carry out intrusive investigations into the proposed organisations and their founding members.

Regardless, charitable and local societies and organisations have played a vital role in mitigating hardship for marginalised social groups, especially since the government adopted austerity measures since the 1980s. This was combined with the weakening purchasing power of citizens when increases in their wages in the public sectors remained insignificant, or when salary increases were overtaken by inflation. Furthermore, the state has frozen employment in the public sector since 1985, which especially hit marginalised groups with nowhere else to go for employment. This was accompanied by a steep reduction in government spending, which caused large sections of society to fall under the poverty line, particularly those depending on public sector salaries. Against this background, charitable organisations have played an important role in helping poor sections of society, particularly those in rural areas. This way, these societies and organisations formed a safety net, particularly during the period of economic transformation, which is often accompanied by economic hardship and severe social implications.

The concept of civil society became the subject of a lively debate among those engaged in its various forms. The debate intensified in 2000, coinciding with the beginning of the presidency of Bashar Al Assad. In the seemingly changed climate, an attempt was made to build a genuine civil society. Accordingly, a process of re-examining the country's ideological history started at various fronts, involving the left, the nationalists and the Islamists, in order to establish a new social contract based on constitutional legitimacy. Syrian intellectuals presented a modern vision of civil society, due in essence to the legacy of a number of these intellectuals in nationalist and leftist thought, and because the concept of civil society emerged and developed. However, their apprehensive look at Syrian society, originating in its divisions, sects, backwardness, and omnipresence of the state, made them extremely concerned about the

lacking historical pillars of a viable civil society. It also became clear that the Arab-Israeli conflict, the prime justification for the continuation of emergency laws, posed a real obstacle even when the rationale for continuously extending the state of emergency had lost persuasion. Indeed, it was increasingly realised that developments in south Lebanon, or during the Palestinian Intifada, would be better approached through the strengths of an open and free society that was not curbed by stringent restrictions. Different approaches to civil society emerged. In the past, the struggle of Syrian elites had focused on gaining power. Now the primacy of political activity shifted to address the needs of society, especially after a new space for freedom of expression appeared to have emerged, following the president's discourse on respecting the views and opinions of others. Subsequently, the relevance of civil society was underscored when public meetings began to be organised by intellectuals and activists sensing a real change. It was widely felt that democracy could only be attained through the rise of civil society in all its organisations and institutions, and by this way creating a critical dialogue between society and the state for the good of the nation as a whole. Indeed, the activation of civil organisations in society and encouraging active social movement, are the only way to build a real state for all its citizens. Achieving democracy and the respect for human rights will not be attained except in a state of institutions and law, embedded in civil society. Consequently, the movement appropriated the concept of civil society from the academic realm in order to give it real currency in the political realm.

This way, it was hoped, civil society could make an important contribution to building a genuine nation-state that could become the backbone of a genuinely sovereign and constitutional Syrian state. Next to the authorities' discouraging response to the regained relevance of civil society, conceptual problems also played a part in the limited success of the movement. Civil society, conceptually speaking, essentially refers to the public space between the state and the private sector. Some included political parties in this space while others excluded, preferring to classify them as being part of political society. Consequently, the relationship between civil society and political society became extremely confused as it lacked clarity. Neither was it clear whether or how democracy and civil society relate to one another. Arguably, democracy by its nature develops and revives thanks to civil society institutions, as the latter empowers frameworks for public space. However, this supposed correlation between the degree of democratic openness and societal openness is not a simple one, nor is it unidirectional. For example, we find in the Gulf states many public benefits organisations functioning within the frame of civil society institutions, but without the presence of a democratic political system. Before its uprising in January 2011, Egypt witnessed at some point the encouragement of social activity as an alternative to encouraging

political parties, and yet an emerging civil society there simply began to coexist with a deeply authoritarian state. In Syria, too, civil society has sprung up, both in terms of the number of civil society actors and the quality of their work. Yet it has remained weak and fragile, not in the least because it continued to be subjected to many serious organisational, governmental, self-imposed and cultural constraints. The expected effects in terms of democratization were also countered because civil society continued to be deprived of a direct political dimension. Prior to the Syrian uprising, it was hoped that this lacuna would at least be partly addressed as civil society actors gradually moved into the realm of development work, encouraged to do so by the Syrian Trust for Development in conjunction with the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

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Chapter 2: Reinforcing Values of Citizenship

Hassan Abbas

Introduction

With the Baath Party takeover of the state in 1963, the contemporary history of Syria witnessed the launch of a totalitarian policy that ensured the dominance of a single party in political life and subsequently in civil society and non-governmental organisations. The media was the first victim of this political domination, which continually gained ground and ultimately led to the subjugation of all Syrian civil society organisations. In the last few decades, the government adopted several policies with the goal of enforcing dominance. Policies ranged from denial and detention to harsh punishment, leading to what has come to be known as “Baathification”. The Baathification policy hinges on preserving the civil structures that previously existed, at least in form, prior to the rise of the Baath party to power. However, the organisations’ structures and administrative and financial systems have been amended so they will be either directly or indirectly subordinate to the political regime. As such, those structures shift from being institutions that seek to protect civil society from the political power’s violence to institutions that protect the power from the vitality of civil society. For this policy to attain maximum effectiveness, it had to be legitimized, so that hegemony would be made to appear as one of the precepts of the stability of the state; a precept that is provided for and the efficacy of which is ensured by law. In 1973, a new constitution was approved which included in article eight the stipulation that “the Arab Socialist Baath Party is the leader of the state and society.” This simply meant that the only way to mobilize the public was through designated official frameworks or by receiving the blessing of the concerned authorities associated with the ruling party. Those who work outside the ruling framework risk being banned from work at least, or even being considered outlaws and thus subjected to heavy punishment and confiscation of property. In practice, this translates into compromising citizens’ rights and depriving them of their basic freedoms (freedom of thought, of expression, of assembly, etc.), their civil rights (security, right to expression, right to media and information, etc.), as well as their social rights (the right to form associations, etc.). In other words, it marks a reduction in the value of citizenship. Instead of being engaged active members of public life, citizens become passive, blindly following the instructions of the regime.

Hegemony has resulted in a culture that has become embedded in the souls of Syrian citizens. This culture, at least until the uprising began in 2011,

ensured the stability of hegemonic relations at various social levels and fields which resulted in a culture of fear. This culture of fear can be defined as a constellation of feelings, conceptions and preconceived notions that overwhelm a person, leading him or her to abandon all forms of action so as to avoid any potential violence they might encounter. At a broader social level, it is an assemblage of feelings, conceptions and preconceived notions that prevents civil engagement and active citizenship, and leads to passivity in order to avoid potential violence by the dominant political authority. On the cultural level, the dominance of fear is evident in terms of creative expression. Among creative writers and intellectuals interested in public affairs, there is a flourishing use of a number of elusive stylistic aspects which promotes a “shift” in meanings, if not totally robbing style of its meaning. Independent actions are blocked at the cultural level. Cultural initiatives that citizens could have opted for are eliminated except for those dictated by the icons of hegemony. During the last years of the rule of Hafez Al-Assad, some of those interested in public affairs began contemplating ways of challenging this social stagnation. Several collective and individual initiatives were developed in an attempt to promote active citizenship, and restore to the public the power to forge their own day-to-day affairs. Even though it would appear that some of these initiatives functioned in, at least theoretically, an apolitical context, in fact they used tools of political struggle. However, the majority of those initiatives were purely cultural in nature and do not qualify as direct political struggle. Nor do they espouse among their proclaimed goals involvement in the political opposition movement. This does not mean that those cultural initiatives are less important than opposition-triggered political initiatives, whether they were reformative or revolutionary. This is not a qualitative comparison between them, judging by the criteria of importance (i.e. which is more important to society). Rather, it is primarily a comparison in terms of the scope of the efforts. Political initiatives are concerned with administrative procedures and regulations, whereas cultural initiatives are focused on raising citizens’ awareness about their status and their role in the world they live in. Political initiatives are an act of opposition and rejection, while cultural initiatives are an act of resistance and construction. Both complement one another. No society could ever hope to effect a change or measure of reform if efforts are focused only on one of these two domains: the domains overlap and one cannot draw a clear-cut distinction between them. When a person holds a seminar on a purely cultural topic at a time when the political rules and traditions do not allow for assemblies, that person is not merely engaged in a cultural act aimed at educating a group of people, it is also a political act that violates established rules. Similarly, gathering signatures on a statement that outspokenly contradicts a certain policy is not solely a political action of condemning one policy and advocating another, it is also a cultural act that

awakens civic awareness. These pioneering initiatives took numerous forms of which the most significant were the publication of statements and convening of forums. Among the earliest of these initiatives was a statement signed by many filmmakers in defence of the National Film Organisation¹ after a series of critiques that were published in the state-owned “Tishreen” newspaper.

A few months after the death of President Al-Assad, and the ascension of the current president to power, a statement was issued on September 27, 2000, known as the “99”, in reference to the number of signatories. The majority of the signatories were involved in creating new knowledge and culture, including film professionals, writers, poets and researchers. Some of them were also involved in politics or were members of political organisations that had been disbanded by the government. The statement included outspoken political demands, leading it to appear as a political, rather than cultural initiative. This statement was followed by many others such as:

- two statements expressing solidarity with the novelist Mamdouh Azam, who was attacked by religious extremists because of his story “*Kasr Al-Mattar*” (i.e. The Palace of Rain). The first statement was issued by a group of creative intellectuals who were from the writer’s hometown in the Al-Sowaidaa’ district and succeeded in gathering hundreds of signatures. The second statement was issued by the Forum for Cultural Dialogue in Damascus, and was signed by hundred people. In addition to the statement, the forum also established a delegation of dignitaries from the metropolis to engage in a dialogue with the sheikhs who supported the attack on the novel. However, the government nipped that endeavor in the bud under the pretext that it was their responsibility to deal with the problem;
- a number of statements to express solidarity with novelist Hydar Hydar, who was declared an infidel by extremists in Egypt, based on his novel “*Walima Le’ashab Al-Bahr*,” (i.e. A Banquet for Seaweed). The Forum of Cultural Dialogue collected the most signatures on their statement;
- a statement in collaboration with students of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus, who objected to provocative changes introduced by the Ministry of Culture, that targeted the Institute and its professors. The statement was signed by dozens of Syrian intellectuals and released in the Lebanese press;
- a statement in solidarity with the Lebanese journalist Samir Kassir whose passport was

confiscated by airport authorities in Beirut, and who was prevented from leaving Lebanon. The statement was signed by only eleven Syrian intellectuals and published in the Lebanese press.

Forums

The first forums included the Friday Cultural Forum, Civilization Forum, Forum of Cultural Dialogue, Forum of National Dialogue, and the Leftist Forum for Dialogue. The number of forums rapidly increased, and by 2001, there were more than 170 across the country. Most of those forums began as cultural initiatives and attracted large numbers of people. However, some politicians saw them as alternative public podiums (which they had been deprived of for years). As such, they strove to frame the dialogues and discussions toward inciting or opposing political action. Other politicians sought to establish outspoken political forums. This in turn, led the regime – which is basically opposed to all collective acts, regardless of their nature, and which generally has misgivings about organised action, particularly given the foreign pressures exercised on it – to see the forums as a violation of its red lines and subsequently, one after the other, all of the forums were forced to close. Activists were not frustrated by the demise of the forums. Independent from dictated institutional structures, marginal initiatives continued to appear. The common ground among the majority of these initiatives was the goal of instigating a new and fearless social and pluralist cultural awakening. As noted above, some of those initiatives were akin to a political struggle in nature, although they were triggered by independent apolitical motives such as human rights associations. Human rights activities are basically part of the culture of human rights, but – by necessity – they lead to candid political action, particularly in societies where the regime does not respect those rights. As such, any attempt to defend human rights is at the same time an attempt to expose the state’s flaws, thus making it an act of political opposition. Yet the majority of those initiatives were purely cultural in nature, and do not qualify as direct political action. Below are some examples of the initiatives² that included exceptional participation among youth.

Theatre

Some theatrical experiments managed to escape the manacles of the government by the end of the nineties, including the Al-Rasif (The Sidewalk) troupe, led by young Syrian director Rola Fattal, as well as the Tunisian playwright Hakim Marzouki, currently residing in Syria. However, the obstacles thrown in the troupe’s way by the regime prevented it from continuing to evolve. In 1999, at the initiative of young theatrical director Nora Mourad, the troupe “Laish”

¹ See chaptersix on cinema.

² It is obvious that we are solely discussing the situation in Damascus, which was a venue for the biggest, most extensive stir. There were other initiatives, of course, in other cities and in the countryside.

(Why) was formed. Commenting on the motives behind forming the troupe, Mourad said, "What drove us to work independently of the state-owned theatre was the dominance of the administrative structure upon that theatre, that imposes a unilateral vision and is unable to accept that the different aspects of theatrical work such as artistic and cultural research may not necessarily agree with the political constraints guiding the artistic directions of the state-owned theatre".³ Following that project, several independent youth initiatives began. Osama Halal established the "Kawn" (Universe) troupe. Eias Mekdad formed "Mehwar" (Axis). Also, "Masrah Al-Studio" troupe was set up within the framework of the Country Development Project, launched by Fardos for Rural Development, a project sponsored by Syria's First Lady.⁴ In parallel, young theatrical director, May Skaf, launched the 'Theatro' Project to support private theatrical projects. Theatro Project offers space for performance rehearsals by private theatre groups. Theatro Project also hosts courses for those interested in learning the art of drama, as well as dance classes for adults and children.

Cinema

There are two levels of cultural awakening with regard to cinema: the film-making industry and the viewers. In regard to film making, there were numerous individual experiments, especially in the field of documentaries and short films that do not require huge budgets. About twenty films have been produced. Some of these, such as "Ibn Al-Am" (Cousin) by researcher Mohamad Ali Al-Atassi, spoke about the renowned dissident Riad Al-Turk, who spent nearly twenty years in prison on account of his political views, received high viewer ratings on private websites. There were also films produced by young directors such as Rami Farah, Loubna Hadad, Al-Fares Al-Zahabi, Amar Al-Baik, Suad Ka'dan, and Reem Ali. All those films were produced without consulting the General Organisation for Cinema or any other state-owned institution. On the level of film viewing, cinema clubs have been of prime importance in awakening public awareness.⁵

Music

During the past two decades, there have been attempts to form independent music bands. "Kulna Sawa" (Together) was perhaps the leading band in that regard. These bands promote a culture that until recently was banned or at least scorned or cursed. At

present, it is commonplace to see wall posters on public streets advertising concerts for Syrian bands that play hard rock, techno or metal music, as well as other genres of music that used to be regarded as symbols of alleged attempts to impose a Western cultural occupation on the Arab nation. In fact, in some of Damascus' upscale districts (e.g. Al-Mezzah, Dummar, Al-Malki), numerous school students used to gather at the beginning of the weekend to showcase their skills in Break Dance, Hip-Hop and Super-electric dance. The police and the security authorities frequently arrested the students to combat the presence of alleged "Satan worshippers". All of the initiatives mentioned above began from within Syrian society. There are also phenomena that are not native to Syria but are part of the process of globalization and the spread of modern technology. These processes have left their mark on Syrian citizens and substantially weakened the hegemonic values. The expansion in freedom of expression can be credited to a large degree to the wide increase in the use of cellular phones, global communication networks and other kinds of new technologies. Based on all of the above, it appears that cultural action in modern Syria has a major role to play in changing the existing relations of hegemony created by single-party rule, and consequently in creating a new and responsible society that is mutually responsible, respectful of pluralism and capable of breaking free of the culture of fear.

Personal Experiences

The majority of the cultural initiatives that were launched towards the end of past century and the beginning of the current century essentially relied on the efforts of a number of individuals who believed that change is both necessary and possible. They believed that given the current conditions in Syria, there was a chance to make change. I was honoured to be among those individuals who launched, or participated in launching, a large number of initiatives. I will cite here a few examples which I deem were important:

1. **The Friday Cultural Forum (1993-2006):** At the end of 1992, I was hired to teach at the French Institute for Arabic Studies⁶ in a programme entitled "Teaching Arabic for Research Purposes", which annually hosts tens of students of various nationalities, all brought together by the desire to learn the Arabic language in order to assist them in their research, as well as by the urge to explore the various aspects of the Syrian and Arab culture. A few months after starting my job, I submitted a proposal to the Institute administration to hold a weekly cultural activity aimed at demonstrating examples of Syrian culture in which students could learn about this and have the opportunity to talk to cultural creators. The administration approved the proposal. Relying on the relative freedom

³ Quoting an interview with the director in Damascus.

⁴ The Fardos project merged with other projects, under the patronage of Mrs. Al-Assad (such as Massar project and Rawafed project) under the umbrella of a major NGO: the Syria Trust for Development.

⁵ It is well-known that authorities are strongly opposed to that kind of assembly. A famous cinema club in Damascus played an important role in spreading visual culture, but was discontinued by the authorities in the early eighties. All attempts to revive it were also foiled.

⁶ Currently the French Institute of the Near East.

provided by the Institute as well as my numerous connections with people involved in the various cultural domains in Syria, the activity began to attract a growing audience which quickly outgrew available classroom space. Because of the discussions that took place during those assemblies or after them, this activity came to be known as the "Friday Cultural Forum." Thriving exclusively on individual efforts, the Forum existed for fourteen years during which over 420 cultural soirees were held. These soirees hosted numerous cultural topics, film screenings, concerts, arts exhibitions, and theatre performances. On average, each event was attended by approximately sixty persons. Thus, over the course of the fourteen years of the forum's activities, more than 25,000 persons attended those soirees, of whom more than 70% were Syrian. These events were not cultural soirees in the regular sense of the word. Rather, they were primarily discussion sessions. Even the musical soirees often concluded with a dialogue between musicians and the audience. It is noteworthy that during the early years of The Friday forum, it was one of the rare places in Damascus where people could come together to publicly discuss Syrian current affairs and its problems; all of which were discussions that digressed from the domain of culture.

2. **The Forum of Cultural Dialogue (1999-2002):** I live just outside Damascus, in an area known as Dammur or, alternatively, Al-Sham Al-Jadida. This area is characterized by a large population of intellectuals and academics. The majority of its residents are well-off though not necessarily affluent, middle class people. The area comprises a curious *mélange* of residents who came from different areas and who belong to various sects and ethnic backgrounds. In the mid-nineties, a group of friends⁷ and I thought of establishing a cultural seminar in this distinguished area. However, several administrative and logistic obstacles kept us from realizing our goal. In early 1999, using available resources and despite many obstacles, we decided to launch the Forum of Cultural Dialogue. The Forum held its first sessions in mid-April 1999 in Ms. Nawal Yazjy's house. For over three years, encounters were held on the first Tuesday of each month until the government issued a decree ordering the closure of all forums in the country. Some sessions had more than one hundred participants, and we were always eager to reach out to a mixed gender audience and a reasonable number of youth. The Forum's methodology was built upon three concentric

circles. The first and smallest of the circles included a member of the forum's committee and the main invited speaker who was typically a critic. This person would present a reading on the selected topic of the session. The middle circle comprised creative individuals or persons involved in the topic of the particular session. The largest circle was composed of attendees. We agreed on a Forum rule respecting dialogue and mutual acceptance and insisted on inviting intellectuals from various and contradictory intellectual approaches. We also sought to involve the audience in the discussions as much as possible.

3. **Cinema Clubs (1998, 2003, 2010):** Cinema clubs were a very effective initiative for attracting audiences, and especially youth. The clubs provided a method for enabling them to express their opinions and learn to accept The Other. Showing a film is, *per se*, a means of expressing an opinion that opens the way for discussion and offers a larger venue for showcasing various opinions. I began the first cinema club in collaboration with a small group of university students who asked me to introduce them to some of the international cinema productions which they were unable to view because of the State's tight grip on importation. In the late nineties, the internet had not yet spread and DVD technology was available only to the rich. My only access to good films was Arte, the Franco-German cultural channel that played excellent films. The lack of subtitles in Arabic was a major difficulty. Frequently, the audience did not understand French or German. Even though it sometimes robbed the film of its beauty, I would interpret simultaneously during the film screenings. We also lacked access to a projector so I would play the films on a 29 TV set at the home of a friend. We held the cinema club encounters once or twice a month over a two-year period. Eventually, the number of people who came to see the films outgrew the space and the film club stopped meeting. The second cinema club also began with a group of university students. Thanks to the spread of pirated DVD's from Taiwan and Malaysia we found films that were subtitled in Arabic. Films were shown in the garage of the home of one of the participants. However, the large numbers of young people who frequented the place caught the attention of the neighbours. They reported the students' presence to the security officer, who convinced the father of the host that he risked getting into trouble if he did not stop the cinema club from gathering in his home. Four months prior to writing this article, we started the third cinema club under exceptional conditions. We now screen the films in a café with a relatively large, air-conditioned hallway onto a wide wall, with the audience sitting on comfortable seats. The films are downloaded from the internet. Using special

⁷They are Ms. Nawal Yazjy and Ms. Sabah Hallak, along with film director Remon Botros and Mr. Mo'az Hamour. That group continued to manage the forum until it was closed down, with only one change, namely that Mr. Hamour left and Ms. Diana Jabour (who later become and still is the general manager of the Syrian television) replaced him.

software, young volunteers subtitle the films into Arabic. As of the fourth film screening, we had 68 viewers in the audience.

4. **The Book Club (2006- 2007):** Triggered by concern over the lack of interest by young people in reading, the owner of a publication house,⁸ interested in cultural affairs, asked me to assist her in putting together an activity that would encourage young people to read with the aim to expand their knowledge through more profound sources than the dominant internet. We eventually agreed to set up a book club that we called "read a book; become younger." The club relied on the principle of choosing books from various subjects and of recognised importance. We contacted different publishing houses and asked to purchase copies at cost prices in order to sell them to club members at no profit. We required that the books be openly discussed, i.e. they must be read. Although more than two hundred young people signed up, only forty participants actually attended the book club meetings. Sessions were held once a month in the hallway of one of the civil society associations operating in Damascus. However, that association imposed stifling conditions on our activities (particularly on the content of our discussions, which – they felt – sometimes crossed the line according to their criteria). We therefore moved our encounters to a low-profile café in the old town after the Minister of Culture personally issued a permit. However, the lacking desire to read stood in contrast with the club's attraction. In our last sessions, there were rarely more than two or three people who had read the books from among the twenty or thirty people who attended. We abandoned the idea after exhausting our limited budget to cover the sessions in the café.

These were not the only initiatives in which I was fortunate to be involved in. I was also invited to deliver lectures or take part in round tables within these forums⁹. I also took part in establishing a human rights association.¹⁰ I cited these specific examples because I was a leader, or one of the leaders in these activities, and because these initiatives reflected my point of view regarding civil action. My conviction regarding the necessity of reviving the culture of citizenship and its values was the prime motive behind all of my societal actions and activities. This has meant primarily urging people, especially youth, to shift from being passive citizens to active citizens who will not be content with what the regime permits, and who will strive to create alternative trends. This in turn, has meant a constant

struggle with the culture of fear because people want to have choices. They are capable of being creative and of creating new entities as well as new elements within the existing spaces. However, decades of imprisonment inside pre-determined visions and collective paths made it seem as if thinking differently is an aberration deserving punishment. Our goal was therefore to advocate the creation of a different kind of cultural and societal mechanism, compared to what is known in the fields of culture and community work --mechanisms that are aimed at helping people gain confidence in their ability to take action as a basic human right. There is no doubt that setting up a new association or forum or club is an act that can be seen as part of the mechanism of activating civil society. However, the presence of those entities remains accidental and of no real impact unless they adopt mechanisms, practices and attitudes that uphold the value of citizenship and deepen it. The fundamental objectives of my activities were:

Taking initiative: For years, the Syrian society has lived in a state of hibernation during which activities have been limited to those permitted within designated official frameworks. Among the deeply-embedded policies typically deployed to prevent new initiatives, were included:

- Curbing independent social initiatives and compelling them to stop. The best example of this is the Damascus cinema club as well as the limitations on cultural and professional civil associations;
- Requiring the sponsorship of all cultural and non-cultural events by an authority. That justifies the right to monitor the activities, assess the association and consequently decide its fate;
- Changing existing independent civil structures and frameworks into subordinate structures, allegedly for organisational purposes. For example, sports clubs did not just lose their civic names, they also lost the power to take action as a result of a law requiring that they represent the Baath Party in their offices;
- Activating events through official structures such as the Revolutionary Youth Union or the National Union for Syrian Students.

Among the results of these policies has been that the only possible initiatives were those launched from the top-down or those that the regime approved. The direct goal of my activities across civil society has been to advocate the right to launch free initiatives and not be content with those handed down by the regime. In my opinion, promoting that right can only be achieved through continuing and extending those activities. The significance of this is that participants in an activity learn that one can engage in an independent activity and persist in it for months and even for years, even if it is stopped as was the case with the cinema club. Despite being shut down, it is possible to re-launch it elsewhere. We also expanded

⁸ Ms. Samar Haddad, owner of Atlas Publishing House in Damascus.

⁹ Al-Atasi Forum, Social Initiative Association.

¹⁰ Human Rights Association of Syria (HRAS)

this to encouraging others to create new activities in different domains. This was how the “Music Club” was born. The Music Club was launched by a group of young people who had previously worked for over a year with me in the Cinema Club. That was also how the Forum of Cultural Dialogue and similar ones that appeared at that time led to new forums.

Freedom of expression: Among the most glaring manifestations of the dominance of the regime in controlling Syrian citizens is the choice to refrain from free collective expression. It is as if people have suffered from some sort of linguistic incapacity which resulted in two different discourses:

1. The memorized discourse of prudence: the kind of discourse that is often used in collective or incidental participation, i.e. when individuals or a group are participants in a discourse but are not among the discourse producer's family or acquaintances. The content of that kind of discourse does not go beyond what is allowed and what is typically communicated by state-owned ideological authorities in educational and media institutions;
2. The discourse of candidness: that kind of discourse is often used in safe milieus, which are, by necessity, limited milieus in which a discourse producer knows all participants and is certain that they all share the same ideas, more or less. The content of the discourse is usually critical, sarcastic or derisive.

Encouraging and training speakers to express their own ideas are among the immediate goals I seek to adopt in the activities I launched. The most effective means of achieving that goal in my opinion is to set aside discussions of directly political topics and to focus instead on cultural and social current affairs which are, in essence, quite political in nature. Surely such discussions are not totally safe from slipping into political expression. My goal, regardless of the topic of that dialogue, has been to “create the mood,” i.e. the mood of free expression.

Respecting differences: Diversity has always been, and still is, the one distinguishing feature of Syrian society. Citizenship essentially means living that difference within the joint national framework. However, the absence of venues for free expression has deprived different individuals from the possible exchange of knowledge. Each of the components of Syrian society has become an “Other,” held within a stereotype projected onto them from outside, rather than an “Other” that is capable of exchange and integration. This has transformed diversity into a curse. People who are different have become cursed outcasts.

I believe it is important to underscore the fact that the various opinions or issues, including or particularly

those that are unanimously agreed on, are not wrong or more or less important than the views of the speakers. They are different but equally respected views.

Conclusion

The basic motivation for my activities and efforts has been my belief in the necessity of reinforcing the culture of engaged citizenship. I realise this does not necessarily require political action and can be carried out within the cultural domain. Therefore, all my activities, while focused on the cultural domain and carried out in private settings, have in-depth political significance. Even until 2011, many of the conditions in Syrian civil society changed. New entities emerged. New forms of action began to take place in sectors of environment, the business and heritage. These are all reasons to rejoice. However, Syrian society still has a long way to go before citizenship can be said to be truly realised. To make headways along that road, it is imperative to reconsider some of the applicable laws, of which the most important is the emergency law. Also, an advanced and democratic law for associations must be passed. Above all, it is crucial to note that civil cultural action is the best school in which citizens can learn and practice democracy. Nonetheless building a democratic state is a political affair, *par excellence*.

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Chapter 3: Feminist Websites and Civil Society Experience

Yahya Al Aous

Introduction

In today's world, civic action without electronic communication is hard to conceive. The two have come to reflect a strong determination and inexorability that have caused the official establishment great concern and insomnia, even before the uprising since March 2011. Given its extensive experience in subjecting the traditional media to serve its interests, the establishment views both civic activity and electronic communication as a novelty which warrants a harsh and rigid response. Repressive regimes have tried to choke any expression of civil society and prevent its growth. In the rare cases in which they lost control in the organisation of civil society, and it came into existence, they would not permit the use of the regime's means of communication. Thus, civil society had no choice but to seek tools that comport with its character, free of government censorship and oppression. Electronic communication enabled civil society to reach the masses of the citizenry, who were tired of the government's interference in the regular media and its constant attempts to keep it submissive. Electronic communication managed to break the isolation that the government forced on the actions of civil society. It became a vital, essential component of civil society activity. This is especially true with respect to the feminist movement's use of its websites, which enabled it to survive the prohibitions and closure imposed by the authorities. The feminist websites were a success because they concerned themselves with social development and empowerment of women. This chapter focuses on the feminist websites due to their important role in creating new perspectives – by means of social dialogue that has taken place on their websites – for advancing women's rights in Syria. Moreover, the very existence of these websites in Syria has provided strength to all proponents of an open society; a society which, in addition to engaging with its political issues, places great value on equality, social consciousness, and empowerment of women.

The notion of progression in the implementation of reform dominated the discourse following the emergence of elements of Syrian civil society in 2000, when President Bashar al-Assad came to power. The notion of progression refers to prioritization wherein economic and social reforms are viewed to precede political reform. This approach was adopted by the authorities, but was rejected by civil society organisations, which hastened to take advantage of the situation and demanded that political reform be placed on the authority's agenda, without of course detracting from the importance of

economic and social reforms. This demand resulted in a backlash from the authorities, which did not content itself with shutting down civil society forums and organisations and arresting their prominent members, but went as far as shutting down internet websites that constituted a means of communication with the general public and for expressing varied and diverse opinions and aspirations.

The Rise of Internet Websites

In the early years of the third millennium, Syrian society witnessed developments which were manifested in the appearance of feminist associations and committees that presented a variety of reform approaches. The authorities turned a blind eye to these associations, since their outlooks did not run counter to those presented by the authorities themselves. Associations that distanced themselves from political issues were established, focusing on social matters. They presented principles such as granting equal rights to women, strengthening their status, and amending laws discriminating against them. A large number of associations were established; old ones revived, but very few were granted licenses by the authorities. The unlicensed associations and committees enjoyed a degree of latitude afforded to them by the government. This mandated media coverage of their activities which resulted in the establishment of internet websites operated by activists and media figures who accompanied the first incarnation of civil activity. Al-Thara (www.thara-sy.com) was the first website to engage in women's and children's rights, and was followed by Syrian Women Observatory (www.nesasy.org). These two websites were the most prominent, and attracted great interest from civil activists. These two websites have been active, without interruption, since 2005. We shall focus on them due to their popularity, and because they involve Syria's main civil society and feminist movements. A number of other association websites were also established, such as Together Committee in Support of Women's Issues, followed by "Ishtar the Syrian", which became defunct after a brief spell of activity. The approaches presented by these websites were not ground-breaking, and remained connected to the perceptions of civil society, which viewed the issue of women's rights as an important stepping stone toward attaining social justice, and political involvement in general. The activities of the feminist websites remained subject to the stringent conditions set by official bodies for the establishment of civil and feminist associations. Associations that emblazoned on their escutcheon issues such as the protection of human or women's rights, or even strengthening women's status, were not allowed to operate. They were also forbidden to incorporate in their platforms expressions of a social or developmental character, such as social initiative or social growth. To this day, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which has

the authority to grant permission to the NGOs, objects to certain expressions such as women's rights. This resulted in the associations hiding behind the banner of social activity in order to be able to fulfill their goals, which are manifested in raising women's awareness of their basic rights. Obtaining a license continues to pose a serious obstacle that also restricts these websites, which are considered "illegitimate children" and are not granted recognition by the Ministry of Information, which nevertheless exercises a policy of turning a blind eye to their activities. So long as the Ministry of Information does not regulate the work of the websites under the Electronic Communications Law, they continue to operate within a grey area. On the one hand they are not legal and cannot gain easy access to information sources, while on the other hand they are not outside the law to the extent of being completely shut down. This state of affairs resulted in social activity being extensively curtailed. The main driver of social activity is the ability to act "on the ground", and reach target groups. This is still far from being achieved. This situation influenced the nature of the media and educational activities the Syrian feminist websites sought to implement within the framework of the objectives they set for themselves at the outset. The attitude of the official media towards the issue of women's rights was conservative, and presented achievements in traditional terminology. For example, when women were permitted to bequeath their salaries after their death, the media hastened to present the new decision as an act of charity, and not as the natural right of women as Syrian citizens. In contrast with the official media, the feminist websites spoke of women's basic rights and not of political largesse on the part of those in power to those beneath them. It could be argued that new channels were opened for similar issues. New perceptions were born, and a new form of reference was created, which shattered the traditional patterns that had prevailed in the official media for a long time. This is particularly true with regard to the issue of legislative and social discrimination against women, domestic violence, honour crimes, young marriage, the right to be granted citizenship, civil marriage, rape, sexual assault, incest, and so forth. In the past, the official media was at best reluctant to engage in these issues, and at worst ignored them entirely.

Enlisting Activists, Intellectuals, and Authors

The appearance of feminist websites created an opportunity for many active women, and for those engaged in public issues, to penetrate the media and public opinion by means of the space these websites created for them. These women found a way by means of which they could intensify their social activity. At the same time they constituted a springboard that strengthened the feminist websites, and positioned them on the high road by publishing their own studies on a previously nonexistent local platform. Highly important studies and articles that analysed Syrian reality and explained it in legal,

social, and economic terms gradually began to appear on the pages of feminist websites. They also spent great effort in presenting solutions and ideas for addressing the complacency that had typified the women's rights issue for many decades. The dust was shaken off these ideas, and they began to occupy centre stage by means of the websites. The feminist websites attracted many committed readers who craved this kind of space, and who later began shifting from being passive readers to interacting actively, and benefited significantly from the possibilities afforded by the internet. Some of these readers even went on to become writers themselves. The feminist activists were not alone. A substantial number of authors, intellectuals, academics, human rights activists, and media figures, who until then had not had an opportunity to engage directly and in-depth in the civil society issue due to the security implications that were liable to become their lot, became involved in the new reality of emerging civil media. The feminist websites which had not been affected by government restrictions that had effectively neutralized the official media, provided them a platform to present their issues, and they in turn found a means in these websites for expressing their vitality and unwillingness to expire. Thus they enriched the feminist websites with articles and studies that greatly contributed to the women's rights issue.

Commitment to International Norms and Conventions

The websites presented a unique strategy that is consistent with binding international norms on women's rights. This was aided by the fact that in 2002, the Syrian government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The websites published an entire arsenal of international conventions concerning women and children, in addition to CEDAW and the Syrian government's remarks and reservations over some of its sections, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Political Rights of the Woman and the appended protocols, the Convention on Protection of Children, the Convention on Home Work, the Convention on Night Work of Young Persons, international conventions on the right to growth, minimum marriage age, various declarations concerning the elimination of violence against women, protecting women and children during states of emergency and armed conflict, labour conventions, preventing discrimination in the workplace and other frameworks associated with equal opportunity, people with disabilities, conventions against human trafficking, sexual exploitation of another, and documents from international conferences on women's issues, in addition to reports on sustainable human growth.

The Position of the Conservative Religious Streams

This activity, which began to anchor within it international perceptions and norms, was a thorn in the side of the conservative religious currents that in the main hold hostile preconceptions about international conventions of any kind. These circles embarked on a smear campaign against the feminist websites and their operators. Feminist activists were publicly accused of heresy for merely expressing their opinion about the *hijab*, civil marriage, and other precepts that shackle Syrian women and curtail their freedom. The conservative religious currents tried to besmirch the feminist websites, and accused them of seeking to destroy society's morality, of propagating Western values, the notion of civil marriage, the rights of homosexuals and lesbians, and total sexual freedom. These accusations were presented as part of the conflict between religion and secularism with the aim of enlisting religious people against the websites. The government's decision to forbid any contact whatsoever with Etana Press, the publishing house responsible for publishing Al-Thara Magazine, is an indication of the negative attitude of the fundamentalist streams toward civil perceptions (www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=21732). At the end of 2006, Etana Press held a conference entitled "Women and Tradition", during which a book entitled "Remove the Hijab" was distributed. This infuriated the religious current, and at its request an official ruling was issued to sever all government contact with Etana Press, which was consequently forced to cease its field activities.

The conflict, sometimes open and at other times indirect, did not stop the websites from continuing to act toward the fulfillment of their primary tasks. At times they refrained from entering into open conflict with the fundamentalist religious streams, fearing defeat due to the balance of power that clearly leaned in the latter's favor. Nevertheless, a network of women's and children's rights activists turned these websites into a reliable source of information in the Arab world in general, and Syria in particular. In this respect it should be noted that the websites provided a platform for what was happening in the Arab states with regard to these issues, since a comparison with what is happening in different parts of the Arab world is accepted by the Syrian public. Particular attention was directed toward the Tunisian experience, and especially Tunisian family law, which attracted great interest, and which was presented as suitable for application to Syrian reality, or at least as a basis for formulating the relevant legislation in Syria. There was also considerable interest in Moroccan and Algerian family law, and a number of progressive laws that were passed in some Arab countries on the rights of women to pass their citizenship to children born to fathers of foreign nationality, and other laws that were more progressive than their Syrian equivalents.

Connection with Civil Society Institutions and Involvement in Civil Activity

Unlike the official media, which looked at the civil society groups as mere charities and discharged their civil and social role, as mentioned above, the feminist websites had a different attitude toward these organisations. A vast amount of material appeared on the feminist websites about associations that were active in diverse areas, such as people with special needs, the environment, prisoners, youth, juvenile delinquents, in addition to those that were active in the fight against various diseases, and so forth. The websites did not stop at media activity, and moved into the civil activity field by establishing a network of connections with the associations engaged in women's and children's rights. The social activity became an integral part of the websites' activities, and their teams were involved in the associations' various activities, in terms both of raising awareness, and providing urgent assistance. It should be borne in mind that many women who suffered violence or threats to their life under the pretext of honour, were provided with protection in women's shelters and with assistance from various associations. The websites played a mediating role by means of the social network they created, and exceeded their media role. For example, Al-Thara Magazine takes part in the assemblies of the Syrian Women's League, a coalition of a large group of registered and non-registered associations for women's issues. The magazine covers the League's activities on the media level, but also provides it with documents and important sources of information to help advance its issues. People involved in the websites routinely participate in feminist civil activity, such as lectures, parades, workshops, and conferences. Particularly striking is the participation of young people who volunteer in the feminist websites. These young people received their training in the websites that provided them with real space to develop their abilities in the media field, and improve their understanding of social and civil reality. It could be argued that large numbers of young men and women who are involved in the media developed particular interest toward civil society in general, and women's and children's issues in particular, by means of the feminist websites.

Relationship with Official Institutions

The government bodies charged with women's and family matters in Syria, especially the General Women's Union and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, could not afford ignoring the feminist websites, which proved themselves as an independent civil partner that does not yield to government dictates, and were like a thorn in their side that would keep on reminding them of their responsibilities. As a matter of fact, these websites became a kind of civil watchdog over government activity.

A Syrian Women Observatory editorial published on May 11, 2005, entitled "Is it time to issue a 'death'

notice for the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs?", went on to say: "Within eight months the centre of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs has been filled with self-serving parties whose presence there is attributed to connections with those holding power. In the present situation few of the people there truly care about Syrian family matters, but sit there doing nothing" (www.nesasy.org/content/view/9005/110). The lead article in Al-Thara Magazine published on April 13, 2009, entitled "Will the General Women's Union come out of its bottleneck?", opened with the following: "For years the General Women's Union has been playing the role of punching bag for all who demand equal rights for women in Syria. The Union, which was founded four decades ago, has failed to bring about any real change in Syrian women's status, although those within it think otherwise. In addition to its resounding failure in the field of legislature (which our sisters in the Union did not consider an arena for activity), the failure has reached other areas, which they definitely cannot deny" (www.thara-sy.com/thara/modules/news/article.php?storyid=802). At the same time, the websites did not ignore the positive activities of these bodies, when they took place, and granted them the same media coverage as the civil institutions. The feminist websites published the studies conducted by government bodies, such as that conducted by the General Women's Union in 2005 on violence against women in Syria, the Syrian Arab Republic National Report for the Peking Conference, and so forth.

Civil Campaigns

For the first time in Syria, civil campaigns were directed toward public opinion and touched upon highly sensitive taboo issues, such as the Campaign Against Honour Crimes, the Nationality Campaign, and the Children in Danger Campaign. The most important of these campaigns was the campaign against the draft family law. These campaigns managed to create genuine civil action, convey their messages, and raise the awareness of new population groups to issues that had been far from the spotlight until then. Due to the efforts of the men and women who took part in these campaigns, a quality change was brought about in the collective stance toward women's and children's issues, and the exposure of erroneous practices and stances prevailing in Syrian society that rooted contemptible male behaviours. In the Campaign against Honour Crimes, the two leading websites, Al-Thara and Syrian Women Observatory, succeeded with the support of a large number of other websites, in embarking on an aggressive campaign against the widespread practice of honour crimes. Since the campaign began, hundreds of honour crimes have been "exposed", as well as thousands of cases that in the past were veiled behind a conspiracy of silence. In the wake of the campaign, thousands of articles were written and studies conducted that expressed opposition to honour crimes, and exposed the social legitimacy ostensibly accorded to them by religion.

The campaign influenced the mood on the Syrian street and caused the official establishment to rise from the torpor afflicting it, as a result of which the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs held a national conference on honour crimes in 2008. These actions matured into an amendment to Article 548 of the Penal Code by means of Legislative Decree 37 that instituted a penalty of at least two years' imprisonment for men who commit honour crimes (www.thara-sy.com/thara/modules/news/article.php?storyid=965). The influence of the campaign on young people is worthy of note. Various groups embarked on field work that included petitions against honour crimes, and managed to obtain thousands of signatures that were later conveyed to the decision-making political echelons. The petition campaign provided an opportunity for young people to come into direct contact with the street, which strengthened the position of the websites as taking a social stand against honour crimes. This opened new channels for dialogue with the public on this sensitive issue. It also impelled the moderate and renewed Islamic streams to renounce honour crimes and try to remove responsibility for them from Islamic religion. In this regard, Islamic parliamentarian Muhammad Habash wrote: "Islam and Islamic commentary reject killing in the name of honour. These crimes are absolutely contrary to Islamic law in three instances, and in each of these instances these crimes are considered a great sin" (swoforum.nesasy.org/index.php?topic=2901.0;prev-next=prev).

Civil Identity

Openness to the moderate Islamic streams bolstered the websites' civil identity. Civil identity quite naturally opposes the principle of exclusion and views citizenship and liberty as fundamental issues. Therefore, even opposing positions found their way onto feminist websites and represented the general position of the fundamentalist religious streams vis-à-vis the sites, and toward the Campaign against Honour Crimes. The feminist websites' cooperative and inclusive approach was not mutual. The official bodies failed to appreciate the wisdom of involving the websites and their activists in formulating the legislative policy framing social life in Syria. Thus, for example, a secret committee was appointed under prime ministerial instructions to draft the Syrian Family Law. This committee comprised members wholly identified with the fundamentalist religious stream, and excluded other elements of society such as representatives of religious and ethnic communities, minorities, and women. A reactionary draft of the Family Law was published in 2009, which had it been passed, could have caused the dissolution of civil life in Syria. For example, the Law denies the authority of the civil courts to hear domestic cases, thus compelling citizens to petition the Sharia and ethnic courts. Consequently, a new campaign was launched that called for the proposed draft law to be withdrawn and replaced with one

modern family law for all Syrian citizens. Thus it came about that for the first time a proposed law was derailed exclusively by civil society organisations, after the official media remained silent and avoided reference to the proposed law on the orders of the political echelons. Over a three-month period, the electronic media, represented chiefly by the two leading websites and others, succeeded in recruiting a large number of intellectuals, jurists, and public activists, who together led a genuine civil campaign (through the websites), managed to nip the proposed law in the bud, and brought about an official announcement on its withdrawal. This, of course, did not prevent the promotion of a new Family Law bill toward the end of 2009, whose aim was to prevent the advancement of a modern civil family law. The websites therefore continued with their efforts to overturn the second bill, and in this case, too, they were successful, mainly due to a manifesto addressed to the President of the Republic by numerous intellectuals and activists, which was published on November 20, 2009. "No to Moving Backwards, Yes to Modernization of the Law" was the title of the manifesto published in Al-Thara Magazine, which included a call for the withdrawal of the new Family Law bill, establishment of a committee consisting of activists and representatives of the government, the legal profession, and all sects, to undertake an open discussion on this issue under the supervision of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, and work together to issue a national Family Law that meets the needs of the modern era (www.thara-sy.com/thara/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1206). Although the second bill was also derailed, the battle was not yet over between those who subscribed to the civil approach and the supporters of isolationism, who transferred it to other arenas, such as the mosques and religious assemblies, and other media forums of a religious bent. All of them furiously denounced anyone calling them "secular", and even the international conventions that the secularists sought to embrace. Thus, on May 8, 2010, Al-Thara's editorial stated: "[...] the portrayal of CEDAW as a grave threat to the lives, morals, and religious values of Syrians is absurd, since it assumes that we are naïve and unable to protect our uniqueness before an international humanitarian convention". And it went on to say: "We are surprised when we hear the fiery sermons against the convention [...] such as that by Sheikh Ratib al-Nabulsi on his website: 'We do not need conventions to secure rights for women, rather, we need to understand that Islam is great and dispense with all these conventions!' [...] And the statement by Sheikh Osama Rifai: 'We must come to a political decision not to raise these reservations, because of the presence of an active and powerful movement in society, particularly among some civil society groups, to put pressure on the government to lift these reservations'" (www.thara-sy.com/thara/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1551). As we have seen, this activity reached the mosques and also some Islamic-oriented websites,

such as the special forum that discusses family law with an Islamic slant. This site contained accusations and threats against those subscribing to the civil approach. A counter response to one of the lawyers supporting civil law was as follows: "Beware [...] You and those standing behind you [...] You are playing with fire"

(damascusbar.org/AlMuntada/showthread.php?s=cd96d765fffd02978ae70585730992d1&p=38352). Al-Thara Magazine established an alternative forum to the religious one, with the aim of providing a platform for discussing the Family Law far from the isolationist and fundamentalist approach. The forum sought to enable large numbers of people to take part in the debate on the Family Law in an attempt to formulate a modern family law that would take Syria's uniqueness into account, and present decision-makers with the essence of the law that the feminist and civil society organisations were striving for.

The Internet and the Crisis of Communication with the Public

The internet continues to be the only weapon in the armory of civil society institutions in Syria. These institutions are failing to penetrate the other media, such as radio, TV, and the press, which hinders their wish to reach the marginal groups that are in greater need than others of raising awareness. Despite the paucity of studies analyzing the characteristics of internet users in Syria, it is evident that the majority are young people. They represent but one element of the target audience, and therefore thousands of women remain outside the feminist websites' sphere of influence. Added to this is the fact that the sphere of activity is dictated and restricted by factors associated with the granting of licenses and permits for holding activities. The feminist websites devoted special attention to the issue of communication with the public, and created an additional channel of communication in the form of direct contact with various social entities, such as independent lawyers, doctors, and other social figures. The aim was to reach additional populations apart from those with access to the internet. This step was quite successful, and these entities enriched the website content, particularly on topics related to children and women who are victims of violence, people suffering various forms of discrimination, and children in danger. Consequently, the feminist websites' volunteers try to establish direct contact with women's and children's populations. On their homepage, the two leading feminist websites have hotlines that women can use to call a centre specializing in providing psychological and physical assistance to female victims of violence. So far, dozens of women have used the centre for support and protection. Al-Thara launched the nationwide Children in Danger Campaign, which was devoted to conveying information and complaints on violence against children in Syria, and abuse of their rights, and the material gathered was transferred to the relevant bodies (www.cid-sy.org). Additionally, the websites invested substantial efforts in a campaign

called, "My Nationality is My Right and the Right of My Children", which was run by the Syrian Women's League (nesasy.org/content/category/53/110/179). This activity ran parallel to work on raising public awareness of the existing laws. It transpires that there is abysmal ignorance of the laws' content, which causes considerable problems among the public. The websites worked to avail surfers of free legal advice, which was provided by volunteer experts and jurists. Furthermore, the sites created comprehensive legal libraries in which they presented the majority of Syrian laws, amendments, the various ordinances, and official decisions on social matters. The sites also published all the proposed laws drafted by the government and civil society organisations. It could be argued that these websites contributed to raising the standard of the public's legal knowledge, among other things by exposing discriminatory elements in the laws, and demanding their amendment. The Al-Thara editorial of February 13, 2010, addressed the draft Law of Associations as follows: "Drafting a new Law of Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations constitutes an issue of great importance since it expresses an urgent demand to reinforce civil endeavor in the country. This law addresses the numerous prohibitions that subjected the civil associations' activities to supervisory mechanisms, and prevented them from filling their role in its entirety." It is therefore evident that the call to amend legislation was a central issue in the feminist websites' activity. The websites are constantly working to expose laws that include discriminatory elements against women and children, such as the Penal Code, Citizenship, and Youth Laws. Additionally, they demand the annulment of the Emergency Law, and the preparation of a Political Parties Law that will breathe new life into political activity in Syria.

Conclusion

In conclusion it may be argued that the feminist websites have succeeded in establishing the core of a social movement, and have made civil steps that are vital to it. The websites provided a space independent of the authorities, built a platform for civil debate, and enabled individuals to express their positions, opinions, and opposition in a climate that touched the boundaries of democratic practice. These websites, in fact, have created a space for debate for a broad spectrum of opinions, and extended the circle of interaction between the various ideological, religious, and ethnic streams. They have not allowed any one group to claim that it represents the others, and they have opened the door to the feminist social movement so it can develop by virtue of the genuine contact that the sites have created between the various social groups in Syria and the Arab world, which share the same ideas. The feminist websites have created human, social, and civil content that is unprecedented on the local level, and have thus far managed to avoid direct confrontation with the state. However, over time these websites will not be able to avoid tough competition from the

radical Islamist movements that oppose all modes of civil life, since they constitute a threat to their own interests.

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Chapter 4: Syrian Charities at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century: Their History, Situation, Frames and Challenges

Laura Ruiz De Elvira

Introduction

In Syria, charities have traditionally been the mainstay of associations. They make up over 60% of all Syrian associations accredited by the State, a total of about 900 charities authorised by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL). These charities are rooted in a long tradition which is both Muslim and Christian, and they are the manifestation of a still-fragile civil society that is shaped by its difficult relationship with the government. They respond to a real need on the part of the population. By no means are they inactive empty shells intended merely to collect funds from international sponsors or the Syrian state. The ideological, historical, sociological and political foundations of these charities are essentially based on a denominational, political-geographic and often clientele-orientated structure. The charity sector – fragmented, apolitical and essentially a provider of social services – is a legitimate subject for analysis. And yet studies of these kinds of associations are rare. This article will try to fill that void, at least in part. As certain segments of Syrian civil society have generally been experiencing a phase of expansion and transformation, partly promoted from above, charities in particular have grown considerably over the past decade. In this context, Islamic organisations have flourished the most. However, Syria does not have a monopoly on this resurgent charity. Studies show that the region's other countries 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 programmes, has led to the establishment of charitable foundations, financed in particular by members of the royal family.¹¹ In this regard, Benthall asserts that at the regional level "even the most ardent defenders of state intervention in a society's activities increasingly seem to recognise the legitimacy and necessity of the complementary role played by private charity".¹² In Syria, state support for

charitable projects has, since 2000, taken place in a context whereby public institutions can no longer meet the needs of the population, despite a real increase in their budgets. This difficulty is exacerbated by population growth and a corresponding increase in the demand for social services. According to the official rhetoric, state representatives now give charity organisations – an integral part of *ahli* civil society¹³ tolerated by the State – the rank of 'partner to the authorities', and call on them to participate in the national development effort. Through a complex and permanent process of negotiation punctuated by intermittent repression, the social activists who now constitute this sector have profited from a period of relative tolerance 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 or circumvent the disciplinary mechanisms established by the Baathist regime, Syrian charities have succeeded in creating leeway within a very restrictive political system, and are far from being puppets of the government. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to introduce a number of tools to increase understanding of Syrian charities. In order to do so, it will first return to their historical background. It will then develop an analysis of these organisations at the turn of the twenty-first century, before examining the frames of this type of collective action. Finally, it will present the challenges that the sector must overcome in order to survive.

A Historical Outline of the Charity Sector

The charities that proliferate in Syria today are in fact only the prolongation of a tradition of beneficence that is strongly rooted in Arab societies. Their evolution is intrinsically linked to the country's political and social history, and their roots date back to the Ottoman period. The first Muslim charity to see the light of day in the *Bilad al-Cham* region, al-Maqasid (1878), was founded in Beirut and has branches in several Syrian cities. However, it postdates the first Christian Syrian charity, the Association Saint Vincent de Paul (1863). 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-Khairiyya* (1907), an organisation for 6 to 13-year-old orphans that provided housing and a teaching centre accredited by the Ministry of Education; the Orthodox Association Saint Grégoire (1912) which, as well as housing and educating orphaned children, gave material support to those who needed it most; and the *Jam'iyyat al-Ihsan al-Islamiyya*, a Shia organisation that looked

¹¹ Amélie Le Renard, "Pauvreté et charité en Arabie Saoudite: la famille royale, le secteur privé et l'État providence", *Critique internationale*, 2008/4, no. 41, p. 138.

¹² Jonathan Benthall, "Islam et charité institutionnelle: doctrine, réalité et interprétation", in Blandine Destremau, Agnès Deboulet and François Ireton (eds.), *Dynamiques de la*

pauvreté en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient, Paris, Karthala Urbama, 2004, p. 183.

¹³ I distinguish between *ahli* civil society, tolerated by the State, and *madani* civil society, which is made up of anti-establishment activists and, therefore, barred from the public sphere.

after poor families from the Shia community and today runs a training centre for women. However, the fabric of Syrian charities only really began to be woven under the French mandate (1920-46). Organisations such as *al-Tammadun al-Islami* (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 put it, its founding is part of a vast Islamic association movement, which emerged in the mid-1920s as a direct result of French colonisation.¹⁴ 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 the Islamic Orphanage at Aleppo (1920) or *Nuqtat al-Halib* 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. Christian charities developed in parallel to this in the 1930s and 1940s, linked to religious institutions.¹⁵ For example, the charity *al-Qadis Lawndius al-Khairiyya* (1944) or the Damascus clinic *al-Moustawsaf al-Khairi* (1946), which was created on the initiative of a group of physicians wishing to give free medical care to the underprivileged. 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 203.¹⁶ This expansion was due to a more favourable environment characterised by flexible legislation, a liberal economic system and new religious leaders asserting their authority.¹⁷ Some of the expansion consisted of charities, such as the *Dar al-Hadith al-Nabawi al-Sharif* (1953), 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 *Cheikh Mahhi al-Din* association, which opened 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 and *zaim*. 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 were created. In this context of expansion, two new instruments of control and coordination were established: one private, the Damascus Charities Union (1957), and the other public, the MoSAL. As soon as it was founded, the MoSAL took responsibility for associations that had previously been under the supervision of the Interior Ministry. It launched a registration process for existing associations; and a licensing system was also established through a 1958 law. 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”.¹⁸ In this context, civil society initiatives were no longer welcome in as much 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. 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 Islamic protests endangered Hafez al-Assad's regime. Between 1962 and 2000, the number of charities dropped from 596 to 513.¹⁹ 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 loosened.

Charities at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

With Bashar al-Assad's arrival in power in 2000, government policy on associations was reversed. After the sudden halt that was put to the ‘Damascus Spring’ in 2001, the public sphere shrank, but this did not in fact revive the status quo of the Hafez al-Assad period. On the one hand, the accreditation procedure for new associations became more flexible from 2004 onwards, which partially opened up access to the association sector. On the other hand, a normalisation process began with the aim of registering ‘informal’ organisations. The combination of these two policies resulted in a sharp increase in registered organisations, from 513 in 2000 to 1,485 in 2009. If these official statistics are to be believed, in only a decade almost 900 organisations were accredited. As part of this, the number of registered charities rose spectacularly. In reality, many of these

¹⁴ Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib, “Al-Tamaddun al-Islami: Passé et présent d'une association réformiste damascène”, in “L'Islam en Syrie”, *Maghreb Machrek*, Winter 2008-2009, nr. 198, p. 80.

¹⁵ Soukaina Boukhaima, “Le mouvement associatif en Syrie”, in Sarah Ben Nefissa (ed.), *Pouvoirs et associations dans le monde arabe*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2002, p. 80.

¹⁶ Thomas Pierret, *Les oulémas syriens: La tradition comme ressource face aux défis du changement social et de l'autoritarisme*. POLS, Monde musulman. Louvain-la-Neuve, Paris, Université Catholique de Louvain, Sciences Po Paris. Doctoral dissertation, p. 342.

¹⁷ *Idem*.

¹⁸ Michel Seurat, “Les populations, l'Etat et la société”, in André Raymond (ed.), *La Syrie d'aujourd'hui*, Editions CNRS, Paris, 1980, p. 122.

¹⁹ Central Office of Statistics, Syrian Arab Republic.

new organisations were the result of an institutionalisation of “informal” associations encouraged by the State. These charities, long marginalised and relegated to a clandestine existence, took advantage of the relatively relaxed situation by legalising their status. Thus, from 2000 onwards, the posters of new charities have decorated Syrian cities. In Damascus, the charity *al-Ri’ayya al-Sihiyya al-Khairiyya* (2005) began its work in the health sector. That same year, *Shabab al-Moustaqbal al-Khairiyya* was founded, which focuses on youth. But the most ambitious of these newly-created organisations is probably the *Mashrou’u Hefth al-Ni’me* (2006), the associative version of the *jama’ Zayd*, the most important Islamic movement in Damascus. This project is dedicated to collecting clothing, medicine, furniture and food for redistribution to the poor. While the strongest growth in the number of organisations was in the capital, there are also numerous examples across the country. In fact, founding charities has become a fashionable phenomenon in which both small shopkeepers and big entrepreneurs wanted to participate. Even someone as significant as Rami Makhoul, Syria’s most powerful businessman and a cousin of the President, got involved in creating the charity *al-Bustan al-Khairiyya* in Latakia. In barely five years of existence, this charity has already signed several cooperation agreements with the Syrian Ministry of Health. The charity sector is, moreover, 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 – are now 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; the eradication of 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 microcredits. Clearly, charities are trying to adapt and seize the zeitgeist. The line between charity and development has become increasingly blurred and given way to new hybrid organisations. Under MoSAL pressure, their role has 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 teach them how to fish”. At the same time, charities considerably increase their scope. New charities become less localised, working at city level, not exclusively at the neighbourhood level. Some are even authorised by MoSAL to carry out their activities in all of the country’s regions – a minor revolution compared to the preceding period. In fact, previously, charities wishing to work in more than one city had been forced to register each branch as an independent organisation. This obligation was

part of a strategy by the regime aimed at preventing the emergence of any charismatic figure or movement who might be capable of rallying the masses. However, what is new about the role of charities is not their geographic reach or their type of activity, but the growing volume of services they offer and their growing number of beneficiaries. For example, in 2008 the charity *al-Ansar* had an annual budget of 120m Syrian pounds,²⁰ which it used, among other things, for two orphanages and its institute for the study of Sharia law. As for the charity *Hifz al-Ni’me*, it distributed more than 22,000 meals per day to destitute families in Damascus during the month of Ramadan 2010, its new kitchens having been financed to the amount of 25m Syrian pounds by the rich entrepreneur Othman al-A’idi. As far as the *Sunduq al-Afieh*, a project of the Union of Damascus Charities, is concerned, its evolution was spectacular: 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 953m Syrian pounds.²¹ Given these figures, the benefits of charities are more than obvious to the Syrian State. Indeed, in the difficult economic climate, with a public deficit that would have forced leaders to review the whole system of subsidies and social expenditures, the usefulness of such organisations is immeasurable. And they are all the more important because the gap between rich and poor has been widening. In this way, the charity sector has gradually become a ‘partner’ of the State. The principle of cooperation with civil society, on which the 10th Five Year Plan (2006-10) is 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 or health centres, has passed into the hands of certain charities. There is no shortage of examples – they are held up as the key to success in the development process. They follow a logic of partial ‘off-loading’ by the State, a formula that is already at work in other countries.²² In other words, the regime favours developing this ‘primary’ kind of organisation over other bodies which are less easy to control and cause more political unrest, such as lobbying organisations. The regime’s support for charities does not necessarily prevent it from maintaining, and even perfecting, a very restrictive system of control and surveillance that is characterised by lengthy bureaucratic procedures; the selection of activists; interference by the authorities; and, lastly, repression. The partial opening-up of the civic sphere has in fact been concomitant with practices such as dissolving boards of directors. In June 2009, for example, the

²⁰ “Religious Schools Under Review”, *Syria Today*, January 2009.

²¹ Annual report of the Damascus Charities Union, 2007.

²² On this idea, see Béatrice Hibou (ed.), *La privatisation des États*, Paris, Khartala, 1999.

board of directors of the Aleppo Charities Union was dissolved by MoSAL one day before its re-election; it was replaced by a 'temporary' board nominated by the Minister.²³ To this must be added other events, such as the 2008 ban on men of religion joining boards of directors; or the prohibition in the same year of 'charity tables' (*mawa'id al-rahme*) during Ramadan. Internet access is also closely monitored. Very few charities have a truly active website (official authorisation being required to activate a site), and site contents are censored. Clearly, the daily life of charities is riddled with more or less significant difficulties that their directors try to circumvent as best they can.

A Singular Form of Collective Action

In this context, it seems important to develop a frame analysis of the activities carried out by the activists who breathe life into charities. This type of activity can be called collective insofar as it is a 'structured' activity that refers to a situation "where everyone contributes in different ways to the same end by submitting to the same rules, by coordinating with each other, and by adopting a perspective of reciprocity".²⁴ Hence, we can see charities as sites of collective action that produce 'meanings' and articulate 'horizons of justification and legitimisation'.²⁵ Now, in authoritarian contexts all collective action carries high risks.²⁶ Indeed, as during the Damascus Spring, the keenest anti-establishment activists, those who openly choose a strategy of 'voice',²⁷ are heavily punished (with imprisonment or travel bans) and excluded from the civil society advocated by the regime. How, then, does society organise itself so as to be active and to continue carrying out social activities in such a political climate? First of all, it has to be emphasised that people involved in charities do not lobby for a political cause and do not have as their objective the overthrow of the established order. They do not seek to 'put pressure on the legislature' or 'influence public opinion'. In other words, charities do not set themselves up to be at odds with the reality in which they live. Their main *raison d'être* is to provide a specific social service to the population. In order to do so, they choose a strategy for action that permits

them to carry out their activities without interruption. Pursuing this objective means accepting the rules of the game as they are imposed. Only from this starting-point can representatives of charities negotiate any leeway, by foregrounding the public usefulness of the service they provide. In other words, this is a delicate activity, but it is ostensibly not 'risky', in the sense that it is emptied of all explicit anti-establishment content or political demands. Charity entrepreneurs effectively avoid making any critical social comments in public whatsoever. The vocabulary used in the charity sector is far removed from indignation or denunciation. For example, when subsidies for petroleum-derived products were reduced in 2008, charities immediately chose to rally to lessen the social impact of these measures, rather than denounce them publicly. Anger at increasing poverty and social inequalities is only expressed behind closed doors. Equally, charity directors who openly criticise the heavy bureaucracy that is hampering their sector are few and far between. Clearly, this does not mean that those involved in charities are completely subservient to the regime, but rather that they are obliged to come to a compromise with the system of domination so as to carry out their activities. In other words, protest and resistance exist, but they are subtle and do not show themselves in the public sphere. They take the path of silent practices, actions and choices that are difficult to identify: for instance, collaborating with one organisation rather than another; participating or not participating in MoSAL initiatives; establishing or not establishing partnerships with the First Lady's Government-Operated Non-Governmental Organisations (GO-NGOs).²⁸ We are thus faced with a constituent part of Syrian civil society apparently opting for strategies of 'exit' or 'loyalty' in order to survive. Indeed, for those who cross the red lines the price is repression, exclusion and sometimes even imprisonment. In this context, limited publicity for one's activities is part of the strategy. Degrees of visibility vary, but in general those in charge of charities practice 'the art of keeping the right distance'. Thus Syrian charities look for discretion outside the community or group which sustains them.

This strategy is in sharp contrast to that used by other organisations, such as development or lobbying NGOs, seeking international visibility as a source of legitimacy. The (horizontal) mobilisation of society is achieved through interpersonal relations and face-to-face meetings in the neighbourhood, community, mosque or church, and not by adhering to a common cause. In this sense, charities differentiate themselves from so-called 'civil' organisations, emerging in several Arab countries in the 1990s. Those have been described as "groupings that are voluntary and not based on any primary affiliation".²⁹

²³ www.free-syria.com/loadarticle.php?articleid=35066.

²⁴ Danny Trom, "Grammaire de la mobilisation et vocabulaires de motifs", in Daniel Cefaï and Danny Trom (eds.), *Les formes de l'action collective. Mobilisations dans des arènes publiques*, Coll. Raisons pratiques, nr. 12, EHESS éditions, Paris, 2001, p. 101.

²⁵ Cefaï and Trom (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁶ Vincent Geisser, Karam Karam, Frédéric Vairel, "Espaces du politique: mobilisations et protestations", in Élisabeth Picard (ed.), *La Politique dans le monde arabe*, Paris, A. Colin, 2006, pp. 193-213.

²⁷ According to the classification established by Albert O. Hirschmann in *Exit, Voice, Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations, and States*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1970.

²⁸ On GONGOs, see chapter 9 of this volume.

²⁹ Vincent Geisser, Karam Karam, Frédéric Vairel, "Espaces du politique: mobilisations et protestations", *op. cit.*, p. 210.

Involvement in charities is re-centred on a personal quest for salvation and on self-fulfilment as a way of carrying out one's religious duty. As a result, the motivation is religious rather than civic. But – and we cannot ignore this – getting involved in the charity sector also constitutes a way of 'being-in-society', finding oneself among likeminded people, increasing and preserving social capital, and maintaining a clientele. To that extent, charitable activities play a 'socialising' role.

Challenges: Adapting to Survive

The recent burgeoning of charities has been concurrent with the need for these bodies to adapt to the current context of economic and social transition in order to survive. The liberalisation of the economy; the nascent semi-privatisation of areas of public action; and the introduction of notions such as 'development', 'participation' and 'good governance' into associative activities are only three of the factors that are driving this transformation. The first challenge has to do with the introduction of the notion of development into charitable activities. For some years now, both State representatives and foreign activists have been putting pressure on charities to become 'development agents'. This means that the more traditional associations are destined to disappear or be ostracised, making room for hybrid bodies situated halfway between charity and development. This is what the European Commission delegation in Damascus calls "charity plus". Here, the challenge is to introduce the notion of development into charitable activities without forgetting their *raison d'être*. Charities run the risk of becoming meaningless organisations that specialise in development rhetoric but are inefficient in the field. The second challenge is linked to the financing and accountancy of charities. Indeed, as charities flourish and the volume of services grows, their financial needs rise exponentially. More and more associations now try to gain, by diversifying their resources, some financial autonomy – not from public or external aid, already infinitely small, but from benefactor donations, which drop noticeably in moments of economic crisis. That is why profit-making activities – such as selling products made by the charities' beneficiaries, renting out premises, managing day-care centres and retirement homes, opening training centres, etcetera – have become common practice in the sector. Thirdly, in order to survive, charities have to provide a service that is more and more specialised and targeted. Along with better organisation and more resources, this also entails professionalising charity staff and paying them salaries. Charities would thus become private social service providers on the same basis as the for-profit private sector. In itself, this specialisation represents an additional kind of legitimacy in the eyes of the authorities, while at the same time enhancing charities' 'general interest'. Finally, the fourth challenge is to preserve some autonomy vis-à-vis the government. Indeed, in a situation where the development of the charity sector is closely

supervised by MoSAL as well as by quasi-governmental bodies such as the First Lady's GO-NGOs, the danger of charities becoming empty shells co-opted by the regime is even more real than before.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that charities are an expression of the dynamism of Syrian society and civil society itself. Their present continues and expands a past that was rich in charitable initiatives, but whose growth was brutally stopped when the Baath Party took power. Today, charities are organisations for the redistribution of wealth and the provision of social services whose efficiency, proximity to the population and financial independence from public aid make them very useful to the authorities. Moreover, they strengthen social ties, participation and the transformation of individual interests into collective ones. It is precisely because of this general 'usefulness' that charities currently enjoy more leeway than in the past. Nonetheless, the rapid growth that I describe has gone hand in hand with a strengthening of the mechanisms of disciplinary control, coercion and repression, particularly since 2008. In this context, Syrian charities are faced with a panoply of challenges that must be met if they wish to maintain their activities and perpetuate their *raison d'être*; and do so within a civil society that is not only expanding, but also better managed and regulated by the authorities.

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Chapter 5: A Tale of “Community-Civic” Work in Salamiyah: The Experience of “Friends of Salamiyah” Society

Mohamed Aldbiyat

Introduction

Arab governments in their different forms impose endless restrictions on political activities and persistently resist the democratization process that forms the core of demands by the political parties and unions. The Syrian intellectual elite, being one of those Arab elites, has found that the only exit of this dilemma in order to be active in the social development process is to get involved in civil performance, to develop it and work through it on changing the nature of the communal society based on primordial relations – in particular those of familial, tribal, religious and regional bonds into a civil society. This envisaged transformation can go through an interim stage, which can be called a “community-civic” period.³⁰ This transformation is directly linked to the issue of belonging, whether on the personal or collective level. A person first develops its sense of belonging to the primary group into which he or she is born, and later to the group which shares his or her thoughts and beliefs, advancing towards belonging to the region where he or she grew and built his or her primary relations and which rooted in him or her the feeling of belonging to those primary ties. The influence of these ties diminishes only with the development of the true feeling of belonging to a civic society, then to the society and state, and finally citizenship. The adoption of new ideas and concepts independent from political or religious ideologies that dominated the process of social change in the world until the end of the 20th century, played an important role in this development. The emergence of these new ideas, most important of which was the environment and its role in human life, played a pivotal role in this development. This new concept surpassed the purely natural aspect of life to encompass the interaction of humans with their surrounding environment, affecting the former as much as the latter affecting it. Other social issues can be grouped under the umbrella of social work aiming at elevating society, such as women’s rights, children’s rights and disability rights, in addition to cultural issues among others. In such circumstances and driven by the desire to be involved in the public life, civil society organisations emerged, incorporating all citizens regardless of their ideological or primary belonging. Moreover, some Arab regimes, especially those built on a civic, rather than tribal or familial basis, realised the significance of developing civic societies, despite their fear of such societies which they regard

³⁰ We have opted in this study for using “community-civic”, instead of civic, as, in reality, we believe we still are in a transitional period from community to civic.

as tools in the hands of the capitalist West, aimed at destabilising developing countries or acting as a Trojan horse through which the West can infiltrate these societies. Consequently, these countries permitted the establishment of non-governmental associations while imposing, at the same time, a number of constraints to ensure that these associations remain “under control”. Furthermore, “the dominant political elites in many Arab countries rejected the use of the term ‘civil society’, linking it to imported ideas, or ideas imposed by other cultures. On the other hand, those who tried to conduct research in this field suffered from a spectrum of random accusations ranging from collaboration to a desire to tear down the established ethics.”³¹ Under such circumstances, it is remarkable how the intellectual elite in the city of Salamiyah succeeded in establishing two main associations concerned with the general affairs in the city and its surrounding area. The first was *Al Adiyat* Society-Salamiyah branch, established in 2002, followed by the Friends of Salamiyah Society, an openly operating society, in 2006. There is also the Association of Olive Producers, for olive farmers,³² which we will not discuss in this study. The decrees of establishing these associations were issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which supervises the activities of civil associations in Syria. This study will focus only the *Adyat* and Friends of Salamiyah societies. However, we must first look at the characteristics that made Salamiyah a unique environment for their birth.

Uniqueness of Salamiyah

In addition to all that we mentioned concerning the general circumstances that affected the emergence of associations in Syria, the city of Salamiyah is endowed with features that we may not find elsewhere, as Salamiyah differs from most if not all medium-size cities in Syria in the following ways:

Newly founded City

The city of Salamiyah was founded in 1849, built on the ruins of the older city of Salamiyah, which blossomed during the Abbasside period as a secret centre for the Ismaili faith. The city was abandoned in the 14th century as a result of the successive Mongol raids, which left the city in ruins. The city remained uninhabited until the mid-19th century, when Ismailis returned to the area, encouraged by the Ottoman authorities, which were seeking to expand agricultural lands to the east into the desert, and hoped this way to control nomadic tribes that threatened the commercial

³¹ Kawakibi, S. From non-governmental to intensively-governmental associations. The Al-Shuruq Egyptian newspaper. 3/5/2010.

³² This association was established in 2006, but as a civil association. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs demanded that the association be a cooperative belonging to the farmers’ union in Syria, similar to agricultural associations. Yet the founders preferred it to be an independent and non-governmental community organisation, focusing on the environment and caring for olive trees.

routes and the main Syrian cities. The city then developed and within 160 years it reached a total population of around 70,000.³³ The city managed to occupy the third position in Midland Syria, next to the cities of Homs and Hama. Since its rebirth, the city has become the centre of a regional area; administratively part of the Governorate of Hama, and containing a population of circa 300,000. Salamiyah remains a rural city. Its economy is largely dependent on agriculture and trade and serves a vast rural area by way of its two agricultural sectors: crops and sheep husbandry. The latter is of particular importance thanks to the huge desert area surrounding Salamiyah exceeding 3,000 km². Semi-nomadic villages dot the space of this desert, which administratively belongs to Salamiyah. The main commercial activity of these villages is the raising of sheep. Agricultural ownership is characterized by mainly small to medium-size units, limiting agricultural production. Years of drought further limited the region's agricultural potential.³⁴ However, the city's dynamics and its rapid transformation from a small village into a medium-sized city are not an automatic result of pure economic factors but also of social factors as well. Among these is its inhabitants' determination for Salamiyah to become a city that enjoys full basic services, similar to other Syrian cities. Thus the citizens' interest in public matters is apparent, particularly with regard to the intellectual elite.

The city of culture and philosophy

Salamiyah's cultural reputation is not without good reason as it sustains a high percentage of intellectuals who are particularly involved in philosophy and literature. This could be mainly attributed to the high percentage of educated individuals compared to other Syrian areas, particularly in the countryside. As a result, the population in the Salamiyah region, both in the countryside and the city, sought education as it was perceived as the only way out for the youth from the hardships in the region. Moreover, the rate of the educated has been remarkably high among both sexes. In the latest census of 2004, the rate of those attending schools in Salamiyah was 61.6% among males, and 65.7% among females while the city's illiteracy rate was less than 6%. The vicinity of the city to the cities of Homs and Hama allowed for the emergence of a large number of commuters working in these cities.

Furthermore, Salamiyah is often classified as a city of intellectuals and poets; a city that enjoys a diversity of political and religious affiliations despite the fact that

most of its residents belong to the Shiite Ismaili doctrine that differs from other Shi'a sects in that their Imam is present, not absent as is the case in the Twelvers Shiites.³⁵ One of the key principles of this doctrine is the reliance on reason and not on inspiration, which led to the development of critical thought among intellectual groups. This background explains the diversity of political affiliation in the city of Salamiyah and towns of the region, and the fierce struggles between various trends in the period following independence.

The First Experience: The Adyat Society

The first attempt to form a civic society in Salamiyah was the opening of a branch of the Adyat Society, based in the city of Aleppo. Adyat is a widely respected society, which was established in 1926 under the name 'Friends of the Castle and the Museum'. In 1930, it adopted its present name. Its main aim was to protect the ruins of the castle of Aleppo and to establish a national museum there. The Society ceased its activity during the Second World War, and resumed it in 1950, following Syria's independence in 1946. Its internal constitution allows for branches in all Syrian districts. At the time of writing this article, it has fourteen branches in various governorate and districts centres.³⁶ Adyat's branch in Salamiyah was established in 2002 by a group of intellectuals interested in archaeology and culture in Salamiyah. The group filed an application to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, through the mother society (as is the norm), for the opening of a branch in Salamiyah. The Ministry approved the establishment of the branch and issued a decree to the effect following the approval of the governor of Hama. The process also requires the approval of the political authorities, which study the application and the founding members, who need to have a 'clean record'. Neither the founder nor any of the members can have a criminal record, nor be prohibited from practicing his or her civic and political rights in Syria. After its foundation in 2002, the association in Salamiyah started its activities, aimed at drawing the attention to neglected archaeological sites still waiting to be excavated, maintained or restored, especially the Shmemis Castle and the ancient Hammam (Roman bath) in Salamiyah. Another aim was spreading awareness of the importance of the archaeological sites through lectures, publications and field trips. The association was also interested in environmental and cultural issues, as it was the only association in Salamiyah prior to the establishment of other societies, such as Friends of Salamiyah Environmental Society,

³³ According to the latest census in 2004, the population of Salamiyah was 66,724, with an annual growth rate of 1.37% since 1994. This rate was less than that of the national average standing at 2.57% during the same period. The relatively modest birth rate of Salamiyah reflects a wider trend in almost all Syrian cities.

³⁴ For instance, during the infamous drought period in the modern history of Syria, which lasted between 1955-1961, inhabitants of the big cities emigrated after their wells dried up causing shortages for irrigation and even drinking water.

³⁵ The Imam of the Ismaili groups worldwide currently is Imam Karim Shah al-Hussayni, also known as the Agha Khan, the founder of one of the most important international non-governmental foundations, the Agha Khan Network, which includes the Agha Khan Foundation, and which is active especially in the fields of environment protection and rural development. It launched its program in Syria in 2003.

³⁶ For more info about the Adyat association in Aleppo see: www.adyatsyria.org.

which we will look into further below. Those interested in civic activities were enthusiastic and joined the society in large numbers so that its membership reached 100 in the first year of its establishment. Moreover, the authorities encouraged the society and provided it with an office in an old building that belonged to Salamiyah's City Council. The Society enjoyed a presence in the city's society and quickly earned its trust. It also played an important role in official meetings and included formal and community activities. The culture of community-civic work began to have a real presence. What contributed to the expansion of the branch's diverse activities was the well balanced relationship with the mother society in Aleppo. The latter did not interfere in the decisions or activities of the branch, and only monitored the election process, annual budget, and the formation of the board of directors, elected by the general assembly in the society's branch every two years. The only weakness the society suffered from was the lack of publicity and the fact that its main decisions, particularly those related to internal organisation, had to be taken by the mother society, whose general assembly organised its activities and branches. In reality, however, the branch continued working almost independently, and the local political and administrative authorities supported this experiment, interfering only in matters related to cultural issues. For the association to organise a lecture, it had to gain the approval of the authorities, especially if the lecture was to be held in the government's Arab Cultural Centre in Salamiyah. The authorities demanded that the lecture be within the scope of the association, thus dealing with historical, archaeological or environmental matters only. The internal statutes codes of the NGOs in Syria (as defined by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) prevent associations and societies from engaging in any religious or political activities. Societies and associations also have to be non-profit, and are prohibited from engaging in any commercial activities. It should, finally, be noted that most of the association's members were retired, except for a small number of young people, mostly students of Archaeology at Syrian universities. The weak participation of the youth, especially young females, is one of the negative aspects many Syrian societies suffer from.

A Leap Forward: The Friends of Salamiyah Society

The next milestone came with the establishment of the Friends of Salamiyah Society (FOS) in 2006. Due to the limited activities of the Adyat Society, and its narrow specialization, a group of intellectuals initiated the process of establishing a new private and independent society focusing on environmental, cultural and development issues. Those who launched this project took advantage of the new proposals that encouraged the role of community societies in local development as emphasised in the Tenth Five-Year

Plan (2006-2010).³⁷ The application submitted by the founders for establishing this society was approved by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs,³⁸ which issued a decree for establishing the society in August 2006. The society was classified as "environmental" since the only other category was "charitable". It commenced its activities immediately, though it was not granted an office space by the administrative authorities in Salamiyah, as the city council did not have one. The society therefore rented an office, financed by membership fees and donations.³⁹ Many intellectuals showed great enthusiasm in joining the society to the extent that one of the members offered to cover the annual rent of its office, while other members donated basic furniture. The society started its environmental, cultural and development activities as described in its constitution. Similar to the Adyat Society, the activities of the FOS society required the approval of the relevant authorities, especially if these activities took place in public institutions, such as the Cultural Centre in Salamiyah, which was supervised by the Ministry of Culture. What distinguished the Friends of Salamiyah⁴⁰ Society from other organisations in the city, or in Syria as a whole, were its developmental activities through its project of improving livelihoods, launched in 2008 in Sheikh Hilal village on the outskirts of the Salamiyah desert. The society chose this village as it had been particularly affected by hardship due to the 1995 ban on farming in the desert, which was informed by government plans to fight desertification.⁴¹ The ban prompted the emigration of half of the village's 1,200 inhabitants, even before it was imposed. One of the developmental projects that were executed was the founding of the solidarity tourism project, which made investments in the preservation of the traditional architectural patterns which characterize the village, mainly clay buildings. The village has more than 300 domes, spread over

³⁷ In chapter six of the plan, which deals with the common issues across the sectors, it identifies as one of its main goals: "encouraging the reliance on local resources, and on the general participation in social developmental activities through expanding the action space of non-governmental associations, and activating non-profit organisations to facilitate their missions since they are a basic part in the developmental process with the state, especially in the attempts to limit poverty." (The Tenth Five-Year Plan, p. 171). Elsewhere it says to aim at: "constructing the capabilities of the civil associations and organisations, and to solidify the partnership patterns by having a true partnership with other sectors to contribute in the efforts of social development" (ibid, p. 28)

³⁸ Decree number 1516 issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Services on August 6, 2004. The decree is based on the set of laws of the associations and private institutions in Syria, no. 93 in 1958, and the approval of the District of Hama.

³⁹ Membership fees are modest, 50 S.L. a month (about one US Dollar), and on top of enrolment expenses to be paid once-500 S.L.

⁴⁰ Syria launched this program after signing the Nairobi International Convention against desert expansion, in Paris 1994.

⁴¹ The CCFD (Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement), with its headquarters in Paris.

140 houses, 70% of which are inhabited, and the rest were deserted due to fears they may collapse. The project received funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) for restoring the clay domes and building sanitary facilities, in addition to empowering women by forming vocational women's groups. The project was inaugurated in 2009, and since then, six restored houses with their twelve domes have accommodated tourists from different countries, especially France. In addition, the project received the support of the French Catholic Association and Development against Hunger, for empowering local administration of the project, and for the construction of a multi-purpose centre for accommodating tourists, which is still under development. The project received a second grant from SDC to empower women and help them establish their own projects. The project also received the support of the local authorities, especially the Governor of Hama, who sped up the execution of the stages related to infrastructural works in the village, such as paving roads and establishing a telephone network. The success of the project raised FOS' status in Salamiyah and nation-wide,⁴² and prompted a strong relationship between the society and the Syrian TRUST, which is currently working on establishing a forum of non-governmental development societies, on top of which is FIRDOS Society.⁴³ The intended forum will stress the empowerment of its NGO members⁴⁴ including the Salamiyah Friends Society, being one of the founding members of the project. The excellent reputation of the society helped in attracting youth, of both sexes, due to its diverse activities, especially sports events in the countryside and cultural activities (such as the cinema club, and the literature forum). However, not only did these activities attract the youth, but it, equally, drew the official authorities' attention who feared that such activities could lead into other directions, far from those stated among the association's goals, especially should the society turn political or religious and provide a podium for certain foreign religious or political groups. In such a case, it was predictable that when association's activities diversified it attracted more attention and monitoring from the authorities. The authorities particularly seem to have feared that the society could be exploited by countries hostile to Syrian policies. This, in turn, caused an emphasis on preventing collaboration with a number of foreign non-governmental organisations, especially American ones. Furthermore, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs requires that non-

⁴² The program was televised on many official Syrian state and private channels including Al-Dunya Channel.

⁴³ The association is sponsored by the First Lady, and was the main association cooperating with the Syrian Secretariat for Development.

⁴⁴ The Secretariat for Development in Syria organized its first conference on 23 January, 2010 under the title: "The role of society in development". First Lady Asmaa' Al-Asad, who sponsored the conference, emphasized the role of civil society in the development process, stressing it constituted the third sector, next to the public and private sectors.

governmental societies do not accept foreign donations or contributions without the Ministry's approval. This constitutes one of the conditions in the internal constitutions of all civic societies, which are made clear by the Ministry at their establishment, and which can only be renegotiated or modified when the Ministry grants approval. Indeed, FOS had received the Ministry's approval prior to receiving the grants from the Swiss agency and from the French Catholic Society and Development against Hunger. Nonetheless, the society enjoys a certain margin of freedom in carrying out those activities as specified in its provisions or articles of association. Should the society depart from its stated goals, it would risk a temporary suspension or even dissolution by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, depending on the importance of the "violation". As for funding, the society depends on its own resources as well as income generated by subscriptions and membership fees, as mentioned earlier. There is also income generated from certain activities, such as trips and parties held on special occasions, such as on the anniversary of establishing the society, or New Year's Eve celebrations. In addition, friends and members of the society give private donations. Furthermore, the Ministry annually provides the society⁴⁵ with a small grant, keeping in mind that financial aid is a sensitive issue, and monitored by the ministry, in particular if the donors include foreign entities. In 2010, about four years after the association was founded, FOS counted 250 members. Women comprise 40 percent of the membership. Indeed, an impressive number of women have taken part in all the organisation's activities. The percentage of young people continues to be rather low, with some 25 percent of the members being under the age of 30.

Obstacles Facing Societies' Activities in Salamiyah

The obstacles facing civic societies in Salamiyah cannot, in fact, be separated from those faced by similar societies at the national level. The most important of these are:

- Regulatory laws pertaining to the establishment of such societies, as well as the lengthy period required for recognition (mostly more than one year), which lessens the enthusiasm of their founders. The current official discourse stresses the need to amend the Societies' Decree, as has been mentioned in the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2006-2010).⁴⁶ So far,

⁴⁵ Since its founding in 2005, the association received only one such grant (about 500\$).

⁴⁶ In the sixth chapter of the plan, which deals with the relationships among the sectors, it says: "Thus, the present Five-Year Plan will witness a modification of the laws of civil associations and organisations stemming from a vision [underscoring] an important role held by free private associations in the development process, in coordination with the state in order to guarantee congruence between the aims of these associations and those of the state, so that financing and networking between public and private associations move towards the same goals." (The Tenth Five-Year Plan , p. 220)

however, no official decree has been issued. But fears are that the new law will not meet expectations.⁴⁷

- The weakness of civil society culture and weakness in the culture of collective voluntary work due to deep-rooted traditions inherent to society, particularly those based on religious or communal affiliations. This results in societies that are primarily elitist and detached from the broader population. These societies may be able to contain their direction to match their main goals and be able to continue running themselves but this often comes at the expense of their growth and development.
- Limited financial resources and the lack of any real financial support from the State, exemplified by the lack of logistic support, or providing office spaces, or the secondment of employees to work at these societies should the need arises.
- Authorities' attempts to contain these societies and turn them into elitist ones, or attempts of some of the political and mainly religious currents to keep their influence by controlling these societies.
- The poor coordination and integration between civil organisations on the one hand, and the political social movements on the other (women's movements, environmental activists, workers, farmers, etcetera), which negatively affects the sharing of viewpoints, cooperation, and organisations' independence.
- The humble support from the currently growing private sector in Salamiyah for social development processes as part of the social responsibility that it ought to assume.
- Despite the cooperation between local government bodies and the civil organisations, the municipalities continue to have little trust in civil organisations.
- Accusations directed by some at those societies that they deal with capitalist powers attempting to infiltrate the heart of societies in developing countries, thus leading these societies to continually defend themselves against allegations such as being collaborators with the West, or supporting secularisation, or mismanaging grants they received, etc.
- The relationship between the developmental non-governmental societies, such as the Friends of Salamiyah, with the government is highly legalistic, allowing the state to intensely monitor the society's activities, including by granting its approval for establishing these societies, receiving grants or donations, and approval for much of its activities.

⁴⁷ A new decree for societies was issued in Egypt in 2002, but was soon swamped with demands to cancel or modify the law.

These obstacles influenced the active role of civil groups and weakened their competence, and subsequently their sustainability. An additional factor is that the young generation has largely shied away from joining them as they are still affected by a culture of fear, causing them to steer away from getting involved in societies which might once be regarded with suspicion by the government, which in turn may negatively affect their opportunities to find jobs in the public or private sector.

Conclusion

Our experience with the Salamiyah societies leads us to believe that NGOs can play an important role in the process of social transformation from a community-based society into a real civil society.⁴⁸ This can be achieved by accentuating and celebrating the diversity of belonging among their members, especially in medium-sized and large cities, and by means of projects and plans that they carry out for the benefit of the general population. The democratic development of Arab societies requires that non-governmental organisations carry out activities that complement the role of the government. The current and prevailing social and productive relations are the products of tribal, semi-feudal and semi-capitalist socio-economic patterns organically interlinked and strongly overlapping. Such a society cannot produce modern civic phenomena based on the concept of citizenship, which assumes a set of rights and duties for individuals. Rather, it leads to phenomena which, even if they claim to be modern and civic, are rooted in tribal or regionalist structures and which absorbs modern phenomena within their folds and infuse them with their own characteristics and problems. Civil organisations empower society to assume a bigger responsibility in the administration of its affairs and helps in spreading the values of assuming initiatives, collectivism and self-reliance. Such organisations endow these societies with better chances to overcome the reliance on the state in every matter, and to counter the influence of primary social institutions, whether the family, the clan, the tribe, ethnic group, or religious institutions, as well as the political and governmental ones. Their activities should be confined to the existing civic society framework based on non-governmental societies and organisations, which base their activities on the principles of voluntary work and the enthusiasm to help and serve the public interest and elevating the status of the individual, without regressing into the culture of individualistic societies. Quite the contrary, they should be working on establishing a culture of social solidarity, embodying an interwoven texture of relations among individuals, and between them and the state, building on mutual benefits and interests, a social contract, reconciliation, understanding, and disagreement, as

⁴⁸ We notice in the current official discourse the confusion between community and civic concepts through the continuous emphasis on calling these societies community societies and not civic ones. The term 'civic' is rarely used and if at all it is often accompanied by the term 'community-based'.

well as a set of rights, duties and responsibilities. We need to focus on ways to encourage the spread of the culture of civic society. The emergence of NGOs in Syria is a relatively new experience dating back only to the last three decades. It is natural, therefore, for them to face some problems and obstacles, particularly at a time when the influence and power of religious movements are on the rise. There is a particular need for a change in current policies that affect the performance of the non-government organisations, which should be accompanied by an increased level of cooperation between these societies and local authorities, such as municipalities and town- and city councils. Finally, there is a growing need to clarify the notion of civic non-governmental work and for keeping it separate from political and communal activities. To sum up, there is a need for an awareness campaign that explains what a civil society is and how it is distinct from the communal or political performance. There is a need, through writings and publications, to create a civil society literature, as a step toward building a genuine civil society culture.

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Chapter 6: Syrian Cinema and Civil Society

Fadel Al-Kawakibi

Introduction

My point of departure in this study on the relevance of Syria's cinema to the country's civil society comprises two key themes. The first is the link between the historical context of civil society in Syria and the modernization process that began in some Ottoman districts and in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century. In this context, I do not refer to the predominant social frameworks at the time (the *waqf*, the Sufi system, *zakat*, or charity, Muslims are expected to give, the professional guilds, and so on) as 'civil society', even though some of these frameworks continued to exist following the onset of modernization. Instead, I contend that these frameworks were based on community and philanthropy. The second theme contains my argument that culture, especially communal performing arts, and cinema more specifically, have consistently served as an 'alternative' or 'substitute' to civil society activism in the long period of authoritarian rule that Syria has been subjected to since 1958. Describing the function of the performing arts this way does not contain a positive or a negative judgment, neither is it an attempt to justify the use of such substitutive means. Rather, it is an attempt to research the existing situation, and to conduct a kind of 'archeological excavation' of alternative manifestations of society in Syria, and contrast these with firmly established democratic countries that do grant a broad scope of action to civil society.

The Modern Conception of the Arts in Syria and its Development

Forms of modern art that emerged in Syria and Egypt at the beginning of the mid-nineteenth century initiated patterns of creative works and artistic genres that had not existed before. These forms and genres developed largely as a result of cultural interaction with the West and the sprouting of new social groups, primarily among Christian circles in al-Sham (the area comprising Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Trans-Jordan – collectively referred to as Greater Syria). These new forms were directly affected by Western culture through books, travel, and education in modern formats. This way, the door opened to the Western modern culture and science, and through it, to the resuscitation of classical Arab culture and its achievements prior to the tenth century. This process also led to the resuscitation of the Arabic language, and witnessed the rise of new linguistic expressions echoing social and technological development. Arguably, the development or resuscitation of the artistic genres required socioeconomic development, which was largely lacking. The theatre, for example,

viewed as a modern social ritual, was not accepted in Greater Syria, and its proponents were compelled to migrate to Egypt, the only country in the Eastern region that had begun to accept, in the mid-nineteenth century, this ritual. Theatre did not penetrate al-Sham Region, in any significant way, until the 1920s. When it finally did, it was the result of earlier efforts, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, of schools operated by missionaries, and of Christian schools that added (with great caution) theatre to their curriculum. The emergence of cinema, meanwhile, was tied to developments in Egypt, and subsequently spread to Syria where the first film was shown, in Aleppo, in 1908. At first, this ritual was viewed largely as entertainment, much like the circus and urban entertainment in their Western forms. Going to the cinema was at first limited to males, and only the lower classes took part. Film watching involving both sexes developed only gradually among the newly developed class of people holding modernist views, especially among urban Christians and the Muslim educated middle class. Indeed, social development generally was a function of growing influence of European culture, the rise of new educated classes, and the political and social dynamics associated with Arab nationalism, which called for the separation from the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of modern nation states. In Syria, this process began in full force in 1918. Yet hopes for Syrian liberation dissipated rapidly with the French conquest of Syria and the imposition of the French Mandate in 1920. The Mandate delayed the attempts at modernization in all sectors of society. Syria's social and economic structures during the Mandate were characterized by hybrid forms, replete with contradictions and distortions. Accordingly, modernization was partial, superficial, and distorted. For instance, the feudal and religious frameworks maintained their dominance with the assistance of the Mandate. Yet simultaneously the first signs of a class of bourgeois and secular elites appeared, primarily consisting of technocrats and intellectuals. Through the spread of modern European culture and values among these educated classes, the principal efforts of the political and cultural elite at the time were directed at political struggle against the occupation, sometimes armed and with the aim of achieving national independence. This is also the main reason why cultural creative activity was severely inhibited under the Mandate until 1946. Pioneers of the modern arts had no opportunity to create quality works or attain a high level of professionalism. Henceforth creative efforts were limited to a few individuals. Works that required greater economic and social frameworks and a modern space developed very slowly and were limited to initiatives of performing by amateur groups, in the music and theatre genres, using non-professional platforms.

The First Fruits of Syrian Cinema and the Reaction of the Ruling Authorities

The brief background presented above relates to the theatre and musical concerts. Yet the situation with regard to filmmaking was even worse. Initial attempts to create Syrian cinema, beginning in the 1920s, were derided by Mandatory authorities and local officials. The French authorities fiercely opposed local efforts to create cinema. The first Syrian featured film – “The Innocent Defendant,” by Ayoub al-Badri in 1928 – is a classic example of the inclination of colonial forces to ingratiate themselves to traditional frameworks in local societies under their control. The Mandatory authorities prohibited the screening of the film, claiming that the woman playing the feminine role was a ‘Muslim woman’, and that her appearance on the screen would enrage ‘traditional’ society and upset religious officials. Therefore, the filmmakers had to remake the film, this time with a foreign dancer causing them significant financial losses. The same fate was met by the second film, “Under Damascus Heavens,” directed by Isma’il Anzur in 1932. The authorities banned its screening on similar pretexts. The first Syrian documentary films, too, were subjected to severe censorship, with much of the footage being cut by the censor. Examples include the documentaries made by Ramadan on the funeral of the national leader Ibrahim Hananu in Aleppo and the reception held for the Syrian delegation upon their return from the Paris talks in 1936. It should be mentioned that the pioneers of Syrian cinema were devotees of technology and personally engaged in the field (some, for example, repairing cameras and radios), or were members of artists’ clubs that sprouted initially in schools, and later became pseudo-civil independent clubs. Semi-professional artists and amateurs gathered here, and presented their works. Yet these artists did not want to be perceived as full-fledged professionals out of fear for the negative effects on their social and family status. In addition, the ruling authorities offered no support whatsoever.

The Artists’ Clubs and Performing Arts

The same reflectance and lack of support apply to Syria’s post-independence authorities. Indeed, the government was conservative and rightist, culturally and ideologically. Professional theatre groups that put on comedies in entertainment halls and auditoriums were the sole exception to the country’s cultural dearth at the time. Their performances provided entertainment but were not real theatrical productions. Yet theatre and theatrical productions expanded as a result of their close historical connection with the growth of cinema. In turn, theatre was a major source of development of cinema and provided its artistic components. The art clubs that flourished from the 1920s until the 1950s raise an irony in the relations between civil society and the government. Consecutive governments between 1964 and 1958 held a clear rightist/conservative

orientation, and despite the pluralism in the political landscape and the freedom with which the press was allowed to operate, it treated culture with contempt, almost to the point of hostility. This attitude was due to the government’s conservatism, which led it to ingratiate itself with the traditional social and legal bodies. Consequently, artistic endeavors, especially the performing arts (cinema, theatre, dance), were minimal. During this period, semi-professional creative artists worked independently, and not within the state’s institutions. In contrast, art professionals developed relations with the state; to be precise, with cultural institutions established by the state or operating under state patronage.

Cultural Works and the Performing Arts during the Union Era

In 1958, the first Arab Union was created between Egypt and Syria under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Union rule was revolutionary, populist, and tyrannical. The political parties were disbanded in favor of one-party rule. A new, restrictive statute for non-profit organisations was enacted. Remarkably, the statute did not prevent the growth of dozens of cultural and artistic associations within a very short period of time. These associations were, at first, a source of enlightenment, and played a significant educational role. Their achievements resulted from the popular and nationalist tide that reached its peak under the Union, and were encouraged by the radical changes in the Syrian economy that included a more egalitarian distribution of resources, and the growth of new classes receiving an education previously been denied. In short, modernism in cultural and social matters became part of the lives of broader segments of the population. Furthermore, the Union established, for the first time in modern Syrian history, a Ministry for Cultural Affairs. Although at the time, in liberal European thought its establishment was perceived as an ideological attempt at mind control of the people, and as being more in tune with the socialism of Syria’s new allies in the East Bloc, the ministry provided a hothouse of support for genuine cultural institutions. Following the establishment and development of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, national theatre, higher institutions for music, theatre, art, cultural centres, and public libraries in towns and villages were founded. Also, folk national troupes were formed, and classical Arab and Syrian arts witnessed a rebirth. The Union also established, in 1958, the first high school for the plastic arts. A few years prior to its founding, the school had been an impossible dream for the educated classes, and an intolerable sin in the eyes of the ruling authorities for whom a school for the plastic arts was nothing more than a focal point of corruption and apostasy. In addition, the Union developed cadres of professional, academic artists by sending them for training to Egypt and to countries in Eastern and Western Europe.

Cinema in the Union Era (1958 – 1961)

In 1958, following a number of failed attempts at filmmaking, the Cinema Service was founded. In 1963, the National Film Organisation was established. This served as a sign that professional, artistic cinema in both the public and private sectors was in the making. It also became clear that the failure of filmmaking prior to 1958 had resulted from the inability (and also the lack of desire) of the ruling class and its capitalism to play any role in establishing any activity of this kind, or even in cultivating a climate that encouraged a cinema culture, or modern culture in general. This occurred, in part, due to the low cultural level among the ruling elites and its conservative position vis-à-vis modernism and the left in general. Despite the relatively pluralist political-party structure that was in place prior to 1958, and the relative freedom of the press, involvement in artistic endeavors did not grow significantly in terms of quantity or quality. This lack of development was especially evident in the arts requiring institutional support. The open market economy nurtured by the government until 1958 was unable to provide meaningful assistance to promote cultural activity. In contrast, the revolutionary ideological climate during the Union was able to help create and promote artistic activity. How, then, can one explain the contradiction between the rather uniform or even authoritarian nature of the Union that was created in 1958 and its cultivation of cultural, social, and economic pluralism, and this way show a degree of openness to modern, pluralist European thought, at times full of contradictions? In my view, the answer lies in four principal elements:

1. The ideology underlying governance between 1958 and 1963 was more modern than that of the semi-feudal and semi-bourgeois forces that ruled prior to 1958. The latter were conservative despite the occasional political pluralism that was generally due to external, rather than internal, influences.
2. The political structures Nasser created following the union in 1958 were part of the ambitious renaissance project of independence he began following the 1952 revolution in Egypt. This project relied primarily on 'independence and renaissance aspirations' that had been fostered by the elites and by the Arab peoples since the early nineteenth century. The primary elements of Nasser's project included the establishment of the nation-state, and after that the single, united Arab state, the building of a robust, developed economy, and elimination of the gaps between the social classes.
3. The predominant ideology put propaganda tasks in the hands of the media, especially radio and television. It did not develop a unique "aesthetic theory" of the kind developed in the Stalinist system. As a result, Syrian culture (including the cinema), at least in this period, did not fall into the trap of rigid ideological rule.

4. In Syria, the leftist (Marxist) and nationalist (both leftist and populist) thought attracted most of the educated elites who made a decisive contribution to building the cultural institutions discussed above, even though a considerable number of these elites later distanced themselves from the political establishment and criticized it, sometimes with hostility.

In light of the above, one could argue that the history of Syrian filmmaking since 1958 has continued to be a dialectic of relations between the ruling establishment and filmmakers, in which the main function of the creative arts has been one of 'substitution' and 'compensation' for the otherwise apparent lack of freedom of action for civil society. The creative arts (including filmmaking) turn this substitution into a process of discovery and of delving into historical and social relationships. In the first stage (1958-1961), and before the founding of a professional Syrian cinema was completed, the process was stopped in the bud with the return of rightist rule following the split between Syria and Egypt (1961-1963). When the nationalist revolutionary government, with leftist leanings (the Arab socialist Baath Party) came to power in 1963, it established, right at the start, the Public Institute for Cinema, which the government has continued to foster to the present day. At the same time, and with the absorption of dozens of artists from amateur or semi-professional status by the state's cultural institutions and Syrian television, which was established in 1960, the first films of private professional filmmakers appeared. There is a clear paradox in the development and achievements of private filmmaking in the shadow of a revolutionary and a leftist-oriented regime. This paradox arises, of course, because the growth of cinema requires a cadre of professional artists who are engaged in their art without society negatively judging their work. This was not the case prior to 1958. In addition, the establishment of the National Film Organisation laid a technical infrastructure that aided the private sector. It should also be pointed out that the regime that took control in 1963 did not fully do away with the private economic sector, and did not nationalize all economic activity, although it began a process of gradual nationalization focusing on the 'commanding heights' of the economy, and continued the wide-scale agrarian reforms that Nasser had begun in 1958.

The 1960s: Cinema in the Private Sector

The release of Syria's first films and the founding of private film companies occurred in 1963. The private sector benefited from stars who had started to gain fame after Syrian television and the professional theatre appeared during the Union era. In the 1960s, the private sector specialized in producing light films, comedies in particular. Despite the entertainment character of these films which varied in quality, they sometimes reflected the socially liberal mood of the sixties. They also reflected the entry of modernity and

social freedom into daily Syrian life, especially among common people. Some of these films presented the conflicts between old and new values (notably with regard to women's freedoms) in a light and melodramatic form, satirical at times. The most prominent films from this period are "Naked but Not Sinning" (1968) and "The Dressmaker" (1969). Some of the films presented an interesting, professional view of relatively-free daily Syrian life. Among the most significant films in this genre are "The Idlers" (1967) and "The Charming Thief" (1968). Anyone watching these films will surely note their urban mood and the lack of any ideological and violent attempts by the regime (with its rural characteristics) to push the state along a socialist path and ignite class conflict. This was especially the case in the period 1966-1970. The urbanity of the films might have resulted from the sector of the population to which the filmmakers belonged, most of whom came from the urban middle class. These groups strongly supported moderate revolutionary change but felt threatened by the increasingly stronger attempts of the rural population (following the solidification of the agrarian revolution, and the increased numbers of educated persons among them) to remove the urban groups from the hub of economic and political control. It might be the case, therefore, that the low and middle segments of the bourgeoisie, again, sought to compensate "by means of artistic works," and by focusing on the city's aesthetics and by presenting the city as an environment capable of accepting and digesting modernism and social liberation. This phenomenon was not expressed solely in films made by the private sector; it also appeared in some famous sarcastic television dramas of the sixties, including *Hammam alHana* (Bathhouse Pleasures) (1966) and *Maqaleb Ghawar* (Ghawar's hoaxes) (1967). Indeed, while the national theatre focused on Western classical works – tragedies and comedies – mass drama excelled in sarcastic comedies, rich in symbolic references. This artistic genre was always popular within the performing arts when it passed through their initial stages. The reason for this, of course, is the ability of this specific genre to achieve a broad audience, and because of its symbolic references, enabling artists to dispense social and political criticism at minimal risk.

The 1969s: Cinema in the Public Sector

Throughout the 1960s, public filmmaking continued its birth pangs in terms of technical developments and by training a cadre of filmmakers abroad. It was therefore only natural that the revolutionary change of the 1960s and the leftist mood of the filmmakers in the public sector would be expressed very cautiously at the end of the decade. Previously, public filmmaking concentrated on documentary films of a propagandist nature and for tourism purposes. The issues that primarily concerned Syrian filmmakers at this time involved the Palestinian issue and the Arab conflict with Israel. This political engagement developed (and was integrated with the ruling government's political discourse) especially after the

1967 War with Israel, and was accompanied by calls to establish a popular liberation movement as one means to liberate occupied Arab territories. This coincided with the tragic plight of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees who were expelled from their land to live in refugee camps in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. These camps provided a harsh visualization of the wretched lives of the recently expelled refugees. These scenes compelled Syrian filmmakers to produce the first important artistic films in the history of Syrian cinema. Most were documentaries, or drama films with minimal plots. The most famous documentaries in this category were "Crown of Thorns" (1969) and "Far Away from the Homeland" (1970).

The 1970s and Political Change

In 1971, a drastic change occurred in the Syrian regime when the Baath Party leadership that ruled from 1966 to 1970 was overthrown. The semi-Maoist leadership, which had rural roots and held radical political positions, was replaced by a more pragmatic and moderate leadership, headed by the late President Hafez al-Assad. Although the leadership remained leftist, like its predecessor, it sought to conciliate with the traditional majority of the population and, more specifically, with the urban middle class, especially the merchant class. Simultaneously, and rather contradictorily, it perpetuated the rule by a single autocrat and limited the role of the ruling party. This emerging form of rule was not ideological in nature, so it would be wrong to call it totalitarian. Due to the relative freedom from ideology, and given the openness it showed toward the urban population and merchants in particular, and combined with the growing conservatism of the discourses of the socialist left, the new ruling leadership felt comfortable and confident, enabling it to grant a measure of leeway to the people. This degree of freedom was especially felt in social and cultural discourses. It was at this time that the young Syrian filmmakers began to acquire the professional tools of the trade and develop their own style, as they benefitted from greater freedoms. The resultant greater scope of action enabled the private sector to produce a larger number of light films. These modestly funded films were replete with elements capable of attracting the public, particularly sex scenes that appeared in films from 1971 to 1976, to an extent unprecedented even in European terms. The public-sector cinema in this period dealt with three principal themes:

1. The Palestinian theme (the Arab-Israeli conflict): Syrian cinema succeeded in producing classic films that provided a basis for the discourse of liberation from occupation. These films engaged in a deep deconstruction of the workings of Zionist mentality, by exposing its weak points and its historical and political arguments. More importantly, these films offered multi-faceted cinematic and dramatic scenes depicting the tragedy suffered by the people under occupation. The films went beyond a direct call to the

masses to take action, and created a profound and multi-dimensional form of cinema. At times these films took on a realistic, metaphoric outlook, as in the film "The Dupes" (1972), or used shock effects borrowed from documentary filmmaking, such as "Kafr Qassem" (1974).

2. Modern and contemporary history themes:

Themes related to contemporary Syria played a major role in helping create the founding myths of the peasant-farmer ideology that had become dominant in Syria since 1963. It is peculiar and rather ironic that these themes did not appear in Syrian cinema until 1970, when control came in the hands of a more pragmatic and less ideological Baath leadership that was closer to traditional urban life than its predecessors. But this paradox was kind of misleading in that the filmmakers who engaged in this theme, and even tried to give it a Marxist twist, were seemingly unaware that these myths would be used to justify the meteoric rise to power of the peasant-farmer elites who had made a covenant with the religious and merchant elites in the cities, and who had joined with these urban merchant elites in gaining control of decision-making, even with respect to society as a whole. Films dealing with this theme described the class oppression suffered by some of the peasant farmers, and presented their harsh and stubborn struggle against pre-1958 feudalism. Although these filmmakers were Marxist, this did not make their films conform to the realistic-socialist school, rather, their films were realistic, critical, poetic, or even experimental, and leant toward an expressionist form. The two most important films of this kind were "The Cheetah" (1971) and "Fragments of Memory" (1978).

3. The modern social-criticism theme:

This theme was initially used in the first plot-based film produced by the public sector. The year was 1968 and the film was "The Truck Driver." The theme gained momentum in the 1970s, and was critical in form. This cinema was more radical than leftist positions on the question of women's liberation and on patriarchal social structures. An interesting fact is that the filmmakers linked the hero's struggle with the support for women's liberation. The film "The Opposite Direction" (1974) offers one other example of this connection. In general, one could argue that these films were similar to the social-realist school, and in most cases were daring in their presentation of sex to an extent never seen before.

4. Documentary Films of the 1970s.

The real product of this theme was documentary filmmaking fulfilled by young filmmakers, most of whom had been trained in Moscow. Their documentaries were characterized by visual intensity and fresh and shocking language. In their films, they filtered documentaries from propaganda and tourism features. The places and material they chose, in fact, were meant to defame the backwardness and patriarchal nature of society, and lament the lack of

economic equality in Syrian society. As if to present a manifesto on the screen, the films made a connection between the elimination of backwardness and inequality and a call for revolutionary and radical change in Syria's economic and social life. Among the most famous and important films that dwelled on this theme were "Life Around the Euphrates River" (1976), "The Roosters" (1975), "In a Folk Neighbourhood" (1974), "The Dam" (1975), "Euphrates" (1978), and "Today and Every Day" (1980). The state censor prohibited the screening of these films, even when all were produced by the state.

The Transformations in the Mid 1970s and Their Effect on Syrian Culture

The Syrian regime, at the time, was running counter to the prevailing mood among the leftist intellectuals. A shift that took the government to the right became clear following the 1973 War, which pushed the Egyptian and Syrian regimes to the right. The new shift was reflected, since 1974, in adopting gradual market-economic liberalism, strengthening of a covenant between the economically burgeoning rural bureaucratic classes and the merchant class, particularly merchants in Damascus. Simultaneously, the world cultural growth of the early seventies helped create civil-society institutions of a special kind. Along with the establishment of cultural clubs and organisations, film clubs sprouted and became a stage for fruitful cultural-ideological exchange. On the other hand, political Islam started to spread its influence in the early 1970s and dominated the religious pulpits (the mosques) and most charitable organisations, which were primarily funded by merchants in the cities. The oil boom of the Arab Gulf States after the 1973 War aided this growth. Tens of thousands of young Syrians went to work there, and returned with strong convictions sympathetic to Islamic fundamentalism, Wahabism in particular. The phenomenal strength of Islamism led to a confrontation with the ruling powers in Syria, which ended with the latter's ultimate victory. The conflict negatively affected cultural life in Syria through increased censorship on intellectual and cultural expression. Nonetheless, Islamic fundamentalism continued to grow and affect parts of Syrian society. These circumstances caused a substantial cutback in cultural life. The cultural clubs and non-profit associations that had served as a 'substitute' for civil society showed a relative decline. Attending performing arts, which required going out and intermingling of the sexes, dropped drastically. Theatres, film houses, and cultural centres became empty. The middle class' involvement in social and cultural events declined sharply due to the people's poor financial conditions in some cases, and due to their fundamentalist lifestyle and thought. For decades, the middle class had been the backbone of culture and of mixed, social, secular, and modern cultural life (the religious, ethnic, and gender aspect), and this outlook now was on its retreat. Along with this, the Ministry of Culture became the main source

of support for leftist intellectuals, filmmakers included. The then Minister of Culture Najah Attar, the first female minister in Syrian history, protected them and served as their patron. It may be argued in this context that the few leftists and academics who at times attained senior posts in culture and communications aided many persons engaged in cultural and creative works. This involvement emphasised the importance of the role played by individuals in the context of purveyors of Syria's developing cultural life. Among these persons were Sami al-Jundi, Sami Drubi, Anton Maqdasi, Hafez al-Jamali, and Hamid Mar'i.

The 1980s and the New Cinema Wave

In the beginning of the 1980s, Syrian cinema produced two films based on novels that created a radical change in the Syrian cinema, albeit their different style. These films are "The Half-Metre Incident" (1980) and "City Dreams" (1983). They were followed by films that engaged in matters that Syrian cinema had not previously dealt with, which led many critics, including European critics, to refer to these films as the new wave in Syrian Cinema. The substantive change in Syrian filmmaking was expressed in the clear and mature progression toward the deconstruction of Syrian life. For the first time in the history of Syria's dramatic arts, filmmakers dared to dissect the structure of government control and its origins since the fifties. For instance, the film "The Half-Metre Incident" was a biting satire on the mentality of the petty bourgeoisie and its conservatism. "City Dreams" was, in turn, the first dramatic work that painted an epic, poetic, and psychological portrayal of the history of the Syrian city in the 1950s, on the eve of the union with Egypt. This was the first film after 1963 that presented an open and frank picture of the ruling party and the class battles and political and cultural life in Syria during that period. The film "Chronicle of Next Year" (1986) drew a connection between enlightenment and democracy ideology. It was followed by "The Stars of the Day" (1988); a film that was considered the most daring of Syrian films, which shocked its viewers. Subsequently, no Syrian films of importance were released except for "The Extra" (1992) and "Al-Lajat" (1994). These two films differed greatly in style. The former included biting social criticism of the ostensibly conservative structures in the modern city, and made a clear link between the concept of individual liberty and political democracy. In "Al-Lajat," a unique film in the history of Syrian cinema, the director sought to produce "pure cinema", untouched by psychological, symbolic, and metaphoric implications, and created an intense tragedy that exposed the brutality of the patriarchal village.

Cinema Clubs

Cinema clubs reflect an advanced relationship between the civil society and the cinema. They arose in Syria as part of the social and cultural development

of intellectual life and of the rising middle class, largely associated with the swift pace of urbanization second half of the 1950s. Paradoxically, while the state played a stronger role in cultural matters, especially by its financial support to cultural activity, greater freedom was given to civil society so that it could become acquainted with diverse and pluralist cultures. As mentioned earlier, from the time that cinema was introduced to Syria, in 1908, to the end of the 1950s, the Syrian moviegoer was exposed only to light, popular films. Quality cinema was a rarity. Yet at the end of the 1950s, a new group was established by nationalist and leftist intellectuals under the name *Nadwat al-fikr wal fan* (The Seminar of Art and Intellect). They screened films that presented cinema of the kind that Syrian moviegoers had not seen before: German expressionism, Italian neo-realism, Soviet avant-garde, the French new wave, and others. Also, the state press began to disseminate a culture of modernism and to expose the reader to diverse streams of thought, from Marxism to existentialism to Freudian psychology and more. In the 1960s, cinema clubs which relied basically on the state (which provided the clubs with licenses and supplied the films and venues to show them) began to proliferate. These clubs relied on the cultural discourse that developed in the written press and on the growing number of professional-quality film reviews. The openness toward European modernism and the world's diverse cultures encouraged demand for the cinema clubs. Intellectuals who frequented the clubs enthusiastically welcomed the cinemas that the state built in 1966. These state-managed film houses provided mainly quality cinema. The state's involvement in providing the infrastructure for the growth of cinema was consistent with the role the state played in the country's economy. This role continued until the mid-1970s, when concern for security and state censorship and supervision began to overshadow the state's cultural policies. The cinema clubs existed primarily in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. Their greatest activities occurred from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. The Aleppo Cinema Club introduced films by Bergman, Antonioni, Tarkovsky, and even hosted, in the early 1970s, famous personalities such as Pasolini, Smoktunovsky, and Wajda. Directors who had returned from their studies in Europe and Egypt transformed the cinema club in Damascus into a centre of free and rich cultural activity. The club did not limit its activity to screening quality films and discussing them, but rapidly became a centre for funding and publishing of books and professional publications on cinema. These clubs did not only discuss cinema. Rather they became centres for debate on socioeconomic issues, as well as political and theoretical questions that engaged the world at the time. Among the prominent intellectuals and cinema personages who contributed to the development of Syrian cinema were Najib Hadad, Rafik Saban, Salman Qatiya, Muhammad Malas, Haitham Haki, Marwan Hadad, and Samir Zikra. The cinema clubs have ebbed in the past decade.

However, cultural life in Syria, including cinema, tried to come to life in the past five or so years, as will be discussed below. The state's withdrawal as the leader in innovation and patron of culture arose at the same time as the state's security apparatuses expanded their operations at the end of the 1970s. The climate changed; what once was open and modern turned into a religious, conservative climate. With large numbers of persons moving from the villages to the cities, the cities themselves became provincial. Shantytowns began to develop on the outskirts of cities, the middle class began to disintegrate economically, and there was a regression to pre-modern structures. At that time, some leftist intellectuals started to adopt liberal and neo-rightist streams of thought.

The Late 1990s Activities and the Role of the Filmmakers

In the 1990s, private filmmaking disappeared completely due to the decline of film theatres and strict censorship, particularly on sexuality. Private filmmaking was replaced by "television dramas," a form of second-grade art, which was partially subsidized by the government and by the conservative Gulf states. The two sides tried to position television dramas as an alternative to the performing arts that required communal viewing. This process comported with Syrian society's increasing conservatism. Simultaneously, satellite stations became common in the conservative society, whose middle class withdrew from its progressive activity. Many intellectuals adopted neo-liberal, or neo-rightist beliefs, which contributed to and perpetuated the backwardness. In the mid-1990s, Syrian social and cultural life was reinvigorated due to objective and subjective reasons. The hold of the state's security forces and Baath party on daily life lessened. Many political prisoners (particularly leftists) were released and they became active in social and cultural life. A large part of the released prisoners had engaged, in one way or another, in cultural works. Some of these prisoners took jobs in this field because of the lack of alternative employment. To their advantage, they had accumulated a great deal of know-how during their long detention as political prisoner. At the same time, the hegemony of the ruling ideology began to wane (intentionally or not), and its credibility suffered greatly. This was accompanied by the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the emergence of rightist neo-liberal and conservative thought among former leftist circles. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the released prisoners who were leftists, adopted neo-liberal or neo-rightist thought. They no longer struggled for social and economic justice, but rather prioritized democracy, pluralism and free elections. Ironically, the regime began at that time an undeclared move toward economic liberalism. Following the publication of the famous investment Law No. 10 of May 1991, the bureaucratic elite that had accumulated great wealth during its control of the public sector's economy turned its attention to the private sector. The state granted them inflated

privileges for private investments, and gradually began to withdraw government support to the poor while the middle class was further eroded. As a result poverty increased. The state entered into negotiations with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Meanwhile, the entire public sector suffered from its inability to stem growing bureaucratic corruption. The government held two contradictory approaches toward the public sector: the leftist approach, which sought to maintain the public sector and carry out internal reforms without harming its primary function, and the neo-liberal approach, which called for a lessening of the burdens placed on it. Several of the persons holding the neo-liberal approach made an exaggerated request to do away with the public sector, transferring its powers to the private sector.

Under these conditions, the National Film Organisation (as one of the institutions of the public sector) became subject to severe attacks in the official press, which claimed it provided no economic or social benefit. Its leading critics (headed by Minister of Information Muhammad Salman) confused the harsh conditions (financial problems, censorship) that were imposed on the National Film Organisation with the Institute's failure to meet expectations. This attack was combined with an assault on Syrian cinema, claiming, for example, that it was elitist and not understood by the public. It is remarkable, therefore, that the alternative proposed at the time was based on the false success of the television dramas that had been screened as a substitute for cinema. It should be noted that the television dramas were a superficial and conservative form of visual works, and their viewers were people sitting in their homes, making it impossible to attain the dialogue and dual-gender civil and social interaction that had taken place in halls and cinemas. The increasing pressure on the National Film Organisation forced Syrian filmmakers, including those who worked for television but still appreciated the cinema as a higher and more important art, to make a public statement. Yet the local press refused to publish it, so they had to approach the Arab press, particularly in Lebanon, to publish their manifesto. Most of the signatories worked for the National Film Organisation and for state television. The manifesto called for increased freedom in the art domains and for the freedom of expression. Oddly enough, the authorities did not take action against the initiators of the public statement, and one of them (the film critic Muhammad al-Ahmad) was later appointed director-general of the Institute. In their manifesto, the filmmakers expressed their awareness of the state's attempt to make the Institute "a scapegoat for the long history of lack of planning and laws (...) which left its mark over the years." They were also aware that "only Syrian filmmakers are entrusted to safeguard filmmaking." The statement protested the attempts to privatize the Institute, or to dismantle it completely, and emphasised that, in defending it, they are defending cinema and genuine national

culture. Twenty-six of Syria's most important filmmakers signed the manifesto, which was issued on 20 July 1999. The filmmakers issued an even more important and courageous manifesto on 2 October 1999. This one also was banned by the local press and found its way to the Arab press. Signed by Syria's leading filmmakers, it bravely made specific demands, though it focused primarily on the protection of creative freedoms and freedom of expression. The manifesto pointed out clearly the role that corruption played in eliminating cultural and social creative activity in Syria. The following excerpts from the manifesto especially warrant quotation: "The status-quo is a big riddle: the absence of cinema from the halls, the absence of halls in society, and the absence of a thoughtful dialogue in society. [...] The unwritten law prohibits discussion of political issues. What kind of law is this? And when did intellectuals refrain from expressing their political opinions? And has there been any change that the intellectuals did not contribute to? The word change dwells in the Syrian street". The filmmakers attached to their manifesto a document containing practical requirements for developing cinema and a film culture, pointing out the need "to re-examine the censorship laws and the manner in which censorship worked," and requested that action be taken "to promulgate a communal cinema culture and to encourage film clubs and amateur filmmaking." They ended the document with the statement that "freedom of expression is necessary for the development of a national, meaningful, and responsible climate". These manifestos were important because, for the first time, persons in the film industry acted beyond the auspices of state and governmental authorities.

These manifestos were the result of a completely free collective initiative. They preceded the political manifestos that appeared after 2000 (notably in the period referred to as the "Damascus Spring") and gave civil society action a direct political dimension, which led the state to retract from its promises to civil society that were made when Bashar Assad had become president. After the state managed to restrict – by force, but while allowing minor exceptions – opposition political activity that sprouted and grew, it managed to freeze civil society activity, in favor of increasing the role of non-governmental organisations controlled by the state (which were referred to as 'community associations'). In addition, political civil society activists expropriated to a large extent the concept of civil society, and impregnated civil action by their opposition agendas of a liberal and neo-liberal nature. There were, it should be noted, a few exceptions in which the activists applied Marxist and leftist thought as a tool for analyzing the changes in Syrian civil society.

The Twenty-First Century and the Expected Horizons

The adoption of a neo-liberal economic policy enabled the capitalist class to accumulate wealth. Simultaneously, the state withdrew from its classic role in economic, health, education, and cultural sectors. Gradually, the management of cultural institutions by Syrian state authorities became corrupt, and surveillance and control of civil society activity, including cultural matters, increased. This change was also a result of the repression of political activity during the Damascus Spring. Simultaneously, cultural activity in Syria collapsed, except for caustic ideological debates, some of which were important, though most of them were not. The authorities intensified their control over cultural activity by imposing strict censorship. The peak of this control came with the enactment of the Publication Law. Syrian cinema suffered under these conditions. The media and the government give bogus importance to television drama, a practice that has affected many forms of arts such as cinema and theatre which had reached its golden age in the 1960s and 1970s. These arts create free, pluralist social activity, in contrast to television drama, which is aimed at a passive audience. Syrian cinema deteriorated further in 2000-2005 in quantity and quality. Filmmakers produced no new aesthetics, nor did they make any statement of meaningful value. Young filmmakers were denied entry to the Public Institution for Cinema, as it was impaired by corruption and bureaucracy.

Conclusion

From 2005 onwards, cultural activities flourished. Although state funding had almost completely disappeared – a policy dictated by neo-liberal economic considerations – there were signs that the state was open to cultural and social (though not political) activity, which enabled modern cultural activity to some extent. Also, civil society managed somewhat to limit the concessions that the government made to religious and conservative groups who had equally curbed cultural expressions. Hence, a number of cultural organisations, among them the cinema clubs, became active again. The new generation of filmmakers found alternative means (no longer relying on the joint state-private enterprise support that had existed in the past) to produce the films. They benefited from 'independent cinema' and from production grants provided by local, Arab, and international cultural institutions. Despite these efforts, Syrian filmmakers have a long way to go. Although some graduates of the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in Damascus are drawn to television drama, the attempts of filmmakers in recent years (whether feature films or short documentaries) are a herald of a new cinema that might delve deeply into daily events and life in Syria. Current cultural activities are not the result of a systematic plan of the government. It takes place among a limited number of groups and in areas where openness is prevalent. Most of these activities are found in Damascus; it

does not reach extensive parts of the country where religious, conservative, tribal, or provincial discourses predominate. These discourses have destroyed notions of inclusive identity and have succeeded in pushing aside a civic and pluralist discourse that had almost gained the upper hand in Syria in previous decades. At the present time, attempts are being made to resuscitate civil-society activity in a controlled manner, by means of the “Syrian Development Agency”. These attempts seek to return the lost prestige of cultural activity as a source of enlightenment, secularization, and development. However, these attempts are in their infancy.

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Chapter 7: Civil Society and the Gender Issue

Nawal Yaziji

“Gender” is a new term in the lexicon of civil society. It came in use as a concept in the 1990s, during and after the Beijing Conference of 1995, when the term became widely accepted. Since it was imported from abroad, the concept “gender” was not warmly welcomed by Syrian society. Those of us engaging in the feminist movement had great difficulty in disseminating and explaining it as a notion that deals with functions and spheres of responsibility for both men and women in the family and society. A renowned human rights activist asked me at a conference: “What is this “gender” that you are talking about? Are you calling for deviant sex? Is this the most important matter concerning us now?” However, with time, many governmental and non-governmental studies have been made based on the concept of gender. The hostility toward the use of the concept has lessened, but it continued on its content. The roots of the modern debate on the question of women in the Arab world date back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The literature of that period reflected the spirit of this complex period in the region’s history, the transformations in the nature of Arab societies, and the fluctuation between the old and the new, and between reliance on the familiar and the aspiration to build new things. Around these fluctuations, conflicts arose between inherited knowledge systems and others that penetrated the culture from elsewhere. All this affected feminist discourse, and the discourse directed to women. One can argue, hence, that various aspects of the issue of women are organically linked to what is customarily referred to as the “Arab Renaissance” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: “Traditional society and the old ideas have cracked.” Conceptions of society and state began to replace the conceptions of narrow membership in tribes, clans and localities. A number of liberal thinkers (women and men) and social reformers with religious authority in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq began to deal with phenomena of backwardness in the political, economic, and social spheres. Many of these thinkers dealt with the issue of women. In this same period, women achieved some freedom to express their views on questions relating to them. At the end of the nineteenth century, and the first six decades of the twentieth century, a movement of intellectual dialogue developed around this issue, which has not existed in previous centuries. The thinkers of that age defended the women’s right to study and to work. Some of them engaged in women’s rights within the family, and made a connection between the resurrection of society and the liberation of women. In doing so, these thinkers paved the way for society’s social

awakening and even managed to make cracks in the conceptions that had ruled, to pave the way for alternative views that were adopted by the states, social institutions and movements; women’s movements in particular.

All this was a result of a prodding society granting education to women and releasing them from outdated traditions and customs, to prepare women to fulfill their educational, social and national tasks. However, the humanistic dimension of women’s rights in the profound sense of the word only gained currency at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet, one definition of civil society is “voluntary, free organisations of groups that fill the public space between the family and the state, with the objective of fulfilling the interests of their members, by adopting values of dignity and tolerance and the peaceful management of diversity and difference.” According to this definition, it is possible to argue that Syria has not yet achieved such a civil society. Therefore, I shall describe it rather as a social movement whose functions and influence on Syrian society develop outside the requisite organisational and institutional framework. In speaking about the position of civil society in Syria on the question of women, one has to deal with the political movements’ influence on developments in this sphere. This movement had a profound effect on general state policy and on modern feminist groups and organisations in the country. A large number of women joined the newly formed Marxist, socialist, and nationalist parties, especially the Syrian Communist Party and the Baath Party. The establishment of these and other political parties, and the fact that women joined them, greatly affected the enactment of many civil statutes dealing with equality in terms of political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Despite this, the parties were unsuccessful in challenging the principle of the husband’s guardianship or custody of the wife within the family. This principle continues to overshadow women’s rights in the private sphere. Their helplessness and inability to change this situation have continued to the present day. Until the 1980s, the few women’s groups that were established following independence, largely adopted Marxist, socialist, and nationalist ideologies involving women’s rights. These ideologies viewed women’s issues as one component of social liberation and its requirements. Consequently, the missions of the women’s movements with socialist affiliation remained within the consensus of national and class liberation. This had a great effect on modern feminist thinking. The methods and mechanisms in handling women’s issues were subjected, generally, to the advancement of the political parties, primarily the socialist parties. Despite its positive effect, this situation narrowed the scope of operation of women’s movements and organisations, and sharply reduced

the possibility of women's organisations and institutions with an independent agenda to meet growing demands in this respect. As a result, women's charitable organisations remained the most common and best organised framework.

It should be noted that social and political elites recognised and largely respected the participation of women in political life, especially in national liberation movements, from the engagement in the struggle for "Turkisation" at the end of the eighteenth century to the struggle against the colonialism in the mid-twentieth century. "Of all women, I respect only those who sacrificed their lives for the homeland," was a conviction that I was told by a young engineer who helped us publish the moderate journal "Women's Voice" in the 1980s. This sentence succinctly captures the function that women were supposed to take upon themselves in the public sphere. However, when women focused on their freedom, empowerment and equality with men, the attitude was different. During this period, there was a rise in the feminist movement. Its theses included liberation of the homeland and a struggle against the colonialists, along with demands calling, in part, to promote women and their development and to provide them with the necessary services, and in part to promote women's rights. However, rights remained in the second place until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Local and international factors in this context affected the opposition toward the hegemonic, traditional views regarding the function of women in social development, comparable to the opposition that took place during the Arab Renaissance at the end of the eighteenth century. These factors included the successes that Syrian women reaped in the economic, social, political, and educational spheres. At the same time, the world women's movement also awakened, prompting the United Nations to hold a number of international conferences and to adopt resolutions and conventions on the subject of women.

Civil Society and the Feminist Question

The "woman question" continues to be a problematic, controversial issue throughout Syrian society; it is affected by different and conflicting conceptions and reference points of the dominant political forces in the country. Today, there is a feminist movement with a social-liberation character. We are witnesses to nascent women's organisations that have a profound awareness and understanding of the most important gender questions. In the past couple of years, the Syrian feminist movement have demonstrated open positions vis-à-vis the Other, and have adopted a democratic process that is based on dialogue with all parties and among all stakeholders, regardless of their reference authorities. This movement has managed to establish important ties with feminist movements in the more enlightened religious currents, or at least opened channels for a dialogue with them. The most prominent expression of this development has been the establishment of a

"Souriat Alliance," which issued a manifesto in 2006, entitled "Pact of Honour". The Alliance comprised a number of women's organisations and groups, including the Non-Violence Planet, the Social Initiative, Souriat Islamic Forum, the Intellectual Forum, the Committee to Support Woman Cause, the al-Thara website, the Syrian Women's League, the National Association for the Development of the Woman's Role, and Alrai al Salah (the Good Shepherd). All but the last two of these organisations are unlicensed by the state.

Since 2006, all these organisations have been engaged in efforts to counter violence against women and in attempts to support various legislative bills involving marital relations. In addition, Souriat Alliance has drafted a bill to replace the current Non-Profit Associations Law, which is considered to be far inferior to similar statutes enacted by other countries in the region. Ultimately, the Alliance succeeded in drafting a bill for the protection of women against all types of violence. These same groups have, of course, also been separately engaged in activities aimed at achieving their own more specific objectives. The Alliance could have developed into a central women's movement capable of affecting all gender issues, were it not for the strong pressures that the Syrian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs placed on it. These pressures began with the dissolution of the Social Initiative Organisation, one of the Alliance's members, for distributing a questionnaire dealing with citizens' opinions on certain sections of the Marital Relations Law. The questionnaire allegedly upset some of the country's most influential Muslim religious leaders. This could be added to other forms of pressure exerted, directly and indirectly, on other groups and organisations, which created an uncertain atmosphere for social action, especially in matters involving women. As a result, the Alliance became less active and lost its influence. Many women are actively engaged in promoting women's rights in the framework of feminist organisations. These women activists include lawyers, politicians, writers, and journalists. Their contribution, together with that of other prominent women, has provided a great source of support for the organisations. In addition, the feminist movement emphasises the importance of the role that men can play in protecting women's rights. The feminist movement in Syria urges political movements and secular and progressive civil society forces to take an active position on women's issues based on democratic principles, human rights and the need for social development. The women's movement views these forces as allies while it sees itself as an integral part of civil society. A significant number of academics, philosophers, attorneys and media figures – women and men – have contributed remarkably to advance women's issues. This contribution constitutes a serious development and suggests social awareness vis-à-vis the roles of women. Women's issues have become part of public discourse, from ensuring complete equality between

men and women in society, to the struggle against all forms of violence and discrimination against women, in both the public and private spheres. Moreover, women have played an important role in civil society activities. Worth noting in this respect are a number of groups that arose in the years 2000-2004 and got engaged in cultural and social activities. An example is the forum of attorney Hanan Najmeh, Ibtisam Smadi, and Georgette Atiya. Women also played a major role in the establishment of groups such as the Cultural Dialogue Forum and the al-Atasi forum. Many of them, as well as literary and cultural groups that were founded throughout the country, viewed the issue of women as part of the process of democratic change that Syria needed. Other women became involved in human rights organisations, although they did not attain decision making positions in those organisations, with the notable exception of Fida Horani, President of the Damascus Declaration National Council. Based on our information, some of the activist women were “disappointed” when they saw human rights organisations becoming more involved in political rights (in particular focusing on government’s imposed prohibitions) than on human rights in general. They were disheartened that women’s rights, a main pillar of human rights, were neglected. These concerns were supported by Hiam Jamil, who published an article in *Al-Nidaa* on 10 December 2010, entitled ‘Women in the Movements for Democracy and Human Rights’. She wrote: “In the framework of the activity promoting democracy that began in 2000 in Syria, many human rights organisations were established. Large numbers of women (particularly lawyers) took part and contributed much to the organisations’ activities. However, no woman succeeded in becoming the head of any of the human rights organisations in Syria”. As for the major focuses of these organisations, Jamil said that the “organisations were primarily involved with the question of political detentions and the disappearance of activists. They published manifestos and condemnations and demanded the release of prisoners of conscience and persons who had been detained for expressing their opinions. No organisation raised any questions dealing with women’s rights or families’ rights”. Her article quotes a well-known activist, Fayez Sarah, as saying, “This tendency creates imbalance within the performance of the human rights organisations, that need to direct their efforts also to other sectors, especially to women’s issues, given their importance to our national life”. Nevertheless, in recent years gender issues have accounted for a larger portion of civil society activity, particularly among the secular segments of the population. This involvement has grown due to the success of the feminist movement (and its allies in the media) in conducting several media campaigns for women’s rights in the family and in society.

The Most Prominent Gender Issues

Below is a highlight of the most important gender issues on the public agenda in Syria.

1) Integration of women in Syria’s general sustainable growth

Under the Syrian Constitution and laws, women have the right to take part in all aspects of political, social, economic, and cultural life, without discrimination between men and women. Accordingly, women are formally allowed to fill all decision making posts. Syrian women have indeed advanced somewhat in attaining such decision making roles in political and economic matters, social and cultural affairs, health, and law. An example of formal gender equality relates to voting rights. Article 3 of the Syrian Elections Law states: “Every citizen of Syria, male and female, who has completed 18 years of age on the first day of the year in which the elections are held, has the right to vote, provided that the person is not prohibited to exercise this right pursuant to another provision of this Law or of any other law”. Furthermore, the Syrian government gives special importance to the question of women’s integration in the country’s sustainable growth strategies. It may also be argued that the activity of civil society, governmental and non-governmental organisations and the media, have contributed to increasing the awareness of the importance of women’s participating in public life. This activity has greatly affected public opinion with respect to women’s participation in decision making generally. Despite this, women’s participation, including their participation in society’s development, has advanced at a snail’s pace, without criteria and clear goals having been set. The percentage of women integrated in the public service is minimal. The vast majority of women who receive an appointment to decision making positions, at the three levels of government authorities, belong to the ruling party, which implies that they do not have independent decision making power. Indeed, their ability to perform their duties is limited. To aggravate matters, due to the weaknesses in the country’s democracy record generally and restrictions imposed on it, women have great difficulty in attaining decision making positions.

As for non-governmental organisations, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, a woman, stated that, in November 2008, there were 1,400 NGOs in Syria. This number included all the registered non-profit associations and charities, but did not include many organisations and entities engaged in gender and human rights, as they have not yet obtained permit. To complete the integration of women in the country’s development process in general, the women’s movement seeks to accomplish the following: bridge the large gap between the number of men and women in decision making positions in all sectors of state development, whether political or intellectual; eliminate illiteracy; remedy the factors of poverty and

eradicate it, thereby giving special attention to the problem of poverty of rural and urban women; create jobs for women; and enable women to inherit, as the law prescribes. In addition, there is an urgent need to deal with the problems of rural women regarding the ownership of land, and to grant them access to and control over resources, and to ensure that they are remunerated for the work they conduct in agriculture and forestry. An effort must also be made to contend with the interference of customs and traditions in the lives of rural women, which prevent them from benefiting from the rights granted to them by law.

2) Change in the stereotypes of the roles of men and women

For three decades, feminist organisations have demanded the authorities to remove stereotypes in the school curriculum with respect to the role of men and women. All texts that present the woman as a nanny and servant, and, in contrast, present the man as being at the centre of authority, must be removed. This demand has made its way to the agenda of the government, which has initiated a process of change starting in the lower grades. Sentences like the following were deleted from a text book: "Father reads, Mother cooks, Rabab [a girl's name] helps Mother, and Basel [a boy's name] plays ball." They were replaced by others that emphasise equal participation in family life. In recent years, many of the literary and religious texts, in all grades, that promote men women stereotypes have been removed. The new texts, to the extent that they praised the historical role of women and their participation in public life, focus on stories of the sisters and the wives of those who fell in the struggle against the occupation and on those heroic women who themselves lost their lives for this cause. We, too, as feminist writers, were influenced by these texts to one degree or another. Many of the texts we produce begin with glorifying the stories we grew up on, but we present them as proof of the right of women to full equality. This connection between stories of national struggle and the right of women to equality is still lacking in the curriculum. The change that must occur is coming slowly; a more systematic effort is needed. At the same time, we should strive for the entry of more modern literature dealing courageously with gender issues, emphasizing equality and universal women's rights recognised in international instruments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Parts of the latter were already included in the school curriculum of elementary schools, under the heading "My Right." In seeking to eradicate women stereotypes, we should also mention the role of the media and of art and literature, especially the literature written by women (I will not classify it here as "feminist literature" because this expression continues to be controversial). A great number of writers – men and women – of television and film screenplays have managed to present historical and current female characters that are not stereotypical. Notable in this context are a number of screenplays submitted by women that touched,

delicately but significantly, on the problems of women of all ages, in all spheres of life, without falling into the trap of preaching. These screenplays were faithfully adapted to the screen by male and female directors. On this point, it should be mentioned that drama that portrayed submissive and dependent women were harshly received by film and television critics. Without doubt, this positive change was made possible by interactions between feminist groups and media, and cultural, literary and artistic groups.

3) Violence against women

The problem of violence against women is extremely complex because of its many dimensions. The social norms permitting violence against women on grounds of the man's right to discipline are often tied to religious tradition, and to an extent echoed by the Penal Code. Official bodies and the feminist movement define such violence in accordance with the universal definition for gender violence, as stated in the international convention on the subject. Syrian women, like all women in the Arab world, and in most countries around the world, suffer from various kinds of violence – physical, mental and sexual. This violence takes place within the family and at the workplace, often in strict accordance with the law. In the past decade, the question of violence against women has been given great attention by Syria's civil society, the media, and governmental and quasi-governmental institutions. For many years, the subject of violence against women was taboo. A number of government plans to combat the violence were drafted, but they remained on paper only and were not made public, and the relevant officials reached no decisions on the way to implement them. Civil society, especially feminist organisations, and websites supporting women combat all forms of discrimination and oppression of women. They expend great effort in drafting bills to protect women from family and social violence and from sexual harassment in the workplace. The national campaign against honor crimes continues and is stronger than ever, being led by two websites – "Syrian Women Observatory" and "al-Thara" – and is supported by all women's organisations. Meanwhile, activist organisations are working to amend the Penal Code, which is viewed to encourage rape of two kinds – of the spouse and of non-spouses – and encourages the killing of women by providing exemptions from punishment on the pretext of safeguarding honour. Despite all our actions, no significant measures in this respect have been taken to protect women, neither by statutory nor preventive means.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ On 3 January 2011, a Presidential Order was issued amending the Penal Law. The amendment, which involved crimes of honor, repealed parts of section 548 of the Law and increased the penalty for murder in case of honor crime from two years of imprisonment to 5-7 years. However, the amendment did not alter the conviction that "honor" was a proper defense in the case of murder of a woman. The derogatory wording of the statute remains: A lighter sentence is justified with respect to a person who surprises his wife or his relative or his brother in the commission of the crime of

4) Women's rights in the statute books

Islamic jurisprudence occupies an important place among other sources of legislation. Article 3 of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic states:

1. The religion of the President of the State has to be Islam [not the religion of the State]
2. Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of legislation [not THE principal source]

Article 25 of the Constitution ensures liberties and the rule of law, equality, and equality of opportunity to all citizens (clauses 4 and 5). Nevertheless, the Constitution does not contain an explicit provision prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender. Article 3 and article 25 reflect the contradiction between *citizenship as a basis for belonging*, as a point of departure of the Constitution, and what the Constitution explicitly states; "Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of legislation." It goes without saying that article 3 is applied only when examination is made of the right of women to equality, especially in the public sphere, although this is not true with respect to other social matters. Article 45 of the Constitution takes a clear position on women: "The state guarantees women all opportunities enabling them to fully and effectively participate in the political, social, cultural, and economic life. The state removes the restrictions that prevent women's development and participation in building the socialist Arab society". But the article does not specifically mention equality. Syrian women are deemed legally competent under the state's Civil Code, which grants legal competency to everyone who has attained the age of majority, which is set at 18 years of age, without discrimination between women and men. Accordingly, women have the right to enter into contracts and hold and use property, without any restriction or condition. The Syrian law does not require a woman to change her family name following

prostitution or in conducting abominable sexual relations with another person, following which he murders them or injures them, or murders or injures one of them unintentionally, and he shall be liable to imprisonment for a term of imprisonment of 5-7 years.

The battle waged by civil society (particularly feminist groups) has focused on the need to repeal section 548 in its entirety and to treat honor crimes the same as other crimes of murder or causing the injury of a person, both women and men. The Presidential Order also amended section 508 of the Law, which exempted a rapist from criminal prosecution if he marries the victim. The section was amended and now reads:

Where a person who committed one of the criminal offenses specified in this chapter enters into a proper marriage with the victim, he shall be entitled to a lighter sentence, under the provisions of section 241 of the Law, provided that the penalty shall not be less than imprisonment for a term of two years. The offender shall be brought back to court if he terminates the marriage by divorce for no legitimate reason, or the woman is granted a divorce, within five years from the date of the marriage. The period of incarceration that the offender has served shall be deducted from his sentence.

marriage, and allows her to change her name independently. In financial matters, a woman is entitled to maintain her own accounts and identity, separate from that of her husband. Her testimony in court is considered equal to that of a man, in contrast, of course, with the situation prevailing in the Sharia courts, where a man's testimony is viewed as the equivalent of the testimonies of two women. In 2000, women were granted the right to obtain a passport and renew it at their own request, without their husband's approval. Women are exempted from obtaining a permit to leave the country, needed to travel abroad, if they are not civil servants. These two actions had previously been made dependent on the husband's consent, which caused at the time much furor among women. The demand to be exempted from this insulting dependence has been a central concern of women's organisations over the years, especially given the increase in the number of educated women and working women, some of whom need to travel as part of their job. The contribution of Syrian women to the life of the country and the family is huge. Women support 10 percent of the households in the country. A high percentage of women work in informal sectors of the economy where employees do not receive social benefits. Women also attend to their families. This homemaking is not considered part of national revenues and no recognition exists of the contribution women make in producing the family's assets, even though the prime burden in households often falls on women. Despite the great contribution women make to the household economy, and the economy of Syria in general, women have yet to attain full equality. A significant number of laws severely discriminate against women, and deny them the opportunity to realise the rights mentioned above. In the following section I will give a description of the most prominent discriminatory laws.

The Citizenship Law

In this law, the Syrian legislator emphasises the father's sole right to grant his citizenship to his children. Article 1.2 of Ordinance 276, of 1965, states that, "A Syrian Arab is deemed, unconditionally and without reservation, to be: (1) a person who is born in Syria or outside of the country to a Syrian Arab father." Article 3(b) states: "Anyone who is born in Syria to a Syrian mother and there is no proof as to his relation to his father shall be Syrian." As a result, the Syrian woman does not grant her citizenship to her children unless two conditions are met: birth in Syria and no proof of the child's relation to his father. In 2003, a national campaign – "My Citizenship, My Right and My Child's Right" – was conducted. The campaign was broadly supported by women, civil society organisations, the media, political forces and moderate religious leaders. The campaign's objective was to amend article 3 to read: "A Syrian Arab is deemed, unconditionally and without reservation, to be: (1) a person who is born in Syria or outside of the country to a Syrian Arab father or to a Syrian Arab mother." The campaign managed to put the issue on

the government's agenda but no amendment to the Citizenship Law resulted. The government gave no convincing explanation for this. The speaker of the Parliament simply said: "There are political reasons – especially the matter of the Palestinian refugees and the decision of the Arab League against their citizenship – that prevent us from making these changes."

The Penal Code

The Penal Code is considered a primary source for the perceived legitimacy of violence against women. Continued reliance on some of its provisions pertains to crimes involving the killing of women, prostitution, and forbidden sexual relations that are deemed disgraceful and shameful. These articles reflect extremely backward norms that date back to the times that norms and patriarchal social values became fixed, in one of the darker eras of discrimination against women. The following will clarify my point. Article 489 explicitly permits the husband to rape his wife: "A person, *other than the husband* who compels a person by force or threat to engage in sexual relations is liable to imprisonment at hard labour for at least 15 years." Accordingly, and since feminist activity is dedicated to combat husband rape, we always encounter waves of censure, saying in effect: "What's all this nonsense talk of yours?" Article 548 permits the killing of women in unequivocal terms, as follows: "A person who catches his wife, or one of his ascendants, descendants, or sister committing adultery (*flagrante delicto*) or illegitimate sex acts with another and kills or injures one of them shall be exempted from penalties". Following the adoption of Constitutional Decree 37 in June 2009, which repealed the exemption from penalty, the penalty for killing one of the women mentioned in the article "shall not be less than two years." In this way, the 'price' for murder is two years' imprisonment. The law continues to permit the defendant to use the exemption. It would not be inaccurate to say that many cases involving the killing of women occur due to economic reasons related to inheritance issues or to religious or ethnic fanaticism, an example being a young girl marrying a boy from another religious or ethnic group. In these cases, the murderer continues to benefit from the exemption. Article 508 exempts a rapist "other than the wife" if he marries the victim "If the person who commits one of the crimes mentioned in this chapter lawfully marries the victim, the criminal proceeding against him shall cease, and if a judgment has already been given, execution of the penalty imposed on him shall be suspended". It is impossible to describe the cruelty and insult, and the psychological harm suffered by the young victim when she is compelled to marry the rapist to conceal the scandal in the family resulting from her no longer being a virgin. It should be mentioned that most of the victims in these cases are minors, and most of the marriage agreements are the result of the pressure the young girl's guardian places on her to consent to the marriage. Also in this context I should mention that most killings of women, minors

in particular, are carried out to conceal rapes where the offender is a blood relative. These are cases of illicit sexual relations which are not considered as crimes under the Penal Code, not even if the act is rape. There is no justification for this classification, other than the young girl's guardian's desire to protect the males in the family from the penalty imposed by the law on the "stranger" who is accused of raping a minor. The penalty for this offence may be death if the victim is killed. Consequently, it is amazing that, despite the dismal and unsafe conditions in which young girls are raised, in addition to the discrimination and oppression they suffer, they grow up to become active women. So the question arises: what is the legal competency that the law speaks about? The discrimination against women in the Penal Code also appears in the penalties imposed on persons found guilty of prostitution. The punishment imposed on the woman is twice as great as that imposed on men for the same offence, even though the consequences are the same for both sides. The discrimination extends to the "evidentiary means," which are absolute when the testimony of the man against the woman is involved, and limited when the woman testifies against the man. Also, a husband is not penalized for the offence of prostitution if he committed it outside the family's house. Contrarily, the woman is punished for the offence of prostitution in all the cases, as prescribed in articles 473, 474, and 475.

When I asked an official in the Farmer's Association in a tribal area about violence against women and the honor killings, he looked at me in amazement: "And why was it necessary to kill? We do not need this. Our daughters know their 'limits' very well, so they act accordingly, or else..." Killing follows, of course. I also heard a Member of Parliament from the Damascus Countryside strongly defend the penalties imposed on women, killing them included, saying, "We will never facilitate our daughters and wives to become 'loose.' They are our honor". Comments of this kind and the view that honor is defined via the woman's body are accepted by many groups in Syrian society, in both rural and urban areas. The law thus strengthens the social consensus on punishing the woman who does not comport with conventional beliefs. Covering the head of women expresses, for example, the values that were given a religious character so they would be strengthened and take root. As a result, women's lives in their social and family environment are not safe, a fact that affects their readiness to make decisions regarding their lives, even on questions dealing with in the state's statutes.

Personal Status Laws

The lives of women and families in Syria are controlled by eight personal status laws that reflect, jointly and separately, the values of patriarchal society. These values can be reduced to one principle: men's guardianship and custody of women. The guardianship and custody are connected in people's consciousness, and among many of the researchers of both sexes, to Islam. There are many reasons for this: the first is the explicit verses in the Koran on this point; secondly, most residents of Syria are Muslims; and the Islamic religion which applies to all citizens, regardless of their religious identity in matters relating to inheritance and guardianship. Hence, all studies on the subject of guardianship and custody and their influence on shaping the collective consciousness and social relations linked the subject to the Islamic religion and its interpretation. Any study on the history of this concept and its reflection in patriarchal society until the present day shows that guardianship and custody express the values of patriarchal society, in which males control the family. Also, guardianship and custody appear in cultures that preceded Islam, particularly in the religious and sacred context. This is true for Christianity and Judaism, whose laws explicitly contain the notion of guardianship and custody. My aim in mentioning this fact is not to defend Islam or its laws that are disadvantageous to women. My intention is to emphasise the clear discrimination in the personal status laws of all religions and ethnic groups. Therefore, all Syrian women, Muslim women in particular, suffer from discrimination in everything related to their personal status rights in the family. This arises, evidently, by means of the authority given to the man in matters of divorce, marriage, child custody, and the right to benefit from the woman's favors without her having the right to refuse and object. One woman told me: "If I push him away, the angels will punish me." Many women feel a constant threat and a lack of confidence, knowing that if he so wishes, the man can get divorced and the woman has no right to any compensation. She leaves empty handed from the house she built, for which she sweated and sacrificed everything. She leaves the house without being guaranteed a roof over her head or indeed any security. In this situation, the woman is given the "right of custody" of the son until he reaches age 12 and of the daughter until she reaches age 15. By law, the son and daughter are thus the children of the man, so the law refers to the woman's right as custody, which can be replaced, and involves small children so long as they require care. The issue of discrimination against women in the personal status laws is of major interest to civil society organisations and the feminist movement in particular. These activists presented and continue to present ideas and proposals, some of which seek to reduce the discrimination inherent to these laws, while others endeavored to repeal them completely. These proposals were prominently on display in April 2007, when a proposed personal status law was

introduced "for all Syrians." The bill contained derogatory and revolting provisions, even more extreme than those prescribed in the existing law. Feminist groups and the media garnered forces to defeat the bill, and were successful. Two months later, the Prime Minister's office proposed a new bill, similar to the existing law, making only minor changes. The two bills were based, purportedly, on Islamic law (Sharia), and left in place the ethnic group laws relating to betrothal, marriage, dissolution of marriage, and so forth. Recently, inheritance was added to the bill, but this too was drafted in a spirit that runs counter to the aspirations of civil society and moderate religious groups. Recently, the bill's progression through the legislative process has been slowed as a result of the opposition of civil society and political groups.

Civil Society and the Personal Status Laws

The fiery disputes on the two bills provide an opportunity to study the attitudes of civil society and religious currents with respect to the changes in the personal status laws (some 300 papers and articles have been published on the subject). The results indicate three principal approaches. *The first approach* is supported by those who seek religious reform, and a number of activists from the Islamic currents and from civil society. This approach calls for the gradual amendment of the personal status laws along with a change in religious interpretation, in a way that will conform to the spirit of the time and to present current needs. This approach seeks to realise "equality" without contradicting the religious laws, as for example occurred in Morocco. *The second approach* speaks to the needs to amend the existing law in the direction of a uniform family law for all Syrians. It calls for guaranteeing equality in sole reliance on the Constitution and on the state's international obligations, without relating to the religious sources. This approach is favored by a large number of intellectuals, media figures and activists of both sexes. However, it does not offer clear solutions to the problem of the multiplicity of ethnic groups in Syrian society, and the associated multiplicity of personal status laws in society. *The third approach* does not reject the two other approaches, but considers reform insufficient. It rather sees a need for radical change in the personal status laws – to make them conform to the reality in which the Syrian woman lives – and to the development in the state's social mentality. This approach is based on the Constitution, on human rights laws and on the conventions and international agreements that the Syrian government has signed. Primarily, it rests on the dignity of women and their sole right in decision making. Ensuring statutory equality between the sexes, according to this approach, is an expression of civil identity that does not rely on religion or on the nation as a religious entity, but is created by the nation of citizens. This approach demands that the amendment of the personal status laws for Muslims shall not apply to the other religious groups,

inasmuch as the religious and ethnic diversity in Syria differs from that of Morocco or Tunisia, for example. The opposite is also true, since the ethnic group laws do not apply to all Muslims. Consequently, this approach concludes that the only law that can strengthen national unity and can organise Syrian family life without any connection to religion or ethnic group is a general, civil family law. Every person can choose, obviously, the religious law as a result of the individual person's natural right to exercise his religious belief. This approach is represented by the feminist movement and social and cultural groups, particularly secular ones.

The Positions of Some Fundamentalist Religious Groups on the Personal Status Laws

The increased influence of fundamentalist groups on society and the state is widely considered the principal obstacle to removing all forms of discrimination against women under existing laws, particularly the personal status laws. These fundamentalist groups strongly object to any change; to them, these laws are eternal, not subject to alteration, due to their connection to Sharia (Islamic law). They do not consider these laws deficient; rather, "they grant Syrian society its uniqueness." Hence, these forces strongly attack the forces of change, accusing those who seek to protect women's rights of collaborating with the West. We see the increased strength of Islamic fundamentalist forces in Syrian society reflected, for example, in the success they have had in drawing large numbers of women to religious organisations ("Nabulsiya," "Zuhailia," "Farafra," "Qubayssiat," and others). In recent years, the wearing of the *hijab* and even the *niqab* (covering of the entire face) has grown significantly; only a few years ago, their use was almost non-existent. Fundamentalists managed to formulate and enforce "Islamic" values for all areas of life: Islamic food, Islamic clothing, Islamic social relations, Islamic welcome, Islamic banks, even Islamic sexual relations. In this way, the fundamentalists have managed to embarrass the feminist movement due to its secular roots, although the latter is rarely openly declared. The situation reached the point that even religiously observant feminists would conclude their demands with the sentence: "And these demands do not contradict the tolerant Sharia" or "These demands do not contradict the aims of Sharia, given by Allah" – or a similar expression. Some women rights activists have begun wearing the *hijab* out of fear of harassment and censure, or were convinced that "this rag" (in their words) would make it easier for them to get to women among the common folk, or it would make it easier for them to speak out. The influence of fundamentalist forces on Muslim circles has been so great that there are now Islamic women movements that go by the wily name "Islamic feminists." Some of them operate within the fundamentalist world, an example being those that participated in the "Bahrain Conference," which rejected international agreements and conventions pertaining to gender issues. Others

ostensibly operate within the framework of a misleading conception – *the cultural uniqueness of Islamic societies*, in their words – which opponents of women's rights hide behind, and which serves in the West as a pretext to deny rights of immigrant women. Regarding the debate on cultural uniqueness, it should be mentioned that a number of researchers and thinkers, especially in the West, find that, "Non-western societies, particularly Middle Eastern and Islamic societies, suffer from cultural and religious stagnation, and from deep-rooted traditional frameworks. This reality prevents these societies to advance and to acclimate to political, economic and technological change. Middle Eastern societies are static ones that seize the old, and fear and flee from anything new. These societies refrain from adventures, at both the individual level and collective level. They build a fortress to protect themselves from changes taking place around them, instinctively hiding behind religious and traditional habitual practices. For this reason, they are marking time". When such researchers speak about Islamic cultural uniqueness, they fail to realise that the cultural uniqueness of people in the region, including Syria, does not include only Islam; these societies are a mosaic of cultures that have interacted with each other and have learned to live together for generations.

I am not, of course, arguing that living together in this way was always ideal and freely chosen. Also, the backward makeup of the countries in the region makes it difficult to create ideal models of natural coexistence between different groups. The danger inherent to understanding Middle Eastern society in this way is that it justifies the "civilized" West to attack the "backward" East and conquer parts of it or the entire area, if that were to be possible, all driven by a desire to assist these societies in overcoming their backwardness, and to enable them to join civilization. It does not take much to expose the hypocrisy in this. The important point, though, is that the Western governments are comfortable with the idea of *cultural uniqueness*, which they use to justify the tyranny imposed by governments in the Middle East on their people, and to justify their unwillingness to adopt the concept of citizenship, and to refrain from dealing with the question of gender, on the other hand. For their part, Arab governments try to avoid confrontation with fundamentalists that have begun to breathe down their neck and threaten their rule. As a result, women's rights lie at the bottom of the order of priorities of these governments, and women's rights are the first to be sacrificed when the governments find themselves under pressure, however small the challenge.

Therefore, and in light of the complex reality in which women seek to protect their right to full and equal citizenship, it would be only natural for them to hope that the best potential for achieving their goals lies with civil society. Yet this potential will not be fully realised because of the severe restrictions placed on

civil society, which prevent it from fulfilling its active role in bringing about democratic change in society, and in opening channels for social development and establishing civic norms. These norms are a fundamental part of the women's movement's efforts to foster a society of culture and enlightenment, and are a substitute for the trends of ignorance and darkness that have become dominant and that threaten to eradicate all the achievements of Syrian society, among them the inclusion of women's rights as an integral part of human rights.

Nawal Yazaji

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Chapter 8: The Health Sector and Civil Society

Fouad Mohammad Fouad

Introduction

There continues to be a controversy on the significance of positive changes in Syrian health indicators during the past three decades, and whether these changes have continued, stopped or regressed according to conventional indicators. Nonetheless, there has been a marked improvement in Syrians' average life expectancy at birth, and this, in our view, constitutes the most important point of strength in the Syrian health system. There has been a steady increase from age 67 in 1990, to age 71.9 in 2007. The main reason behind this improvement is the decrease in the level of mortality among mothers and children, due to relatively more advanced vaccines and better health care provided at birth. Other factors surely also contributed to this improvement, most notably the availability of clean water, the spread of education and the rise in the level of environmental awareness among the public. In addition, health care decision makers have decided to fight infectious diseases, increased the number of hospitals and the average number of beds per thousand inhabitants, and established a wide array of public health centres among most urban and rural communities. This was coupled with a major development in the Syrian pharmaceutical industry which enabled it to maintain a niche in some areas at the regional level as a whole, and to provide an adequate supply of pharmaceuticals at relatively low prices, when compared to its counterparts in other regions of the Arab world or even elsewhere. This chapter assesses how these improvements have come about, and whether civil society played a role in these and, vice versa, whether health sector developments have boosted Syrian civil society. It is argued that, given the declining role of the public health sector in Syria and the inequities associated with increasing private sector provision of healthcare, civil society has begun to play a highly significant role as a third partner. This, however, should not be taken as a pretext by the state to not fully attend to its responsibility in implementing a fair policy of health services.

The Health System in Syria

The main infrastructure of the Syrian health system (as a reflection of the political-economic structure) has historically relied on two major pillars: the public and the private sectors. Despite the fact that the Ministry of Health is considered the primary reference for health services as well as the main body which determines the structure of the health system, there have always been other public entities concerned

with health affairs such as university hospitals, as well as health services provided by the military establishment, schools, municipalities, and other services provided by the General Federation of Labour Unions and the teachers and police unions, etcetera. These relatively large entities could have constituted a flexible and decentralized framework for health services, but due to a decline in coordination between them, as well as the lack of a unified health policy, the results were largely counterproductive, including in some cases fragmented, dispersed and low quality services. Today, the private sector remains disorganised. However, its contribution to the structure of the health system is significant since the services it provides that are paid for with public health expenditures is almost 49% of total public health budget expenditures. While the various organisations and institutions in the public health sector provide a large and extended health network that guarantees health services for the poor and the needy, financed by the public health budget, the private sector suffers from fundamental problems. The private sector is mostly made up of a fragmentary and non-institutionalized structure in which private clinics constitute the primary unit (every general practitioner has his/her own private clinic, even if he/she is also employed by a publicly managed hospital or organisation). This has a negative impact on the speed and quality of the services provided by public health institutions. As a consequence, the investments that are meant to contribute to human development are largely wasted. The financial burden that the patient has to bear here constitutes a significant proportion of his/her salary, especially if he/she is among those who are low-income or, even worse, if he/she is among those marginalized and vulnerable social groups. According to a 2000 report of the World Health Organisation, one of the basic indicators of a functioning health system is the distribution of financial contributions to health costs.

This indicator is called the Equity Index. It measures the distribution of risks that a family has to deal with because of the financial costs of the health system and its capacity to cover these costs, rather than the risk of morbidity. The health system cannot be considered equitable if an individual or family is compelled to immediately pay for unanticipated medical expenses the moment he/she is in need of such services, or when low income people pay more than those with higher incomes. This is due to the fact that society as a whole carries the burden of the government's health expenditures, yet citizens benefit from its services in an arbitrary way. According to the indicator mentioned in the report, Syria ranks 142 on a world-wide scale. Within the Arab world it ranks 16, succeeded only by Sudan and Mauritania. In other words, any serious attempt to liberalize the health sector and make more support available for the private sector should fully and absolutely respect the standards of human dignity and take into account

considerations of human security, particularly for those who are unable to pay unexpected expenses.

Expenditures on Health Services

An examination of data on health expenditures, including public expenditures that the Ministry of Health and other public bodies provide, and the private expenditures represented by the health services offered by the private sector, indicates that with regard to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), over a period of ten years (1997-2005) we see relative stability with an average rate of approximately 3%. In 2001, health expenditures reached the highest level of 3.4%. Yet this rate remains much lower than the 6% rate recorded in most middle income countries, while in rich countries it can reach up to 11% of GDP. Syria's public spending constitutes approximately half of the total spending on health, as it hovered around an average rate of 1.5% of GDP. This is low compared to the rest of the world.⁵⁰ Public spending on health constitutes only a small proportion of the total government expenditure. In fact, since 2006 it has not exceeded 5% of the public budget. Slightly more than 2% of the public health budget was spent by the Ministry of Health. The remaining amount was spent by other relevant ministries. In recent years, there has been a decline in the proportion of investment spending when compared to current spending, despite the growing share of total public expenditure on health (current and investment) of total government spending (general budget). The share of (governmental) public spending of total (governmental and private) expenditure on health has been in decline at a relatively rapid rate. The proportion of total expenditure on health for the year 2005 reached 1.4% of the GDP. This proportion was much less than the 3% recorded for middle-income countries generally, 2.7% for countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and 6.6% for rich countries.⁵¹ An additional indicator that further demonstrates the problem, especially at the level of health policy, is that the government's share in the provision of health services (which is already low as is clear from its low ratio to GDP) has continued to decline in recent years. This means a decline in the equity of the health system, especially since low income groups lack the financial means to benefit from such a health system. In fact the structural makeup of health services in Syria is changing. The share of the government in the total value of the health services that are provided to the inhabitants has decreased 11% in a relatively short period of 8 years, from 60%

⁵⁰For comparison, here are a few examples on public spending (governmental) on health in relation to GDP: Advanced countries (Iceland 8.8%- the highest in the world - France 7.7% - USA 6.8% - Spain 5.5%), and ex-Socialist countries (Czechoslovakia 6.8% - Lithuania 5.0% - Poland 4.5% - Russia 3.3% - Turkmenistan 2.6%), and Developing countries (Cuba 6.3% - Turkey 5.4% - Argentina 4.3% - Ethiopia 3.4% - Iran 3.1% - China 2.0%) and Arab countries (Jordan 4.2% - Algeria 3.3% - Mauritania 3.2% - Egypt and Tunis 2.5% - Sudan 1.9%)

⁵¹The World Bank, Human Development Indicators 2005

in 1997 to 49% in 2005. This means that spending on health in the public sector has decreased to less than half of the total expenditure on health; a common feature of undeveloped countries. With regard to the possible implications that the decline in the government's share in the health services might have on the Syrian population, there is a direct relationship between the increase in the share of the state in the health services (which are usually free of charge or minimal) and the increase in the average life expectancy at birth. This can be attributed to the ability of low income groups to access preventive and therapeutic health services. In comparison, the private sector's health spending has exceeded the threshold of half of total spending. However, its structure suffers from fragmentation, dispersion and institutional weakness, and from its failure, in its performance to abide by just and equitable standards. Accordingly, its increasing role in health services constitutes not only a social problem but also a problem in the fairness and quality of health services, even for those who can afford to pay their high prices. Based on the analysis above, we can conclude that the role of the public health sector in Syria is declining and is gradually losing its most important components: equity and social justice. On the other hand, despite the significance of the private sector's share in the market of health spending, it is still an immature and non-institutional sector, governed by the mentality of the market place and guided by the idea of small, quick profits which rely on a hit and run policy. In this equation, civil society has begun to play a highly significant role as a third partner.

The Five Year Plan and the Role of Civil Society

The health section of the tenth five-year plan of 2006-2010 stated that the development of the plan "was done in coordination with all the major players of the health sector, including the public and private sectors and civil society organisations. The aim was to ensure the widest possible participation of all parties to guarantee the plan's responsiveness to the needs of modernization as well as the active participation of these sectors in its implementation."⁵² The state adopted this approach as its policy and as part of the process of development and modernization for the first decade of the third millennium. Moreover, the plan stated that the health system needed a change of direction to enable it to become a developmental sector that would support socio-economic processes. Civil society (or *al-Mujtama' al-Ahli*) was repeatedly mentioned in those sections of the plan, connected to a vision of how to administer the health system and consolidate societal participation in public health programmes in the future. The plan also discussed the need to remove all the obstacles which obstruct the participation of civil society,⁵³ and to facilitate

⁵²The Tenth Five Year Plan 2006-2010, Chapter Twenty. The State Planning Body – Arab Republic of Syria

⁵³Ibid.

access to information on health affairs. However, the role that the plan gave to civil society remained obscure and unspecified. This was especially so when compared to the role that it gave to the private sector by apparently encouraging investments in the therapeutic and pharmaceutical fields and even in training and technical support programmes.

Civil Society and Health

Since the very early period of the history of modern Syria, civil society organisations have concentrated on health care. Already in 1922, a Syrian NGO was formed called *nuqtat al-halib* (the Drop of Milk). In 1946 it was classified as beneficial and subsequently registered in 1959. The purpose behind its establishment was to provide sterilized milk for poor children from birth to age 4. However, this society, which continues to be active today, eventually began to emphasise services for children with special needs. Although more than ninety years have passed since its establishment, there is nevertheless insufficient participation of civil society organisations in Syria's public life proportionate to this relatively long period of time. In 2009, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs released a report which stated that there are 1,240 registered and licensed societies. The report failed to provide any information on the number of societies that were still active or that have stopped functioning but were nonetheless licensed. Of this total number, Damascus has 443 societies.⁵⁴ When compared to Egypt, which has 22,102 societies, and to Turkey, which has 173,000 societies, of which more than 110,000 societies are active in all parts of the country, the figure of 1.240 is modest relative to Syria's population of slightly more than 20 million people. In 2004, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs delivered a speech at the general conference of NGOs. She emphasised the important role of civil society in the process of development and underscored the necessity to transform these traditionally charitable and religious NGOs into organisations that would actively participate in development. She reiterated this emphasis in the first conference on development that was held in the beginning of 2010, when she stated that "despite the need for religious charitable work, this should not exceed developmental work". Nonetheless, the mechanisms for establishing any kind of non-governmental organisation – whether medical, therapeutic or otherwise – remain excessively bureaucratic and require complex security checks in order to be approved. Yet those who have kept track of the work of health related societies in Syria will recognise the increase in their number in the last five years. However, it is necessary to note that the more active nonprofit organisations (and their larger visibility in the media) are those whose boards of directors are involved in

one way or another as decision makers or opinion makers close to the regime in political and economic fields. For instance, the head of the board of directors of the Syrian Organisation for the Handicapped (*Aamal*), established in 2002, was Asma al-Asad, the first lady. Additionally, the board of directors included the son of an assistant to the president as well the former defence minister. Also, the head of the board of directors of the Syrian Society for the Fight against Cancer was Abdul-Rahman Khleefawi, the former prime minister (his son was his successor as a member of the board).

The Mufti of the Republic serves as head of the board of directors of the Society for the Enhancement of Health and Social Standards. Bureaucratic procrastination in the process of registration and licensing may be the reason why the founders of these societies often decide to invite members of the political establishment to join in the establishment of these organisations; their inclusion apparently expedites the process. Furthermore, there are problems of a different nature like the intervention of the Ministry of Health in what it considers to be its essential domain. For example, the Ministry of Health decided to place a specialized clinic for patient diagnosis (funded by a grant from the Japanese Embassy and run by the Syrian Society for Hemophiliac Patients) under the administration of Ministry-managed hospitals. The reason behind this decision was the ministry's claim that "the clinic did not have any licensed equipment that would enable it to do laboratory analyses". In an effort to express opposition to the Ministry's decision, the Syrian Society for Hemophiliac Patients produced a letter, sent by the Ministry of Health, to the Ministry of Higher Education which requested the creation of a national committee that would include members who have "either specialization in blood diseases or specialization in blood diseases amongst children" and who are not members in any charitable organisation that provides medical services to hemophiliac patients". Contrary to the fate of the Syrian Society for Hemophiliac Patients, "Basma", a society that was established in 2006, had a more positive experience. Basma was established in order to "improve the social and health conditions of Syrian children who are suffering from cancer by providing psychological and moral support to children and their families through the period of treatment. The Society also provides financial support to the families of cancer patients by paying for the costs of treatment. The Society's financial assistance also includes aid for medical units for the treatment of children with cancer in Syria. The aims of this project are to improve the medical services that are provided to children, to encourage initiatives aimed at the establishment of new local units, and to increase public awareness about children suffering from cancer". Established by a group of influential public personalities in 2008, this Society was able to fully supply a specialized unit with all the equipment it needed, as well as sixteen beds to the Ministry of

⁵⁴ Followed by the Governate of Rif Dimashq which has 157, Aleppo 150, Hims 101, al-Ladhiqiyah 94, Hamah 78, Tartus 51, Idlib 28, Dayr ar-Zawr 25, al-Qunaytirah 23, Dar'a 21, al-Hasakah 19 and Ar-Raqqa 16 society.

Higher Education – administered Bayrouni Hospital. The Society also succeeded in signing a memorandum of understanding with the hospital under the supervision of the minister of higher education. The memorandum states that “Basma” will be responsible for the full operation of the unit for a period of two years and that the agreement is open for renewal. This partnership between the public sector and an NGO was the first of its kind in Syria.

During the last three years, the Society has registered more than 900 children who have benefited from its “medical support programme”, which supplies vital and otherwise unavailable medicines to governmental medical units specializing in the treatment of children with cancer. The Society also provided a partial contribution toward the costs of treating some children who had already received some care at the children cancer’s centre in Lebanon, administered by St. John’s Organisation, an American foundation. The President’s wife provided moral support to “Basma” by making regular visits to the society and expressing her direct and personal concern and encouragement. Indeed, the concern expressed by the First Lady is considered the main source of moral support enabling NGOs to provide social and medical services throughout different parts of Syria. This is the underlying reason for the strong motivation of many NGOs, implicitly expressed at times and explicitly at others, to seek out public figures such as the president’s wife as an honorary chair, key supporter, or sponsor of their work. This was clearly expressed by the Syrian Secretariat for Development,⁵⁵ which explained the president’s wife being the head of the secretariat as a “guarantee behind the realization of social development in accordance with the national vision for change and social development.”⁵⁶ However, nothing is directly mentioned in the four programmes, which form the Syrian secretariat for development, about issues of health, although the latter are included in one form or the other in the programme for urban development (Fardos). Contrary to these societies, also called governmental non-governmental organisations (GONGOs), a new and different type of NGO is on the rise in Syria. These new societies obtain their power and legitimacy as representatives of particular religious or sectarian trends, even though they function under the framework of a charitable organisation. A distinctive example of this type of religious-charitable society is *Jameyyat al-Bir wal-Ihsan* in Homs. In addition to providing support to poor families and fighting the phenomenon of begging, it owns what it calls a charity fund for health, whose aim it is to pay for the expenses of kidney- and open-heart surgery. Its main source of funding comes from donations received from the Islamic charity, *Amwal Al-Zakat*, and in terms of financial capabilities and spending it is considered one of the largest organisations in Syria. In 2008 it spent approximately

three million US dollars on various programmes and charitable activities. The Society for Charitable Programmes set itself similar aims. Founded in 1924 and legally recognised in 1929, the Society’s aims are to accommodate or house the aged and disabled, women and men in a special home, medically treat patients in a Society-administered hospital, offer support to “wretched and poor families, and assist orphans and educate youth”. The founding text of the Society emphasises that “the society does not discriminate between religious affiliations or interfere in political issues and religious ideologies.” What is striking is that in 1929 the Society began publishing a journal, which continues to this day. Contrary to the NGOs which concentrate on charitable work and offer direct treatment to patients, there are professional and specialized societies concerned with health affairs. These professional NGOs include “the Diabetes Society”, “the Syrian Society for the Fight against Osteoporosis and Osteo-Arthritis Diseases” and “The Society of Heart Diseases”, and other similar organisations. In most cases these societies are comprised of members who have different medical specializations. Their work tends to focus on organizing scientific conferences and publishing specialized journals and weekly or monthly bulletins to enhance the professional standards of those with medical specializations. These societies also sometimes engage in non-professional activities such as raising public health awareness about diseases such as diabetes, tuberculosis, or mental illness and potential treatment methods.

A Personal Experience

“The Syrian Centre for Research on Smoking” was established in 2002 by a competitive grant provided by the American National Institute of Health. The aim of the grant was to encourage research studies on diseases caused by smoking as well as to develop a special clinic suitable to the local environment that would teach people how to quit smoking. This was, and remains today, the only independent research centre in the field of public health and medical studies in Syria. From early on, the Centre encountered difficulties due to the lack of a legal-operational framework through which it could be established. This is due to the lack of any available formula that would allow for the establishment of an independent centre, even if the aim was to engage in health studies. In order to get registered, the Centre had to either become a part of one of the governmental organisations (and this was unrealistic) or else to simply register as a society (as was the case with the Society for Medical Studies in Damascus), which requires at least two years for various bureaucratic procedures. The only other alternative available to the Centre was to become part of an already registered society with a legal license to function, such as the Society for the Fight against Cancer. The Centre decided to use this approach, and its activities became part of the Society for the Fight against Cancer. Despite this decision, this situation resulted in depriving the Centre of its independence and it

⁵⁵<http://www.msv-sy.com/vb/showthread.php?t=182>

⁵⁶Ibid.

became a victim of the internal changes that were taking place within the Society. Researchers became subject to the conditions that the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs imposed on the movement of all those who were members of Syrian NGOs. For example, anyone working for an NGO who wanted to travel abroad or to acquire funding for research purposes was required to receive the Ministry's approval. In 2006, the Centre closed temporarily, and the Society for the Fight against Cancer was pressured to cease allowing the Centre to function under its auspices or else risk losing its license. The reason behind the mounting pressure on the Society was the result of misunderstanding from false information which reached the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs about the decision of one of the Centre members to travel abroad to attend a conference without having received the Ministry's formal approval. Until the matter was cleared up, the Centre remained closed. The Centre's overall reputation has been enhanced as a result of the changes that have taken place in Syria during the past few years, together with its emergence as one of the most professional scientific centres in the region and the Arab world, as well as its success in garnering several international prizes for its research accomplishments in the field of public health. This, however, did not result in any change in the ministry's attitude towards its legal status.

Health Societies in Syria – Do They Have Any Role?

Despite the fact that the five-year plan frequently reiterated the need for real partnership between the public and private sectors and civil society in the field of health, and went on to emphasise its view of the necessity "to reinforce individual efforts with collective efforts and to lessen the sufferings of people by supporting private projects through social guardianship,"⁵⁷ what became apparent was that civil society organisations, even under the most ideal conditions such as by their association with the government's apparatus, were no more than a fragile layer which could be disbanded at any time. Accordingly, the Ministry of Health's description and implementation of partnership was imbalanced and unsustainable. At the end of 2009, the President of the Republic issued a decree which required people not to smoke in public areas. The decree was welcomed by many civil society organisations active in the field of environment and in anti-smoking campaigns. The NGOs reacted positively to the World Health Organisation's call in Damascus to form an alliance of NGOs to monitor the presidential decree and encourage the relevant government agencies to ensure proper enforcement. What was both striking and surprising is that the Ministry of Health pressured the WHO to recognise it as the only body authorized to supervise the implementation of the decree, and that the work and activities of NGOs should be carried out in direct coordination with it. In

practice, coordination meant containment and a weakening of the work and initiatives of these organisations. And, in the best of conditions, the actions of the Ministry would only mean that it was directing the course of NGO activities in accordance with both its vision and interests.

Can These Organisations Take the Role of the State?

The WHO's subsidiary committee concerned with social determinants for health emphasised in its final report⁵⁸ that the Syrian government and its various ministries should be responsible for taking all the necessary health measures and should be fair in its implementation of particular health policies. In the committee's view, the government should try to be balanced in its public policies and should also consolidate the role of the state to provide necessary health services. However, the committee also maintained that the government should empower all social groups through fair representation in the procedures governing the decision-making process. It stated that the government should empower civil society organisations by granting them independence in decision making, the ability to organise and supervise their own activities, and to exercise all political and social rights that would enable them to adequately play their role in providing services in the health sector. The report emphasised the fact that civil society is "one of those active groups in the international programme for health equity", and that its various organisations have "a fundamental role that complements the measures taken by the government to narrow the gap in the health services provided to the various social strata". In this context the report referred to world-wide civil society networks as a health movement representing peoples of the world that have played a fundamental role in favour of health fairness. However, it also stated that the increasing number of these active groups working in the area of health on the international level did not, apparently, contribute to the consolidation of equity especially when considering the existing gaps in life expectancy between middle and high income countries. Syrian civil society organisations active in the area of healthcare fulfill two different roles. There are charitable health services that have unsuccessfully sought to fill the gap resulting from the failure of the state to provide sufficient care to its citizens (regardless of the financial contributions made) and there are ideologically-based organisations whose aim is to demand at least a partial degree of participation for civil society. In fact, this demand serves the interests of some individuals or groups, or is used to respond to those demanding a larger role for civil society organisations. Civil society organisations that are concerned with health

⁵⁷The Five Year Plan, Ibid.

⁵⁸The committee concerned with social determinants for health. Decreasing the gap within one generation: justice and equity in the area of health due to the measures taken on the social determinants of health. The Final Report of the Committee Concerned with the Social Determinants for Health, Genève, the WHO, 2008.

affairs in Syria do not claim they constitute an alternative to the role of the state. And this, in fact, should not be taken as a pretext by the state not to fully attend to its responsibility in implementing a fair health policy. The state should play its role fully, especially given that it constitutes the real expression of people's needs and aspirations. Health is one of the fields of the "public sphere" which the German philosopher Habermas defined as "the social sphere for the crystallization and exchange of ideas", and thus the formulation of public opinion through the liberty of exchanging information and acquiring knowledge via reason and debate.

Appendix:

Manifesto of Civil Society Organisations in Arab Countries on the Tenth Annual Commemoration of the WTO:⁵⁹

Maintaining the role of the state: Governments need to protect their political space and be more flexible in those strategic areas they negotiate under the auspices of the WTO. It is essential that they exclude fundamental services such as education, water, health, social protection and energy from any negotiation or discussion that has to do with free trade, for these constitute an essential part of human development and social justice. The UNDP's report on human development has repeatedly cautioned against the negative consequences of the trade agreement that had to do with aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPS), in addition to food security, original knowledge, existential security and access to medicine and medical care. The wave of economic and institutional restructuring which came in response to the increase in competition in the world market and the wide-spread deconstruction of social security systems and the decline in the standards of social services led to unemployment, lack of job security, work lay offs, vagrancy (displacement), bank repossession of land, loss of income sources, damage to health, and a worsening of working conditions. These conditions lead to violations in the fundamental obligations by states to enforce social and economic rights. These are rights which are the sole responsibility of state decision makers. People should not die from diseases that can be cured, in order to double the profits of multinational drug industries⁶⁰.

Notably, only three out of forty five Syrian civil society organisations signed the manifesto. These groups included the National Committee for the Fight against Poverty; The Centre for Environmental and Social Development; and the Syrian Centre for the Media and the Expression of Opinion. None of these organisations are known as being active in the health

field, while two of these organisations are not legally licensed, and the third lacks specific aims and its activities are unknown.

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⁵⁹ <http://miftah.org/arabic/PrinterF.cfm?DocId=4613> accessed on 27 September 2010.

⁶⁰ <http://miftah.org/arabic/PrinterF.cfm?DocId=4613> , accessed on 27 September 2010.

Chapter 9: Syria's Very Governmental Non-Governmental Organisations

Salam Kawakibi

Introduction

In the first decade of the new millennium, Syria underwent social and economic changes that profoundly affected its social structures. These changes, which took place under the rubric “transfer from a state-controlled economy to a social market economy,” brought some hypothetical improvements in the climate for private investment through legal reform and project proposals for both Arab and foreign investors, at least so prior to the current uprising. Consequently, new spheres of activism opened up for the Syrian private sector, which had adjusted in the years referred to as “the Socialist period,” to hybrid economic patterns, and found ways to go around the law, especially the statutes dealing with social responsibility and protection of workers’ rights. These maneuverings were made possible by a complex system based, in part, on corruption, contacts, and patronage. The state now dropped its role as patron of commercial activity but continued to maintain complete control of the public sphere and of social and political activism. As a result of its withdrawal as patron, and due to the decline in the standard of living of low wage-earners and even of many members of the free professions who did not want, or were unable, to compete for the crumbs left by the wealthy, the Syrian government was hesitant to fully implement its declared liberal economic policy, even under the nicely coated name: “social-market economy.” Consequently, an uneasy cautious process began in which some civil society organisations became linked to fulfill certain state tasks involving healthcare, social affairs, and cultural production. A new set of organisations, later grouped under the auspices of the ‘Syria Trust’, emerged.

These organisations will be the main focus of this chapter. Below, and after explaining the main rationale for its emergence, I will describe the Trust’s main projects. I collected relevant information from personal interviews and from studying its publications. Following this overview, I will discuss the Trust’s main features in terms of coordination, orientation, and its support for its own projects and those of other civic entities that do not directly fall under its wings. Then I will delineate the most important contributions of this ‘non-governmental organisation’, which in fact is closely linked to officials even higher than those in the government perse, including the executive body and the presidency. In my conclusion, I will comment on the positive and negative aspects of this experiment, which is still in its early stages.

The ‘People’s’ Organisations Make Room for the Syrian Trust

As we saw in the chapter on the evolution of civil society (Chapter One by Salam Kawakibi and Wael Sawah), licenses were given to many nonprofit organisations engaged in development issues, healthcare, and social affairs; but not to nonprofit organisations engaged in advancing citizens’ rights. In addition to recognizing the inability of its institutions to meet socioeconomic development needs, the state also acknowledged the failure of the many “people’s” (popular) organisations to play any of the roles that the government wanted, and hoped they would play for many decades. The “people’s” organisations in Syria, which are part of the archaic political structure preceding recent transformations, had been considered as an example of Syria’s civil society, and included legalized associations (unions) comprising young adults, students, and women. For decades, these organisations offered meaningless and insubstantial frameworks whose entire function was to impose political and social control. Society at large was being denied the right to act independently and freely, without being subject to the dictates of the ruling party. The “people’s” organisations’ main objective was to organise the population by age group and by occupation. Until recently, these organisations related to themselves as the most sophisticated form of civil society, and the state related to them likewise. In practice, these people’s organisations were political party branches that sought to develop social, cultural, and occupational life, alongside the control that the party held in political matters. With the shift to a market economy, and given the non-implemented declarations of socialism and social justice, the organisations’ influence over the lives of the target population – via supervision, monitoring, developing activities and frameworks for expression – declined.

As a result, an urgent need arose to compensate for the lack of society’s trust in the state’s institutions, which had become bogged down with bureaucratic concerns of security and revenue. A great vacuum emerged due to the marginalization of more genuine civil society forces. Religious groups (from all currents) stood out as the sole alternative in filling this vacuum. Drawing on their long tradition of faith-based charitable organisations (as explained in Chapter Four by Laura Ruiz de Elvira), the latter expanded and improved their modes of operation to meet the needs that had emerged in the community and developmental spheres. In light of this, and at the initiative and under the supervision of the Syrian president’s wife, Mrs. Asma al-Assad, a number of development programmes began to sprout in 2001.

The programmes’ work focused on providing a foundation for the concept of citizenship among young people, and on realizing this concept in the framework of a major project known as *Massar*. Other

programmes, under the heading *Firdos*, focused on the development of rural areas. Other programmes engaged in empowering young people to join the labour market, and in providing tools for development of business ventures, which was carried out in the *Shabab* project. Other projects included one dealing with culture and heritage (*Rawafed*) and a research centre that engaged in civil society issues and in socioeconomic dimensions of Syrian life. In 2007, The Syria Trust for Development was established as an umbrella organisation for all the aforesaid projects and in order to develop new areas of activity. Before describing the Trust's operational strategy, it is important to recognise each of the projects that operated independently for six years prior to the Trust's establishment, the transformations of their work methods, and the division of the work when the projects were brought together under one organisation.

Firdos

The economic development plan in Syria gave precedence to urban areas and ignored rural areas, despite the importance of the agricultural sector (which was largely disregarded by the state's economic planners) and despite the fact that most of the decision-makers actually came from rural areas. It appears that psychology played an important role in this process: denial of their social and geographic origin, which was treated as a stage in their life experience that they had to rid themselves of, while emphasizing elements of their lives that are linked to the urban centres. Many local and regional development reports noted the need for investment in the rural sector and the necessity of preventing its massive deterioration. From this arose the vision of the *Firdos* project: improving the living conditions in rural areas by empowering individuals and communities to enhance their self reliance and create equal opportunities for its members.⁶¹ At the start, *Firdos* provided social services, created work opportunities and developed expertise of residents in forty villages in six governorates. The project relied on its own resources and on local administrative resources that are provided to beneficiaries. The directors of the project found that it was impossible, given the project's configuration, to expand its operations to other rural areas. Project officials gained valuable professional experience in aiding local and regional organisations, enabling them to overcome some of the difficulties they faced in dealing with state bodies. The project established local committees or labour committees, which it trained to build assessment and intervention programmes. Then, the committees were connected to existing resources to enable them to work independently. *Firdos* aspired to establish a support fund for young businesses in rural areas and to expand into new areas. The project's objectives were to provide financial grants and services, reduce

gender gaps in rural areas, give priority to rural growth, encourage integration in civil society by means of rural growth, and, finally, strengthen its reputation and sustainability through the involvement of the Trust.⁶² The project hoped to strengthen and expand training to enable implementation of local projects with, or without, state assistance. One significant indicator of the project's success is its ability to transfer responsibility to the committees and organisations whose establishment and training it funded, and the lack of need for it to interfere in their operation. Monitoring and assessment are two of the project's fundamental components. In general, *Firdos* attempted to create confidence in the ability to act at the local level, by means of development of civil society. It also aided in the enactment of legislation and in amending existing legislation in a way that supports its objectives. It engaged in networking with government, community, regional, and international entities that were active in the same areas. The directors of the projects reported obstacles that make advancements difficult, in addition to bureaucratic problems and institutional opposition by government ministries, in particular the Ministry of Agriculture.

Massar

Given the increasing number of young people entering the labour market in the Arab world, and particularly in Syria, international and regional development organisations directed the government's attention to the need to improve its work methods, and to deal with the resultant social instability. The *Massar* project sought to aid the state in coping with the deteriorating situation in the country, since the social and family solidarity networks are no longer able to alleviate the situation. The project's vision was "to turn children and young people into active citizens, to enable them, through education, to acquire the understanding and ability to change the world around them, and to gain control over their present and future."⁶³ Given the bad situation of the education sector, the project began, in 2005, with the objective of disseminating active-learning and learning-by-doing programmes. The project has a good working relationship with schools. The officials in charge reported that the Ministry of Education opened the schools' doors for them to expose the teachers and pupils to new pedagogic methods, such as simulation methods and interactive theatre. This cooperative effort was strengthened by the positive and open approach taken by the minister of Education himself. Forty thousand pupils a year took part in the project's various activities. These included the opening of "Discovery Centres", the first of which was established in Latakia in 2007. Other centres were scheduled to open in other districts, and the main centre in Damascus was planned to be opened in 2013. The Discovery Centres created interactive opportunities, trained teachers, and developed school

⁶¹ Syria Trust for Development, "Draft of Five-year Development Strategy Plan" (Damascus, 2010).

⁶² Ibid., p. 11.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 15.

curricula. They also engaged in civic affairs, such as strengthening voluntarism, development, and the use of dialogue in dealing with social questions. By means of its interactive website, *Massar* worked with persons who were unable to directly participate in its activities.⁶⁴ Although the central government was involved in the project, *Massar* officials sought regional and international partners, and strived to engage Syria's civil society and the country's business sector. Politically, the project was highly sensitive because it operated directly with the young generation and addressed many social issues that might result in the development of civic concepts and dialogue. For decades, civic concepts and dialogue have been lacking in Syrian society and in its political lexicon. Another objective of the project was to address the dearth of awareness with regard to gender issues among young people. On these issues, *Massar* proceeded with great caution, and with the attentive patronage of top officials.

Shabab

The target population of *Shabab* project is slightly older than the *Massar* project, but also this project aimed at persons under thirty years of age. It sought to reach "the more open and creative young people who are self-reliant, active within their society, are aware of their abilities, and wish to achieve all that their abilities allow for."⁶⁵ The project, which began in 2005, sought, among other things, to strengthen business ventures among young people. It did this by means of programmes to increase awareness and to provide participants with practical experience in public and private companies. A department was opened to provide advice to persons wanting to enter the business world, and to connect supply and demand in the labour market. Project directors reported limited success so far, having been able to reach only 100,000 persons within its target population of six million persons. Yet the same officials were still optimistic, one reason being that the business-venture programme had become part of the curriculum in professional schools and academic centres in 2009. According to *Shabab's* directors, the project aspired to achieve cooperation with civic and economic sectors, in addition to the relevant governmental institutions, and with international institutions. Theoretically, the project integrates, among its aims, cooperation with non-governmental organisations involved in addressing and tackling youth unemployment. Organisations of this kind do not exist, unless the project directors view charitable and religious organisations as being engaged in this work. Just before the uprising, there was still hope that the door would open for non-governmental organisations to operate in this sphere. *Shabab's* activities illustrate the concern over the inability to cope with economic developments and their

consequences, particularly given the constant need to find funding that will facilitate young people in finding jobs. In social matters, the project sought to influence policy relevant to employment of young people. In early 2011, 50,000 young people took part in its activities.

Rawafed

The cultural planning was the responsibility of the state. The Ministry of Culture and its district offices were responsible for the planning of cultural activities on behalf of the state. Harsh restrictions were placed on creative works and forms of expression, even when cultural works of high quality were produced, primarily during the early 1970s. Yet censorship and funding difficulties left most cultural centres without meaningful cultural activities. Cultural issues were left to the service sector and were not given proper attention in the development plans. Those in charge of cultural activities saw culture as a luxury item and a privilege, and not as a resource that promotes growth of local communities. In contrast, the conception of *Rawafed* was that "the Syrian public should benefit from culture, which plays a vital long-term role in the country's economic, social, and human development."⁶⁶ The project began in 2007, the year that the Syria Trust for Development was founded. At first, *Rawafed* supported a number of musical enterprises and encouraged the development of local talents. It slowly integrated in the Syrian cultural life. In 2009, it established frameworks that would enable sustainable growth, and sought to establish a link between cultural and economic growth. Currently, *Rawafed* has great influence and is able to make contact with the citizenry and the media directly. *Rawafed* was comprised of two major programmes. The first programme deals with investment in cultural activity by way of mapping cultural resources in the communities. The objective was to draw a cultural map depicting the cultural resources in the country: museums, music, oral histories, and so forth. The project's officials then worked with civic organisations with the aim to develop their human resources. The second programme provided support for cultural and artistic activity and cultural institutions, created tools and frameworks to meet the needs of the cultural sector, and supported sustainable cultural projects. Its goal was that the cultural resources and cultural works would improve the quality of life and generate change in the local communities. Achieving this goal was deemed to be possible by means of encouraging the cultural sector and social, economic and human development, and it was thought necessary to convince leading state officials in charge of development policy of the importance of culture in achieving human development.

⁶⁴ The link to the website is www.massar.sy.

⁶⁵ Syria Trust for Development, "Draft of Five-year Development Strategy Program," p. 21.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

The Development Research Centre (DRC)

Initially the DRC was a department within the Syria Trust for Development, but in 2010 it became formally independent. The DRC, funded by the Trust and by other sources, provided research services for the Trust and carried out other research projects. The DRC's main activities included the assessment, monitoring and supervision of the projects. The DRC, which had a number of full time researchers, sought to turn scientific research into a major component of projects. Henceforth, it encouraged project managers to conduct research in the specific sphere of activity in which they were engaged. The DRC was funded directly, by funding earmarked for carrying out independent research that is not connected to purposes for which the Trust was founded. As a result, its financial situation was stable. At first, the DRC gave priority to conducting research for the Trust. After it became independent, it balanced its time and effort between its obligations to external entities and its commitments to the Trust. An example of the kind of research the DRC conducted is analysis of the state's economic and social policy. Also, the DRC took on a new project that would soon become independent: the Civil Society Organisations Forum. The DRC also nurtured researchers and developed research capabilities, the objective being to increase the success of development programmes, and to facilitate exchange of knowledge at the local and international levels. It aspired to be an authoritative reference body for local and international entities engaged in development. The DRC indeed became a source of knowledge and a reference body for the media. In this context, it engaged in turning its website into an information centre on all matters related to development, foremost by providing main development indicators, analysis, and recommendations. The DRC established the *Syrian Young Scholars Programme* in cooperation with *Gulf Sands Petroleum* and *Thomson Reuters* companies. The programme was intended to develop the expertise and capabilities of young Syrian researchers, in addition to dealing with the lack of scientific research, facilitating the exchange of information, strengthening the culture of development of scientific research, and creating opportunities for young Syrian researchers. The head of the DRC, Nizar Qabani, believed that "the existence of a centre that specializes on research constitutes an important component of development work in general. The research and services that the Centre provides are transparent and precise with respect to the findings of projects and programmes, which contribute to their development." In addition, he stated that "the Centre's activity is not limited to Trust programmes and projects, and it takes on external research projects and initiatives for capacity building in cooperation with local and international research centres, which provide benefit to society. Research conducted by the Centre provides a foundation of knowledge for economic and social development in

Syria."⁶⁷ Research studies carried out by the DRC involved a variety of subjects, from the economic and social uniqueness of Syria's rural sector to the benefits of establishing agricultural cooperatives, and efforts to encourage children to read.

The Structure of The Syria Trust for Development

The Trust was founded in 2007 as a statutory and administrative umbrella for projects that had previously existed, including those described above. These projects deal with three spheres of activity: education, rural development, and culture or heritage. The purpose for which the Trust was founded was to strengthen cooperation and integration between projects and to benefit from common management and standard criteria for assessment, greater transparency, and in-depth examination of projects. In early 2011, the Trust employed 190 persons. It encountered problems in drawing skilled personnel due to the small number of educational programmes in Syrian universities in fields connected to development. Thus, it was necessary to invite expatriate Syrian experts, or offer advanced courses to train a local cadre of skilled personnel in relevant fields. The need for qualified staff became critical when it sought to expand operations to new areas.

The Trust's five-year plan called for expanding the total number of staff, in all the projects, to 700 persons. This ambitious goal demanded great efforts in building and keeping professional cadres, since many staff tended to leave after gaining the requisite experience. Since one of the Trust's major goals was to aid Syrian civil society in absorbing trained persons who will help bring about the success of its projects, and to strengthen transparency and accountability (traits that were acquired while they worked for the Trust), the phenomenon of staff leaving the Trust does not concern its managers. The Trust's vision was to achieve "a Syrian society in which its members can realise their potential for the sake of themselves and their families, their society, and their homeland."⁶⁸ In its publications, the Trust also says to support non-governmental organisations not operating under its umbrella. It offers aid in preparing applications for funding and for grants and loans. This aspect of its work was considered a weak link in civil-society organisations working in the area of development in Syria.

The Trust's strategy was reflected in a desire to take positive action on behalf of non-governmental organisations that are not operating under its auspices and with its funding. The Trust described itself as an information and coordination source, as a builder of a cooperative network that assists in the advancement of development of Syrian society. In

⁶⁷ The comments were made at a meeting with Mr. Qabani in Damascus in December 2010.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

this context, the Trust's officials spoke of its function in creating a common platform for non-governmental organisations for the distribution of knowledge, for capacity building, and for providing aid aimed at Syria's development.

Conclusion

Were we facing new attempts by the government to attract a following or constituency within the context of the general deterioration of Syria's people's organisations? The establishment of the Syrian Trust for Development, it indeed seems, was part of a process that sought to create new, state-created social structures that would be more active and credible than "people's" organisations. The Trust managed, as our review of its components shows, to draw and absorb many skilled persons engaged in a variety of activities. It also trained new personnel and channeled them into civic work. Some of these persons moved on to work with non-governmental organisations outside the confines of the Trust after they garnered valuable experience. In that regard, the Trust's effect on civic activity in Syria has been positive. Despite the political support given to the Trust, and its ability to overcome many administrative and security obstacles that civil-society organisations in Syria face, it must be acknowledged that the Trust succeeded in creating an institutional structure based on principles of civic action that appear to correspond to western models. In doing so, it provided valuable mid- and long-term services in providing the foundation for a new, non-ideological culture; a culture based on professionalism. At the same time, however, the increased activity of the Trust, its expansion, and the strengthening of its projects contributed to a reduction in the activity of financially weak civil-society organisations where morale is low. Although the Trust assists other organisations in improving their work methods, and in developing new techniques for dealing with foundations and working with the target populations, it drew, knowingly or not, most of the international support earmarked for strengthening civil society in Syria. Undoubtedly, the Trust instilled new practices in the public sphere in Syria with respect to governance, monitoring, assessment and accountability, which even genuine and independent civil society organisations could not recognise. If given the opportunity to influence and develop further, and if civil society is offered a real chance to attain relative freedom, the Trust will play a role in establishing a major and significant nucleus of professionalism in Syrian civil society.

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Hivos and University of Amsterdam, Department of Political Science, initiated the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia in 2008. This academic activist initiative generated insights on the role of local civil society actors and Western donors in democratisation processes in Syria and Iran. Hivos currently co-produces policy papers, policy briefs, working papers, research papers, books and newsletters with think tanks, experts and activists mainly in MENA, but also in the US and EU. These in-depth insights deal with dignity revolutions and transition challenges and how Western donors can accompany transitions through insider knowledge.

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