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LIMITS OF “AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING” IN SYRIA: PRIVATE WELFARE, ISLAMIC CHARITIES, AND THE RISE OF THE ZAYD MOVEMENT

Now I want to see your donations. Each of you, how many young people’s marriages do you want to pay for?

(A man in the mosque raises five fingers.)

Yes? Abu Bashar? Five? So, our brother Bashir Khuli, five young people. Jamal ‘Ammuri, five young people. Doctor Mahmud Hallaq, five young people.

(The shaykh turns toward a man in the first rank.)

Abu Muhammad, how many? Five, too? OK. My dear brothers, remember that this is your gift to the Prophet, so give as much as you can.

—Shaykh Na‘im al-‘Arqsusi

Shaykh Na‘im al-‘Arqsusi is one of Damascus’s most popular Muslim scholars. A leading figure of a local Islamic movement called Jama‘at Zayd (Zayd’s Group), he is widely praised for his knowledge, modesty, and asceticism. Every week, this frail, short-bearded fifty-six-year-old attracts several thousand people to the huge concrete al-Iman mosque next to Ba‘th party headquarters in the middle-class neighborhood of al-Mezra‘a.

The fundraising event described above was organized on the occasion of a *mawlid* (celebration of the Prophet’s birthday) in a packed al-Iman in April 2007. At the end of the evening, Shaykh Na‘im invited donations for a charitable project called Sunduq al-Mawadda wa-l-Rahma (The Love and Mercy Fund), which helps young people marry by contributing to the dowry payment. Well-off followers raised their hands to donate grants of 50,000 Syrian pounds (£)–about U.S. \$1,100–each of which would pay for the marriage of one couple. Next to the shaykh, in a perfect suit, Sunduq al-Mawadda’s moustachioed director, “Hajj” ‘Umar Mukhallalati,¹ a member of the Damascus

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Chamber of Industry, took note of the donations. At the end of the “auction,” more than 150 grants, about S£7.5 million, had been collected.²

Scenes like these are increasingly common in Syria, where charitable activities have grown in number and scale since the 1990s.³ At the origin of this development are two distinct dynamics that affect the nature of state–society relations in the country. On the one hand, Syria’s welfare arrangements have come under acute strain since the mid-1980s as shrinking state resources, decades of rapid population growth, and inefficiency have undermined the state’s ability to provide adequate social services to the nation’s poor. Starting in the late 1990s, the government progressively relaxed its restrictions on charitable associations, which have provided a useful—although still relatively modest—contribution through the growth of private-sector-funded welfare schemes. Faith-based initiatives in particular have proven apt at mobilizing charitable donations from the middle class and the bourgeoisie.

On the other hand, the growth of the Islamic charitable sector speaks of a *détente* between the Ba‘th regime and the Islamic trend that began in the mid-1990s. Hoping to strengthen its legitimacy by improving relations with domestic and regional Islamic forces, the regime has allowed the partial comeback and restart of activities by actors it had quelled from the 1979 to 1982 Islamic uprising onward. In 1994, leaders of Jama‘at Zayd, a Sufi-inspired yet politically aware, middle-class Islamic organization, returned from their refuge in Saudi Arabia. By the time the regime eased restrictions on the associative sector, the movement was already reestablishing itself, and during the following decade it emerged as a leading player in private welfare.

For the regime, the best scenario would have been to see the rapidly growing charitable projects run by traditionally regime-friendly Islamic networks such as that of late Grand Mufti Ahmad Kaftaru. However, these networks have proven to rely on too narrow a social base to efficiently carry the process by themselves.⁴ Zayd, by contrast, draws on huge popularity among the Damascene merchant middle class, which provides it with a unique capacity to attract funds from the private sector. As a result, the movement has carried out a *de facto* takeover of the capital’s charitable sector.

Through a detailed, fieldwork-based analysis of this process, we deepen our understanding of Islamic charities’ success. We go beyond traditional assumptions about these charities’ “cultural embedment” and “organic character” because our goal is not to determine the cause of this success *in general* but to explain why certain faith-based initiatives succeed better than others. In addition, we propose an empirically nuanced contribution to the debate on current transformations of Arab authoritarian systems. The Syrian regime, like other “hard” variants of authoritarianism, is often studied in a top-down perspective that overlooks social actors’ agency. Without underestimating the constraints imposed from above, we show here how such actors use their resources to seize opportunities left by a readjusting state.

Scholarly accounts of Islamic charities have generally stressed their ideologically counterhegemonic dimension, whether as the cause of their success⁵ or as the consequence of their action—that is, Islamization of society. The Islamization process is supposed to occur “vertically” through the associations’ recruiting of the poor,⁶ or, as Janine Clark more convincingly argues, “horizontally,” because involvement in charitable activities fosters middle-class Islamist networks.⁷

The specificities of the Syrian context lead us to adopt a different perspective. Under the Ba'athist regime, political restrictions have maintained Islamic associations in a somewhat "primitive" state, most of them remaining simple administrative structures involving few human resources. Because their only task is to gather and redistribute money, these charities consist only of a board composed of notables, a general assembly that meets once a year, and a handful of volunteers or employees. Therefore, they cannot be considered a locus for political mobilization and socialization but are mere functional agencies of broader informal religious structures. In Damascus, indeed, the fastest growing charitable projects are only the "tip" of the Zayd-movement iceberg that provides them with money through trust, networks, and informal hierarchical power structures. In other words, the social reach of Zayd, which results from a network of around thirty mosques whose staff are actively proselytizing, is more of a cause than a consequence of successful charitable projects. In the current economic context, this unequal distribution of social capital among local religious actors has important consequences for the Syrian political system—not because Islamic charities attract new members to Islamic networks but rather because these networks' leaders have become increasingly important, even if undesired, partners of the regime.

The political consequences of transferring responsibilities formerly borne by the public sector to social actors are contested in the academic literature. The neoliberal assumption that it leads to the emergence of civil counterweights to the political elite has over the last decade been challenged by critical approaches that speak of a "redeployment of the state," the retreat of formal state institutions being combined with continued effective control over the economy.⁸ Steven Heydemann has recently joined the latter trend by arguing that a process of "authoritarian upgrading" is taking place in the Arab context whereby regimes adjust to pressures for reform by manipulating features of political and economic liberalization, such as pluralist elections and privatizations. In doing so, they minimize political constraints stemming from increased social participation and maximize their relative autonomy from society's less supportive sectors. The outcome, Heydemann claims, is an authoritarianism that is "stronger, more flexible, and more resilient than ever."⁹

In line with this argument, recent works have analyzed cases of private welfare initiatives that are politically risk free for Arab regimes because the state possesses or tightly controls the resources needed to finance charities through oil rent (Saudi Arabia),¹⁰ formerly nationalized religious endowments (Egypt),¹¹ or crony businessmen—that is, actors who belong to the same networks as the political elite, share the regime's interests and worldview, and often depend on state contracts. Heydemann puts forward the example of semiofficial nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) founded by Arab first ladies, such as the organizations composing the Syrian Trust for Development, which are sponsored by Bashar al-Asad's wife, Asma' al-Akhras, and mainly financed by the European Union.¹² The actual social impact of these empowerment-oriented projects is dubious and in any case far from matching that of the more classical redistributive associations managed by religious leaders.

Even though some of these associations are led by "state-sanctioned" Muslim scholars, they cannot be collectively considered pawns of the regime. Indeed, the state's limited financial resources do not allow for any significant public assistance to private welfare

organizations,¹³ and for political reasons, foreign backing for Islamic associations is severely restricted.¹⁴ As a consequence, they are mainly financed by local entrepreneurs through zakat (alms) and *tabarru'āt* (voluntary donations). Moreover, the social capital needed to attract donations from the “pious bourgeoisie”¹⁵ is provided by Muslim scholars whose popularity relies on factors over which the state has no control. Indeed, the Zayd movement accumulates this social capital not only through its religious activities properly speaking (religious-science lessons and spiritual guidance) but also, given the Ba‘thist regime’s lack of legitimacy among the conservative Sunni middle class,¹⁶ through its independent political stance.

The “sociology of efficient funding” is incompatible with the Syrian regime simply choosing the most compliant religious actors, which means that the current growth of charitable activities cannot be seen as a mere redeployment of the state. The outcome rather is a complex interdependence where the mutual cooperation of state and charity leaders deepens. Although the political outcomes of this alliance are still modest, they nevertheless constitute a clear break with former patterns of state–society relations in Syria. Indeed, the regime’s relative autonomy from society has traditionally been ensured through partnerships with social actors who are historically sympathetic to the Ba‘th and/or, in the religious realm in particular, sufficiently weak to abide by the rules of a patron–client relationship. This is not the case with Zayd, whose large popular and economic base means it can afford to cooperate with the state while lending it only passive support. The authorities’ association with highly popular religious forces and tolerance for increasingly dynamic faith-based initiatives thus stabilize the regime while curtailing its autonomy by contributing to the integration of unenthusiastic partners into the state-supporting elite coalition. It appears that “authoritarian upgrading” is not as safe as suggested by the previous examples of state-sponsored NGOs.

In the next section of the article, we describe the 20th-century development of the financial and organizational backbone of Syria’s charitable sector, which we call the ‘ulama’–merchants nexus. The second section deals with the remarkable growth of private welfare organizations in the country since the late 1990s. The third section presents the Zayd movement’s “charitable empire.” The fourth section argues that Zayd’s strength in the charitable field stems from its long-established, deep roots in the small- and medium-sized private sector. The last section analyzes the ambiguous political relations between Zayd and the regime.

THE ‘ULAMA’–MERCHANTS NEXUS

The Syrian Islamic charitable sector is based mainly on cooperation between ‘ulama’ and merchants (*tujjār*). Although the association of these two social groups is not uncommon in the Muslim world,¹⁷ Syria’s modern history has given it particular strength.

In Damascus, the 1925–50 period witnessed a complete renewal of the local religious leadership. A new cultural mood that pushed the city’s social elite to send its children to new secular schools, as well as the disappearance of the Ottoman state’s support, led to the end of the old upper-class Damascene families as significant religious actors. At the same time, the spread of secular ideas by the French occupier and the ruling

bourgeoisie led to a religious reaction called “the awakening of religious knowledge” (*al-nahḍa al-‘ilmiyya*). This movement was led by Sufi-leaning Muslim clerics—like ‘Ali al-Daqr, Salih al-Farfur, Hasan Habannaka, and ‘Abd al-Karim al-Rifa‘i—from petty- and middle-bourgeois families that had previously been unknown for producing ‘ulama’.¹⁸ In the absence of any support by the state or by a prestigious academic institution like the Egyptian al-Azhar, these shaykhs had to rely on their own popular and economic base. As a consequence, Damascus’s new Islamic leadership was virtually born from the suq, with most of the newcomers being merchants or shopkeepers. They were backed by their relatives and neighbors, whose money they needed to build mosques and finance charitable and educational associations. In return, associations’ boards of trustees always included the main merchant sponsors.¹⁹

Urban networks of traditional entrepreneurs and ‘ulama’ thrived in the liberal system set up after the 1946 French withdrawal, and the 1950s witnessed a flourishing of private associations. However, their functioning and creation were hindered by more restrictive legal provisions after Syria’s merger with Egypt in the United Arab Republic in 1958 and above all by the 1963 institution of the state of emergency—still in force in 2008—by the new Ba‘thist regime.²⁰

During the 1960s, given the weakening of the now suppressed Muslim Brotherhood,²¹ the ‘ulama’ and their merchant following spearheaded opposition to the Ba‘th’s secularist and socialist ambitions. In Damascus, their leader was Shaykh Hasan Habannaka, whom the regime tried to counter by backing the more compliant Ahmad Kaftaru, appointing the latter grand mufti in 1964.²²

The “corrective movement” launched in 1970 by Hafiz al-Asad downplayed the goal of cultural and economic transformation and relaxed relations with the religious elite and the private sector somewhat.²³ Given the dismantling of the haute bourgeoisie under the Ba‘thist regimes of the 1960s, Syria’s first *infitāḥ* (opening) benefited not only a so-called “new class” of crony businessmen but also merchants from traditional urban quarters. They seized large parts of the country’s domestic and foreign trade and developed small-to medium-sized industrial activities. The enrichment of the suq’s leading families turned them into what Philippe Droz-Vincent has called the “merchant upper middle class.”²⁴ To date, this social category has kept a relatively modest economic and political profile, even though some exceptional trajectories—such as that of the al-Shallah family, which wove close ties with Hafiz al-Asad—complicate the picture.

The process was highly beneficial to the country’s religious elite because traditional merchant families were the very same stratum that produced and backed the ‘ulama’ from the 1920s onward, with the result that “shaykh” and “merchant” were only distinct professional identities for people belonging to the same social class. This situation hardly changed during the following decades: lacking resources and religious legitimacy, the Ba‘thist regime never managed—and apparently never tried—to turn members of the religious elite into civil servants gathered in an obedient official body. Senior ‘ulama’ often refused remuneration for posts in mosques; in any case, the Ministry of Religious Endowments paid only nominal salaries. As a consequence, many Muslim scholars continued to rely on teaching posts in private institutes and on informal donations from well-off people as well as on their personal financial investments, again facilitated by their social capital. Up to the present, business has remained a favorite career for the sons of Syrian ‘ulama’.

The 1979–82 Islamic uprising revealed deep differences in the relations between the regime and the country's main cities. In Aleppo and Hama, widespread popular hostility toward the political center, stemming partly from the local private sector's sense of economic marginalization by Damascus, led to a bloody showdown with security forces. In Damascus, relatively better relations between the regime and the business sector limited the extent of the crisis.²⁵ Nonetheless, several of the capital's leading Muslim scholars were forced into exile, and related Islamic associations were closed.

The following decade was one of the darkest periods in the history of Syrian 'ulama', with extremely severe restrictions imposed on most Islamic activities except for state-sponsored networks such as Kaftaru's. Relations between the regime and the rest of the religious elite started to improve only following the return of some formerly exiled clerics in the mid-1990s.

In the economic realm, the 1986 fiscal crisis was followed by a second *infitāh* that significantly improved the relative strength of the private sector. By 1990, gross private investments, which ranged around one-third of total investments in the 1970s, exceeded those of the public sector.²⁶ After a temporary halt during Syria's peace negotiations with Israel in the 1990s, economic reforms resumed under Bashar al-Asad. In 2005, the tenth Ba'ath Party Congress formally declared that Syria was heading toward a "social market economy."²⁷ During this new phase of liberalization, the private sector has made its appearance in services, such as banking and insurance, that since the 1963 Ba'athist takeover had been the exclusive prerogative of the state.

As Syrian businessmen thrived, their relations with the religious elite seemed better than ever, as illustrated by a private *mawlid* that took place in June 2007 in a luxurious private residence on the outskirts of Damascus. The feast was given by a typical member of the local merchant upper-middle class who made his fortune through the import and manufacture of home appliances. An important backer of several Islamic associations, the entrepreneur had gathered some 250 people, predominantly from the business community, along with ambassadors, parliamentarians, and top religious dignitaries like Sa'īd Ramadan al-Buti, Syria's most renowned Muslim scholar; Ahmad Hassun, the republic's grand mufti; and Sariya al-Rifa'i, a leader of the powerful Zayd movement.

The reception gave rise to numerous compliments between the 'ulama' and their private-sector backers. The host first welcomed the clerics: "When I invited you, I intended to invite the makers of this nation [*umma*]*—*those who make the minds and hearts and shape them in the Prophet's manner . . . You, my teachers and masters: the honorable 'ulama'." Grand Mufti Hassun answered by drawing a line from piety to prosperity and success: "When hearts are lightened with faith, then the money is purified in our pockets . . . and heaven gives us prosperity and grace." Shaykh al-Buti added to these words by praising "the coming together of all the indispensable pillars of the ideal Islamic society." In his words, "religion plans, industry provides and completes, and commerce sells."²⁸

The continued potency of the 'ulama'–merchants nexus also became clear in the April 2007 legislative elections: all main lists of independent candidates in Damascus were composed of a majority of businessmen accompanied by a religious figure. Muhammad Hamshu, a nouveau-riche Sunni and crony of the Asad family, and 'Abd al-Salam Rajih, dean of Kaftaru Academy's shari'a faculty, came out on top with about 80,000 votes

each. Their list received significant public support from the local religious elite, its businessmen having built several large mosques in recent years and provided generous financing of religious associations.²⁹

CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES ON THE RISE

In its embrace of market adjustment, the regime has adopted a very careful approach. Since 1970, it has sought a gradual liberalization of the investment climate without abandoning the populist social contract on which the regime is built. Thus, while streamlining rules and regulations for the private sector, the government has mostly avoided subsidy cuts and public sector reform.³⁰ Periods of acute fiscal crisis, however, have pushed the Syrian leadership against the wall. Notably, in 1986, it cut the budget from around 50 percent to 30 percent of the GDP and throughout the 1990s maintained a policy of freezing wages and downscaling public investments. Although the social impact of these measures was attenuated by fortuitous economic conjuncture in the first half of the 1990s, economic fortune changed in 1996, when Syria entered years of decreasing oil production, falling oil prices, fading private investment, and drought. The nadir was reached in 1999 with a negative growth rate of 3.6 percent.³¹

During Bashar al-Asad's first years in power, public salaries were increased on several occasions, and public expenditure as a percentage of the GDP rose from 30 to 33 in 2003.³² Nonetheless, given persistent rapid population increase and insufficient economic growth rates, the Syrian government is no longer in a position to adequately fulfill its welfare obligations. In 2004, 10.36 percent of the population (almost two million Syrians) were living on less than \$2 a day.³³ Despite recent higher growth rates (6.2% in 2007),³⁴ the situation has worsened due to a sharp increase in the consumer price index (10% in 2006).³⁵

To attenuate the destabilizing effects of poverty, the regime liberalized its policies toward private welfare in the late 1990s. As a consequence, charitable associations began to rise from their decades-long lethargy and witnessed a major expansion in terms of number, financial means, and scale of activities.

Recent years have seen a wave of new charitable projects unprecedented in the Ba'ath regime's history. According to estimates from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, the total number of associations in Syria doubled from 586 in 2004 to 1,187 (including about 600 charitable organizations) in 2006.³⁶ The director of the Union of Charitable Associations in Damascus (UCA-D),³⁷ a private body that coordinates activities of the city's charities, explicitly linked the burgeoning of new associations to deteriorating social conditions:

The increasing number of associations points to the government's desire to get rid of its responsibilities toward citizens, as it gives a diagnosis of a society that is in majority composed of poor people . . . Those who work in the charitable associations perfectly know the extent of poverty in this country: while associations multiply, the situation gets worse.³⁸

Legal provisions do not recognize a distinct religious identity for these organizations, but in the early 2000s, among the approximately 100 charitable associations located in Damascus, at least 80 percent were Sunni Muslim³⁹—the rest were Twelver Shi'ite Muslim, Christian, and secular.

In the absence of reliable statistics, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of these associations' charitable work. For 2003, that is, before the post-2004 associational boom, Syrian researcher Jum'ā Hijazi estimated that around 300 associations provided S£842 million in aid to more than 72,000 families.⁴⁰ If this figure is accurate, a gross extrapolation suggests that private welfare extends to several hundreds of thousands in Syria today.

Whereas in Damascus the revival of the charitable sector has relied mainly on previously existing civil associations, in some places it has consisted of privatization (or to more be precise, denationalization) of formerly state-managed structures. In Hama, for instance, the *Maktab al-Ri'āya al-Ijtima'iyya* (Social Care Bureau)—the city's most powerful charitable association, born from the 1983 nationalization of *al-Nahda al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Awakening)—was turned into a private body in 2003 and became *al-Jam'iyya al-Khayriyya li-l-Ri'āya al-Ijtima'iyya* (Charitable Association for Social Care), which opened several branches in the villages of Hama's countryside.⁴¹ Two years earlier, the former *Jam'iyyat A'mal al-Birr al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Association for Charitable Works), the oldest organization of its kind in the city (1925), had been reestablished as a private body under the name *Jam'iyyat A'mal al-Birr*.⁴² Because Hama was the main center of the 1979–82 Islamic uprising, its society (and especially its religious component) remains under closer control than anywhere else in the country, which may explain why a local governor presides over *al-Jam'iyya al-Khayriyya* and a former governor over *Jam'iyyat A'mal al-Birr*.⁴³ However, their boards, like those of other recently founded associations in the city, include notables from the city's old Sunni families (*al-Kilani*, *al-Jabi*, *al-Barudi*, *al-'Azm*), whose social capital is probably needed to raise funds from the private sector.

During the past few years, greater government flexibility has coincided with an unprecedented flow of capital into the Syrian economy, driven by several factors: a new regime policy aimed at facilitating the return of expatriate capital, the latest oil boom, large amounts of Iraqi wealth accompanying waves of refugees, growing insecurity for Arab investments in the West because of the “war on terror,” and the opening of private banks in Syria as relations deteriorated with Lebanon, a traditional safe haven for Syrian wealth. According to official Syrian figures, investment projects have increased by 250 percent since 2004, reaching \$9.2 billion in 2006.⁴⁴ This bonanza resulted in a sharp increase in charitable donations, which multiplied associations' means. For instance, the annual expenditures of the *Sunduq al-Mawadda wa-l-Rahma* rose from S£2.7 million (about \$60,000) in 2002 to S£22.1 million (some \$500,000) in 2006.⁴⁵

Ba'ṭhist repression fossilized the associations' scale and activities by severely limiting their growth and the possibility for them to open private schools and hospitals. As a consequence, in the late 1990s, Islamic charities were mostly small-scale structures dating back to the pre-Ba'ṭh era, the majority dedicated to distributing money, food, and other first-necessity items in the neighborhoods that surrounded their headquarters.⁴⁶ Since the 1990s, however, Syria has witnessed the emergence of charitable projects characterized by much larger financial resources and a wider range of action. Some of these associations are linked to traditionally proregime religious leaders.⁴⁷ However, the most successful and well managed among them are without a doubt those run by the Zayd movement, whether directly or through the Union of Charitable Associations in Damascus.

ZAYD’S CHARITABLE EMPIRE

Following in the footsteps of his father, ‘Abd al-Karim (1904–73), a leading figure of *al-nahḍa al-‘ilmiyya* and the founder of the Zayd movement, Shaykh Sariya al-Rifa‘i is the most influential actor in Damascus’s charitable sector. In 2002, he launched the Hifz al-Ni‘ma (Preservation of Grace) project, which takes an approach similar to Egyptian preacher ‘Amr Khalid’s campaigns to collect surplus food, medicine, clothes, furniture, and books.⁴⁸ Every day, Hifz al-Ni‘ma’s van fleet delivers meals across the city, and dozens of poor people gather in front of the association’s distribution centers.⁴⁹ According to Sariya al-Rifa‘i, who never loses an occasion to promote his project from his pulpit, Hifz al-Ni‘ma now helps more than 6,000 families—far more than any traditional neighborhood association.⁵⁰

Al-Rifa‘i’s organization’s ability to work on a large scale probably explains why, during the month of Ramadan 2006, the Ministry of Religious Endowments chose it to provide food for the official daily fast-breaking ceremony in the Umayyad mosque that was attended by a daily average of 10,000 people.⁵¹ Likewise, Hifz al-Ni‘ma played a leading role in helping the tens of thousands of Lebanese refugees who flooded Damascus during the July 2006 war, providing about 20,000 individual meals daily.⁵²

Beside Hifz al-Ni‘ma, the Zayd movement has continued to manage and expand a network of local associations that was set up in the 1950s by ‘Abd al-Karim al-Rifa‘i. Historically rooted in traditional Damascene quarters and the first belt of newly constructed, middle-class and bourgeois areas, Zayd’s charitable network nevertheless managed to spread to more peripheral, working-class neighborhoods. For instance, in May 2006, the Al-Sihha (Health) association was inaugurated in Harasta, east of Damascus, in the presence of Zayd’s three leading figures—Sariya al-Rifa‘i, his elder brother Osama, and the aforementioned Na‘im al-‘Arqsusi. Noted businessmen also attended the ceremony, including the head of the Damascus Countryside (Rif Dimashq) Chamber of Commerce.⁵³

In addition to directly run projects like Hifz al-Ni‘ma, the Zayd movement’s charitable empire is built on its hold on the UCA-D. The UCA-D was founded in 1957 by Muslim scholars and merchants to coordinate and represent the city’s charitable associations.⁵⁴ It was always dominated by Islamic organizations, and Zayd-related associations exerted a strong influence due to their number and fundraising capacity. In the wake of the government’s new hands-off approach, the Zayd movement has completely taken over the UCA-D. In the 2006 general election for the union’s governing board, a majority of Zayd-affiliated businessmen came out on top. The organization’s president (‘Umar Mukhallalati), vice-president (‘Umar Sayrawan), and secretary (Safuh al-Samman)—three typical upper-middle-class merchants⁵⁵—as well as several of its directors are closely linked to the movement. It is telling that, following the election, the UCA-D moved its headquarters next door to al-Rifa‘i’s Zayd bin Thabit mosque, in a building it now shares with the offices of the Hifz al-Ni‘ma project.

At the end of the 1990s, the UCA-D launched its own large-scale, self-managed projects—Sunduq al-‘Afiya (Health Fund, 1997), which covers surgical operation expenditures, and Sunduq al-Mawadda wa-l-Rahma (1999), which subsidizes marriages. Between 1997 and June 2007, the former gathered \$£953 million (around \$21 million), which allowed it to finance about 60,000 surgical operations for 29,823 people, and

the latter collected S£75 million (\$1.6 million) for 2,000 young couples.⁵⁶ In 2005, the UCA-D also launched a project for a large hospital, which is now under construction next to the Midan bridge in southern Damascus.

As a religious network, Zayd has not spread to any of the country's other major cities, a result of political restrictions on the part of the regime and, just as important, of the strength of local identities among Syrian clerics.⁵⁷ However, its charitable projects as well as that of the UCA-D have been exported as "franchises" outside the capital. For instance, the *Hifz al-Ni'ma* project in Hama is run by the local Charitable Association for Social Care whereas Aleppo's *Sunduq al-'Afiyya* is patronized by Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun.⁵⁸

Although financing medical care is a common activity in charitable associations all over the world, helping young people to marry may sound less familiar to Western readers. In fact, the rationale behind it goes beyond humanitarian principles and has a strong moralistic-religious dimension, as conveyed by the project's Qur'an inspired name. In the view of this conservative society, economic difficulties that delay marriage make young people vulnerable to moral corruption in the form of premarital sex. Providing the financial means by which young people can build a home and raise a family is thus considered a particularly pious act.⁵⁹ A leaflet distributed in mosques to promote *Sunduq al-Mawadda wa-l-Rahma* explains that the project aims at "building pious families and protecting young men and women . . . through the elimination of their psychological and moral problems."⁶⁰ This discourse echoes that of Sariya al-Rifa'i who, during the celebration of a disciple's wedding, asked the crowd to "pray God so that He gives a pious wife to every young man and a pious husband to every young woman in order to make corruption disappear from the surface of the earth."⁶¹

Following a clientelist pattern, people already having contacts with the religious and business personalities that constitute the backbone of Zayd's projects are clearly favored in their requests for financial help. *Hifz al-Ni'ma* relies on the list of beneficiaries of forty existing neighborhood associations and, like the UCA-D, "makes sure of their needs whether through an inquiry that is carried out by the association that is the closest to their living place or through their acquaintance with a well-known business personality or a member of the board." Likewise, young people asking for marriage grants must present a good-morals certificate signed by "a religious scholar or a notable."⁶² It is interesting that the official policy of *I'faf* (Making Chaste), a similar project launched in 2005 by the *Dar al-Iman* association,⁶³ gives priority to "holders of high academic diplomas."⁶⁴

Whereas distribution-oriented charitable projects target deprived Sunni Damascenes, marriage-financing initiatives seem to favor middle-class graduates, the core constituency of the city's leading Islamic groups. Both cases illustrate that the importance of Islamic charities as welfare providers must not be apprehended in absolute terms, because even tens of thousands of beneficiaries are not much in the face of Syria's poverty problem, but rather in relative ones, because associations are by far the main source of private aid to the Sunni poor and lumpen intelligentsia of Damascus, two social categories seen as key threats to political stability in the capital.

Nevertheless, because of political pressure, religious charitable associations must also help people who do not belong to their traditional clientele. As a representative of the UCA-D explains, "When the Ministry sends me a demand, I cannot refuse it or even wait

for the case study to be carried out, and it is the same for numerous requests coming from sides I prefer not to mention."⁶⁵ Although this policy shows that the state is trying to redeploy itself through private welfare organizations, it would be wrong to conclude that Zayd's associations have become mere "government-organized NGOs." Indeed, official pressures and monitoring cannot compensate for the absence of state control over these associations' social capital, which is provided by the 'ulama', nor can the state direct where merchants donate their money.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE FINANCING OF ISLAMIC CHARITIES

The rationale for cooperation between 'ulama' and businessmen is not hard to see, because the partners complement each other: while the latter provide financial backing and management skills, the former bring social capital—that is, prestige, trust, and networks. The outcome is also mutually beneficial for the two parties: entrepreneurs gain prestige and connections, and the power and patronage of the religious institutions increase. Recent electoral campaigns have provided telling examples of such trade-offs; when speaking off the record, some candidates did little to hide the strategic nature of their financial contribution to charitable organizations.⁶⁶ Small and large entrepreneurs are also rewarded symbolically for supporting these associations, which prompts invitations to sit close to the shaykh during religious ceremonies and, more generally, maintains their reputation of piety. Donations also improve a tarnished reputation, as illustrated by a tycoon of the tourism sector who gave a S£44 million (close to \$1 million) donation to Hifz al-Ni'ma, even though "it is well known," a pious merchant asserted, that this crony capitalist "does not pray."⁶⁷

Interpreting Syrian 'ulama'-merchant cooperation as a purely opportunistic alliance is misleading, however. As we have shown, the very concept of "alliance" is somewhat inappropriate in view of the common social origin of the contemporary religious elite and the merchant upper middle class. Shaykhs and *tujjār* are often linked by kinship and neighborhood ties as well as by spiritual ones. In the words of U., a pious engineer running a small import-export office and a backer of Zayd's charitable projects, "the two main values of Damascene society are the following: to have money and to have a shaykh."⁶⁸

Such personal religious links have a direct impact on the financing of Islamic charities. Whereas big businessmen (and electoral candidates) maximize public-relations gains by backing several of the main religious associations, smaller entrepreneurs are more likely to follow their shaykh's instructions and finance a single organization. For this latter category of benefactors, religion—not only reputation—matters. This makes Muslim scholars' prestige and charisma the key factors in the success of Islamic charities.

The most popular 'ulama' can count on myriad highly devoted small and middle businessmen whose aggregate capital resources are impressive and whose constant support guarantees stable incomes and political autonomy. One such shaykh is Ratib al-Nabulsi, whose immensely popular radio program has earned him wide financial support from the private sector since the middle of the current decade. Although this money benefits formal charitable projects, it is also redistributed in an informal and clientelist manner: the shaykh is famous for handing out small amounts of cash to people after his lessons in the mosque.⁶⁹

Al-Nabulsi's example of private-sector support built on sudden fame is a rather exceptional one. For other Muslim scholars, the possibility of drawing on a large pool of entrepreneurs is the fruit of decades of grassroots proselytizing. Such patient work in *da'wa* (Islamic call) is the fundamental cause of the Zayd movement's present hegemony over Damascus's charitable sector. Although this domination would have been impossible without the regime's consent, authorities had little alternative. Historically, relations between the Ba'athist state and the movement have been difficult, to say the least. However, even rival religious leaders acknowledge that Zayd's social base includes a vast network of shopkeepers and middle businessmen that has no equivalent in Damascus and that is indispensable for establishing any effective charitable project at the city level.

For Zayd, the financial support of the local private sector is not only a necessity but also a source of pride and a matter of doctrine. Indeed, before his death, 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i reportedly enjoined his successors to ensure the independence of the movement by refusing any state or foreign funding and accepting only donations from Syrian merchants.⁷⁰ During his lifetime, he worked tirelessly to lay the foundations of this economic autonomy.

The shaykhs of the *nahda* period not only founded formal associations and schools but also informal structures (*jamā'āt*) that constituted their less visible but actual power base. Like the better known *jamā'āt* that appeared during the interwar period in India (Tabligh), Turkey (Nurcu), and Egypt (Muslim Brothers), the Syrian ones resembled Sufi brotherhoods in organization because their hierarchy relied on the master-disciple relationship. Yet they stood out from traditional brotherhoods by a definite sense of social mission: in a time of rising Western cultural influence, the *jamā'āt* were actively working for *da'wa* to bring Muslims back to the path of Islam.

In Damascus, the *jamā'āt* founded by shaykhs like Hasan Habannaka and Salih al-Farfur were mostly composed of scholars because their purpose was to train the future religious elite. In contrast, 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i's *jamā'āt* aimed to provide the whole society with a sound Islamic education, including Qur'anic memorization classes, basic religious sciences, and Sufi spirituality.⁷¹ Lay-movement Zayd had much wider appeal than the "clerical" *jamā'āt*. Through an active policy of mosque building that was backed by his merchant following, al-Rifa'i set up the largest network of places of worship in the capital. By the 1970s, this network covered both traditional and new, well-off city neighborhoods. In all these mosques, the shaykh inspired multilevel study groups adapted to "workers" (mainly merchants) and students (sons of the traditional and new middle classes). He strongly encouraged his young disciples to engage in secular higher studies so that, as physicians or engineers, they would be models of piety in a society threatened by "atheism."⁷²

The situation differs little today. Although well-educated middle-class young people constitute the bulk of Zayd's following, special courses are still organized for merchants. Every day after the dawn prayer, Shaykh Osama al-Rifa'i ('Abd al-Karim's eldest son) gives a lesson in his mosque's basement, recently fitted out like university classrooms. Reserved for the elite of Zayd's followers, the lesson draws about 200 people, most of them movement shaykhs and devoted merchants.⁷³ Similar examples of daily, intimate contacts between Zayd's leaders and the (wealthy) faithful could be given for every mosque run by the movement, from courses on the jurisprudence of commercial transactions to seminars on Islamic banking.

Illustrating the symbiosis between Zayd and the private sector was the *mawlid* organized by merchants of the Bab Srije suq in early April 2007. Located next to the Zayd bin Thabit mosque, Bab Srije was the very first stronghold of 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i's movement in the 1950s. The celebration took place in a street illuminated by fairy lights and covered with streamers and flags in praise of the Prophet. Hundreds of local shopkeepers sat on plastic chairs watching hymn singers and dervishes whirling in front of the stage. Standing in the spotlight, Shaykh Sariya al-Rifa'i addressed the audience with a speech praising the values of the "Muslim merchant," a frequent topic in his discourse:

O People of this neighborhood! O merchants of this neighborhood! . . . God is the one who plants the love of things in your heart, so that you love money, work, and take care of your family. On the other hand, if you become an ascetic in this world, if you quit working, if you give up the love of money, if you stay in the mosque, do you think you will be rewarded? . . . In no way, my dear brothers! In fact, it is when you work in the suq that you worship God, provided that you abide by the rules of shari'a.⁷⁴

Our fieldwork observations suggest that Zayd's growing charitable role does not change the distinctly middle bourgeois character of its following. This is not surprising: as Janine Clark accurately puts it, charities are more of a *raison d'être* for middle-class networks than a means to recruit the poor into Islamic movements. At best, Hifz al-Ni'ma and its likes may have expanded the group's working-class clientele, but Zayd's clerics are far from turning into populist preachers. Probably attentive to the opinion of his merchant supporters, Sariya al-Rifa'i often derides the "profiteers" among the city's beggars and vows to replace distribution-oriented charities with a "workfare" system.⁷⁵

Zayd's popularity among conservative Sunni Damascenes also has a political dimension because in the public's view its leaders maintain a safe distance from the regime. Since the beginning of the current decade, however, authorities have tried to get into the movement's good graces by giving it freer rein, not least in the charitable realm. As a result, Zayd's political behavior has become somewhat ambiguous.

AMBIGUOUS RELATIONS WITH THE REGIME

During the last few years, Zayd has engaged in a delicate balancing act. As political and administrative restrictions soften, the movement must maintain antiestablishment credentials accumulated through a stormy history. The difference between Zayd and proregime groups such as the Kaftariyya is not a matter of religious doctrine because both belong to the Syrian mainstream of Islam defined by Ash'ari theology, observance of one of the four Sunni schools of law (in this case Shafi'i), and Sufism. It is rather a problem of political stance and, above all, historical record.

Since its emergence in the 1950s, Zayd's middle-class organization has always behaved as a social movement dedicated to education rather than direct political action, an approach similar to that of the Turkish Nurcu groups.⁷⁶ However, it has also displayed an obvious awareness of (and interest in) the ideas of contemporary Islamist thinkers like Mustafa al-Siba'i, the first leader of the Syrian Muslim Brothers, and Abu al-A'la Mawdudi, founder of the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami.⁷⁷

During the Islamic awakening of the 1970s, Zayd's large mosque network and focus on young, educated middle-class Syrians put it in a good position to attract parts of the following of the banned Muslim Brothers. Despite al-Rifa'i's death in 1973, the movement had become the city's largest religious organization when, near the end of the decade, militant Islamists began to clash with the security apparatus. Although Zayd's leaders refrained from taking a stance in the conflict, armed groups recruited some of their young adepts. This eventually forced the movement's leading figures, including al-Rifa'i's two sons, Osama and Sariya, into exile in Saudi Arabia. From 1981 to the mid-1990s, Zayd's activities were almost completely frozen. Yet the network survived in Damascus thanks to older and second-rank leaders who were allowed to stay.

Along with several other exiled 'ulama', al-Rifa'i's sons came back in the mid-1990s in a context of limited political decompression.⁷⁸ The movement slowly regained its strength, and at the beginning of the current decade, the postsuccession regime started to give it freer rein in order to widen support among significant parts of the capital's pious bourgeoisie and clerical circles beyond traditional allies such as the Kaftaru network and Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti.

In 2002, Bashar al-Asad privately visited Shaykh Osama al-Rifa'i, Zayd's highest spiritual authority.⁷⁹ This gesture of respect was significant because the president traditionally limits himself to receiving 'ulama' in his palace or meeting them during public celebrations. In practical terms, Zayd has obtained the agreement of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqāf*) to raise funds for its charitable projects at the exit of Friday prayer.⁸⁰ The movement also reportedly managed to gain control over new mosques, replacing their previous staffs, a move that could only be accomplished with the authorities' help.⁸¹ Zayd's members who have made their way to midlevel administrative positions include Haytham al-Idlibi, national director of the Hafiz al-Assad Institute for the Memorization of the Qur'an, and Ziyad Musalli, appointed in 2008 as director of religious endowments in the Damascus Countryside province.⁸²

To date, however, hopes of a full, Kaftaru-like cooptation have been misplaced, because the state's favors have not succeeded in turning Zayd into a mouthpiece of the regime. The regime's goodwill has not prevented the al-Rifa'i brothers from challenging two requirements usually imposed on state-supported religious actors: to refrain from cross-sector attacks against secular rivals and to constantly display signs of deference to the president. In fact, Osama and Sariya al-Rifa'i have not hesitated to publicly vilify articles by secular-minded journalists of the official daily *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution) whether from their *minbar* or in the pages of the Ministry of Religious Endowments' journal.⁸³ On two occasions, the security apparatus even bowed to Osama al-Rifa'i's (and al-Buti's) demands to move against the secular trend, seizing an anti-hijab book in the country's bookshops in November 2005 and withdrawing authorizations for two feminist associations (including one linked to a proregime branch of the Communist Party) in early 2007.⁸⁴

Moreover, Zayd's improved relations with the regime did not turn into open support. Its leaders' public attitude toward the state leadership has remained somewhat lukewarm. For instance, some of Zayd's Friday preachers do not ask their audience to invoke God for "our president, Bashar al-Asad" but rather use euphemistic expressions like "the holders of rights upon us." In a similar vein, although the Kaftaru Academy organized a massive celebration on the occasion of the president's reelection in May 2007, Zayd leaders

adopted a much lower profile during the "Yes" campaign. Beside the Zayd mosque, a discreet banner bore the slogan "Yes to the first supporter of charitable work." As for Osama al-Rifa'i, he straightforwardly linked the national leadership's legitimacy to the embrace of an Islamic agenda. During a *mawlid* attended by several thousand people, he said the following:

I must warn the leaders in our country . . . that their power . . . springs from the *umma*. Thus, since this *umma* has come back to its religion . . . those leaders have no other choice but to reflect the desire of their people and to raise the flag of Islam. Indeed, their [future] position depends on their return to God . . . and to the desire of the *umma*. . . . If they don't reflect this desire, they will lose their credibility and in the end, they will lose everything in this world . . . and God will replace them with better people.⁸⁵

EPILOGUE

In August 2008, the recently appointed minister of religious endowments, Muhammad 'Abd al-Sattar al-Sayyid, announced the end of "the era of anarchy," hinting at an authoritarian turn in the regime's religious policy. Projected measures strengthened the state's control over Islamic teaching in the country and targeted charitable activities by forbidding mosques from holding *mawā'id al-raḥmān* (tables of the merciful, that is, public fast breaking where food is provided for the poor).⁸⁶ On 27 September, a car bombing that killed seventeen in a Damascus suburb provided the ministry with the excuse to widen the scope of its plan by imposing complete ministerial control over private shari'a institutes and dismissing the country's Muslim clerics, including Sariya and Osama al-Rifa'i, from charitable associations' boards of directors. Authorities chose substitutes from three-candidate lists that each concerned 'ālim was asked to provide.⁸⁷ Although the president received a delegation of Muslim scholars protesting these measures, it quickly appeared that the "ministerial" decision in fact emanated from the Ba'th Party's National Security Bureau and was thus virtually irrevocable.

Although the causes of this sudden change on the part of the regime are not clear, it has been facilitated by the improvement of Syria's international position in 2008, notably, with Hizbullah's military takeover of West Beirut in May, Bashar al-Asad's official visit to Paris in July, and signs of a coming resumption of the dialogue with the United States. Bolstered by its progress on the international arena, the regime appears to feel strong enough to withdraw some of its earlier concessions to the 'ulama', demonstrating that the regime has never been at ease with Muslim scholars' expanding role in the private welfare sector. That dismissed clerics were allowed to suggest the names of their substitutes, however, suggests that authorities remain concerned not to irreparably damage the symbolic capital charities need to raise funds. Whether the private sector will be as willing to contribute to charitable associations as before remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian regime is often depicted as an all-powerful force that manipulates compliant social actors and suppresses restive ones. In contrast, our article shows that the Ba'thist leadership, in its bid to perpetuate itself, draws on the help of domestic partners it has chosen rather unwillingly.

Strained by population growth and inefficient economic structures, the regime has tolerated the expansion of the private welfare sector from the late 1990s on. Parallel to this process, the state's quest for domestic legitimacy has led it to improve its relations with some of the more popular religious forces that had been targeted by the early 1980s state repression. The combination of these two dynamics resulted in the Zayd movement's control of Damascus's most powerful charities. Despite Zayd's background of strained relations with the state as well as its leaders' continuous rebellious posture, the group's incomparable hold on the Damascene pious bourgeoisie left decision makers with no credible private welfare alternative. This is the paradox behind the government's quiet acceptance of the "charitable empire" run by Zayd.

Despite accounts of political meddling in the choice of the associations' beneficiaries, the expansion of Zayd's charitable activities cannot be seen as a mere extension of the reach of the state. The Syrian leadership certainly tries to co-opt Zayd (as illustrated by the 2002 presidential visit to Osama al-Rifa'i), but the movement does not allow itself to be drawn too far in this direction and continues to display a politically independent stance. Indeed, Muslim scholars must act very cautiously when exploiting administrative and political privileges obtained in exchange for their contribution to social stability to avoid appearing to be "in bed" with the regime—two conflicting constraints we identified as the cause of Zayd's ambiguous political attitude. Yet the state administration has continued to facilitate the movement's welfare activities during most of the last decade, encouraging de facto the growing influence of an independent religious actor.

As far as we can judge, the government policy tightening of October 2008 was limited because the 'ulama' dismissed from the charity boards have been allowed to propose their substitutes, thus maintaining an indirect control over the associations. Moreover, Zayd-linked but businessmen-led organizations such as the UCA-D seem untouched by these measures.

The ability to provide efficient welfare services is often used to explain the popularity of Islamic movements. In this article we have turned this argument on its head by suggesting that Zayd's following should be seen as the source rather than the result of its success in charitable activities. Zayd's wide middle-class constituency stems from the movement's conception of *da'wa*. Where other religious institutions concentrated on training future 'ulama', Zayd targeted laypeople and privileged popular education. Through decades of mosque building and patient grassroots proselytizing, the movement has built a social base that is unique in Damascus. Without this submerged part of Zayd's activities (its day-to-day work for *da'wa*), the more visible part (rapid expansion of charitable activities) would not be conceivable in Syria.

There are thus clear limits to the strategy of "authoritarian upgrading" in Syria. The Ba'ath regime does not possess the material and symbolic resources that could make development of private welfare politically risk free by allowing for direct state control over the social dynamics underpinning charitable activities. The private sector's most reliable sources of funding are small- and medium-sized, noncrony entrepreneurs. These businessmen predominantly give their money to Muslim scholars whose popularity derives from their independent political stance as well as from more strictly religious causes. The most efficient private welfare providers, in other words, are those over whom the government has the least political control.

The development of private welfare also strengthens the position of charitable associations' leaders vis-à-vis the state, provided those leaders—as in Zayd's case—draw their funding from a large popular base that limits the possibilities of instrumentalization by the regime. The wider impact of this process is ambivalent: it stabilizes the unsteady Syrian authoritarian system by alleviating its religious legitimacy problem as well as by absorbing poverty-related tensions in a politically critical social segment but brings unreliable elements into the state-supporting elite coalition.

The rise of the Zayd movement does not mean that the Syrian state is "going Islamic" or that a significant change in the balance of power is coming. It points, more simply, to the fact that the regime has widened its support to include a religious force whose large popular and economic base allows it to deal with the authorities on the basis of a partnership rather than a patron–client relationship.

NOTES

¹The title *Hajj* ("pilgrim") is theoretically given to someone who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. In Syria, as a more general way to emphasize piety, it is traditionally used for merchants.

²Observation by the authors, 27 April 2007.

³For a history of Syrian associations since the French Mandate, see Soukaina Boukhaima, "Le mouvement associatif en Syrie," in *Pouvoirs et associations dans le monde arabe*, ed. Sarah Ben Nefissa (Paris: CNRS édition, 2002), 77–94. On Syrian secular NGOs in the early 2000s, see Mathieu Le Saux, "Les dynamiques contradictoires du champ associatif syrien," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 115–16 (2006): 193–209. For an overview of recent works on Islamic charities, see "Conflict and Development," *ISIM Review* 20 (2007): 4–19.

⁴On Kaftaru, see Annabelle Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany: Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, 1998). For the post-1997 period, see Leif Stenberg, "Young, Male and Sufi Muslim in the City of Damascus," in *Youth and Youth Culture in the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Jørgen Bæck Simonsen (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 68–91.

⁵Benoît Challand, "A *Nahḍa* of Charitable Organizations? Health Service Provision and the Politics of Aid in Palestine," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40 (2008): 227–47.

⁶See, for instance, Sami Zubaida, "Islam, the State and Democracy: Contrasting Conceptions of Society in Egypt," *Middle East Report* 179 (1992): 2–10.

⁷Janine A. Clark, *Islam, Charity and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004). See also Iman Farag, *Croyance et intérêt: Réflexion sur deux associations islamiques* (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1992).

⁸See Béatrice Hibou, *Privatising the State* (London: Hurst, 2004), 38–39; Charles Tripp, "State, Elites and the 'Management of Change,'" in *The State and Global Change: The Political Economy of Transition in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Hasan Hakimian and Ziba Moshaver (London: Curzon, 2001), 211–31.

⁹Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Saban Center Analysis Paper 13 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2007), VII.

¹⁰Amélie Le Renard, "Pauvreté et charité en Arabie Saoudite: La famille royale, le secteur des affaires et 'l'État-Providence,'" *Critique internationale* 41 (2008): 137–56.

¹¹Daniela Pioppi, *From Religious Charity to the Welfare State and Back: The Case of Islamic Endowments (waqfs) Revival in Egypt*, EUI Working Papers RSCAS 32 (Florence: EUI, 2004).

¹²Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism*, 8; Le Saux, "Les dynamiques contradictoires," 197.

¹³The Ministry of Social Affairs allocates a yearly grant of S£20,000 (around \$400) to every charitable association. Buthayna 'Awad, "Hal Turid al-Hukuma an Tatakhalasa min Fuqara'iha?" (Does the Government Want to Get Rid of its Poor?), *Abyad wa Aswad* 225 (May 2007): 2–4.

¹⁴One of the very rare exceptions is the preregime Kaftaru Academy, which receives formal financing from the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. See *al-Thawra*, 2 February 2007, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=17138424020070201195055 (accessed 1 February 2008).

¹⁵Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁶The roots of this lack of legitimacy are too complex to be discussed here, but the regime's authoritarian nature; its rural, socialist, and secular origins; and the dominance of the Alawite minority at the highest levels of power are all contributing factors.

¹⁷For Iran, see, for instance, Ahmad Ashraf, "Bazaar–Mosque Alliance: The Social Basis of Revolts and Revolutions," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 1 (1988): 538–67.

¹⁸Thomas Pierret, "Sunni Clergy Politics in Syria," in *Demystifying Syria*, ed. Fred Lawson (London: Saqi Books, forthcoming).

¹⁹Muhammad Hasan al-Humsi, *Al-Du'at wa-l-Da'wa al-Islamiyya al-Mu'asira al-Muntaliqa min Masajid Dimashq* (Preachers and Contemporary Islamic Call Stemming from Damascus's Mosques), 2 vols. (Damascus: Dar al-Rashid, 1991), 1:263–82.

²⁰Boukhaima, "Le mouvement associatif," 83–85.

²¹The Muslim Brothers retained a relatively important influence on the ground through semiclandestine networks until the 1979–82 uprising, when they were eradicated through bloody state repression. Even though the movement's London-based leadership still constitutes the main component of the exiled opposition, the Muslim Brothers have probably ceased to exist as an organization at the domestic level; there has been no report of dismantling an active cell for about two decades. Since the 1990s, most of the Islamic activists jailed in Syria belong to the Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Liberation Party) and Jihadi networks.

²²Abd al-Rahman Habannaka, *Al-Walid al-Da'iya al-Murabbi al-Shaykh Hassan Habannaka al-Midani* (My Father the Preacher and Educator Shaykh Hassan Habannaka al-Midani) (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Basha'ir, 2002), 228–302.

²³Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995), 50–53.

²⁴Philippe Droz-Vincent, *Moyen-Orient: Pouvoirs autoritaires, sociétés bloquées* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 240–43.

²⁵Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 271–72.

²⁶Hans Hopfinger and Marc Boeckler, "Step by Step to an Open Economic System: Syria Sets Course for Liberalization," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23 (1996): 183–202.

²⁷*Al-Thawra*, 10 June 2005, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=102583488720050610015327 (accessed 1 February 2008).

²⁸Observation by the authors.

²⁹Observations by the authors in Damascene mosques during the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, 4, 9, and 15 April 2007.

³⁰In May 2008, however, the government decided to set a maximum quantity of subsidized fuel available to each family.

³¹United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Poverty in Syria 1996–2004: Diagnosis and Pro-Poor Policy Considerations* (Damascus: UNDP, 2005), 12.

³²Samir Aita, *Syria Country Profile: The Road Ahead for Syria* (Cairo: Economic Research Forum, 2006), 2:21–22. In the spring of 2008, salaries were increased by 25 percent. See *al-Thawra*, 5 May 2008, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=83807347620080505010042 (accessed 1 February 2008).

³³UNDP, *Poverty in Syria*, 23.

³⁴Oxford Business Group, "Syria: 2007 Year in Review," 15 January 2008, <http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/weekly01.asp?id=3562> (accessed 1 February 2008).

³⁵*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 15 September 2007, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=6&article=437103&issueno=10518> (accessed 1 February 2008).

³⁶We thank Laura Ruiz de Elvira for this information, which she obtained from a Syrian researcher working for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. The ministry denies formal access to its own register of licensed associations. Approximate figures sometimes given to the media do not differentiate charitable associations from cultural, professional, sports, and housing ones.

³⁷Ittihad al-Jam'iyyat al-Khayriyya bi-Dimashq.

³⁸Awad, "Hal Turid al-Hukuma," 4.

³⁹We consider associations "Sunni Muslim" on the basis of at least one of the following criteria: a name referring to Islam, headquarters located in a mosque, or a board that includes clerics.

⁴⁰*Al-Hayat*, 5 January 2006, <http://www.daralhayat.com/special/features/01-2006/Item-20060104-96c4b119-c0a8-10ed-0025-b64d4f24edab/story.html> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁴¹SANA, 19 May 2008, <http://sana.sy/ara/7/2008/05/19/175097.htm> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁴²*Al-Fida*³ (Hama), 6 February 2006, http://fedaa.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=9409836920080205220920 (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁴³*Official Website of the Hama Governorate*, 23 July 2006, <http://www.hama.ws/NewsDetails.asp?NewsID=295> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁴⁴Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Syrian Expatriates Return Home in Hopes of New Wealth," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 29 December 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1227/p04s02-wome.html> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁴⁵UCA-D, *Al-Taqrir al-Sanawi li-Ittihad al-Jam'iyat al-Khayriyya bi-Dimashq* [Annual Report of the UCA-D], 2007, 11.

⁴⁶An example of these small Islamic charities is the al-Ta'awun association, which, in 2007, was giving an average monthly benefit of S£1,000 each to 650 families of the Baghdad Street quarter (‘Awad, "Hal Turid al-Hukuma," 2).

⁴⁷This is the case with al-Ghayth, launched in 2004 by disciples of Ahmad Kaftaru's right-hand man Rajab Dib, and al-Shahba' Association, founded in 2005 by Aleppo's Islamic MP ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Shami.

⁴⁸Hifz al-Ni‘ma's official website, <http://www.hifz.org/home.htm> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁴⁹Observations by the authors, Damascus, 2006.

⁵⁰Sariya al-Rifa‘i, Friday sermon, Zayd bin Thabit mosque, Damascus, 2 March 2007.

⁵¹*Reuters* (Arabic), 4 October 2006, http://www.all4syria.biz/index.html/index.php?item=view_article&id=3411 (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁵²*Al-Thawra*, 28 July 2006, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=952921620060727221614 (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁵³*Al-Thawra*, 19 May 2006, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=55883001220060518225003 (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁵⁴Al-Humsi, *Al-Du‘at wa-l-Da‘wa*, 1: 267.

⁵⁵The three are middle industrialists descended from old local merchant families. ‘Umar Mukhallalati, a clothing manufacturer and a member of the Damascus Chamber of Industry, runs two shops in the Old City's suq. ‘Umar Sayrawan is also involved in the textile industry and trade. He is the brother of Jamal, one of ‘Abd al-Karim al-Rifa‘i's most prominent disciples, who has lived in exile in Saudi Arabia since 1981. Safuh Al-Samman owns an ironmongery factory. Other directors stemming from well-known merchant upper-middle-class families are Mustafa al-Hakim and Safuh al-Nuri.

⁵⁶UCA-D, *Al-Taqrir al-Sanawi*.

⁵⁷From the 1950s to the 1970s, Zayd had a sister organization in Aleppo (Jama‘at Abi Dharr), which was founded and run by local ‘ulama' from the al-Bayanuni family.

⁵⁸SANA, 19 May 2008, <http://sana.sy/ara/7/2008/05/19/175097.htm> (accessed 1 February 2008); SANA, 13 October 2005, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=54411212620051012230519 (accessed 1 February 2008); for Sunduq al-‘Afiya in Homs, see *Al-Thawra*, 14 August 2006, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=99672875020060813231123 (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁵⁹For an analysis of the rationale of a similar project, see Quintan Wiktorowicz and Suha Taji Farouki, "Islamic NGOs and Muslim Politics: A Case from Jordan," *Third World Quarterly* 21 (2000): 685–99.

⁶⁰UCA-D, *Sunduq al-Mawadda wa-l-Rahma* (Damascus: UCA-D, 2007).

⁶¹Observation by the authors, Damascus, 30 March 2007.

⁶²UCA-D, *Sunduq al-Mawadda wa-l-Rahma*; Salwa al-Ustuwani, "Al-Ni‘ma . . . Maladh Fuqara' Suriya (Al-Ni‘ma . . . The Refuge of Syria's Poor)," *Islam Online*, 8 July 2004, <http://www.islamonline.net/arabic/economics/2004/07/article02.shtml> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁶³Dar al-Iman is not clearly associated with any specific Islamic network, but its board of directors includes at least one merchant closely linked to Zayd, Anwar Jum‘a Zabadina.

⁶⁴I‘faf, "Al-Mustafidun" (The Beneficiaries), (dead link, accessed 1 July 2008).

⁶⁵‘Awad, "Hal Turid al-Hukuma," 4.

⁶⁶Interviews by the authors, Damascus, 14, 21, and 22 June 2007.

⁶⁷Discussion with the authors, 6 May 2008.

⁶⁸Discussion with the authors, Damascus, 14 August 2007.

⁶⁹Observation by the authors, Damascus, July 2007.

⁷⁰Interview with an adept of Zayd, Damascus, 6 May 2008.

⁷¹Instead of following a preexisting Sufi tradition, Zayd has set up its own mystical rituals, both individual and collective, by picking up *awrad* (litanies) from the Qur'an and Sunna.

⁷²Sada Zayd, “Ra’yuhu fi al-‘Ulum al-Kawniyya wa-Hadd Tullabihi ‘ala al-Nubugh fiha” (His Opinion on Worldly Sciences and His Exhorting His Students to Distinguish Themselves in Them), 9 April 2008, <http://www.sadazaid.com/home/play.php?catsmktba=2990> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁷³Observation and interview by the authors, Damascus, 5 March 2007.

⁷⁴Observation by the authors, Damascus, 4 April 2007.

⁷⁵Sariya al-Rifa‘i, Friday sermon, Zayd bin Thabit Mosque, 1 December 2006.

⁷⁶During the periods of parliamentarianism that preceded the 1963 coup, al-Rifa‘i forbade his followers from running in elections but openly supported candidates from both bourgeois-nationalist and Islamist parties. See Sada Zayd, “Mawqifuhu min al-Siyasa wa-l-Siyasiyyin (His Position Regarding Politics and the Politicians),” 9 April 2008, <http://www.sadazaid.com/play.php?catsmktba=2991> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁷⁷See for instance Sariya al-Rifa‘i’s praise of al-Siba‘i in *All for Syria* (e-newsletter), 9 September 2007, http://www.all4syria.biz/index.html/index.php?item=view_article&id=7364 (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁷⁸Raymond Hinnebusch, “Calculated Decompression as a Substitute for Democratization: Syria,” in *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, ed. Baghat Korany, Rex Brynne, and Paul Noble (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 223–40.

⁷⁹Interviews (names withheld by request), Damascus, August 2007.

⁸⁰Sariya al-Rifa‘i, Friday sermon, Zayd bin Thabit mosque, Damascus, 2 March 2007. In 2007, money collected in mosques constituted 40 percent of the UCA-D’s income. See *al-Thawra*, 6 January 2005, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=2477707820050105203020 (accessed 1 February).

⁸¹Interviews (names withheld by request), Damascus, May 2007.

⁸²Al-Fath Online, “Al-Akhbar (News),” 16 April 2008, <http://www.alfatihonline.com> (accessed 1 February 2008).

⁸³*Al-Jamal*, 9 July 2006, <http://www.aljaml.com/node/3713> (accessed 1 February 2008); Sariya al-Rifa‘i, “Risala min Nahj al-Islam ila al-Thawra” (Message from Nahj al-Islam to al-Thawra), *Nahj al-Islam* 107 (2007): 20–22.

⁸⁴*Akhbar al-Sharq*, 11 January and 11 February 2007; Syrian feminist activist (name withheld by request), interview with the authors, Damascus, 13 May 2007.

⁸⁵Osama al-Rifa‘i, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim al-Rifa‘i mosque, Damascus, 31 March 2007.

⁸⁶*Cham Press*, 28 August 2008.

⁸⁷*Al-Thawra*, 31 October 2008, http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=18551902020081030210027 (accessed 1 February 2008); Damascus Center for Theoretical and Civil Rights Studies, 12 November 2008, <http://www.dctcrs.org/s5178.htm> (accessed 1 February 2008).