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THE END OF THE BAʿTHIST SOCIAL CONTRACT IN BASHAR AL-ASAD'S SYRIA: READING SOCIOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS THROUGH CHARITIES AND BROADER BENEVOLENT ACTIVISM

Abstract
This article reads Bashar al-Asad's rule through the prism of social activism and, in particular, through the field of charities. The sociopolitical transformations Syria experienced between 2000 and 2010—the shift in state–society relations, the opening of the civic arena, and economic liberalization—are explored through the activities of charitable associations, including their interactions with other Syrian actors, and we argue that they reflect the unraveling of the old social contract. The Syrian leadership outsourced important state welfare functions to charities while also creating nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) under its own control and supporting developmental NGOs loyal to the regime. These NGOs differed from the existing charities in terms of their social base, financial backgrounds, motivations, modes of institutionalization, and public relations strategies, and enabled the authoritarian regime to pursue a new strategy of divide-and-rule politics. At the same time, subcontracting poor-relief measures to charities eroded the regime's political legitimacy and helped sow the seeds of the 2011 uprising.

Since Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, Syria has undergone far-reaching sociopolitical and socioeconomic transformations, leading to ruptures that the 2011 uprising brought painfully to the surface. However, it is difficult to put a finger on the exact nature and extent of these transformations: during the rule of Bashar al-Asad, both the son of a ruler who had repressed the people for thirty years and a well-educated "modern" newcomer, change and continuity have been inextricably linked, yet hard to trace and understand. As most social science literature on contemporary Syria has focused on the political elite and on economic policy changes, we have a rather limited understanding of how these transformations affected Syrian society as a whole.

This article shows that charities and other forms of benevolent activism are a suitable point of entry for comprehending Syria's developments since 2000. Through these organizations, political, economic, and social changes can be analyzed and the shift

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in Syria's social contract can be understood. As these actors aim to help alleviate society's most pressing needs, they are particularly sensitive to the transformations it undergoes. Furthermore, they need to negotiate their position within the current political and economic environment and the existing balance of power. Whereas state power aims at "managing the poor" from above,[1] charities demonstrate the de-facto situation of poor-relief policies and, therefore, of socioeconomic conditions. Charities can be used as a tool to interpret changes taking place around them. As Jean-Louis Laville puts it, "the malleability and adaptability of the associative phenomenon . . . grant it importance as an instrument of societal analysis . . . that reveals a great deal about the tensions of an era."[2] Charities are thus an excellent indicator for the current state of societies, and especially so in Islamic countries, where charitable giving is a religious duty and omnipresent practice.[3]

In order to use charities as a sociopolitical barometer, they need to be contextualized in an environment of other social actors with which they interact, such as individual philanthropists, NGOs, and state welfare agencies. Through this interaction they interpret and adapt to changing circumstances and, if necessary, redefine their discourse and area of activities. Since charities sometimes also engage in the same activities as development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), we use a broad definition of the term "charity": an institution or organization established to help those in need. This definition works as a translation of the Arabic term *jamʿiyya khayriyya*, which reflects different and evolving nonprofit practices such us taking care of the poor, the handicapped, the orphans, and the elderly but also giving IT courses or fighting unemployment. Similarly, in Singer's classification, "'charity' has become, and is used here to describe, a wide variety of behaviors. . . . [The] investigation of giving in this broadest sense—whether beneficence, philanthropy, welfare, or aid—is integral to interpreting any society or culture."[4] In the interplay between different charitable actors, society's changing dynamics become more visible.

Existing scholarship on contemporary Syria's associative field has tended to focus either on religious charities[5] or on developmental NGOs,[6] without exploring the interrelations between the diverse actors which shape that field and which are themselves conditioned by the state's wider socioeconomic policies. For instance, Islamic charities, and specifically the Zayd movement, saw a rise in bargaining power vis-à-vis the regime since the year 2000, as Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik's excellent 2009 article demonstrates.[7] Yet, these authors did not elaborate on the new cleavages in the Syrian associative field—which we argue were fostered by the duality between religious charities and the far less numerous but more visible regime-promoted NGOs. Likewise, Selvik's comparison between the giving of religious zakat (alms) through charities and giving under the more recent framework of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) does not explore how the difference between these forms of giving may have affected Syrian society and its political and economic realities.[8]

In exploring these missing perspectives, our analysis of the Syrian charitable and benevolent sector focuses on how the regime of Bashar al-Asad failed to uphold the terms of the social contract inherited from his father Hafiz al-Asad. As in other Arab states, this contract was based on the state's provision of social welfare and development in exchange for the population's renunciation of political participation. By "social contract" we mean here not only "an institutionalized bargain among collective actors" but also

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"a set of norms or shared expectations about the appropriate organization of a political economy in general."[9] Our approach thus also differs from the "authoritarian upgrading" literature of the 2000s, in that it focuses more on how liberalizing and pluralizing policies not only strengthened but, paradoxically, also gradually weakened the regime's popular legitimacy.[10] Showing how the social contract was abandoned over time also helps to explain the outbreak of the 2011 uprising because, though Syrian protesters did not at first call for the resignation of the president, they did demand the fall of what they identified as an unfair and unviable social, economic, and political system, a demand epitomized in the chant "*al-shaʿb yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām*" (the people want the fall of the system/regime).

This article proceeds as follows. First, we give a historical overview of Syrian charities, illustrating how their evolution since the late 19th century has related to that of the state and of the social contract in Syrian society. We then turn to major changes in the associative field from the year 2000 onward. The second section details the rise and changing composition of actors in this field, especially the increasing number of religious charities and the establishment of several regime-promoted newcomers, thus tracing transformations in the relationship between state and society. In the third section, the role of charities and other nonprofit organizations in Syria's economic transformation is investigated; this exposes why and how the Syrian leadership attempted to reduce public expenses by outsourcing former state functions to these groups while keeping them under the regime's surveillance.[11] The fourth section looks at the contrasting strategies, motivations, goals, identities, and social bases of the charities and regime-sponsored NGOs, highlighting the role these differences played in Syria's authoritarian context. We conclude by considering how the changes we have discussed broaden our understanding of the Syrian regime's increasing renunciation of the social contract.

The article employs an interdisciplinary approach, engaging with works from political science, the sociology of associations, and the anthropology of charitable practices. It is based mainly on qualitative fieldwork conducted by the authors between 2007 and 2011, primarily in Damascus, including more than eighty semistructured interviews with representatives and employees of charities and NGOs, participant observation sessions, visits to more than thirty charities, and one year of ethnographic work with the Bayt al-Salam association. We also draw on Syrian newspapers, official documents, and other nonacademic literature such as reports, guides, and leaflets produced by charities and NGOs.

SYRIAN CHARITIES AND THE PRE-BAʿTH AND BAʿTHIST SOCIAL CONTRACTS

In Syria, charities have historically constituted the vast majority of formal and informal (unregistered) associations. Their evolution is closely linked to the country's political and social history, thus revealing the nature of each period's social contract. Their institutional roots date back to the Ottoman period, though Muslim, Christian, and Jewish charitable practices existed earlier. The following paragraphs trace these developments by using some well-known Syrian charities as examples.[12]

The first Muslim charity to see the light of day in the *bilād al-shām* region, al-Maqassid al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Charitable Intentions), was founded in 1878 in

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Beirut by the well-known Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qadir Kabbani and had branches in several Syrian cities. The first Christian Syrian charity, the Association Saint Vincent de Paul of Damascus, was established earlier, in 1863, after the 1860 massacre of Damascene Christians. At the start of the 20th century, other charities were created, by various religious communities, throughout the territory that would later become Syria.

However, the fabric of Syrian charities only fully developed under the French Mandate (1920–46). Organizations such as al-Tamaddun al-Islami (The Islamic Civilization, 1932)—which had not only a charitable but also an intellectual mission—date from this period.[13] Numerous structures were created as vehicles to confront the Mandate power with political demands; their leaders and initiators "believed that a sound Islamic education and a strong social-welfare net would re-establish Islamic culture in its true essence and thus remove the West's unwelcome authority over Syria and the rest of the Arab world."[14] This phenomenon was accompanied by the creation of less politicized charities, such as the Islamic Orphanage in Aleppo (1920) and the Jamʿiyyat Nuqtat al-Halib (Drop of Milk Association, 1922) in Damascus, a women's organization that supported poor women unable to breastfeed their infants.[15] Christian charities developed in parallel to this in the 1930s and 1940s, and most of them were strongly linked to religious entities.[16]

Yet, the golden age for charities was in the years following Syrian independence in 1946, particularly in the 1950s. Between 1952 and 1954, the number of associations almost tripled, from 73 to 203, and leapt to 596 by 1962.[17] This growth was due to more flexible legislation, a liberal economic system, new religious leaders asserting their authority, strong clientelism, and a weak state. Several medium-size charities sprung up, such as the Dar al-Hadith al-Nabawi al-Sharif (The House of the Noble Prophetic Hadith, 1953), which helped to finance an existing religious school of the same name. Others were small neighborhood organizations that restricted themselves to distributing financial and material aid once or a few times a month. Several of these charities were still operative in the 2000s, but as they had not substantially developed their structures and rhetoric since their foundation, they continued to lag behind the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor's (MoSAL) new developmental trends. Notably, it was also in the 1950s that the first charities with a national scope were established, including networks of associations such as al-Nahda al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Awakening, 1954) and al-Birr wa-l-Khidmat al-Ijtimaʿiyya (Charitable Works and Social Services, 1955).

In the context of this expansion, three new instruments—one public, two private—were created to control and coordinate charitable associations: in the former category, MoSAL (1955); in the latter, the Damascus Charities Union (1957) and the Aleppo Charities Union (1961). MoSAL took responsibility for associations, which previously had been under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior. It launched a registration process for existing associations and enacted a new, more restrictive licensing system through Law Number 93 of 1958, which remained in force until 2012.

When the Baʿth Party came to power in 1963 and declared a state of emergency, the new regime began a process of bringing civil society "into line."[18] In this context, civil society initiatives were no longer welcomed since it was feared they would challenge the status quo. As a consequence, not only were very few charities founded during this period but also the existing associative sector was increasingly penetrated by *munaẓẓamāt*

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shaʿbiyya (popular organizations), which provided a means of controlling and channeling popular mobilization.[19] Government control and repression reached its peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Islamic protests endangered Hafiz al-Asad's regime and were infamously crushed in Hama in 1982. Even amongst popular organizations, independently minded elements were marginalized during these years.[20] According to official statistics, from 1962 to 2000 the number of registered associations dropped from 596 to 513.[21] The almost systematic refusal to authorize new charities also led to the development of informal organizations, which became active behind the scenes either through informal networks linked to charismatic individuals, through the protection of Christian religious institutions, or through the aegis of already registered charities, which functioned as umbrella organizations.

Before 1963 there was thus a burgeoning Syrian civil society in which charities played an important role. Associations—generally run by members of notable families or by religious leaders—were relatively autonomous. Furthermore, in the postindependence context, which was also more economically liberal, the incapacity of the ruling elite to build a broad-based social contract[22] and the absence of a "strong state" favored local and private initiatives, including charities. Their expansion was however halted and reversed when the Baʿth came to power and started building new state institutions. The social contract evolved toward a more populist model, in which state institutions and corporatist unions became the bodies responsible for implementing the Baʿth Party's socialist and state-centered developmental politics.

CHARITIES AS A BAROMETER FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF STATE–SOCIETY RELATIONS

Although there was very little space for civil society actors during most of Hafiz al-Asad's rule (1970–2000), informal networks and small-scale benevolent actions persisted and, during the 1990s, civil society forums emerged and gradually became more vocal in a new, albeit limited, atmosphere of public discussion about economic matters.[23] With Bashar al-Asad's accession to power, important changes occurred in both discourse and policy related to civil society. In the context of economic pressures and liberalizing measures toward a "social market economy," charities and other social actors were encouraged by the regime, as long as they did not actively pursue a political agenda. While many unions had previously held the sole right of representation in their respective area of concern[24]—under Hafiz al-Asad, society was organized according to strictly functional corporatist lines—a new, yet controlled, pluralism became allowed and indeed called for. But, as we will show, this also gave rise to new divide-and-rule practices that had not been possible before.

Charities as well as new kinds of organizations—focused, for instance, on environmental, cultural, developmental, and women's rights issues—responded to this call. New charities were created and authorized throughout the country, offering more services and engaging in larger-scale actions. Moreover, traditional charitable activities—such as looking after orphans and the elderly, supporting poor families, providing medical care, or financing religious education—were combined with new projects that sought to integrate a development dimension. These included, for example, providing assistance to young couples wishing to marry, countering unemployment through training courses

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and advisory services, offering literacy and IT courses for illiterate mothers, and granting microcredits. Thus, the line between charity and development became increasingly blurred and gave way to hybrid forms of organizations. Some newly created charities even added the word *tanmiyya* (development) or the adjective *tanmawī* (developmental) to their names.[25] According to interviewees, these organizations no longer sought to "give fish to the poor to feed them for a day, but rather to teach them how to fish."[26] Clearly, charities tried to adapt and seize the *zeitgeist* and, arguably, also reacted to the competition from new regime-sponsored organizations.

Charities were allowed to considerably widen the scope of their activities, both geographically and in total volume. New charities became less localized, working on a city- or region-wide level, rather than exclusively at the neighborhood level. Some—like the Jamʿiyyat al-Riʿaya al-Sihhiyya al-Khayriyya (The Charitable Association for Medical Protection, 2005)—were even authorized by MoSAL to carry out activities across Syria, a minor revolution compared to the preceding period. Equally important was the charities' growing volume of services and number of beneficiaries. For example, the number of beneficiaries of the Damascene Amal al-Ghad (Tomorrow's Hope, 2004), founded to support handicapped children, surged from 35 in 2005 to 207 in 2009.[27] Even more spectacular was the evolution of the Sunduq al-ʿAfiya (The Health Fund), a project of the Damascus Charities Union, whose number of beneficiaries increased almost ninefold, from 536 in 1997 to 4,455 in 2006. During one decade, this initiative paid for the medical care of 29,823 sick people, including 60,000 surgical treatments, at a total cost of 953 million Syrian pounds (ca. U.S. $19 million).[28] The number of beneficiaries of the Sunduq al-Mawadda wa-l-Rahma (The Love and Mercy Fund), also belonging to the Damascus Charities Union, increased from 44 in 1999 to more than 550 in 2007.[29] Thus, charitable associations' contribution to social welfare provision developed significantly during the 2000s—and it was also this great volume of action that distinguished charities from regime-promoted and loyalist developmental organizations, the scope of which was definitively narrower.[30] Rich entrepreneurs, like ʿUthman al-ʿAidi and the al-Shallah family, upper-middle-class merchants (whether regime-friendly or independently minded), and, more sporadically, ordinary people, contributed to this significant rise in charities' resources.[31]

In parallel with the promotion of charities—which were useful and urgently needed to fight poverty in a rapidly growing population—the transformation of state–society relations was reflected in the regime's efforts to build another official "civil society" from above. Asmaʾ al-Asad played a leading role in the creation of several organizations that were accused of undermining the defining feature of NGOs and were thus called "government-organized nongovernmental organizations," or GO-NGOs. One respondent called them "the semi-official sector."[32]

Thus, while existing charities were closely monitored and political organizations successfully marginalized—especially after the crackdown of the Damascus Spring (2000–2001) and the repressive measures against the activists of the Damascus Declaration (2005)—Bashar al-Asad's first ruling decade also saw the creation of a plethora of loyalist NGOs, often directly supported by the regime and commonly known by their acronyms. In 2001, the first development project initiated by Asmaʾ al-Asad, FIRDOS,[33] which supported rural communities, such as through granting microcredits or initiating community-based organizations, saw the light of day. The Syrian

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Organization for the Disabled AAMAL (2002)[34] and another organization engaged in—as it was also called—Modernising & Activating Women's Role in Economic Development (MAWRED, 2003),[35] were also founded on the First Lady's initiative. Two autonomous NGOs focused on the development of business skills, the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association (SYEA) and the Junior Chamber International Damascus (JCI), were established in 2004. Both were initiated by young wealthy Syrian businessmen and offered training courses in business skills. While JCI was founded as the local branch of an international NGO and to some extent was bound by practices of its parent organization, SYEA was said to be closer to the Syrian political establishment. In 2005, MASSAR and SHABAB,[36] providing education for children and young people, respectively, were both created with the support of the First Lady. BASMA (Smile!), a charity and lobby group for children affected with cancer, was founded the same year with the indirect involvement of Asmaʾ al-Asad, as she financed a one-year study trip for a co-founder to research best practices for treating childhood cancer in other countries.[37] In 2007, most of the organizations initiated by the First Lady—FIRDOS, SHABAB, MASSAR, and the two new divisions, RAWAFED, on cultural development, and the Syrian Development Research Centre—were merged in the Syria Trust for Development, known as "the Trust."[38] In 2008, Diala al-Hajj ʿAref, minister of social affairs and labor from 2004 to 2011, founded her own NGO, Tumouhi (my ambitions), together with well-connected businesspeople like ʿAbdulsalam Haykal, who is also cofounder of SYEA. Until 2011, Tumouhi provided university scholarships for high-achieving poor students.

Meanwhile, over the last two decades, both the Baʿth Party and the corporatist mass organizations gradually lost their linkage to society because, as Hinnebusch suggests, businesspeople became the main target of Baʿthist cooptation efforts, and privileges reserved for party members, such as easier access to public sector employment, shrank.[39] Under Hafiz al-Asad, these organizations drew at least some active—though controlled—popular participation, but under his son's rule Syrians increasingly felt that being a member of these institutions brought few advantages. Previously, some citizens had reported their problems to the party or to mass organizations, hoping for help in the form of subsidies, reduced taxes, etc. In the late 2000s, they turned instead to their family networks, to private organizations, including charities, or to religious leaders.[40] The new GO-NGOs were arguably meant to fill this gap by helping to link state and society, in addition to their other functions such as securing international donors' money,[41] "disciplining" the associative field, and conveying a modern, professional image to the world. As one Syrian consultant put it: "This elite civil society . . . is given a certain freedom. Because one major problem in our society is that . . . nobody is able to communicate between society and the state. Party [and] official civil society [are] out of function [i.e. dysfunctional]!"[42] Arguably, GO-NGOs monopolized certain economic, educational, and cultural activities and networks in a quasicorporatist fashion, thereby reproducing patterns of authoritarian rule while pretending to further civic pluralism.

Yet, neither GO-NGOs nor charities could replace the old popular organizations. The activities of GO-NGOs were relatively limited in size and scope as well as in terms of their geographic spread and program contents. Furthermore, their staff's often privileged background made populist outreach more difficult. Charities, which had more direct links to poorer parts of society, were encouraged by the regime to play a more active role, but since by design they fulfilled other, not primarily political, functions,

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they neither were able nor aspired to replace old "official" organizations. Thus, neither charities nor GO-NGOs fully inherited the socialist organizations' and unions' function of shaping and maintaining state–society relations. Still, since GO-NGOs and charities were occasionally connected to leading regime figures, such as Asmaʾ al-Asad or the president's cousin Rami Makhlouf, they created new means of patronage and clientelism.

The expansion of both charities and GO-NGOs after 2000 reflected a clear shift in state–society relations, in the sense that autonomous and semiautonomous initiatives became not only tolerated but also promoted by the state leadership. Furthermore, it reflected a shift from a social contract that had favored civil servants and peasants—based in poorer suburbs and the countryside—toward a more limited social contract, which increasingly concentrated on urban, middle-class professionals and businesspeople. This generated discontent among the regime's previous social base, as demonstrated by the spatial distribution of protests during the early uprising in 2011, which concentrated in small towns and in the suburbs of big cities.

CHARITIES AS A BAROMETER FOR TRANSFORMATIONS IN ECONOMIC POLICY

In Syria, as in other Arab countries, charities had been seen as superfluous and noneconomic players under "Arab socialism," particularly in the 1960–80 period. With the state assuming all social responsibilities, providing charity became both an anachronism and a dangerous act for those who exposed their wealth too much, hence facing expropriation.[43] After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Syria's socialist ideology was put on hold, though not fully revoked.[44] Economic liberalization measures, some of which were started under Hafiz al-Asad, were accelerated under his son: depleting oil resources, significant population growth, and an overstaffed and ineffective public sector accentuated the economic pressures. Most of the reforms aimed to strengthen the private sector and, several years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Tenth Five-Year Plan (hereafter FYP) for the years 2006–10 formalized the transition from a socialist-style planned economy to a so-called "social market economy."[45] This plan openly called on both the private sector and civil society to contribute to the "societal transformation":

> [The t]ransition to social market economy . . . will certainly require forging a new social contract among the vital forces in the Syrian society. These are comprised of the state, private sector, and civil society organizations bounded through healthy dialogue and interactive participation in formulating and implementing the [Five Year] Plan. Such partnership is the only route to win the societal transformation and meet the associated challenges.[46]

In this context, the term "public-private-partnership" became increasingly popular. Ostensibly following the principles of participation and partnership, important state functions were effectively outsourced to private agents, including charities and other benevolent organizations. As an interviewee put it:

> Reform is happening by empowering the civil society to play a larger role in supporting and developing the country. The government can no longer afford [it], [n]or do the job on its own. Nor [can] the private sector [alone] do that. So, civil society, [needs to be] supported . . . not only [by] charity organizations, but [by] development [organizations].[47]

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This resembled policies of privatization in other Arab countries that were trying to adjust to changes in the world economy.[48]

Relying on charities, private companies, and international donors (via GO-NGOs or other "new-style" institutions like the Syrian Enterprise and Business Centre) helped to reduce state expenditure. From the perspective of the Syrian regime, looking to implement cost-saving measures, it was of little importance that charities' financing strategies were radically different from those of GO-NGOs and that they perhaps reinforced charity leaders' social capital.[49] In 2008, the Syrian consolidated budget was estimated at 600 billion Syrian pounds, of which only one billion (0.2%) was spent through MoSAL and about seven billion (1.2%) through the Ministry of Health.[50] In 2007, only about 6 percent of the state budget was spent on education.[51] Overall, public spending as a percentage of GDP decreased.[52]

While charities were not allowed to become involved in certain fields, such as higher education,[53] their activities were encouraged and praised in official discourse, particularly in sectors like medical care and poverty alleviation. *ʿUqūd tashārukiyya* (association agreements) were established as part of the new "managing the poor" policies. Through these agreements, the maintenance, management, and often financing of certain public institutions—like schools or health centers—passed into the hands of charities. For example, the Qaws Quzah (Rainbow) association, founded in 2002, signed an agreement with MoSAL to make the management of the only public Damascene orphanage its responsibility. Similarly, the charity Jamʿiyyat al-Bustan al-Khayriyya (The Garden Charitable Association, 1999), founded by Rami Makhlouf in the city of Latakia, signed several *ʿuqūd tashārukiyya* with the Ministry of Health. These examples clearly illustrate how the frontiers between public and private had become blurred, which is a sign, according to Hibou, of an increasing "décharge de l'Etat."[54] Instead of fully retreating, the state outsourced costly services to private actors while maintaining control over these fields of action through informal, sometimes clientelist, arrangements.

GO-NGOs—with the possible exception of AAMAL and BASMA—and loyalist philanthropists played a much smaller role in poverty alleviation. They were mainly interested in projects that might grant them some form of return or profit. Businesspeople "invested" in philanthropy primarily to boost their companies' reputations. Corporate Social Responsibility therefore tended to focus on projects with a distinct developmental character, because education, capacity building, and support for business start-ups are better suited to building a positive, future-orientated corporate image than are regular poor-relief payments or medical care. Likewise, the majority of GO-NGOs concentrated on developmental activities like capacity-building and training events, often with an "awareness-raising" component. For instance, the Trust spent a staggering 84 percent of its funds in 2007–08 and 70 percent in 2009–10 on learning activities.[55] Ultimately, social welfare functions like medical care or providing for orphans, the elderly, or handicapped people, remained underserved.

Two notable exceptions of "loyalist" organizations that did engage in charitable giving were AAMAL and BASMA. Between its inception in 2005–06 and the beginning of the uprising in 2011, BASMA helped over 1,700 children with cancer and established a specialized unit for the diagnosis and treatment of childhood cancer at al-Beruni University Hospital in Damascus.[56] AAMAL, founded in 2002, treated approximately

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8,000 persons with speech disorders, more than 70 autistic children, and 30 children with hearing impediments, and diagnosed many more persons affected by these disabilities.[57] At the same time, both organizations emphasized their efforts in training, awareness raising, and lobbying activities. AAMAL, which trained close to 5,800 persons from 235 institutions, sought to follow a social rehabilitation model and not the purely medical model that it claimed was used by charities.[58] Similarly, one of BASMA's cofounders stressed that "BASMA is not only a charity but also a pressure group. . . . Here many people thought it can only be a charity."[59] Thus, both organizations aspired to be more than just charities.

Since most of the activities of loyal philanthropists and developmental GO-NGOs focused on expanding Syria's private sector, such as by running capacity-building workshops or by lending money to business start-ups, they played a role in Syria's outsourcing policies that was very different from that of religious charities. GO-NGOs and other developmental NGOs supported the outsourcing of formerly public services to a growing private sector by mainly organizing activities for younger members of the middle classes who, with a little instruction or financial help, could open a business themselves and become job creators rather than job seekers. In a way, they adopted tasks that usually—in countries with a more inclusive social contract—are fulfilled by government-run job centers, but, because they did not have the necessary scope or financial resources, they did not prove very effective in reducing youth unemployment. Charities, in contrast, adopted some of the state's outsourced welfare services and, by offering them mainly to the lower and lower-middle classes, bore the brunt of private poor relief.

The Syrian "mixed economy of charity"[60] thus shifted toward the "private benefactors" end of the continuum. In the short term, a positive-sum relationship was established: on the one hand, by outsourcing its welfare responsibilities the state was able to mitigate and, to some extent, control social instability. On the other hand, nonprofit organizations, especially charities, obtained more room for maneuver. Charities and NGOs could not, however, carry the whole burden of social services necessitated by rising unemployment and the growth of the population. These simultaneous processes can be considered a sign that the old social contract had declined. These developments put stress on state–society relations—similar to low pressure on a barometer—and thus foreshadowed, in the form of gradually rising popular discontent, the eruption of popular protests in 2011.

CHARITIES AS MEANS OF UNDERSTANDING HOW SOCIAL GROUPS ORGANIZE IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

The two preceding sections have shown how, in the Syrian context, charities and other benevolent organizations help us to read transformations in state–society relations and in economic policy, and how these changes involved a redefinition of the social contract. This section demonstrates that the study of these associations can also be extremely useful for understanding how social actors can, or cannot, organize themselves in authoritarian contexts.[61] It elaborates on the previously discussed differences between charities and developmental GO-NGOs, which reveal and reproduce the divide-and-rule politics often practiced by authoritarian regimes.

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Differences and Convergences between Charities and Developmental GO-NGOs

The type of action undertaken by associative structures qualifies as collective action insofar as it is a "structured" activity in which "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."[62] Hence we can see charities and developmental NGOs as sites of collective action that produce "meanings" and articulate "horizons of justification and legitimization."[63] However, in authoritarian contexts all collective action carries high risks. Indeed, during the crackdown on the Damascus Spring in 2001, the most visible anti-establishment activists—those who chose to publicly raise their voices—were punished with imprisonment or travel bans and were excluded from the civil society advocated by the regime. How, in such a political climate, does society organize collective action and continue carrying out social activities? The following paragraphs juxtapose charities' and developmental GO-NGOs' answers to that question by discussing the respective backgrounds of their employees and members, their motivations and (non-)political outlooks, their degree of institutionalization, and their visibility in public.

First, Syrian charities have been mainly organized along the lines of what Elizabeth Picard calls "basic affiliations," in this case religious and ethnic links—there are, for example, Sunni, Shiʿi, Armenian, and Circassian associations—which the Syrian regime was unable to weaken, had it even wanted to.[64] In this way, charities achieved the mobilization of parts of the society through interpersonal relations and face-to-face meetings in the neighborhood, community, mosque, or church rather than by adhering to a common cause (except maybe a religious one), which would be easier to identify and, if considered necessary by the authorities, to inhibit. In this sense, the charities were distinguished from so-called "civil organizations," such as the developmental NGOs, which can be described as "groupings that are voluntary and not based on any primary affiliation."[65] In contrast to charities, GO-NGOs did not have a closely knit grassroots base, despite adhering to a grassroots rhetoric in their projects. While charities gained legitimacy and influence by building a popular base at the neighborhood, religious, or family level, drawing on the significant "social capital" of their boards, GO-NGOs did so through their "professional" style and mission, their high degree of institutionalization, and their public relations strategies. Furthermore, the background of people mobilized by recently established Syrian developmental NGOs and GO-NGOs differed from those active through charities. The latter comprised persons of all classes, education levels, professions, and political opinions, though the nature of their involvement—for example, as founders, donors, board members, administrators, volunteers, or employees—usually varied according to their social origins. GO-NGOs, in contrast, drew a high percentage of their staff and volunteers from highly skilled professionals, and most private sector philanthropists were business cronies of the regime. Thus, their share of middle- and upper-middle-class urbanites was much more marked and disproportionate than it was amongst charities' staff.[66] Unlike in the charitable sector, senior staff often had extensive work experience in international development agencies or held degrees from foreign universities;[67] for many expatriates considering a return to their native Syria, Asmaʾ al-Asad had been a role model. Yet, because of their often upper-class background, the

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professional style of GO-NGO staff was sometimes criticized as "detached," "arrogant," elitist, or as "a bit of a snobbi[sh] benevolence."[68]

Second, it must be emphasized that involvement in Syrian charities was, at least at first glance, a nonpolitical action. Charity founders and members neither lobbied for a political cause nor aimed at overthrowing the established order. Their action was generally centered on a personal quest for salvation and on self-fulfillment as a way of carrying out their religious duties; their motivation was religious rather than civic. Furthermore, their rhetoric was consciously distanced from political discourse and they avoided making any critical comments in public. For instance, when subsidies for petroleum-derived products were reduced in 2008, charities immediately worked to lessen the social impact of these measures by distributing financial aid, clothes, and blankets, but did not publicly denounce the official policy. Similarly, few charity directors openly criticized the heavy bureaucracy that hampered their work, nor did they decry the Ministry of Awqaf's (Religious Endowments) prohibition of the *mawāʾid al-raḥmān* ("tables of the merciful," i.e., public fast breaking where food is provided for the poor) in 2008.

Above all, in contrast to Lebanese, Palestinian, or Egyptian charities—some of which are linked to Hizbullah, Hamas, or the Muslim Brotherhood—Syrian charities had no linkages with political parties. This was due to the fact that the only political parties tolerated by the Syrian regime were leftist parties that belonged to the National Progressive Front (a coalition accepting the Baʿth Party's control of the Syrian parliament) and did not believe in charities but rather in the state's responsibility to care for its citizens.

The *raison d'être* of charities is to provide a specific social service to the population. In pre-uprising Syria, they chose a particular strategy that allowed them to carry out their activities without interruption, which meant accepting or bypassing the rules of the game as they were imposed from above. Only by foregrounding the public usefulness of the services they provided could representatives of charities negotiate any leeway in the authoritarian system. Their action was therefore delicate but not overly risky, as it was emptied of all explicit antiestablishment content or political demands. Clearly, this does not mean that those involved in charities were completely subservient to the regime but rather that they had learned to compromise with the system in order to carry out their activities. The political dimension could only be perceived upon close scrutiny: resistance could take a passive form, such as choosing to finance an independent charity instead of a loyal one or not participating in activities promoted by the state or the First Lady. Finally, and we cannot ignore this, getting involved in the charity sector also constituted a way of "being-in-society," finding oneself among likeminded people, increasing and preserving "social capital," maintaining a clientele, and, sometimes, helping one's career. To that extent, charitable activities played a role in socializing Syrian citizens.

While GO-NGOs and other developmental organizations also refrained from expressing antiestablishment critiques, their activities were more political in the sense that they championed a well-defined common cause. People became involved with these organizations because, above all, they wished "to do something good" for Syria and for "those less privileged."[69] Their motivation therefore lacked the element of piety or religious duty found in traditional charitable giving. They instead invoked universal development jargon—which sometimes was directly "imported" by those who had studied

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or worked abroad—and most were not particularly, or at least not publicly, religious.[70] Philanthropic businesspeople involved in NGOs or GO-NGOs also had materialistic motives: economically, CSR promised more clients and greater profit and, politically, it established better relations with the regime. In this regard, Singer reminds us that benevolence helps us "to understand how notions of entitlement and obligation evolved in societies."[71] Syrian donors to charities mostly felt obliged in a religious sense, as interviews show. For instance, one wealthy merchant from Damascus, who in 2009 financed five charities, explained his involvement in terms of the religious obligation to pay the zakat.[72] Likewise, a young Christian, volunteering in the Mashghal al-Manara (The Lighthouse Workshop) since 1997, qualified his work in this association as a *risāla dīniyya* (religious mission) with a "spiritual goal."[73] Supporters of developmental NGOs became engaged in benevolent work because of "altruism" and a belief in progress; and philanthropists, who *a priori* had loyalist political "baggage," may have felt they needed to repay the regime for received political favors by helping in the outsourcing policy. The fact that charities and developmental organizations had different social bases and adhered to different self-defining paradigms reinforced certain divisions in Syria's civil society. Yet, their activities were not necessarily mutually exclusive and some of the entrepreneurs involved in CSR were also active in charitable structures.

As a third major difference between charities and GO-NGOs, the absence of formal and institutionalized networks linking the different charitable projects must be highlighted. Only two *ittiḥādāt* (literally "unions"), those of Damascus and Aleppo, connected some of the charities established in these two cities by offering joint projects (e.g., the above-mentioned Sunduq al-ʿAfiya). There are two ways to explain this fragmentation. On the one hand, it was due to the usual competition between different associative actors to attract donors, members, and beneficiaries, and to gain credibility and prestige. Singer notes: "Competition could be as fierce in charitable endeavors as in any other route to power and glory because beneficence contributed so directly to enhancing reputation, status, and legitimacy."[74] On the other hand, it can be explained by the regime's divide-and-rule strategies, which tried to deepen the existing competition and "break the dangerous links."[75] As a consequence, charities' networks were rather informal and mostly built on preexisting family, neighborhood, community, or religious ties.

In contrast, there was much closer coordination between GO-NGOs. This was especially the case after 2007, with the establishment of the Trust and the launch of the so-called NGO Platform. The latter project was initiated by the Trust's Research Division in collaboration with MoSAL and UNDP. It aimed to foment synergies between NGOs and, to a certain extent, harmonize them along the ideal exemplified by the Trust. Only a few charities, such as the Muʾassasat Himayat al-Usra and the Jamʿiyyat al-Israʾ al-Khayriyya, took part in the platform, whereas the majority of loyalist NGOs and GO-NGOs did so; thus it did little to overcome the fragmentation of charities and instead brought GO-NGOs even closer together. On top of that, the GO-NGOs' high degree of institutionalization served to gain better publicity for them—as well as for the regime's modernizing policies—and thus to attract international funding. This institutionalization also helped them to cooperate and coordinate with state institutions—though, arguably, the Trust's intimate relationship with the upper echelons of power was of greater significance than any formal recognition: "Who wants to say no to the First Lady?"[76]

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The fourth and last point of comparison concerns the low visibility and publicity of Syrian charities. Limited publicity for their activities was actually part of their strategy. Although degrees of visibility varied according to the associations' legal status, prestige, resources, and relations with the authorities, those in charge of charities generally looked for discretion outside the community or networks that sustained them. Their use of the internet as a tool was, for instance, rather restricted. Their low profile can be considered a form of rational self-censorship and an autodefense mechanism in the context of an authoritarian system in which those who were too visible were perceived as potential enemies. However, their low visibility was counterbalanced by the grassroots aspects of their work, such as their proximity to local communities, their construction of a loyal clientele, and their insertion in informal social networks.

The public relations approach used by GO-NGOs, seeking international visibility as a source of legitimacy and funding, was in sharp contrast to the one used by charities. Indeed, regime-initiated organizations were characterized by high-impact media coverage based on professional advertising, regularly updated internet appearances, and frequent references to their well-known international cooperation partners.[77] Notably, the media coverage was not primarily framed as "official propaganda" but rather emphasized international professional standards. The Trust's image campaign culminated in the First International Development Conference in January 2010, which featured keynote speeches by the First Lady as well as internationally renowned development experts and was attended by several high-level government officials.[78] It is significant that the media campaign mainly focused on international or upper-class media—mostly in English, not Arabic—and did not address poorer Syrians, who often did not know the Trust and its services but were familiar with the charities active in their neighborhoods or religious communities.

Still, despite the huge differences between the two kinds of organization, there was also some convergence. Encouraged by the success of developmental NGOs, some charities started to expand their own areas of responsibility into developmental activities and increasingly became "hybrid organizations." Likewise, around the years 2008–2010, GO-NGOs started to realize that their staff was too "elitist" and sought to recruit more "down-to-earth" staff with more local knowledge and contacts on a community level.[79] Yet, the division between the approaches of charities and GO-NGOs remained considerable, with the latter constituting the loyalist, officially promoted segment of civil society.

Charitable Giving to Understand Authoritarian Divide-and-Rule Politics

The differences between charities and GO-NGOs outlined in the previous section were accentuated by a universal rhetoric distinguishing three generations of NGOs that coexisted in Syria in the years 2000: a "first generation" of charities providing immediate help and welfare for the needy; a "second generation" of developmental NGOs striving for sustainable, longer-term projects; and a "third generation" of advocacy NGOs. This widely accepted distinction[80] was adopted by the Syrian English-language media and development professionals alike. In the Syrian context, distinguishing between three

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generations of NGOs promoted the connotation of a hierarchy of different kinds of associations, and had the side effect of favoring the authoritarian regime politically.

In the politicized version of the "three generations" discourse, charitable, developmental, and advocacy organizations represented three levels of NGOs with different roles and values: "first generation" charities provided welfare but lacked "second generation" developmental organizations' more effective, accountable, long-term, and sustained global vision. At the same time, "third generation" organizations remained excluded, for political reasons, from the official discourse promoting public-private partnerships.[81] In this reading, charities' social services—though they were more comprehensive, accessible to a wider range of people, and thus extremely important for poverty relief—were played down because the work of GO-NGOs and other developmental NGOs was presented as more professional and systematic and thus as essential for solving Syria's problems.

A considerable share of the interviewed staff of GO-NGOs adhered to, and helped to promote, this perceived "hierarchy" in the civil society field, though sometimes unconsciously. For instance, a senior staff member at MASSAR pointed out: "Civil society [is] supported with institutions, like not only charity organizations, but development[al organizations]. So we're switching . . . from the mentality of charity to development, so it's becoming more sustainable. And the Syria Trust is one of the leading NGOs that is enhancing that kind of NGO role."[82] Foreign-educated returnees were particularly susceptible to this discriminatory development rhetoric. For instance, a U.S.-educated philanthropist believed that in "the NGO sector they [foreign-educated Syrians] helped a lot. Having understood what an NGO does, what philanthropic work is: it's not charity but developmental."[83]

Perhaps most disturbingly, the discourse touched the raw nerve of secular individuals concerned that religious segments of society might gain political influence.[84] While this perception did not correspond to the low political ambitions and engagement that Syrian charities in fact had, it coincided with the secularism officially promoted by the Baʿthist regime. According to available sources, the regime neither furthered this misconception nor actively countered it. Only after 2011 was this vague fear of Islamism exploited and fueled by the regime's claim that sectarian divisions were behind the uprising.

From the authoritarian establishment's perspective, the regime-initiated and loyal NGOs, along with the judgmental interpretation of the "three generations" discourse, helped to counterbalance charities' rising significance: to be able to reduce government spending, the state needed to build on existing charities' expertise without helping charity leaders become too influential and a challenge to its authority. Accentuating their differences and the existing competition between organizations in the associative field enabled a divide-and-rule strategy. Paradoxically, since the regime relied on charities' provision of social welfare, it could not openly endorse the discriminatory "three generations" narrative. Regime officials only engaged in it indirectly and cautiously, such as by noting that charities were a very significant Syrian tradition while then emphasizing how important the new developmental NGOs were. Professionals working for developmental organizations were—as seen in the above quotations—more outspoken in this regard. One could almost say that the dissemination of this discourse was outsourced to the staff of GO-NGOs as well.

Altogether, prerevolutionary Syrian civil society was very fragmented, not only between *al-mujtamaʿ al-madanī* ("civil society")—a term that came to denote independent

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and, from the authoritarian regime's perspective, potentially subversive organizations—and *al-mujtamaʿ al-ahlī* (generally translated in other Arab countries as "communal society" but used in Syria to denote a noncontentious civil society) with a purely societal, nonpolitical agenda.[85] As we have shown, there was also a split within the *mujtamaʿ ahlī* (i.e., the civil society we have been referring to in this article), between recently founded loyal developmental organizations and more autonomous traditional charities. Therefore, despite a more inclusive and liberal rhetoric, and even if the old social contract had been abandoned, the way Syrian charities and NGOs organized themselves and were active in society continued to be shaped by the authoritarian political system.

CONCLUSION

The sociopolitical transformations of Bashar al-Asad's Syria examined in this article—that is, the growth of the associative field as a result of altered state–society relations, partial economic liberalization, and the outsourcing of social responsibility—indicate that the tacit and inclusive social contract, which was established between the Syrian regime and various social forces about five decades ago, underwent a far-reaching renegotiation and redefinition.

In Hafiz al-Asad's Syria, political efforts centered on developing rural areas and public sector institutions as well as on improving peasants' and workers' living conditions. Although al-Asad senior cooperated with the merchant class more fully than had his more radical Baʿthist predecessors of the 1960s, he never marginalized populist constituencies to the same degree that Bashar would. Hafiz al-Asad had already reduced the significance of the social contract, especially during the last years of his rule, but under his son attempts were made to forge a new social contract, as reflected in the 10th FYP, and both policies and rhetoric changed significantly. The focus largely shifted to Syria's main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, and to the private sector. A more selective approach privileging bourgeois and upper-middle-class segments of society was adopted. Through discourse about "social responsibility," "participation," and "partnership," the state tried to co-opt entrepreneurs and professionals as well as civil society actors. The old corporatist organizations were put aside and dwarfed by the First Lady's GO-NGOs—mainly the Trust—that, despite their success, could not fill the gap.

In a comparative perspective, there are several similarities between Asmaʾ al-Asad's self-adulation as the torch-bearer of Syria's civil society and Egyptian King Faruq's ambition to become "the center of numerous benevolence projects" in the 1940s.[86] Both aimed at using the associative field to present the existing political order in a favorable light and to legitimate it, and both failed.[87] Similarly, Egypt's Suzanne Mubarak had been active in charitable work but could not offset social imbalances or the people's wrath against her husband. In Tunisia, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's Fonds de Solidarité Nationale (created in 1992), was no more successful in mitigating the socioeconomic problems that would trigger the outburst of the "Jasmine Revolution." Whether Queen Rania of Jordan's extensive philanthropy or the Initiative Nationale pour le Développement Humain, established by Morocco's Mohammad VI in 2005, have been more successful, as the authoritarian monarchical systems in their countries are still surviving, is debatable.

If the Syrian regime intended to use charitable action in order to win the hearts and minds of a wider population, it failed. Charities' expansion and assumption of new

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responsibilities, even if not sufficient to take up the whole burden of social services, reflected the outsourcing and selling-off of the state's responsibility to the poor. The larger the role of charities became, the more visible it was that the regime had abandoned the old social contract; even if charities had been capable of mitigating Syria's rising poverty, by 2010 the retreat of the state from social services was obvious. Although the state certainly remained the dominant agent of redistribution and the main provider of social welfare, nonstate actors—that is, the private and the associative sectors—became increasingly important in ensuring economic growth and social welfare provision to a growing and impoverished population.

The fact that the Syrian regime welcomed and supported charities and other benevolent actors did not mean that it became more interested in pro-poor politics but, on the contrary, that it became less willing to engage in providing welfare, instead commissioning this task to trustworthy, that is, loyal or apolitical, nonstate actors. Therefore, it is not only the new, modern-looking GO-NGOs, which first come to mind when talking about "authoritarian upgrading," that demonstrate both the significant transformation of Syrian society and the attempts by the regime to keep a closed lid on politics. Even more pointedly, the developments in the "traditional" charitable sector reflected profound political, economic, and social changes that fueled popular discontent and helped to provoke the—at first peaceful, then defiant, and eventually violent—uprising. In that sense, Bashar and Asmaʾ al-Asad did not "manage the poor" of Syria: the old social contract crumbled and the poor were mostly left out of new GO-NGO initiatives. The divide-and-rule politics between "first and second generation" NGOs could not conceal this but rather underlined the GO-NGOs' elitism.

Thus, the Syrian uprising that began in March 2011 suggests that unraveling the old social contract was a fatal error on the regime's part. Already when the Arab uprisings started, the Syrian leadership seemed to realize, at least to some extent, that its neoliberal and outsourcing policies had gone too far, and began to "reanimate" the old social contract. For instance, in February 2011, the long-awaited National Social Aid Fund was launched, the goal of which is to "protect and nurture targeted individuals and families through providing regular or emergency aid," to "enable the beneficiaries economically, socially, and in the fields of health and education," and to "promote development and investment in human capital."[88] The government also raised civil servants' salaries and promised to further increase subsidies. Furthermore, ʿAbdullah al-Dardari, the main architect of the 10th FYP, was dismissed from his influential post as deputy prime minister of economic affairs, and agriculture was rediscovered as the most important economic sector.[89] Yet, these measures—coupled with relentless repression—turned out to be "too little, too late." As this paper has sought to illustrate by adopting the perspective of charities, the exclusionary measures of the 2000s were sweeping and altered the very core of Syrian state–society relations.

NOTES

Authors' note: We thank Raymond Hinnebusch, who showed us, while editing the book *Civil Society and the State in Syria: The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), to what extent our research findings merit systematic comparison, as well as Hamit Bozarslan, who has inspired some aspects of our analysis. Finally, we thank Paul Randles for his diligent proofreading as well as the four anonymous *IJMES* readers, and, above all, our Syrian interviewees for sharing their insights with us.

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[1]Mine Ener's expression "managing the poor" fittingly describes a situation characterized neither by "policing" and "controlling" the poor nor by the "provisioning of [enough] assistance" to the poor. Mine Ener, *Managing Egypt's Poor and the Politics of Benevolence, 1800–1952* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 15.

[2]Jean-Louis Laville, "Associations et société," in *Sociologie de l'association, des organisations à l'épreuve du changement*, ed. Laville and Renaud Sainsaulieu (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1997), 317. Authors' translation.

[3]Amy Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[4]Ibid., 2–3.

[5]See, for example, Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, "Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading' in Syria: Welfare Privatization, Islamic Charities and the Rise of the Zayd Movement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41(2009): 595–614; and Laura Ruiz de Elvira, "Christian Charities in Bashar al-Assad's Syria: A Comparative Analysis," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Religion, Society, and Culture under Bashar al-Asad*, ed. Leif Steinberg and Christa Salamandra (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).

[6]Mathieu Le Saux, "Les dynamiques contradictoires du champ associatif syrien," *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116 (2006): 193–209; Géraldine Chatelard, "ONG environnementales arabes et gestion des aires protégées: des acteurs entre histoires nationales et paradigmes mondialisés," in *Le développement, une affaire d'ONG? Associations, États et bailleurs dans le monde arabe*, ed. Caroline Abu-Sada and Benoît Challand (Paris: Karthala-IREMAM-IFPO, 2012); Tina Zintl, "Modernization Theory 2.0: Western-Educated Syrians and the Authoritarian Upgrading of Civil Society," in *Civil Society and the State in Syria: The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 31–63.

[7]Pierret and Selvik, "Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading' in Syria."

[8]Kjetil Selvik, "CSR and Reputation Building in Syria: Contextualizing 'the Business Case,'" in *Business Politics in the Arab World*, ed. Steffen Hertog, Giacomo Luciani, and Marc Valeri (London: Hurst, 2013), 133–58.

[9]Steven Heydemann, "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," in *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*, ed. Oliver Schlumberger (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 25.

[10]After general disillusionment with transitology, since Middle Eastern states did not undergo democratization, a strand of literature developed over the 2000s that was devoted to explaining why authoritarianism was so resilient. See, among others, Daniel Brumberg, "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002): 56–68; and Raymond Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique," *Democratization* 13 (2006): 373–95. Heydemann argues that establishing a nationalist-populist social contract was typical for Middle Eastern countries and helped to make their authoritarian political system more adaptive. Heydemann, "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism," 21–38. Advancing this argument, Heydemann and Leenders denote the regimes in Syria and Iran as "recombinant authoritarianism" because they are capable of proactively altering their governance structures and possess an "institutionalized flexibility." Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, "Authoritarian Governance in Syria and Iran: Challenged, Reconfiguring, and Resilient," in *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, ed. Heydemann and Leenders (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013), 7. The present article shares Heydemann's more critical conclusions in his seminal analysis of authoritarian upgrading techniques that "[s]tates are unlikely to resume the redistributive role that anchored the populist social pacts of the 1960s to 1980s across the Arab world. . . . [but] are gambling that the economic and social payoffs of upgrading for some segments of Arab society will exceed the costs that are imposed on those it excludes and marginalizes." Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Saban Center Analysis Paper 13 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2007), 27–28. Thus, this article aims to emphasize that the adaptability of authoritarian regimes should not be overestimated and to highlight its limits.

[11]In the Syrian context, the terms "regime" and "state" became increasingly blurred, because the regime usurped state functions and state institutions were rather weak, so that policy changes were often perceived as introduced by regime figures rather than by these institutions.

[12]Historical works on the Syrian associative sector are not numerous, but see, for example, Soukaina Boukhaima, "Le movement associative en Syrie," in *Pouvoirs et associations dans le monde arabe*, ed. Sarah Ben Nefissa (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2002), 77–94. Unless otherwise noted, this section draws on information from interviews conducted in Syria between 2007 and 2009.

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[13]Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib, "al-Tamaddun al-Islami: Passé et présent d'une association réformiste damascène," *Maghreb Machrek* 198 (2009): 79.

[14]Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Baʿthist Secularism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 37.

[15]Women and philanthropy are closely connected. See, for example, Beth Baron, "Islam, Philanthropy, and Political Culture in Interwar Egypt: The Activism of Labiba Ahmad," in *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, ed. Michael Bonner et al. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003).

[16]Boukhaima, "Le mouvement associatif en Syrie," 80.

[17]Thomas Pierret, "Les oulémas syriens: La tradition comme ressource face aux défis du changement social et de l'autoritarisme" (PhD diss., Sciences Po/Université Catholique de Louvain, 2009), 342; Central Office of Statistics, Syrian Arab Republic (1963).

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

[19]They included, for instance, trade, student, women, and farmers' unions controlled by the party.

[20]For more details, see Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995), 170–80.

[21]Central Office of Statistics, Syrian Arab Republic (1963; 2001).

[22]Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–70* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 30–54.

[23]The *infitāḥ* (opening) policy of the 1990s was a result of the severe economic crisis in Syria in the 1980s. See, for example, Aurora Sottimano, "Ideology and Discourse in the Era of Baʿthist Reforms: Towards an Analysis of Authoritarian Governmentality," in *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 25.

[24]The women's general union, the youth union, and the workers' union held such monopolies. See Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria*, vol. 19 (October 2007), 23.

[25]For example, the Jamʿiyyat al-Israʾ li-l-Tanmiyya al-Khayriyya (Israʾ Association for Charitable Development).

[26]This quotation has been attributed to Laozi, the founder of Taoism, but its actual origin is unknown. Authors' interviews, Syria, between 2007 and 2009.

[27]Amal al-Ghad's brochure (without date), distributed at the First International Development Conference in January 2010.

[28]This fund, created in 1997, was strongly backed by middle-class Damascene merchants and by 2011 had become one of the largest and most successful projects in the city. *Al-Taqrir al-Sanawi li-Ittihad al-Jamʿiyyat al-Khayriyya bi-Dimashq* [Annual Report of the Damascus Charities Union], 2007.

[29]Ibid.

[30]The umbrella organization Syria Trust for Development, with around 150 employees, cites for all its programs a total expenditure of ca. 555 million Syrian pounds (U.S. $11.1 million) in 2007–08 and ca. 494 million Syrian pounds (U.S. $9.9 million) in 2009–2010. Figures from The Syria Trust for Development's annual report brochures, 2009 and 2010.

[31]For instance, Sunduq al-ʿAfiya Damascus experienced a significant increase in revenue, from 80 million Syrian pounds in 2001 to 165 million in 2006, and the budget of the Christian Association of St. Vincent de Paul in Damascus reportedly jumped from ca. 17.5 to 19 million Syrian pounds in the course of one year, 2007–08.

[32]Authors' interview, Syria, April 2010.

[33]FIRDOS, meaning "paradise" in Arabic, is the acronym for "Fund for Integrated Rural Development of Syria."

[34]Arabic for "hope."

[35]Arabic for "resource."

[36]Arabic for "destiny" and "youth," respectively. SHABAB is the acronym for "Strategy Highlighting and Building Abilities for Business."

[37]Authors' interview, Syria, May 2010.

[38]See www.syriatrust.org (accessed 5 August 2012).

[39]See Raymond Hinnebusch, "President and Party in Post-Baʿthist Syria: From the Struggle for 'Reform' to Regime De-construction," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Political Economy and International Relations*

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under Bashar al-Asad, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming), 101. On the dysfunctions of the Baʿth party see also Caroline Donati, *L'exception syrienne* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 153–57.

[40]Authors' interview, United Kingdom, February 2011; Thierry Boissière, "Précarité économique, instabilité de l'emploi et pratiques sociales en Syrie," *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 105–106 (2005): 109–31.

[41]Reportedly, 75 percent of FIRDOS' funds stemmed from international donor agencies. Le Saux, "Les dynamiques contradictoires," 197.

[42]Authors' interview (in English), Syria, March 2010.

[43]Patrick Haenni, *L'ordre des caïds. Conjurer la dissidence urbaine au Caire* (Paris: Karthala, 2005).

[44]The Baʿth Arab Socialist Party retained its full title. Only under the pressure of the uprising did Syria adopt a new constitution, by "popular" referendum in early 2012, which did not refer to socialism.

[45]Examples are the laws permitting private banks, private insurance companies, and a stock market. For a good overview, see Samir Seifan, *Syria on the Path to Economic Reform* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010), 13–17.

[46]English original, available at www.planning.gov.sy/files/file/FypChapter1En.pdf (dead link, accessed 31 November 2011).

[47]Authors' interview (in English), Syria, April 2010.

[48]See Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, eds., *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalization: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2009). On Egyptian charities, see Daniela Pioppi, "The Privatization of Social Services as a Regime Strategy: Islamic Endowments (Awqaf) in Egypt," in *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, ed. Oliver Schlumberger (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 129–42.

[49]The resources of Syrian charities mostly came from private donations—many of them collected via mosques or during religious celebrations—whereas regime-promoted organizations attracted money from more secularly minded businesspeople or, more often, from foreign organizations.

[50]Figures from Central Office of Statistics, *Majmuʿa Ihsaʾiyya* (Statistical Abstract), chap. 14, 2009, www.cbssyr.org/yearbook/2009/chapter14-EN.htm (accessed 3 September 2012).

[51]Oxford Business Group, "A Change of Plans," in *The Report. Emerging Syria*, 2008, 29.

[52]This decrease was particularly significant compared to the period 1958–85; see Steven Heydemann, "Social Policy, Social Provision, and Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria," unpublished presentation at Sciences Po, Paris, 22 June 2009.

[53]For instance, Decree 36 of 2001 allowed the establishment of for-profit private universities but precluded charities and other nonprofit organizations from creating higher-education institutions. An official at the Ministry of Higher Education commented: "We would love to establish a new law, in the Turkish style [which allows creating higher education institutions in cooperation with *awqāf*]. But at the moment the *awqāf's* influence is still confined to building mosques" (authors' interview, Syria, 2010).

[54]Béatrice Hibou, ed., *Privatising the State* (London: Hurst, 2004).

[55]Only 5–10 percent were spent on rural development projects, which may have had a more direct impact on poor people's livelihood. The Syria Trust for Development's annual reports 2009, 61, and 2010, 31.

[56]See BASMA's webpage: http://www.basma-syria.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2&Itemid=12 (accessed 18 August 2012).

[57]Presentation by AAMAL's executive director Rami Khalil, http://www.slideshare.net/aamalsyria/aamal-presentation, uploaded on 30 January 2011 (accessed 18 August 2012).

[58]Ibid., slide 4.

[59]Authors' interview, Syria, May 2010.

[60]Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies,* chap. 5.

[61]As Clark observes, working in authoritarian contexts implies facing "alternating policies of control, repression, co-optation, and encouragement by the state." In Egypt, for example, "because of state restrictions, only a limited number of ISIs [Islamic social institutions] have been permitted to establish nationwide institutions." Janine Clark, "Social Movement Theory and Patron-Clientelism: Islamic Social Institutions and the Middle Class in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen," *Comparative Political Studies* 37 (2004): 945.

[62]Danny Trom, "Grammaire de la mobilisation et vocabulaires de motifs," in *Les formes de l'action collective. Mobilisations dans des arènes publiques*, ed. Daniel Cefaï and Danny Trom (Paris: EHESS éditions, 2001), 101.

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[63]Cefaï and Trom, *Les formes de l'action collective,* 12.

[64]Élizabeth Picard, "Les liens primordiaux, vecteurs de dynamique politique," in *La Politique dans le monde arabe*, ed. Élizabeth Picard (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 55–77.

[65]Vincent Geisser, Karam Karam, and Frédéric Vairel, "Espaces du politique: mobilisations et protestations," in Picard, *La Politique dans le monde arabe*, 210.

[66]Reports that ʿAlawite villages and regions were most frequently selected as project sites, e.g., for MASSAR and FIRDOS, could not be corroborated. Authors' interviews, Syria, 2010.

[67]See Zintl, "Modernization Theory 2.0."

[68]Authors' interviews, Syria, March 2010.

[69]Authors' interviews, Syria, March and April 2010.

[70]This could be linked to the secularism promoted by the Baʿthist party and state. However, interviewees did not openly relate this.

[71]Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies*, 3.

[72]Authors' interviews, Syria, 2007 and 2009.

[73]Authors' interview, Syria, October 2009.

[74]Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies*, 131.

[75]Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 169.

[76]Authors' interview, Syria, April 2010.

[77]For instance, the Trust proudly pointed toward MASSAR's selection as a case study for the Harvard Business School's MBA program. See The Syria Trust for Development annual reports, 2009 and 2010. In contrast, charities and independent NGOs concealed their international linkages, if they dared to have any. Authors' interviews, Syria, 2010; Le Saux, "Les dynamiques contradictoires."

[78]For more information, see http://syriadevconf.org (accessed 18 June 2010). On media coverage see, for example, the March 2010 editions of the Syrian English-language monthlies *Syria Today* and *Forward Magazine*.

[79]A senior Trust executive emphasized in early 2011: "The original recruits of the Syria Trust [formed] a certain, let's say, *enclave* of like-minded people [and] became a bit dissociated from other partners and stakeholders in Syria. . . . If you want this organization to grow, to be sustained, [you] can no longer think in this enclave." Yet he also stressed that good rapport with government institutions remained a key priority. Authors' interview (in English), Syria, April 2011.

[80]See, for example, David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1990).

[81]The "third generation" category of NGOs remained rare in Syria, which is not surprising considering the controlled and technocratic approach of reforms adopted. Especially after the Damascus Spring, most advocacy NGOs were rejected official permission to operate. Only if lobbying was used in a strictly functional sense, as it was by BASMA or AAMAL, could it gain a foothold.

[82]Authors's interview (in English), Syria, April 2011.

[83]Authors' interviews, Syria, April 2010.

[84]Authors' interviews, Syria, May 2010 and April 2011. This concern was expressed by some respondents belonging to religious minorities, such as the Christian and ʿAlawite communities, but was never directed against specific Syrian individuals or charities.

[85]Laura Ruiz de Elvira, "L'État syrien de Bachar al-Assad à l'épreuve des ONG," *Maghreb-Machrek* 203 (2010): 48.

[86]Ener, *Managing Egypt's Poor and the Politics of Benevolence,* 24.

[87]On King Faruq, see ibid., 132.

[88]See the National Social Aid Fund's website: http://www.nsaf.gov.sy/forms/cms/viewPage.php?id=40 (accessed 15 January 2012).

[89]"There's no doubt that agriculture is the backbone of Syrian economy; and the state has made great efforts in order to develop this sector during the past decades. But the attention given to agriculture during the past few years was not adequate." See "President al-Assad's Speech to the New Government," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 18 April 2011, http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/04/18/pr-341923.htm. This shift in priorities was also exemplified by the fact that, in the cabinets of 2011 and 2012, the previous minister of agriculture became prime minister.

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