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**The Syrian Private Media and Discourse of the Development of the Syrian National
Economy**

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Economy**

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Abstract

The Syrian Private Media and Discourse of the Development of the Syrian National Economy

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In 2001, Syria opened its media outlets to private ownership for the first time in over forty years. This thesis conducts a critical discourse analysis of the economic coverage of the sole Syrian political daily newspaper *al-Watan* and asks how media liberalization in Syria is more so emblematic of pro-market economic reforms as opposed to media reform. In this sense, it is the economic content of *al-Watan* that signifies how a private media outlet – under the guiding force of “red lines” and other regulatory mechanisms, yet financially “liberated” via advertising revenue and wealthy regime-friendly backers – can demonstrate its utility to the regime by providing a reiteration of its social-market economic policies all the while existing as a public embodiment of the regime’s willingness to embrace a marketized Syrian society. Simply put, *al-Watan* is a perfect vehicle for propagating the regime’s gradualist pro-market reforms in the public sphere.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Ba’th party’s March 8, 1963 coup has been labeled by a prominent Syrian scholar as the beginning of the end for the “free” press in the country (Abbas 2007, 5). During the first days of the coup, the Revolutionary Leadership Council enacted several decrees, one being the establishment of the legendary Emergency Law and another ordering publishing houses to stop the printing of all publications with the exclusion of three Ba’th-friendly newspapers (Abbas 2007, 5). Since then, the 1963 Emergency Law is still in effect, but Decree Four – which abolished all civilian-owned press – has been overturned.¹ In September 2001, more than a year after coming to power, President Bashar al-Asad issued Decree 50, which effectively overturned Decree Four and officially permitted the private ownership of media outlets.²

While Decree 50 is often rosily credited with reforming the Syrian media landscape, it actually instituted more restrictions on journalists and publishers than ever before. This includes forcing journalists to reveal their sources, as well as the imposition of strict fines and jail terms for journalists or publishers who disobey the restrictive publishing guidelines or publish without a license.³ Furthermore, actually obtaining a publication license is nearly as difficult as keeping one. As the details of Decree 50 make clear, opening the door for the privately-owned press in Syria did not ensure a press free

¹ Syria’s Emergency Law is still the primary restrictor of political and civil-oriented activities in the country as it effectively suspends all constitutional rights. The law is often used as official justification for restricting speech in the country since the regime considers Syria to be in a state of war.

² Decree 50 amended other press-related legislative decrees, including Press Law 53 first implemented in 1949. Before the unification of Syria and Egypt in 1958, Syria’s press is often characterized as pluralistic with relatively few restrictions.

³ Thabet Salem, “Pushing For Reform,” *Syria Today*, May 2009.

of government restrictions.

Despite these restrictions, privately-owned publications are on the rise in Syria, co-existing in supposed “harmonic competition” with the official media (SANA 2006). The Syrian regime and its cohorts laud the establishment of the private media in the form of Decree 50 as yet another “modernizing” reform enacted by Bashar, which will “serve the nation” (SANA 2006). As the uncritical celebration of the private media persists within domestic Syrian discourse, some English-language news reports have focused on the historical momentousness of the emergence of the private press in Syria, remarking that even though the press may not be “independent” by Western standards, it could mark the beginning of a new era of press freedoms (Layalina 2006, AFP 2006). The scholarly works on Syrian media also use Decree 50 to suggest the possibility of further media freedoms in Syria’s future.⁴

These characterizations demonstrate how the inception of the private media in Syria has been placed by numerous actors within a framework of positive progress on the path of “media development” in Syria. In other words, the allowance of private ownership of media outlets in Syria is used to symbolize a positive change in the media environment of the country, despite the fact that the diversification of media ownership has not led to adjustments of the formal and informal restrictions on actual content. This observation on media content is not intended to promote a normative view of a liberal press structure, but it is meant to differentiate actual change from perceived change in the

⁴ See Chapter 3 Literature Review on the Syrian media.

Syrian media structure. To this end, there is an inconsistency between the purveyance of the idea that the Syrian media are undergoing gradual reform, yet the only indicators of this supposed reform has been the allowance of private ownership and a heap of additional restrictive media laws. One of the keys to unraveling this contradiction and developing a more informative understanding of the function and actual standing of the private press in Syrian society is by partly removing it from a framework of media development and re-situating it within the context of Syria's pro-market economic reforms of the past decade.

Syria's "Social-Market" Economy

The transitory moment between the end of Hafez al-Asad's reign and the birth of Bashar's in 2000 stimulated Syrian and foreign speculations of how Bashar would re-make Syria. Now that nearly a decade has passed since Bashar's ascension to power, this moment of uncertainty has dissipated and various groups have made assessments on how Bashar has (or has not) installed a new vision for Syria.

As the prospect of political liberalization faded with the regime's suppression of the Damascus Spring civil society movement in 2001, it became clear that economic – not political – liberalization would be the unmistakable consistency throughout his rule. Indeed, pro-market moves such as the privatization of banks, further orientation to an export-based economy, and encouragement of foreign direct investment have abounded throughout the past decade, resulting in improved business climate ratings and favorable reviews from the World Bank and several investment groups. Yet despite this undeniable

shift toward a market economy, the Syrian government still retains a dominant public sector that is key to maintaining unity with past regime discourses and socialist economic policies (Abboud 2009, 8). The persistence of a strong public sector in the midst of a definitive transition toward a market economy forms one of the many backdrops for framing the regime's economic discourse, since it is in this situation that the paradigm of a "social-market" economy came to fruition (Abboud 2009, 11).

A full decade of gradual market reform in a largely state-dominated economy has allowed for a conceptual reconsideration of policies implemented at the onset of Bashar's rule, including Decree 50. While initially considered by many parties in the light of possible political and media reform, there is now reason to believe that the allowance of private media in Syria is more so in line with the economic reforms of the past decade that have privileged privatization, investment opportunities, and creating new markets. In this sense, we can begin to understand the massive disjunction between the favorable portrayal of the Syrian private press in several pro-market discourses and the condemnatory portrayal in the discourses of Syrian and Western human rights/press freedom organizations.

The pro-market discourses demonstrate how it is becoming more popular, and perhaps more conceptually accurate, to interpret the private media in Syria not as a breeding ground for further press reform, but as a fledgling market ripe for investment. Whether or not this was the regime's intent is irrelevant, but it is clear that an analysis of the economic role of the private press presents several implications for the conceptual

construction of Syria's privately-owned media.

Understanding the Private Press as a Symbol of Economic Reform

For the first time since the Dubai Press Club's inception years ago, Syria has been included in the organization's *Arab Media Outlook* report.⁵ The primary reason behind Syria's inclusion in the 2009-2013 report is its allowance of private media ownership. In other words, there is now a potentially profitable media market open to investment whereas in the past, the official media would have been the only outlet, and not profitable at that. This crucial fact has given Syria a discursive presence in a literature from which it had previously been excluded. The most recent report posits an optimistic assessment of a burgeoning media market in Syria worth 41 million dollars and praises the growth potential for advertising in the privately-owned magazines and newspapers (Dubai Press Club, 147). Syria's newfound identity as a host of private media outlets is perceived through the language of anticipated economic benefits and elevated prestige stemming from its move away from state ownership toward private ownership. In this discourse, the Syrian private media do not operate as a symbol of press reform, nor is it intended to, but it is firmly a symbol of economic growth potential.

Another example of how the Syrian private media are constructed through the lens of pro-market discourse is the Oxford Business Group's 2008-2011 Syrian media and advertising overview. The basic premise of the report is that Decree 50's allowance of private media ownership effectively opened a nascent media market in Syria that will in

⁵ The *Arab Media Outlook* is published by the Dubai Press Club and forecasts media industry growth in Arab countries.

turn nurture growth (Oxford Business Group, 131). The author's admission that Syria's media liberalization does not amount to media independence does not dampen the report's optimistic tone for profit-generating potential in print advertising or television drama. The report gives precedence to the views of Syrian private media owners such as publishing baron Abdul Salam Haykal, who asserts: "An increase in press freedom is not needed to establish higher credibility of media and attract readers" (Oxford Business Group, 132). This statement perhaps serves to assuage the concerns of potential media investors who are concerned that Syria's liberalized yet restrictive media environment is not able to generate ample readership to generate revenue growth.

The amount of material that constructs the Syrian private media in this fashion is seemingly boundless. These reports demonstrate an alternative construction of the private press within the context of investment and marketing opportunities that rhapsodize over the promise of economic growth via market capitalism. On the contrary, my construction and usage of the Syrian private press as a symbol of the regime's social-market reforms does not seek to commend such developments. Instead, this thesis is predicated on a critical reading of this interpretation that highlights how it has detracted from the reality of a highly restrictive and censored press environment in Syria by enthusiastically and uncritically accepting any moves toward privatization as progress. I also maintain that by understanding the private press as an oft-used discursive symbol of economic development in the vein of market reforms, we are better able to situate and analyze the actual content of the private press in view of the surrounding regime and development

discourses that have sought to triumphantly foreground this portrayal. While explicating these discourses external to the private press is not the central function of this thesis, they provide crucial background context to understanding the private media as both embodiment and instigator of the regime's version of pro-market reforms.

Al-Watan and Economic Liberalization

This thesis will build on the conceptual framework outlined above by focusing on how the only privately-owned political daily newspaper in Syria, *al-Watan*, portrays issues pertinent to the “development” of the national economy. In my analysis, *al-Watan* is a symbol of economic liberalization in a highly restrictive media environment and its economic-related content reflects the paper's position within the discourse of an economic opening. This thesis will also examine the impact of regime discourses of economic reform on *al-Watan's* economic coverage and determine the extent to which this newspaper's content coincides with official economic discourse. On another level, this content analysis of *al-Watan* will lead to a probing of wider issues related to the complex role of media outlets in demonstrating the regime's power to mold and restrict the public sphere (Sottimano 2009 and Wedeen 1999).

Al-Watan as a Private Media Outlet

Al-Watan's website proudly announces its status as the “first daily political, independent newspaper in four decades.”⁶ This self-declared break with four decades of state-controlled journalism is not a subtle statement, yet even a cursory reading of the

⁶ See *al-Watan's* home page: <http://www.alwatan.sy/>

paper's political content reveals that there is no major shift in the norms of press coverage.⁷ Still, the explicit reference to decades of Ba'th party rule as a period of non-independent publishing indicates a desire to represent its presence and coverage as a harbinger of change in the media.

Since its inception in November 2006, the newspaper's founding editor Waddah Abd Rabbu has become the de facto media spokesperson and has made several references to *al-Watan's* "independent" nature and his belief that the private media can "reflect the people's will" (Layalina 2006). Rabbu's robust presence in the English-language media has overshadowed the fact that Bashar al-Asad's cousin and prominent businessman Rami Makhlouf is the primary financial backer of the newspaper.⁸ Makhlouf is all but invisible in most media coverage (English and Arabic) of *al-Watan*, but it is undeniable that Makhlouf's standing as a close associate of the regime gives further credence to the oft-repeated observation that all privately-owned Syrian media are owned by staunch regime supporters.⁹

The ownership of Syria's private press outlets by individuals close to the regime is just one example of how the outlets' viability as a source of "independent" news is undermined, as are the previously-noted restrictions in Decree 50. Another factor is the existence of a system of official censorship and self-censorship that prevents reporters

⁷ This is not to say that there were not minor changes in media coverage. Shortly after coming to power, Bashar al-Asad requested that no fawning epithets be attached to his name in the media.

⁸ International Relations and Security Network, "Syria Squeezes Private Media," Mar. 5, 2009. <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=&lng=en&id=97255>

⁹ International Research & Exchanges Board, "Syria: Media Sustainability Index 2006/2007." http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_MENA/2006/MSIMENA06_syria.asp

and editors from crossing the tacit “red lines” in Syrian society. The subsequent content restrictions detract from the paper’s self-constructed identity as an “independent” media outlet. These observations beg the question: if the private media outlets do not represent a substantial departure from the official media and propagate the same types of restricted content, then what is the function of liberalized media ownership?

In this sense, it is the economic content of *al-Watan* that signifies how a private media outlet – under the guiding force of “red lines” and other regulatory mechanisms, yet financially “liberated” via advertising revenue and wealthy regime-friendly backers – can demonstrate its utility to the regime by providing a reiteration of its social-market economic policies all the while existing as a public embodiment of the regime’s willingness to embrace a marketized Syrian society. Simply put, *al-Watan* is a perfect vehicle for propagating the regime’s gradualist pro-market reforms in the public sphere. The paper can embody the current economic discourse changes in the Syrian public sphere by printing BMW advertisements on its front page alongside extensive articles praising a strong public sector in Syria. Among other things, *al-Watan*’s economic discourse could serve to normalize pro-market readings of the national economy while maintaining a discourse of socialist convictions to bolster the regime’s continued relevance in the economy.

This thesis will engage in a critical discourse analysis of *al-Watan*’s economic content in order to highlight the conceptual underpinnings of the private press in Syria as both a physical representation of an opening market and a discursive extension of the regime’s current social-market policies and past socialist economic discourses. The central

questions stemming from this are: how does *al-Watan* portray policies and ideas that are central to implementing the economic reforms currently underway in Syria? What are the implications of this discourse and how does it detract from or maintain unity with the official discourse?

CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY

This thesis will engage in a critical discourse analysis of a privately-owned Syrian newspaper's economic coverage.¹⁰ I argue that an analysis of *al-Watan*'s discursive constructions of economic issues will give insight into how the private press can be viewed as a tool for enforcing a public news discourse that encourages and embodies pro-market reform all the while mediating past regime socialist economic discourses. A collection of every article from *al-Watan*'s economic section from Jan 14, 2010 to March 1, 2010 serves as a basis for discourse analysis and the unique categorization schema outlined below.

Over 245 articles have been collected five days a week from *al-Watan*'s website. The primary units of analysis are the news article and the opinion article, yet other elements within the article such as the headline and the lead paragraph have played a role in devising organizational categories. Articles will be referred to individually in this thesis as well as cumulatively to exhibit wider trends. The online archive of *al-Watan* is a complete representation of all articles printed on a daily basis, yet the absence of access to the actual newspaper has put me at a disadvantage.¹¹ While the website archive displays any given day's articles for a week, they are afterwards relegated to an inscrutable search engine making daily collection a necessity. *Al-Watan* also offers

¹⁰ Foucault's method of discourse analysis has informed my reading of *al-Watan*'s content. By outlining discursive formations and positions, I seek to understand how they operate as a form of power in Syrian society. Every discursive object is indicative of a wider discourse and the private press in Syria is not an exception.

¹¹ For example, I have not been able to look at article placement or advertisements in the newspaper in order to determine priority. The website provides a PDF copy of *al-Watan*'s first page, but not the rest of the newspaper.

expanded online coverage through another website “Al-Watan Online,” but the articles examined for this thesis are solely those which appeared in the print edition.

Categorization of Articles

Initially, all articles were categorized by their central subject matter as indicated in the headline or lead paragraph. This process resulted in approximately 40 specific issue-based categories (transportation, tourism, export-business, etc.) that provided an overview of *al-Watan*’s coverage by subject. After detailed readings, the articles were meaningfully categorized into five thematic categories, which will provide the structure of this thesis. In brief, they are: Development, the Syrian Market, Agriculture and the *Felaheen*, the Public and Private Sectors, and the Common Good. Each category will be further defined in detail in their respective chapters, but cumulatively they provide the basis for analyzing the paper’s discursive formation of national economic policies.

These thematic categories have been devised based on two factors stemming from the contents of *al-Watan*’s economic section: 1) demonstrated relevance to development of the national economy and 2) revealed a complex reading or interpretation of the diverse features of a social-market economy. The first selection qualification required that the thematic category demonstrate its relevance through extensive and regular coverage in the newspaper. In order to be considered relevant at least 20 articles had to address this thematic category in depth and utilized repetitive terms and themes in explicating its relevance to the development of the national economy.

The second factor determining the inclusion of a thematic category necessitated that it reveal particular and unique views on features of a social-market economy. For

example, all of the thematic categories point to a body of articles within *al-Watan*'s economic coverage that discuss the topics in terms that justify and validate their place in a social-market economy, while other elements are excluded from a vision of this economy.

Structure-Based Analysis

In a content analysis of *al-Watan*, it is impossible to ignore the distinct structural and layout formats used in the articles. Specifically, extensive use of block quotes from certain officials and marginal placement of “opposing” views not in line with the regime, highlight the paper’s willingness to flatly regurgitate regime views with little editing or abridgement. I argue that these elements are relevant to a discourse analysis since, in essence, discourse consists of all material in a specifically-outlined body, irrespective of its origin (Andersen 2003, 6). Therefore, the block quotes from a Syrian minister, even though uttered outside the framework of the newspaper, exist within a discursive formation inside the newspaper.

Methodology Literature

Many of my practical and specific methodological approaches for deconstructing articles and editorials from *al-Watan* align with a wider body of literature that describes how to look at media and official texts as discourse and then analyze them as such. This section will focus on some of the key works in this literature that have informed my variety of approaches in discourse analysis.

One of the most influential ideas behind my reading of *al-Watan* texts is Foucault’s idea of disciplinary power as explicated in Lisa Wedeen’s *Ambiguities of*

Domination.¹² By looking to media discourse as a source of disciplinary power – especially in a restricted media environment such as Syria – we are able to examine how the narratives of regime officials as perpetuated in the private media “orient citizens by providing the guidelines for proper public articulation” (Wedeen 1999, 42). Not only does it orient citizens, but it also directs the discourse of numerous media outlets through various mechanisms. As mentioned in the structure-based analysis section, *al-Watan* often chooses to republish official statements in full as to avoid the risk of departing the realms of acceptability for public speech. Within the discourse, my goal is to extract and then analyze the dominant forms used to structure the acceptable speech. I do this by honing in on the previously-specified categories and determining the central narrative that constructs each theme. In this way the private media in Syria operate as a disciplinary power in the public sphere, by both regulating and serving as a model for proper speech.

The next key works that have informed this discourse analysis are Arturo Escobar’s deconstruction of development discourse in *Encountering Development* and Wolfgang Sachs’s *Development Dictionary*. While they do not focus wholly on media analysis, they present crucial tools for understanding the language of development in media sources. Since this thesis deals primarily with economic issues, it must be acknowledged that current economic ideas, especially in the “Third World,” are profoundly affected and framed by the discourse of development. Both Escobar and Sachs rightly view the Western views of development as dominating non-Western discourses and this idea is explored further through *al-Watan*’s texts.

¹² Foucault’s idea of Biopower or regulatory power also helped frame *al-Watan*’s discourse in Chapter 8.

There are other works more specific to media discourse that utilize different analytical tactics, yet many contain assumptions about the universal existence of liberal media structures, making their application in this case less useful. For example, Donald Matheson's *Media Discourses* constructs the media as a "shared world of a culture" from an entirely liberal perspective (Matheson 2005, 1). These assumptions behind the function of media do not assist in discourse analysis.

CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The two sections of this literature review will focus on separate, yet intertwined, subjects: the Syrian economy and the Syrian print press. Though the literature regarding these subjects are handled distinctly from one another, it is a goal of this thesis to demonstrate how combining information from these two fields can lead to unique understandings of the Syrian private media.

Literature Review: Syrian Economic Discourse

This section of the literature review will bring together the most recent and influential works on the Syrian economy that have contributed to a discussion of the following issues: economic discourse in the public sphere, Syria's ongoing transition to a market economy, and the concept of development as purveyed in Ba'thist discourse. Due to the large volume of literature on the Syrian economy, it has been necessary to focus on these issues that are most relevant to understanding the current state of discourse on the national economy in the private press.

Aurora Sottimano's article "Ideology and Discourse in the Era of Ba'thist Reforms" traces the evolution of Ba'thist discourse on the national economy from 1963 to 2009 through the use of documents from the party's national congresses. By using Foucaultian discourse analysis, she aims to draw the boundaries of acceptable economic discourse as determined by the Ba'th party at different periods in history. The overall goal is to analyze how economic discourse contributes to the enforcement of power relations in Syria (Sottimano 2009, 3).

Sottimano successfully conveys how the Ba'th sought to frame their economic policies in terms of socialist progress even when they bore the mark of capitalism. She outlines how after Hafez al-Asad's Correctionist Movement in 1970, the concept of class struggle was abandoned in the literature as a way of reflecting the government's new business alliances with the previously detested bourgeoisie. Volker Perthes's analysis of the same period in *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* also points to the "deepening" of socialist discourse despite further cooperation with the private sector (Perthes 1995, 49).

Even though the Ba'th party has been able to re-structure their discourse to suit their economic agendas, there is a disjuncture between the socialist-revolutionary nature of the discourse and the implementation of liberalization policies favorable to business interests. This chasm continues today even as the Ba'th discourse has slowly incorporated the language of the market economy into the public sphere. Yet with the symbolic and actual opening of the media market to private ownership, the regime has new outlets for its version of acceptable pro-market discourse. Samer Abboud's assessment of post-2000 discourse in "The Transition Paradigm and the Case of Syria" supports the idea of a regime unable to "publicly embrace capitalism" as it could possibly lead to the discrediting of decades of state planning (Abboud 2009, 11). For this reason, the term social-market economy is utilized in the official discourse as an intentionally vague bridge between socialism and capitalism.

In the above readings, we see how the autocratic nature of the Syrian government makes it tempting to portray Ba’thist discourse as the only extant discourse in the public sphere, but it is also valuable to acknowledge other (though certainly less dominant) entities competing for space in the public discourse and possibly having an effect on the direction of Ba’thist discourse. Kjetil Selvik addresses this by examining how official Ba’thist discourse is interpreted by an emerging entrepreneurial class in his article “It’s the Mentality Stupid.” By looking to this new class of entrepreneurs, his work gives us valuable insight on how this social strata is responding to the official discourse. Predictably, the entrepreneurs view the current privatization measures as slow and many push for a full embrace of capitalism. Selvik then posits that this base could “reinvigorate” the regime – making it clear that Selvik sympathizes with the business class goals and advocates economic liberalization (Selvik 2009, 65). Selvik’s pro-liberalization position is not rare in the literature and the complications stemming from this bias are addressed in the conclusion. Joseph Bahout’s study of this same entrepreneurial class in “The Syrian Business Community, its Politics and Prospects” is more useful in delineating the origins of this group and he also posits that the regime’s privatization efforts are mostly cosmetic since actual privatization could create a powerful bourgeoisie that could challenge regime power (Bahout 1994, 76). Bahout does not consider the possibility that market reform can actually be a mechanism of control for the regime.

These authors are on the mark with their surveys of Ba’thist discourse, yet it is Lisa Wedeen’s contribution to the understanding of Syrian discourse in *Ambiguities of*

Domination that adds depth to the discussion. Though Wedeen does not directly address economic discourse, her insights on how discourse communicates the power of the regime by “specify[ing] the parameters of the permissible, [and] communicating acceptable forms of speech and behavior to citizens” can be directly applied to the realm of the discourse of the national economy (Wedeen 1999, 45). Furthermore, she looks at how Syrians are able to replicate official discourse thus demonstrating how they become both subjects and purveyors of a discourse they may oppose. Wedeen’s framework is indispensable to an analysis of economic discourse in Syria. Unlike Selvik and Samir Abboud’s work that supposes a greater level of public debate on the economy and thus flexibility in the public discourse, Wedeen’s work, as well as Sottimano’s article, allows for flexibility in the discourse, but also demonstrates how the regime establishes the acceptable bounds of discourse and, whether intentional or not, citizens stay within the parameters or seek to subvert the discourse. Just like any other speech, economic speech is subject to restrictions.

Understanding changes in the official Ba’thist economic discourse over the past four decades is necessary to understanding the current state of Syrian economic discourse. In this thesis, the private press represents both an extension of the Ba’thist discourse – in that it does not violate the boundaries of acceptable speech – but also a manipulation of that discourse since the private press is a novel entity that could possibly embody and instigate the regime’s pro-market agenda. The works on economic discourse in Syria have laid the groundwork for studying the subtleties of current discourse and how individuals

and concepts once rejected by the state as detrimental to development have now been brought into the fold of permissible speech. My thesis will address the new complexities of public discourse after nearly a decade of rule under Bashar al-Asad and since the emergence of the first privately-owned, “independent” daily newspaper since 1963.

Syria’s Transition to a Market Economy and the Concept of Development

There is consensus in the literature that since 1970, the Syrian economy has been marked by several reform processes varying in scope and motive. Most often, these periods of adjustment are labeled as *infitahts* or “openings” and are characterized by increased privatization and a greater reliance on world markets (Perthes 1994, 45). As a state that has historically relied on and prized the public sector, any move toward privatization is viewed as a significant policy change that is in line with the state’s larger development goals. In the literature, there are multiple interpretations of Syria’s *infitahts* throughout history as well as precise characterizations of the state’s concept of development, which rhetorically encase such shifts. The summaries below will provide an overview of how the literature frames the workings of a Syrian *infitah*. Afterward, the conclusion will address the deficiencies of both the discussed literature and the literature excluded from this review.

Volker Perthes dedicates the entirety of *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* to understanding Syria’s “ongoing process of economic transformation” (Perthes 1995, 6). To Perthes, it is important that economic policy be viewed as explicit choices made by the regime as opposed to reactions to crises or external pressure. In other words,

the formulation of Syrian economic policy is foremost impacted by the country's political structures, economic interests, and social alliances (Perthes 1995, 8). In this way, Syria's economic history can be divided into two significant *infitahs*, one occurring from 1971-1977 and the next from 1983-1990. (Perthes was not able to address Bashar's *infitah*, as the book was written before his coming to power.) Perthes believes that both *infitahs* ushered in market-friendly policies that were perfectly compatible with the state's socialist-oriented concept of development, meaning that the government would remain committed to a robust public sector and only assign a limited role to the private sector (Perthes 1994, 48). Perthes does not probe too deeply into how the Syrian regime has conceptualized development, but he does state that under Hafez al-Asad, economic development in the form of fast-growth and industrialization was viewed as a means to achieve greater regional power and strategic dominance (Perthes 1994, 41).

Raymond Hinnebusch's article "Syria under the Ba'th: the Political Economy of Populist Authoritarianism" takes Perthes's analysis to another level by ascribing to the regime explicit political goals in undergoing periodic *infitahs*. At its core, the "populist-authoritarian" Syrian state embraces a "neo-mercantilist" system that "fosters economic development not just as an end in itself but as essential to the creation of state power" (Hinnebusch 2009, 10). By using the term neo-mercantilist, Hinnebusch rejects the Syrian regime's self-imposed label of a social-market economy and imposes a unique paradigm for understanding Syria's *infitahs* and development strategies. In his framework, an *infitah* can be used to appease threats to the regime's power posed by an emerging bourgeoisie

while simultaneously allowing the state bourgeoisie to expand its investments in the private sector (Hinnebusch 2009, 9 and 13). Hinnebusch agrees with Perthes that the private sector is subordinate to a dominant public sector, but Hinnebusch more clearly defines how the private sector is a valuable political tool aimed at aggregating power.

Samer Abboud's article "The Transition Paradigm and the Case of Syria" focuses on Bashar's *infatih* while echoing Perthes's assertion that internally-guided policy is the central factor in determining the direction of the *infatih*. The economic policies implemented since 2000 suggest that Bashar "has committed to initiating a structural transition away from a centrally planned to a market oriented economy" (Abboud 2009, 3). Unlike Hinnebusch, Abboud does not ask why Syria is undergoing this *infatih*, but instead looks at how Syria's *infatih* resembles a China-style gradualist transition marked by incremental steps toward a market economy while maintaining the existing power structure. In his discussion of Syria's public and private sectors, he maintains the dominant view in the literature that the public sector is crucial to Syria's socialist identity, thus making an open acceptance of capitalism impossible (Abboud 2009, 11). In this vein, he explains the regime's label of social-market economy as a way to "maintain coherency with [a socialist] pre-transition policy" (Abboud 2009, 8). Abboud's article denotes optimism about the change that Bashar's *infatih* will bring to the Syrian economy, a tone that is typical of many articles that equate marketization with economic progress.

Sylvia Polling's article "Investment Law No. 10: Which Future for the Private Sector?" shares a similarly optimistic tone as she looks at the trajectory of privatization

in Syria after the its implementation of a then-seminal investment law in 1991. Polling looks to external factors to provide the logic behind privatization – a stark contrast to Perthes’s and Hinnebusch’s insistence on internal planning providing the central impetus to privatize. Instead of looking to the historical patterns of Syrian privatization, she labels the current phase as a “haphazard liberalization program” (Polling 1994, 22). She then lauds the private sector as having introduced efficiency and profitability to the Syrian economy and encourages the Syrian government to “accelerate economic liberalization” (Polling 1994, 25).

Conclusion

The Syrian economy has inspired a field of studies that, though comprehensive and intelligent, is seemingly motivated by a larger quest to understand the country's supposed lack of economic “development.” This observation is not solely a reference to business reports that serve as investment guides for international financial organizations, but also to academic studies seeking a more complex reading of the Syrian economy. It is telling that in this literature review, there is not one work on the Syrian economy that has critically and comprehensively addressed the concept of development or the unbalanced nature of economic and power relations on a global scale. Hinnebusch briefly mentions that Syria is on the “periphery” of a global capitalist system and Perthes acknowledges that Syria’s economic reforms, though not directly overseen by the IMF or World Bank, essentially replicate their structural adjustment programs (Hinnebusch 2009, 5 and

Perthes 1994, 56). Yet both authors deny Syria's role in a complex process of globalization.

It is absurd to continue portraying the Syrian economy as an isolated entity not subject to the pressures and complexities of globalization. While it is true that Syria's economy cannot be compared to those economies afflicted by extensive World Bank intervention, it is not wise to relegate international intervention and development discourse to a minor role. A factor that perhaps compounds this shortcoming is that many of the authors equate privatization and a transition to a capitalist economy with progress and development while they view the public sector as impeding their undefined version of economic growth.

Despite these undeniable flaws, there are many works that, on some level, have sought to portray the Syrian economy from local perspectives while avoiding an external narrative of progress that portrays the economy as perpetually lagging behind developed Western economies. Furthermore, this literature has succeeded in proving the current transitional nature of Syria's economy and the government's underlying motives for the propagation of a social-market ideology. Many of these ideas establish a basis through which the economic coverage of *al-Watan* can be interpreted.

In this thesis, I will not isolate the Syrian economy from global systems and I will use this complex reading of an increasingly globalized Syrian economy in my discussions of discourse in the private press.

Literature Review: Syrian Media

Contemporary Syrian media, in most forms, receives little attention in studies of Arab media – the one exception being the Syrian *musalsel* or television drama series. Syrian news media from print, broadcast, and radio sources have garnered relatively small amounts of serious scholarship in studies of Arab media systems. Most often, the Syrian media are featured as valuable sources in larger works on the political economy of Syria and in turn have effectively been used to either give insight into the formal presentation of Syrian policy or provide an inlet into dissecting Ba’th ideology. There are specific reasons behind the near exclusion of Syria in Arab media studies, one being the sheer difficulty of conducting an open and thorough study of the media in Syria without confronting various obstacles inflicted by the government. Another reason is the country’s presumed lack of prestige as the hub of any dynamic media changes in the region.

Despite this lacuna in Arab media studies, a few works in Arabic and English have sought to understand the Syrian media from a multitude of perspectives and methodologies. The bulk of this literature focuses on the official state-run media since it is the dominant media form in Syria, yet certain works have attempted to address the re-emergence of the private press in 2001 and its supposed implications for Syrian media. With this in mind, the following review will focus on literature that has given substantial attention to constructing frameworks for understanding the role of both official and private print media in Syria. While many of these works fall short of creating a coherent typology for Arab media systems, several of their observations and conclusions on Syrian media proved useful in informing my research question on how the private press

discourse portrays issues pertinent to the Syrian national economy.

The Literature

William A. Rugh's efforts to create a typology of Arab media systems spans nearly three decades. His latest elaborations of this typology are his 2004 book *Arab Mass Media* and a 2007 article titled "Do National Political Systems Still Influence Arab Media?" in which he categorizes 18 countries, including Syria, into four media systems: mobilization, loyalist, diverse, and transitional. Before detailing how Syria fits into this framework, it is necessary to point out some gaping flaws underlying Rugh's analyses. At the onset, Rugh says that of the 18 countries "most of them share a single culture, language and religions, and their sense of a common destiny is very strong" (Rugh 2004, 2). Furthermore, Rugh uses the following quote from Edward Atiyeh¹³ in order to describe Arabs: "It is a characteristic of the Arab mind to be swayed more by words than by ideas and more by ideas than facts" (Rugh 2004, 19). Rugh's reliance on stereotypes of Arabs' inner thought processes and the supposed shared culture of 18 countries does not give confidence to the reader in his ability to assess Arab media outlets in a meaningful manner.

The core assertion of Rugh's work is that the nature of a country's political system is the key factor in determining the shape of the media. From this assumption, he places Syria in the "mobilization" media category along with Libya, Sudan, and pre-2003 Iraq. This category is characterized by an authoritarian system with no competing

¹³ Edward Atiyeh (1903-1964) was a Lebanese-British professor and statesman who is best known for his book *The Arabs*. Like Rugh, Atiyeh put forth many generalized and unsubstantiated claims about the "nature" of Arabs.

political parties or elections. While Rugh's analysis results in some accurate descriptions of the reality of the Syrian media, he often generalizes and makes unfounded comparisons between the countries in his "mobilization" category. For example, Sudan has active (though oppressed) domestic opposition parties – a stark contrast to the neutered party alliance of the Ba'th in Syria. How can Rugh's typology claim to accurately characterize media outlets when his assessment of political systems is often erroneous? Upon examination, most of Rugh's categories do not stand up to rigorous scrutiny, but he is correct in his most basic description of press behavior in Syria as avoiding criticism of the president and major policies.

In summary, Rugh seeks to portray the Syrian media as such: institutions overtaken by a revolutionary regime and then put to work as mobilization tools for a vanguard political agenda (Rugh 2004, 54). Nowhere does he discuss in detail the press reality outside of the regime's interpretation of the media's role in society or the possibility that the Syrian press is actually an extension of the regime as opposed to a distinct organization where an external will is imposed. Rugh's typology fails to provide a convincing framework for understanding Syrian media and possibly ignores differences between countries in order to produce a more convincing typology.

In *The Making of Arab News*, Noha Mellor provides a lengthy critique of Rugh, but is only able to demonstrate one of her key points with partial success. She argues that journalists, in the face of restrictive political systems, strive to adhere to their own professional standards thus lessening the influence of political regimes. While true to an

extent, Mellor does not explain her understanding of political power thus de-emphasizing how governments have been able to exercise a monopoly on public speech in the media (Wedeen 1999). Additionally, Mellor has no type of textual evidence to support her claims of journalistic professionalism and actually focuses most of her work on the pan-Arab press.

Mellor never addresses Syria directly and replicates Rugh's error of speaking too generally about the workings of the "Arab media" when it is doubtful that most Arab news sources can be grouped together in any meaningful way.

Instead, studies that have dealt with the Syrian media independent of generalizations about Arab media systems tend to bring more detailed readings of Syria's distinct media environment. Hassan Abbas's lecture cum article "The Reality of the Syrian Press" (in Arabic) forms a direct correlation between the rise of the Ba'th party in 1963 and the death of "civic press." Like Rugh, he puts precedence on the political system as a central factor in determining the nature of the country's media system. Yet unlike Rugh, he looks specifically at how a combination of restrictive laws and the imposition of Ba'thist political discourse in the public sphere have led to Syria's current media state. Abbas cites the March 8, 1963 proclamation in which the Ba'th party ordered a press freeze of all non-Ba'thist publications as a starting point to the elimination of diverse politics in society (Abbas 2007, 5). This constant pursuit of Ba'thist political and discursive hegemony in the public sphere led to the elimination of politics as a form of expression and as a result, the sole public discourse took on a

Ba'thist form (Abbas 2005, 7). Abbas's informed analysis proved useful in further exploring the connection between Ba'thist policy and the reality of the Syrian press today.

Other scholarly Arabic-language sources on the Syrian press do not afford the same attention to current times and instead heavily focus on the media under the Ottoman period, French Mandate, and essentially anything pre-1963. *The Syrian Media* from Samir Abdul Rahman is the one other available Arabic-language work that has focused on the most recent time period. Rahman's Damascus-published work seems to talk about the Syrian media without actually engaging Syria's political realities. Though there are oblique references to a closed press, Rahman believes the true crisis in the Syrian press is its waning readership due to the influx of other regional and pan-Arab sources. The rest of his work is a mild call for reform that does not seek to address the media from a political perspective. Rahman's analysis does not fit clearly into a larger discussion of the Syrian media, but his work represents a slightly critical call for reform that still respects Ba'thist restrictions on the press.

The most ambitious attempt to provide a comprehensive discursive overview of Syrian print media is Mordechai Kedar's *Asad in Search of Legitimacy*. While Kedar uses a wide breadth of source material from Syrian newspapers (and even includes the original Arabic text), his thesis that Hafez al-Asad "used the press as a tool for creating legitimacy for himself as president and for the systems he operated to implement his rule" is not adequate to explain the function and consequences of the Syrian press in society (Kedar

2005, xii). Kedar's thematic analysis of articles from the Syrian press is useful in understanding how the Ba'th sought to portray certain issues, but his repeated insistence that "legitimacy" was the end goal of all extant discourse in the Syrian press is complicated by Lisa Wedeen's re-conceptualization of Asad's popular cult and the Syrian media as "forms of power in their own right, helping to enforce obedience and sustain the conditions under which regimes rule" (Wedeen 1999, 5). Wedeen acknowledges that legitimacy may be a factor in some of the displays, but ultimately the regime does not need to seek out legitimacy in its rhetoric or symbols since it remains politically viable through compliance and other methods of enforcing its dominance in the public sphere.

Nonetheless, Kedar's work provides the only detailed look at press discourse in the first year of Bashar's rule as well as lengthy excerpts from the official media. Though he does not note any major changes in official media content under Bashar from 2000-2001, he concludes that Bashar's exposure to the British press during his time abroad influenced his views on media, thus paving the way for the legalization of the private press (Kedar 2005, 272). This is one of Kedar's many unsubstantiated claims and demonstrates how the author conceptualizes the newly-christened private press as a move toward a Western model of the press and possibly its freedoms. Not only does the private press represent a move toward a "modern" press system, but it has its origins in Bashar's personal vision of a future free press.

In this vein, most scholarly works on the Syrian media have yet to look critically at the emergence of the private press in Syria. Instead, simplified and unexamined assertions on how the private press sprung from a desire for media reform abound even

though there has been no textual or structural analysis of the private press to evidence such claims of gradual media reform.

For this reason, this thesis has introduced an alternative conception of the Syrian private media as extensions and embodiments of the regime's social-market economic policies. This conception has been bolstered by several discursive regimes that prioritize the privately-owned Syrian media as indicators of economic liberalization while completely sidestepping the fact that the private press is still legally subject to the same content restrictions as the official media. As Syria's privately-owned media outlets are given privileged positions as representations of the country's economic reforms, their content can be viewed as a discourse that serves to normalize an ongoing gradualist capitalist transformation of the economy while operating within the established Ba'thist socialist discourse.

CHAPTER 4 DEVELOPMENT

Al-Watan represents a unique space for the purveyance of a development discourse. As a privately-owned media outlet in a regime-defined “social-market” economy, it operates as both a symbol for Syria’s latest economic opening and a continuity with certain pre-2000 socialist ideals. It is unquestionable that, though *al-Watan*’s news coverage represents only a fragment of a larger Syrian discourse on economic development, it presents this discourse in many of its complexities. This chapter will provide an overview of how *al-Watan* shapes an expansive concept of “development” in its economic coverage.

In most discourses, there is an unmistakable “semantic confusion” surrounding the term development since it can be used as an umbrella term for numerous projects and phenomena (Sachs 1992, x). *Al-Watan* is no exception. Within the economic news discourse, the term development (*tanmiya*) is used with little restraint and often in conjunction with the common buzzwords and constructs of Western development discourses. As a result of such effusive use of the term, it has been possible to extract several readings of development in a Syrian context. The process of tracing a discourse of development in this chapter will frame the proceeding chapters of the thesis since the idea of development in all of its manifestations is the ubiquitous end goal of topics as diverse as agriculture and banking.

First, this chapter will elaborate on *al-Watan*’s construction of Syria’s placement on an international trajectory of development. Though this thesis does not adhere to the

construct of a development trajectory, the implicit presence of one in *al-Watan*'s coverage is undeniable. Next, this chapter will delineate how *al-Watan* creates an abstract and actual space for development by determining the limits and restrictions on who participates in development and what they can develop. By nature, discourses operate via exclusion of certain sectors of the population and the possible empowerment of others, but the specificities of the Syrian political situation have enforced a unique dynamic of exclusion in the development discourse of *al-Watan*. Finally, I will outline the discourse of proper solutions and paths toward economic development. This means determining what the discourse constructs as constraints and stimulants of development while at the same time constructing convincing measures of “progress” in development.

International Development Trajectory

Al-Watan discourse places Syria in the category of “developing countries” (*al-duwal al-namiyya*) as a way to highlight the country's lack of characteristics possessed by fully “developed” countries.¹⁴ These characteristics – ranging from efficiency and modern infrastructure to advanced telecommunications – are central in instilling a sense of underdevelopment or lack in the discourse. Syria's identity as “developing” is rarely highlighted through explicit mentions of the term, instead, it becomes apparent through a construction of relations with “developed” countries. In this simplified paradigm, development is discussed as some nebulous economic and social quality that Syria lacks, but other countries, such as Germany and France, possess.

¹⁴ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 9, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73701>

The sending of “expert” delegations from Western Europe to advise Syrian institutions and train Syrian employees signifies the transferring of Western development knowledge to Syria. (This knowledge almost always comes in the form of reform designed to liberalize Syrian economic structures.) The significant feature of this development knowledge transfer is that it takes place in the framework of partnership (*sharaka*) and cooperation (*ta’uun*) between the West and Syria – far from the past discursive representations of exploitative relationships in the colonial and immediate post-colonial eras. Even though Syria’s status as underdeveloped is acknowledged in the discourse, Syria is at times cast in the role of aid provider, as seen in coverage of the country’s donation of food and medical aid to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake.¹⁵

The overall effect is that Syria’s development, despite assistance from European experts, is framed as a distinctly Syrian-led project “free from external aid.” Paradoxically, the discourse broadcasts Syria’s need of external aid, but only in the form of partnerships and investment pacts.¹⁶ This relationship between European development knowledge and Syria’s constructed need of this knowledge is never hidden, yet the power dynamics inherent in this relationship – who possesses the knowledge and who receives it – must be recognized in order to understand Syria’s self-perception as “developing.”

To summarize, Syria’s status as a developing country in the discourse springs from a subjective self-placement on an international development scale where it is

¹⁵ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 21, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72529>

¹⁶ *Al-Watan*, Feb, 10, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73788>

juxtaposed with the developed West. In this discourse, Western development expertise is transferred to Syria via workshops and conferences whereby Syria is able to mold mechanisms of its economy in the images of Western efficiency. Ultimately, this unequal dynamic between developed and developing is present throughout most of *al-Watan's* entire development narrative.

Development Space

Al-Watan's content structures what I call a “development space,” meaning the abstract and actual space in which development takes place, as well as the individuals, institutions, and groups permitted to engage in development. *Al-Watan's* development space is created through the inclusion and exclusion of specific views on development in news and opinion articles as well as giving centrality to views that advance specific narratives of development. A clear portrait of the development space will provide the foundation on which the other discourses discussed in this thesis can be considered, but most of all the concept of development space will facilitate an understanding of discourse as a means of structuring the boundaries of permissible public speech on the topic of development.

Syria's public sphere has witnessed many dramatic shifts in the construction of development space. In 1963, a revolutionary Ba'thist discourse framed development as the purview of the state and several “progressive forces” such as the peasantry (*felaheen*) and workers (Sottimano 2009, 10). The actors in this development space called for the nationalization of industry and import substitution as a means of progress while

landowners were considered “backwards.” Under the leadership of Hafez al-Asad in the 1970s, the class-based interpretation of development ended and gave way to a view of development as a means to attain national security and promote solidarity in the face of Israeli aggression (Sottimano 2009, 18). This demonstrates that Syria’s development space shifts over time and *al-Watan* represents both a break and continuation with past development discourses.

Development Actors

Syrian government ministers lead the discourse on development. Out of 245 articles from *al-Watan*, at least half base their entire premise either on a minister’s speech or a report released by a government ministry. In this sense, government views not only dominate the discourse on development, but they also envelop the entirety of *al-Watan*’s economic coverage.

Regardless of the ministry, the development of the national economy is an important theme in government ministers’ statements. Ranging from ministers of tourism, oil, transportation, agriculture, and industry, each contributes to the discourse by seeking to demonstrate their respective sectors’ contribution to the overall development of the national economy or, more accurately, how their sector is in the process of undergoing development itself. Effectively, these ministers typify development from a state perspective, but their views represent the brand of economic reform in implementation since 2000 – meaning they can simultaneously promote privatization/open-market policies and a robust public sector all under the banner of a social-market economy.

Yet there is a hierarchy in place as to which ministers' views dominate the development discourse. While one might assume the Minister of the Economy Lamia 'Aasi would be given precedence in the coverage, it is actually the Deputy Finance Minister Abdullah Dardari who is allotted the most space in the economic coverage, especially coverage concerning economic development. In a brief comparison, 'Aasi is mentioned in 10 headlines while Dardari occupies 12. This seems to be an equal amount of coverage, but there is a crucial difference: when Dardari is mentioned in a headline, the entire article becomes his soapbox, while the 'Aasi headlines only indicate shorter finance-related briefs. In many ways, Dardari emblemizes the social-market economy in *al-Watan's* coverage, but perhaps with more emphasis on the market. He is heralded as a straight talker on the economy who has implemented sweeping changes and is portrayed as someone who is pushing forward true progress.¹⁷ As Dardari's views are further elaborated in proceeding chapters, it will become clear how his pro-market leanings drive much of *al-Watan's* economic coverage.

In comparison with Dardari's discussion of economic development on a national scale, lesser ministers tend to speak of economic development only in relation to their individual sectors. The ministers establish the parameters of development discourse by defining the obstacles to development and how their ministries will overcome these obstacles, yet the inclusion of government ministers in the discourse serves a more practical function: it allows for the publication of officially sanctioned views on

¹⁷ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 14, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73967>

development as to avoid overstepping boundaries of acceptable speech.

The next set of permitted development actors are Syrian businessmen and investors. Their role as the financial backers and movers of development is a cornerstone of a development discourse that privileges certain pro-market economic reforms. The businessman's importance to the viability of the national economy is expressed in an article titled "[Syrian Prime Minister] Mohammad Naji Atri Woos Syrian Businessmen" where Atri tells Syrian émigré businessmen, "You are the birds that have flown away and now it is time to come home after a long time away and strengthen the revivals in the Syrian national economy. Now, [we are] beginning to cut the fruits of development with the Five Year Plan and reap the benefits . . ." ¹⁸ Also emphasized is the Syrian businessman's potential to cultivate international ties and bolster Syria's international reputation.¹⁹ The Syrian businessman cum investor is a steady player in development, representing a discursive solidification of Syrian engagement with private interests and a growing discursive space in support of individuals profiting from the economic development process.

The first of the minor figures in the discourse are international financial organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF, the Arab Monetary Fund, and international investment banks. Each of these institutions interacts with Syrian

¹⁸ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 9, 2010 <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73705>

¹⁹ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 9, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73706> and *al-Watan*, Feb. 14, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73961>

development in different ways, but their discursive characterizations are largely positive and often connected with the potential of infrastructure modernization and opening to global markets.²⁰ Included in this category are the Western development “experts” that come in numerous forms. Whether it be private investors, NGOs, or companies, these actors play a significant role in shaping development views.

The last significant player in the discursive development space is possibly the most complex.²¹ It is the actors residing under the space of “civil society” (*mujtama’ ahli* or *qata’ ahli*). To many, the last traces of Syrian civil society were suppressed with Bashar al-Asad’s crackdown on the several politically-oriented forums that existed under the banner of the Damascus Spring movement in 2001. Yet, as demonstrated in *al-Watan* discourse, the Syrian government has attempted to recreate a tightly controlled civil society that operates under government auspices and without the participation of activists. One of the crucial steps in activating the concept of a new Syrian civil society in development discourse has been to introduce its tenets and new structures into the public discourse through conferences and the participation of sanctioned non-governmental development organizations.

²⁰ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 8, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73614> and *al-Watan*, Feb. 4, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73419> and *al-Watan*, Feb. 11, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73872>

²¹ While the ministerial and business views on development occupy over 100 articles, I want to briefly mention some minor actors in the development discourse. Syrian chambers of industry, trade, and agriculture are present in this discussion, as are industrialists and to a lesser extent, the peasantry (*felaheen*). Syrian economists and “economic experts” are at times asked to discuss the country’s development trajectory, but rarely in the same articles with ministerial views. Other Arab economists are also brought into the fold, but not very often. The presence of these perspectives pale in comparison to the main development actors mentioned in the text.

The January 2010 development conference titled “The Growing Role of Civil Society (*Mujtama’ Ahli*) in Development” received extensive front-page coverage over two days from *al-Watan*, even re-printing an entire speech from the conference’s primary “organizer” Syrian First Lady Asma al-Asad.²² Her presence at the conference is relevant in that it represents government approval of opening development to a newly-conceived civil society. The discourse stemming from this conference involves solidifying the positions of the sanctioned development actors (many of them discussed above) in civil society, as well as setting boundaries for permissible actions in this civil society so as not to present a challenge to governmental authority. The function of discourse as power is clearly elaborated in the development conference’s ability to define the parameters of acceptability in civil society through discursive mechanisms.

In order to oversee a civil society, one must be able to define it. The conference participants presented several interpretations of civil society, but the views of Asma al-Asad and co-coordinator Omar Abdul Aziz al-Hallaj of the Syria Trust for Development, are given precedence in the discourse.²³ Asad’s vision of civil society is one which would operate under a new law establishing civil society as the “third essential sector for development work” after the governmental and private sectors, since experience has proven that governments alone “lack the ability to confront [developmental] challenges

²² *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72621>

²³ Asma al-Asad is mentioned separately in two headlines while excerpts from her speech were put in the lead paragraphs and quoted the most extensively. Hallaj’s speech enjoyed similar attention, as did Abdullah Dardari. These facts are notable since the so-called keynote speaker of the conference, Lord Mark Brown, was barely mentioned in *al-Watan*’s coverage.

without widespread and organized societal participation.”²⁴ Most notably, Asad directly attributes the strengthening of Syrian civil society to government policy, which is perhaps counterintuitive in light of the government’s past restrictions on civil society.²⁵

Other participants presented different interpretations of civil society, many encouraging more attention to the phenomenon’s neglected political aspects. Dr. Ali Ghadir of the Arab Planning Institute in Kuwait noted, “Economic development in all of its meanings includes humans and political freedoms . . .”²⁶ In a similarly critical tone, a professor from Dubai was confounded by Syria’s interpretation of civil society considering that the country is the “last of the Arab countries to turn to it.”²⁷ This multiplicity of views demonstrates *al-Watan*’s ability to act as a space for competitive views on development, as long as these views operate within the permitted realms of speech. Some of the most definitive views on the meaning of civil society came from Deputy Finance Minister Dardari, who stated that civil society would function as a mediator between the state and the market since civil society is the only sector able to provide a level of “shared wealth in society.”²⁸

Syria’s political reality – a state of authoritarianism buttressed by the 1963 Emergency Law – does not permit politically oriented activity outside the official sphere of power. Quite literally, all manifestations of civil society are funneled through the state

²⁴ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72621>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72711>

²⁸ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72709>

through a process of permits and regulations designed to control any expression of popular will. Still, the regime discourse (with the help of *al-Watan*) insists on characterizing a new Syrian civil society as a third pillar of development that is separate from the government. In reality, Syria's political situation precludes any possibilities of civil activity in non-government regulated channels.

As a result, it is most likely that the activities and actors of the new Syrian civil society will be confined to several state-approved development organizations such as the Syria Trust for Development and the Agha Khan Development Network. In this continuing discourse of development space, political elements such as the Ba'th party are underscored, while human rights organizations and pro-democracy activists are excluded entirely. It should also be noted that Syria's one million Kurds who live without official citizenship do not factor into a discussion of Syrian civil society (Yildiz 2005, 8).

The Paths to Economic Development

In the discourse of *al-Watan*, there is no single path to economic development. Instead, we find an amalgamation of development goals from various sectors that offer their own solutions. Despite the disjointed nature of these plans, they include discursive links with the wider development goals of the national economy as outlined in the 10th Five Year Plan. The 10th Five Year Plan represents a central discursive blueprint for developments in the national economy according to a vision of a social-market economy. The plan allows for flexibility in the nature of development solutions. For example, some sectors advocate government support, others government withdrawal, but this is

indicative of the versatility of a Syrian economic discourse that promotes a social-market economy.

The 10th Five Year Plan incorporates ideas in favor of further privatization and marketization as well as strong support of the public sector. Therefore, when one looks at the characterizations of the 10th Five Year Plan and the reasons behind its so-called “failure,” one must recognize that this plan incorporates wide-ranging economic reforms geared toward the market and not just prescriptions for the public sector. It is this framework through which we can assess the discursive characterizations of the primary “constraints” and “stimulants” to economic development. The constructed constraints and stimulants to Syrian economic development are numerous, yet below is a synthesis of the most emphasized factors in the discourse and how they frame a discussion of how to develop the Syrian economy.

A constant factor cited in the failure of the 10th Five Year Plan is the drought in the East. Therefore, the element most to blame for lack of achieving development goals was something unforeseeable and uncontrollable.²⁹ The second key constraint to development is administrative inefficiency in implementation of the Five Year Plan.³⁰ This is one of the many human-related factors that impede development as well as a favored topic of columnists who assail the slowness and inefficiency of local bureaucracy. In one opinion piece titled “In the Bed of Bureaucracy” columnist Ali Hamra describes how

²⁹ *Al-Watan*, Jan 20, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72325> and *al-Watan*, Jan. 26, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72828>

³⁰ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 26, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72828>

incompetent local officials hamper investments with their mountains of paperwork.³¹ Hamra calls for the destruction of bureaucracy with a pick-axe. Deputy Finance Minister Dardari laments that this administrative inefficiency has contributed to Syria's lack of competitiveness in the global market, which in itself is a constraint to development.³²

According to the discourse, other factors slowing development are: unemployment, lack of technological expertise, weak investments, and lack of export capacity. These elements are normally attributed to the public sector while the private sector is heralded as a model of progress. It quickly becomes apparent that most moves toward a market economy are viewed as development progress while anything that stands in the way of this transition is viewed as emblematic of backwardness. Even though the public sector is still framed as essential to the development of the national economy privatization and open markets are consistently praised for their values of efficiency.

Any path to development must incorporate elements of the social-market economy as explicated in the government's Five Year Plan. For the most recent 10th Five Year Plan, pro-market moves such as investment, export strategies, and privatization are promoted alongside a public sector. The idea goes: if all sectors strategically adopt moves in line with the Five Year Plan, then this will in turn lead to national economic development, which will then facilitate social development. Deputy Finance Minister Dardari said, "Whoever calls for the obliteration of economic reform so that social

³¹ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 14, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=71934>

³² *Al-Watan*, Jan. 26, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72828> and *al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72709>

development can be realized, is like someone who wants to distribute a small cake – but it is not enough, you must have something to distribute.”³³

Growth

The prominent development actors in *al-Watan* go to great lengths to explain how development can be achieved and measured, but they also elaborate on how *not* to measure development. In this case, looking to “rates of growth” as the barometer of development is represented as an incorrect way to measure development. While the development actors verbally stress this idea, quantifiable growth is a hallmark of *al-Watan* economics coverage and obviously a significant factor in how development is interpreted.

The Minister of the Economy Lamia ‘Aasi said, “[B]alanced development is not to reach high levels of growth, but [it is meant to] reflect on the standard of living of the individual.”³⁴ An anonymous official in the Ministry of the Economy reiterated the sentiment and said, “Do not pay attention to numbers and rates of growth realized in Syria unless they reflect upon the lives of the citizens.”³⁵ The idea that rates of growth – unless they reflect on the individual citizens – are meaningless gives way to a “compassionate” view of economic development. Yet it also belies the fact that rates of growth are an essential feature of how levels of development are gauged both in *al-Watan* and regime discourse. If a sector is not experiencing quantifiable growth on some level then it is failing in the social-market framework.³⁶ Here are some story topics from *al-*

³³ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72709>

³⁴ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 8, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73611>

³⁵ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 10, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73786>

³⁶ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72709>

Watan that demonstrate how they frequently equate numeric growth with economic success: Lattakia port reports growth success in overall revenue³⁷; overall export growth increases³⁸; growth in investments in the Free Zone leads to overall economic growth³⁹; and even a generic “total economic growth” is reported for 2009.⁴⁰

This is but a small selection of articles that give substantial weight to “growth” as being indicative of success or progress. Not all of these examples of growth reflect on factors that affect the individual citizen, but nevertheless, they are reported as decisive indicators of development.

Conclusion

This chapter has helped to understand how development is not a neutral concept and can be used as justification for the perpetration of certain pro-market policies. The idea of development forms a central theme in this thesis since it provides a basis for much of *al-Watan*’s economic coverage. The following chapters will further explain how the discourse of *al-Watan* constructs key areas crucial to the forming of a social-market economy.

³⁷ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 1, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73115>

³⁸ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 8, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73611>

³⁹ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 26, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72836>

⁴⁰ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=74791>

CHAPTER 5 THE SYRIAN MARKET

The Syrian regime's discursive portrayals of the global market have undergone several transitions in the past several decades. The Ba'thist revolution of 1963 was characterized by open hostility to market relations with non-revolutionary states as well as full nationalization of industry and import substitution programs (Sottimano 2009, 10). When Hafez al-Asad's Correctionist Movement "cleansed" the Ba'thist system in 1970, a market-friendly program was adopted, but with tight regulations. During the 1990s, regime economic discourse appears to unabashedly support various market reforms and a public discussion of the "market" is commonplace (Sottimano 2009, 25). In the post-Hafez era, the pages of *al-Watan* show further mutations of a public discourse of the market.

The central factor that defines *al-Watan's* discursive construction of global and local markets is the regime's vision of a social-market economy – the tenets of which *al-Watan* does not deviate from. *Al-Watan* follows ministers from meeting to meeting, republishing or summarizing their official statements on Syria's relationship with a seemingly formless global market. At every turn, *al-Watan* echoes the regime's credo of a market economy, the crux of which is best summarized in a quote from the Minister of the Economy Lamia 'Aasi: "Syria is continuing to work on integrating and placing herself into . . . the world economy as well as strengthening competitiveness and productivity, all on the principles of the social-market economy."⁴¹ Furthermore, it is only through the global market that Syria can realize its proper place as "a bridge between Europe and the

⁴¹ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 8, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73611>

Arabian Gulf as well as between the West and the East, not only in issues of trade, but also culture . . .”⁴²

In other words, integration into the global market is a gradual process that will be facilitated through the ethos of a social-market economy.

Though *al-Watan* puts forth a largely favorable view of the global market’s potential to stimulate development, the paper also includes views from columnists and economists that express hesitation or unease about integration into a global economy. They view the market as a potential threat to the social welfare system and call for the adoption of a “market with a heart.”⁴³ Yet this line of thought should not be read as discord with the regime narrative of development via the social-market economy since state support in its various forms is still a fundamental component of the Syrian economic discourse. If the entire discourse advocated a full embrace of the market, the state would be in a curious position of re-asserting its relevancy to the economy in the midst of a liberalization drive. Therefore the discourse functions as a mechanism for demonstrating the positive role of the state in determining the shape of the market (as well as enforcing this version of the market when necessary) as opposed to expressing total support of a more uncertain global market beyond the state’s control. The following sections will elaborate on how *Al-Watan* provides a blueprint for the acceptable discourse of a market economy.

⁴² *Al-Watan*, Feb. 16, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=74181>

⁴³ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 18, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72131>

The “Regional” Global Market

The phrase “global financial crisis” is common in *al-Watan* economic discourse. Specifically, the global financial meltdown that became widely known in 2009 is portrayed as mostly external to the Syrian economy with effects from the crisis being felt in the shape of reduced investments and finance opportunities. The idea of the global financial crisis operates as a specter in *al-Watan*’s discussions of fully open markets, but it also functions as the pretext for strengthening regional economic ties primarily with other Arab countries and Turkey. In fact, the crisis is not only a pretext for strengthening regional ties, it is often the cause since the unsteady global market has in effect pushed countries to Syria’s stable market.⁴⁴

In the discourse, these regional economies represent a more steady base for Syria’s foray into an open market economy not just because of their proximity, but also because of deep-rooted “historical ties” and presupposed shared interests.⁴⁵ We can see how regional economies become a tangible representation of *al-Watan*’s alternative formation of a regional market in the face of the more unstable global market that is in the midst of a crisis. This restrictive view of the market and limited acceptance of who Syria will open her markets to is seen in her dealings with countries such as the Czech Republic and the Philippines who serve as models for Syria because of their “economic reforms and freedoms.”⁴⁶ In these discussions of economic cooperation with non-regional actors, the

⁴⁴ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72661>

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 17, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=74295>

crisis is not present in the discourse, choosing instead to focus on how Syrian products have found new markets for exportation as well as new sources that will provide Syria with technological expertise.

The market's identity waivers between secure and uncertain depending on the contexts illustrated above, yet what is less emphasized in the official statements is the effect of global imports on the local Syrian market. Before analyzing the discourse's look at the deleterious effects of globalization on the local market, it is necessary to understand the privileged paradigm of an export-oriented economy.

Turning the Local Market into an Export Market

As briefly mentioned above, *al-Watan* economic discourse promotes (at times, idealizes) the social-market vision of an export-oriented economy. Yet this vision of a bustling export economy cannot be realized without structural economic reform and monetary backing.⁴⁷ For this reason, the Arab Monetary Fund is looked to as the primary facilitator for Syria's transition to an export-oriented economy as it is explicitly represented in the discourse as an organization that will assist Syria in creating export development strategies.⁴⁸ By shifting the gears toward exports there are several implications for an economy that has prized itself on self-sustainability, yet these issues are invisible from this realm of discourse. Instead, we are to interpret further moves toward an export economy in specific sectors as being tantamount to developmental

⁴⁷ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 23, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=74734>

⁴⁸ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 4, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73419>

progress in the “interest of the nation” and the “interest of the self.”⁴⁹

It should be noted that not all sectors are subjected to the language of exports. While the private and public industrial sectors are encouraged to export goods, the agricultural sector is not openly constructed as an export-oriented sector.⁵⁰ These are complex constructs, but it suffices to say that an export-oriented industry is expected to wean itself from government support and enhance the quality of its products in order to compete on a global market. But it is when the discourse acknowledges the connection between an export-oriented economy and the concomitant necessity of opening local markets to certain global products, there develops a low-level friction between export fantasies and import realities. Yet this debate, as seen below, is played out within the acceptable parameters of a social-market economy discourse.

The Local Market and Global Competition

The discourse portrays the Syrian market as a space that countries are eager to penetrate.⁵¹ Not only is the geographical location a crossroads between the West and the East, but the Syrian populace’s demands for consumer goods is growing. The actual extent that foreign imports penetrate the Syrian market is never entered into the discourse, but there is a steady broadcasting of the attractive qualities of the Syrian market. Furthermore, the Syrian market is in the midst of an opening, which means the government is lessening restrictions on imports and, soon, there will be minimal

⁴⁹ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 1, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73108>

⁵⁰ See Chapter 6.

⁵¹ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72661>

restrictions. Yet alongside this discourse of import Shangri La is a parallel discourse from industrialists in the public sector that calls for more state support of industry and greater checks on imports. In a way, the function of the industrialist discourse in this debate strengthens the discursive foundations of a social-market economy by demonstrating a strong desire for government intervention on behalf of industry.

The industrialists claim that their products cannot compete with the imported goods in the local Syrian market nor in the global market therefore they request government price regulations and more controls on imports in a struggle to survive in the face of Syria's opening to global markets.⁵² The industrialists plea with the government to not abandon them in this time of uncertainty. The government's reaction to the demands for support of national industry is twofold. On the one hand, they assert the importance of national industry to economic development and state that a strong national industry is in the best interests of all parties.⁵³ Yet on the other hand, the government states that the industrialists are demanding too much financial assistance and have not taken the initiative to make their industries competitive. The Prime Minister Mohammad Naji al-Atri envisions a future where the public sector industry is strong, yet this vision will not be realized through constant intervention. Instead, the industrialists must improve the quality of their products through the recommended reforms in order to grab hold of the

⁵² *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72563> and *al-Watan*, Jan. 28, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72911> and *al-Watan*, Feb. 10, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73783>

⁵³ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72563>

local market.⁵⁴

This paradigm presents a market-minded government rejecting requests for support from what they see as a fully capable public industrial sector. This does not mean that the government does not acknowledge the difficulties faced by the public sector, yet it places the onus on the industrialists to adapt to the new system. The Minister of Industry Fouad ‘Aisi al-Jouni even suggested a marketing campaign for Syrian-made products in which the products would be placed in Syrian films and television dramas.⁵⁵ He insisted that the quality and pricing of national products is not the problem, but difficulties lie in insufficient marketing. Regardless of the perceived problems of national industry, the overlying message from the public sector industrialists is that the global market has unleashed forces that make it difficult to compete on a local, much less a global, scale.

The discourses of the government and the industrialists coexist and never reach a level of condemnation from either side. In an *al-Watan* column titled “Rescue Industry” the author frames the debate in the following way.⁵⁶ The industrialist position “claims that outside industries are encroaching on Syria from the borders” while the government maintains that “national industry needs to defend the local market.”⁵⁷ The columnist is sympathetic to the industrialists in that the “signs of the economic opening (*infatih*) are beginning to appear” as evidenced in the better pricing and quality of Turkish cookies to

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 8, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73616>

⁵⁶ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72561>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

locally-made cookies. This is a sorry state of affairs, the columnist laments, but he believes that “blame trading” needs to stop and the time has come to make agreements between industrialists and the government. In this way, the columnist recognizes that the source of the industrialist problem lies in the pro-market reforms, yet these difficulties can somehow be overcome through reaching agreements with the government.

This public series of exchanges between industrialists and the government represents the bifurcation of the market into mutually beneficial state-supported and market-regulated paradigms. These two paradigms represent the ideal dynamics between the state and the market in Syria’s brand of social-market economics: while the government takes on the role of encouraging industry to adjust itself to the free market, industrialists pronounce its need for continued government support. The government is crafting its discursive role in the social-market economy in which it supports national industry by encouraging the mechanisms of the market all the while industrialists perform the function of demonstrating continued desire for government intervention in the market. Both the industrialist and government demands create a discourse that permits the elaboration of a social-market economy and the government’s role in this economy.

Other Issues Related to the Syrian Market

The discussion of the Syrian market is highly integrated in the economic discourse. Discussions on issues such as inflation are discussed as expected hurdles of the marketization process, and though concern is expressed, the market’s ability to develop Syria is never questioned. At times, the government is called to assuage this economic

transition by continuing to subsidize certain products (such as heating oil) and by exerting stronger controls on the market. These discussions often illustrate the construct of a social-market economy by demonstrating the need for both economic liberalization and state support.

There is also regular coverage of the Syrian stock market, perhaps one of the most symbolic institutions in Syria's post-2000 economic opening. The descriptions of the newly christened stock exchange are characterized by companies' ups and downs as well as a standard listing of the market's cumulative value. Yet the discourse is somewhat critical of a Syrian stock exchange that that is not an "accurate reflection of Syrian economic activity."⁵⁸

These observations testify to the normalization of market discourse in *al-Watan*. At times, opening to the market as a reform measure is explicitly mentioned, yet other times it is just assumed. There is no element of the discourse that rejects Syria's move toward the market, even if there is acknowledgement of several adverse effects of the market on society. The unique characteristics of the social-market doctrine remedy the possible downfalls.

Yet there is an area of the Syrian economy that has escaped the discourse of the market since enveloping this sector with market jargon could detract from its essence as the backbone of the Syrian economic foundations. This area is agriculture and the next

⁵⁸ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 28, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=74962>

chapter will examine how certain views prohibit a discursive construction of Syrian agriculture as being fully subject to market forces.

CHAPTER 6 AGRICULTURE AND THE *FELAHEEN*

While the discourse of *al-Watan* creates a space in which most sectors of the Syrian economy – from transportation to industry – engage openly with the discourse of pro-market reforms, the discourse on the Syrian agriculture sector remains protected from the idea of the market and is instead framed as the state’s treasured domain. The discourse of the agricultural sector as an esteemed element of the public sector did not originate in the pages of *al-Watan* – it has had a durable presence and steady evolution in the public sphere at the hands of the Ba’th regime.

The 1963 Ba’thist takeover was in many ways an “agricultural revolution” by way of the party’s implementation of socialist land reforms (Sottimano 2009, 10). The Ba’thist government’s commitment to agricultural reform was portrayed in the public sphere as a state-led initiative that would enforce a new social order (Hinnebusch 2001, 115). These reforms drastically changed the social makeup of the agricultural sector in Syria and further gave precedence to the conception of a strong, state-run agriculture sector as fueling national economic development. Even with Hafez al-Asad’s Correctionist Movement in 1970 and his expulsion of “radical” elements of the Ba’th party, the characterization of the government as pursuing a “nationalist socialist line” persisted in spite of Hafez’s reestablishment of friendly relations with the land-owning classes (Hinnebusch 2001, 125). The socialist foundations of the agricultural sector were firmly embedded in the public discourse through the symbolically powerful actions of 1963 and 1970.

Interpreting the agricultural sector through the lens of the free market would be tantamount to abandoning key elements of the regime's discursive continuity. As private media actors such as *al-Watan* are incorporated into the public sphere, they are careful not to rupture the previously conceived images of the agricultural sector, even as they promote pro-market reforms in other contexts. *Al-Watan* yet again structures its coverage within the confines of the regime discourse through either the direct reiteration of ministerial press statements or the verbatim reprinting of speeches from official meetings. While this formula varies at times to include the views of economists and anonymous citizens, it is a way of reproducing the regime discourse with only minor variations.

The Felaheen

The *felaheen*, or peasants, are crucial to *al-Watan*'s discursive construction of the agricultural sector. According to Hanna Batatu, "There is no such general category as 'peasants'" since they are representative of many levels of income, social status, and trade (Batatu 1999, 10). But *al-Watan* glosses over any complexity of the term and the *felaheen* operate on a singular plane of amicable relations with the state under the credo of development in the social-market economy. The constant expression of good will from the government toward the *felaheen* is a fixture of nearly every mention of the *felaheen*, as is the government's willingness to "support" the *felaheen* both financially and socially. The *felaheen* are seen, in essence, as those who work the land and contribute to agricultural development, yet their inclusion in the discourse is also a link to Syria's "agricultural revolution" of times past since the *felaheen* embodied this revolutionary change.

As mentioned above, the Ba’th party not only implemented major land reforms, but they also vested large amounts of power to the *felaheen* as a way to broaden their base and consolidate support in the rural areas (Hinnebusch 2001, 125). The day of the March Revolution in 1963, Ba’th leaders caravanned groups of *felaheen* to the city who then “flooded the streets with banners and militant chants to render a sense of legitimacy to the regime and intimidate urban enemies” (Hinnebusch 2001, 53). Furthermore, the Ba’th party’s ranks from 1963 through the 1970s were composed of *felaheen* from different economic backgrounds thus lending further political caché to this sector of the population (Batatu 1999, 218). While the political influence of the *felaheen* has indubitably rescinded since past decades, their discursive presence remains a powerful link with a socialist agricultural policy that can be viewed as one of the foundations of the modern Syrian state.⁵⁹

Since the *felaheen* are still a relevant symbol in the agricultural discourse, they are juxtaposed with discussions of state agricultural policy in the rural areas of Syria, predominantly Eastern Syria. The Minister of Agriculture Dr. ‘Adil Safar asserts the Syrian government’s commitment to both agriculture and the *felaheen* in a meeting in Hassekeh:

There is agreement from all that the agricultural sector is a very important public sector within the Syrian economy. This sector is supported from all fronts and now we will continue in that support, as we made clear to our brotherly participants, especially the *felaheen*, that the government will spare no efforts in giving this support . . . so we have made several decisions in the interests of our *felaheen* brothers.

⁵⁹ The symbolism and importance of the *felaheen* in Syria goes as far back as the Ottoman era when they were portrayed as symbols of resistance to Ottoman control (Batatu 1999, 110).

In the discourse, it would be unheard of to issue any decision that would counteract the image of full government support for the *felaheen*. Therefore even if the *felaheen* are not prominent actors in the narrative of development, they represent ties with a socialist past that privileged a form of state support for “the people.”

This discourse of *felaheen*-state cooperation can also extend to Arab states that discursively embody a close relationship with the *felaheen*, such as Saudi Arabia. In *al-Watan*'s coverage of the signing of an agricultural investment contract between Syria and Saudi Arabia, the exchange is rooted in the language of shared histories via a profound respect for the *felaheen*. The Saudi Ambassador to Syria said that the Saudi government wants to provide “the necessary supplies to deepen the connection of the *felaheen* to their land and continue optimal agricultural operations, especially in the East.”⁶⁰ This trade deal is no longer just a trade deal, but now it is a move that strengthens the *felaheen*'s ties to their land. This discursive maneuver permits the selective opening of the Syrian agricultural sector to outsiders who have demonstrated their connections to the *felaheen*.

The most succinct elaboration of the state's connection to the *felaheen* is the printing of a “Congratulations” notice to the government from the staff of *al-Watan*:

Congratulations! The government will remain in control of the public sector and it is the role of the state to protect the rights of workers and the *felaheen*, and defend them. Here, we do not wish but to congratulate the public sector, the workers, and *felaheen* and the role of the state and we say to them all together: congratulations to you, and may the next five years permit the same.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 3, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73315>

⁶¹ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 2, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73240>

The Development of the Agricultural Sector: From Traditional to Modern

The importance of bestowing a public sector identity upon the agricultural sector can hardly be overstated, yet a lesser part of *al-Watan*'s discourse encourages non-state solutions and finance opportunities to stimulate the development of the agricultural sector.

Like most sectors of the Syrian economy, the agricultural sector is portrayed as being in a state of underdevelopment. In this case, even the *felaheen* and their government counterparts cannot overcome all the development challenges faced by the agricultural sector, therefore other acceptable development participants and strategies must be identified while maintaining cohesion with the state-support narrative.⁶²

The central obstacle to agricultural development is phrased as a lack of modernity.⁶³ The discourse elaborates that while the government has exerted tireless efforts to push the sector forward, there is a need for reform that would modernize agriculture production and marketization methods. Specifically, the call to modernize is referenced in relation to irrigation methods and other technologies. While the discourse does not push for total exposure to open markets, it opens the door to outside investors to fund large-scale infrastructure projects through loans. Yet this is the discursive limit for outside involvement in Syrian agriculture.

⁶² *Al-Watan*, Jan 21, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72431>

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Indeed, exposing the agricultural sector to the market is portrayed as an “unjust” move since the sector is clearly in need of a “caring state” to further development.⁶⁴ One separate reason for such strong calls for state support is the widely discussed drought in the East that has caused the migration of thousands. The discourse calls on state intervention to alleviate the people’s suffering and to prevent the *felaheen* from abandoning their land. In this context, declining rates of agricultural growth are a source of concern for the government, as is food security. The drought has brought both issues to the forefront and while outside investment is encouraged, the discourse prioritizes the state role in attending to the drought.

Declining agricultural production also takes on a new level of graveness since the East is often considered “the most important productive region” in Syria.⁶⁵ Since the East is in a period of decline and the *felaheen* are migrating from the countryside to urban areas, one would expect a tone of crisis in the coverage, but instead, there are only heightened calls for government action.

Privileging the Public Sphere

This chapter has demonstrated that *al-Watan* discourse is fully capable of promoting the “social” aspect of the social-market economy. The lack of critiques of government agricultural intervention and the consistent support for the *felaheen* speak volumes on how the newspaper not only remains within the confines of acceptable speech, but it has internalized certain state narratives. This becomes even more apparent

⁶⁴ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 3, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73316>

⁶⁵ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 27, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72828>

in the next chapter, which discusses in detail the discursive constructions of the public and private sectors in Syria.

CHAPTER 7 THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

The distinction between the public and private sectors is an important dichotomy in the discourse of *al-Watan*. Not only is the newspaper's status as a private sector entity necessary to bolster its claims of journalistic "independence," but it is also used as a way to draw clear lines between itself and the public sector media. *Al-Watan*'s coverage has highlighted how its reporters were denied access to government meetings while their official counterparts at SANA were given full access.⁶⁶ Other times, the paper's coverage features quotes from prominent figures (both governmental and non-governmental) chastising private media outlets for their judgmental reporting while praising the public media's responsibility to the people.⁶⁷ The effect of the latter tactic is to enhance the credibility of the private media by suggesting that it is willing to endure censure at the hands of the powerful in order to serve the public good.

Al-Watan's efforts to create a distinction between itself and the public sector media are apparent, but how does this public-private dichotomy extend to other areas of the Syrian economy? As demonstrated in the previous chapters, *al-Watan*'s nature as a privately-owned entity has not guaranteed critical coverage of the public sector nor glowing coverage of the private sector. In fact, it has not generated much critical coverage at all and instead provides a space for championing the benefits of both the public sector and the private sector. *Al-Watan* promotes a discourse of "harmony" between the public

⁶⁶ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72663>

⁶⁷ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 31, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73017>

and private sectors where the ideal model of economic cooperation is when the two unite to form partnerships in various fields. Yet even within this idealized depiction of partnership, there are complexities to this framing and both sectors are still represented as distinct entities with their own deficiencies that serve different functions in society.

While this partnership ideal finds its origins in the regime discourse of both past and present, the regime and *al-Watan* discourses also align in their strong support for a public sector. In the 1970s, the Ba’th party had made the public sector the “core of the economy” and the discourse proceeded to emphasize this role (Hinnebusch 2001, 125). With the beginnings of economic liberalization in the early 1990s and a strengthening of the role of the private sector, a new discursive importance was vested in this sector without detracting from the strategic importance of the public sector (Hinnebusch 2001, 133). In a 1993 interview Hafez al-Assad said, “In our planning, we proceeded on the basis that no one sector could of itself meet the people’s needs. Taken individually, no single sector could stimulate the required development . . . a single economic sector cannot mobilize the entire potential of a country” (Seale 1993, 118-19). The idea of a partnership between the public and private sectors as a path toward “complete” economic development was becoming increasingly important.

This chapter will discuss the complexities of the public-private sector dichotomy outlined above and demonstrate how *al-Watan* uses the regime discourse to nourish this framework. In the process, we will understand how *al-Watan* conceptualizes the ties between the two sectors and engages in limited criticisms of the public sector.

The Public Sector as Inefficient Duty

The label of public sector applies to a diverse range of government offices, industries, schools, and even theaters. As an umbrella term, the public sector refers to any entity directly run by employees of the state that also receives the majority of its operating funds from the state. These areas of the public sector also have places in the discourse as historical realms of state control. In relation to the economic discourse of *al-Watan*, the coverage focuses on the areas of the public sector that can be interpreted through the lens of economic growth or government spending.

The public sector in its multiple forms is a steady feature in *al-Watan*'s discourse. On a fundamental level, the discourse portrays the public sector as a much-needed presence in both the economic and social realms of Syria. (This message was broadcast succinctly by *al-Watan* in its "Congratulations" message to the public sector, as noted in Chapter 6.) Yet with further reading, the complexities of a discourse on the public sector in a private sector newspaper emerge as several features of the public sector are highlighted as inefficient, corrupt, and a drag on development initiatives. This critical discourse is not unique to the private press and ever since the 1990s criticisms of public sector ineptitude have been commonplace in the public sphere, but *al-Watan*'s discourse occupies a unique spot as it blends views from both its own columnists and government officials.

Without a doubt, the public sector is a crucial component leading the country toward "complete development," yet the sector's potential has not been reached due to

inefficiency in its cadre of bureaucrats. While Deputy Finance Minister Dardari decried this inefficiency in his speech at the International Development Conference in January 2010, *al-Watan* columnists frequently elaborate on this public sector incompetence. In Ali Hamra's column titled "Corrupted Morals" (a reference to the publicly-run Central Bank's recent debacle with corrupted currency), he writes that the public sector is at the heart of the ineptitude of the Syrian economic sphere.⁶⁸ He expresses this with a metaphor, "The cost of fixing your car in the public sector year after year might add up to more than the car's original value." This suggests that the public sector is not capable of implementing government reform plans or contributing to economic progress because everything it touches regresses and becomes irreparable. According to Hamra, the root of the public sector's problem is its corrupted morals in the form of administrative inefficiency. Even though the system may be broken, he believes that it can be fixed through intense government overhauls.

Intense criticism of the public sector is always accompanied by a final assertion of confidence in the ability of government reforms to ultimately overcome these difficulties. This necessary caveat lends credence to Aurora Sottimano's claim that the public sector represents a powerful signifier in Ba'thist discourse and that "questioning its role would have endangered the whole edifice of Ba'thism" since its disciplinary power was/is based on such structures (Sottimano 2009, 20). This disciplinary power is both reflected and internalized in *al-Watan*'s portrayal of the public sector.

⁶⁸ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 4, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73421>

The Private Sector as Efficient Progress

Al-Watan offers an economic history of Syria where the private sector, just like its public counterpart, is an integral part to the development of Syria.⁶⁹ With its demonstrated dedication to the goals of the national economy, the private sector has proven itself to be in harmony with the mission of the public sector. This conceptual fusion of the private and public led one Syrian private business owner to declare, “The private sector is a national sector.”⁷⁰ While the identities of the two sectors are melded on the level of national interest and development, they are stratified in the portrayal of their central qualities.

To the detriment of the public sector, the private sector is commended for its exceptional administrative skills and encouraged to assist in training the public sector.⁷¹ This more advanced skill level is attributed to the private sector’s close relationships and partnerships with European companies that have engaged in knowledge transfers and workshops – something not often offered to the public sector.⁷² In turn, the skill edge possessed by the private sector has made this sector more attractive to outside investors looking to profit from Syria’s burgeoning market. Yet the private sector activities are limited to “light” industry such as tourism, while “heavy” industry is dominated by the public sector. Even so, the private sector is represented as a robust force in both investing

⁶⁹ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 10, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73788>

⁷⁰ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72714>

⁷¹ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 4, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73420>

⁷² *Al-Watan*, Feb. 8, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73614>

and receiving investments, but at times, government assistance is what propels private sector activity.⁷³

With the release of the 2010 government budget, *al-Watan* devoted several articles to gauging the opinions of economists and economics students at the University of Damascus on the pros and cons of the budget.⁷⁴ Several of them said that the government had decreased investment in the public sector, meaning greater focus on the private sector. All considered this a positive move and believed the rise of the private sector in Syria was synonymous with a better way of life for most Syrians – except for the “poorest classes” who would still require a strong public sector to take care of their needs.

The looming authorities in Syria’s growing private sector economy are expert delegations from the World Bank and IMF. These two organizations are constructed as a positive force for development in *al-Watan* perhaps because of their staunch support of the private sector. Still, the views of the IMF and World Bank in relation to the public sector are never fully explicated and their voices are only brought in to demonstrate the growth potential of privatization measures and how the public sector can take on private sector attributes in order to contribute to the development of the national economy. For example, the World Bank is seen giving support to the public sector with infrastructural loans to the transportation ministry. On the other hand, the IMF gives advice to public banks on how to adjust their currency to favorable market rates while simultaneously

⁷³ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 4, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73418>

⁷⁴ *Al-Watan*, Jan, 18, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72151>

encouraging a “leading role” for the private sector in infrastructure building.⁷⁵ Even though both organizations have actively worked to eliminate public sectors in the past, their role in the discourse takes on a milder form that is both friend to the prized Syrian public sector, but also a strong proponent of privatization.

With *al-Watan* frequently praising the development advantages of the private sector and harshly criticizing the inefficiency of the public sector, how is it possible that a discourse of “harmony” emerges from this framework? By presenting the contrasts of the public and private sectors, the discourse gives rise to the ethos that the “government cannot do development alone” and therefore willingly engages with the private sector in the best interest of the citizen.

Partnership Harmony

Partnership (*nidham al-tasharikiyya*) between the private and public sectors is not just a discursive structure in *al-Watan*, it is also a business structure codified in Syrian law and an ideological structure in regime discourse. *Al-Watan* discourse on this partnership remains stolidly within a regime discourse by printing articles from the government-run news agency SANA, as well as extensively rehashing ministerial quotes. This serves the effect of reinforcing a state narrative of idealistic partnership between the two sectors.

A SANA article printed in *al-Watan* presents a clear idea on how this partnership

⁷⁵ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 11, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73872>

should appear in the discourse through its use of key terms and emphasis on certain elements of the partnership.⁷⁶ The setting for the article is a partnership workshop sponsored by the Finance Ministry and attended by members of the public and private sectors who were encouraged to discuss why partnering is necessary. The article is formulaic in its listing of benefits provided by the partnership: shared financial risk, benefit from private sector expertise, and modernization of methods. Yet there is an overarching vision of how the “unity” of the two sectors will create a “wider infrastructure base” and this will in turn lead to “increased rates of growth and the [bringing] of wealth to the economy.” It is also possible that this partnership could alleviate some of the obstacles presented by “rushed development” – perhaps a reference to the partial opening of Syria’s markets to global competition.

Yet with this confident outlook for public-private partnership, the government role must be reaffirmed. The Finance Minister Dr. Mohammad Husayn perhaps overemphasizes this point: “The government is seriously interested in the issue of participation between the public and private sectors, without this meaning a rescinding of the state’s role or spending. The role of participation will compliment the state’s budget . . . and not serve as a replacement for it. The government will not abolish its role or responsibilities.”⁷⁷

Other articles from *al-Watan* strengthen this frame of both an active government and private sector role – making sure that the partnership is praised without de-

⁷⁶ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72714>

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

emphasizing the importance of government involvement. Underlying the partnership framework is the idea that the government exists to play a positive role in the Syrian citizen's life, especially the least fortunate of Syrians. This idea is often expressed in terms of the "common good" and will be elucidated in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8 POVERTY AND THE COMMON GOOD

It is no longer acceptable for a public discourse of economics to exist purely in the realm of GDP growth, market indices, and investment rates. In the era of a global development discourse, economics must address how constructed (and actual) social problems can be solved or eradicated through mechanisms of the economy (Escobar 1995, 23). Economic discourse in *al-Watan* follows a course similar to that of the global development discourse by constructing social problems and then proffering their solutions in economic planning. Poverty, as a general term, is one of the most common social issues addressed by *al-Watan*, and this chapter will discuss how it is conceptualized in the economic discourse.

There is no denying that poverty exists and that many humans suffer in its deplorable conditions. Yet this does not preclude poverty's existence as a construct in economic discourses that serves to solidify specific ideas about its causes, solutions, and most of all, its subjects – the poor. This type of discourse often excludes discussions of the social, historical, and economic contexts of poverty thus producing a homogenizing effect that erases all the specificities of individual poverty and leads to the creation of a poverty phenomenon that can be manipulated to serve the interests of proponents of various economic policies. In the case of *al-Watan*, the constructs of poverty and the poor classes exist in a complex web of a social-market economy that simultaneously seeks to solidify the role of the state as the protector of the poor and also implement pro-market policies that would possibly integrate the poor into a global market.

Biopower and Biopolitics

Yet *al-Watan*'s discourse of poverty has implications greater than the homogenization of a complex situation, it also serves to reveal the methods through which the Syrian government is seeking to assert a type of regulatory control over its population through the systematic constructions of social categories based on "biological" characteristics. This, of course, is a reference to Foucault's concept of biopower/biopolitics, which is useful in that it provides a framework for analyzing how discourse underlies government efforts to regulate societies by "bring[ing] together . . . mass characteristics of a population" into a system of knowledge (Foucault 2003, 249).

The Syrian system of biopower is not full-fledged since the state's actual capacity to accumulate accurate data about its population, such as birth rates, has definitely not been fully realized (an observation made frequently in the pages of *al-Watan*). But even though the state lacks the capacity to systematize knowledge about its population, it still employs social categories in the public discourse as a way to manage and regulate ideas about the social makeup of Syria. Furthermore, *al-Watan* plays a role in enforcing this regulatory power by using social categories to demonstrate how certain sectors of the population are underdeveloped and must submit to (or be incorporated in) the state's vision of development or else they will be viewed as an economic group external to the social order and not receive benefits.

In this case, the social categories discussed are limited to those defined explicitly by *al-Watan* and those defined by their relationship to monetary wealth. Social class is

phrased in multiple ways in *al-Watan*; for example, poor classes are labeled as “poor,” “the weaker class,” or “marginalized groups.” These terms represent a new dynamic in Syrian public discourse since the days of Ba’thist class war rhetoric faded out with economic liberalization in the 1970s. Instead, social class is more of a regulatory mechanism that determines how constructed population groups are viewed by the state and in what capacity they are able to interact with the state.

Marginalization of the Poor Through the Concept of the Common Good

I argue that *al-Watan*’s economic discourse effectively marginalizes the “poor classes” of Syria through its usage of the concept of the “common good.” Within the texts of *al-Watan*, we read how economic plans are heralded as benefiting the “common good” with the “interests of the majority in mind.” This is a near ubiquitous sentiment from various development actors. Upon initial reading, the common good seems to refer to an idea of providing mass benefits to the entire population of Syria without distinction between social classes. In other words, whatever policy benefits the majority and serves the common good is the best policy for the nation.

Yet these terms become problematic when we ask, what sectors of the population actually represent the “majority” in the discourse and who will benefit from plans implemented in the name of the “common good”? The discourse makes it clear that the poor classes of Syria are a distinct sector of the population and by no means a majority. In fact, as this chapter will show, the poor are isolated from society in the discourse on account of their poverty that necessitates special attention. In this case, we see that the

common good cannot represent the poor classes; instead, the common good is a reference to the middle class or wealthier sectors of society since the poor are dealt with in a separate discourse.

This differentiation between the common good and the poor classes of Syria highlights how poor people exist in a discursive realm separate from the normalized realm of Syrian society presented in the discourse. By treating the poor as an entirely separate population with certain development needs, it allows them to be treated as bodies to be regulated through the implementation of various economic plans. The discourse has the effect of justifying the different regulatory mechanisms in the form of economic reforms used to facilitate the poor classes' integration into the acceptable (and economically beneficial) realm of Syrian society. Yet until they are integrated into the productive world of middle class Syria, they will be segregated through certain discursive mechanisms.

Discourse of Isolation, Regulation, and Integration

The headline for an article on a UN-Syrian development pact is “Plan to Organize the Poor Sector!!”⁷⁸ This refers to the signing of a development plan titled “Legal Empowerment for the Poor and Organization of the Informal Sector” that will “encourage small traders in the informal sector to join the formal sector where they can be subject to laws that will facilitate economic activity and raise [their] standard of living . . .” The small traders referenced are most likely the individuals who sell goods on the streets of

⁷⁸ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 4, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73417>

Syrian towns and exist without any formal government regulation (except in confrontations with the police). This UN-Syrian plan is an attempt to actually integrate the traders (or the “poor” as the headline and pact note) into a system where they will be subject to government regulation. This article represents a clear framework through which the poor exist outside of government regulation and the government – for the proclaimed benefit of the poor population – seeks to bring them in the fold. We see how the discourse shows the poor to exist quite literally as a separate population by virtue of their non-participation in the economic laws of the state as well as their underdeveloped nature.

The article elaborates on the acute underdevelopment of central Syria as the factor that has led to the implementation of a “special legal system” that will facilitate development of this area. This system will assist in preparing local markets to the opening of the economy to global markets, but furthermore it will “improve the standard of living” in the region. The poor population addressed in this article probably have little in common except their shared poverty in the discourse, yet the article utilizes “poor” as both the identifying label for this population and also the problem in need of solving. In the discourse, the problem is constructed as underdevelopment and poverty, yet is it possible that the true problem is the government’s inability to regulate the “poor” of society? Indeed, the discourse demonstrates that alleviation of poverty is actually a means to integrate the poor into a network of government control.

Deputy Finance Minister Abdullah Dardari said that Syria’s 11th Five Year Plan

will have two definitive goals: alleviating poverty and building a competitive economy.⁷⁹ While the tandem goals of developing a competitive economy and alleviating poverty might seem at odds, it is appropriate since the market can often serve as a regulating force of populations, especially those defined as poor (Burawoy 1979). Dardari goes on to define the poor as “those who cannot obtain health services with their own money, and those who cannot obtain education with their own finances.”⁸⁰ In other words, the poor classes are in a state of need and the government is the primary fulfiller of those needs. In time, it is possible that a “competitive” economy will fulfill the needs of the poor. Until then, Dardari says, the market is only a portion of the solution to poverty, but it must work in coordination with the state. This certainly affirms the vision of a social-market society, but it also further embeds the identity of poor Syrians in a network of government support.

The article elaborates on the rest of the upcoming 11th Five Year Plan, but poverty is mentioned only briefly – despite it being a “main” goal of the plan – with the other parts of the plan not expressing openly any “solution” to poverty. In this sense, we observe how poverty exists as an isolated phenomenon in the discourse to be dealt with as a separate issue from run-of-the-mill economic reforms. It is a paradox that poverty’s incorporation into a discourse of economic reform could actually lead to the enforcing of a separate identity as “poor” and thus further marginalization within that discourse. Until

⁷⁹ *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72709>

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the poor adopt the economic behavior of middle class citizens, then they will remain on the margins.

One way in which the poor are encouraged to participate in acceptable economic arenas is through microfinance. In the discourse, giving small loans to poor Syrian families will both assist their transition from poor to middle class and integrate them into a fruitful economic system. A headline in *al-Watan* declares that at least 260,000 Syrian families “need” small loans for their economic plans, while another headline declares, “1.2 Million Families Benefit from Small Loans.”⁸¹ The small loan programs embody the key elements of regulation and integration of poor families into a system of state and economic control. The Agha Khan Development Network and other locally-run NGOs play a role in advocating microfinance as a way to increase the poor’s “standard of living.”⁸² Yet these organizations are keen to mention that their role in development is in no way a substitution for the government role.⁸³ The perpetual insistence that the government role in alleviating poverty trumps all other roles enforces the idea that poverty is a phenomenon that exists in constant interaction with the government and the idea of poverty as a social category exists as a part of a schema to further regulate the behaviors of the population.

Exclusion from the Common Good

Illustrated above are the plans that the discourse asserts will benefit the poor

⁸¹ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 28, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72905> and *al-Watan*, Feb. 11, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73868>

⁸² *Al-Watan*, Feb. 7, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73533>

⁸³ *Ibid.*

classes of Syria. These plans solidify the identities of a poor class by emphasizing specific plans catered to usher them into a “developed” life and integrate them into an economy that will improve their standard of living. It becomes obvious that the solutions to poverty are also a way to regulate the behavior of the poor through government surveillance or market mechanisms. Yet the sheer constructed identity of poor also serves to order society through its imposed framework of “us” and “them.” In this case, the middle class of Syria represents the norm of the populace and the poor represent an aberration to this norm. We see this bifurcation in a discussion of certain policies that benefit the common or greater good of the Syrian population.

In discussions of policy geared toward poverty alleviation, the assertion that these policies will benefit the common good is non-existent. Instead, the common good paradigm is used in projects that improve transportation, health care, and also create jobs – programs not explicitly geared toward the poor classes. The economic reforms are instead oriented toward the middle classes and thus the discourse states that they will benefit the common good.

The transportation minister states that improvements to the system will “realize the greatest benefit for all citizens,” while the new government-run health care system will benefit the common good.⁸⁴ Furthermore, government reforms that have no specific form

⁸⁴ *Al-Watan*, Feb. 17, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=74294> and *al-Watan*, Feb. 2, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73237>

are also intended to “fulfill the larger interests of society.”⁸⁵ While the term appears to be all-inclusive, it is actually quite exclusive since it is only used outside the context of benefiting the poor. This distinction would not be possible if not for the clear social construct of poverty established by an *al-Watan* discourse.

CONCLUSION

In an April 2010 article for *Gulf News*, the editor of privately-owned Syrian magazine *Forward* Sami Moubayed wrote on the prospects of private media in Syria.⁸⁶ He interviewed a private sector journalist who said, “Private media in Syria – and especially business journalism – is going through a golden era, thanks to the economic reforms under way.” This quote sets the tone for the article in its recognition of economic reform as the source of Syria’s flourishing private media instead of media reform. In this way, the benefits of the private sector are assessed not by its groundbreaking news coverage, but by the number of private publications on the market – 165 – and how these publications’ subject matter ranges from luxury to entertainment.

Immediately after Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, individuals sought to frame the private press in a context of media reform and possible political liberalization, but after a decade in power, the dominant portrayal relies on an economic paradigm to frame the private press as a successful, progressive endeavor – with occasional hints of developing press freedoms. Moubayed’s article takes it one step further by suggesting that Syria’s lack of pre-censorship is evidence that press freedoms are here. A quote from an *al-Watan* journalist in the article is presented as proof of media freedoms: “You write what you want, how you want, keeping laws and regulations on the back of your mind; once you go wrong, you will be called to court to testify before a judge.”

On a basic level, this thesis has sought to demonstrate how the private press in Syria simultaneously exists in a highly restrictive media environment and perpetuates the

⁸⁶ Sami Moubayed, “An Upswing in Syria’s Private Sector,” *Gulf News*, April 16, 2010.

regime discourse that contributes to this restrictive environment. Perhaps the most interesting revelation of this thesis is how *al-Watan*, a newspaper that is used by many to represent Syria's media and economic liberalizations, has stayed so close to the regime dictates of acceptable speech. This may not be surprising since *al-Watan's* claims to independence have been shot down on the basis of numerous facts, including: ownership by Bashar al-Asad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, the existence of media laws designed to punish offensive content through fines and prison time, and finally, the unspoken guidelines of acceptable discourse internalized by most Syrians that prevents public criticism of several issues. This discourse analysis of *al-Watan's* economic coverage has given further insight into how Syria's private media outlets are willing to reiterate regime discourse without a formal system of censorship or reliance on government funding. While this is the thesis's most sweeping conclusion, there are several other conclusions related specifically to the function and role of *al-Watan's* economic discourse in the public sphere.

The economic discourse addressed in this thesis was divided into several thematic areas that demonstrated explicit yet complex constructs of the Syrian national economy. I argued that each thematic area assisted in defining what is permissible speech in relation to Syria's previous and current economic reforms. Cumulatively, the discourses explicated in this thesis revealed that the framework of the social-market economy outlined by the regime through various mechanisms was a central element in crafting an orderly and acceptable narrative of development, the market, and other fundamental constructs of the Syrian economy. I have examined in detail how *al-Watan* uses specific

constructs such as poverty, the *felaheen*, and the public sphere to emphasize the public need of government assistance all the while pushing for market reform that would effectively reduce the role of the government. This dichotomy is encapsulated in the social-market framework of *al-Watan*'s coverage.

Yet how does the construction of the Syrian economy in *al-Watan* contribute to the discourse of the economy in the public sphere? By adhering so closely to the regime's economic narrative, I argue that the private media are both purveyors and products of the Syrian regime's disciplinary and regulatory powers over the public sphere (Wedeen 1999). In a way, the Syrian private media can be said to "[reinforce] the expectation that most everyone will obey [the regime's political power] most of the time" (Wedeen 1999, 152). To this effect, the private media show us that even with mutations in the Syrian legal system that appear to give further leeway to an "independent" public sphere, these institutions are still subject to the numerous manifestations of the regime's power. The label of "privately-owned" is not indicative of private control over content since the regime's discourse is ubiquitous. In this framework, I do not want to discount the possibility of dissent in the public sphere, but the private press in Syria is not an outlet for critical discussion of economic or political issues. While light critiques of Syria's obstacles to development are permitted, articles that issue structural critiques of the Syrian regime are non-existent in *al-Watan*.

This project is one of the first steps toward understanding the boundaries of permissible economic speech in the Syrian public sphere through the constructs of economic issues in *al-Watan*. With the Syrian economy in a state of capitalist transition,

economic discourse can reveal the state's need to reassert its role in the economy while simultaneously promoting the advantages of limited market reforms. Through the course of tracing this economic discourse, the lines between the regime's and *al-Watan*'s position became blurred, giving substance to claims that power is the definitive factor in shaping public discourse.

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