

Development in Syria:
A Gender and Minority Perspective



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DEVELOPMENT IN SYRIA: A GENDER AND MINORITY PERSPECTIVE

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CONTENTS

Foreword	7
Summary	9
Part 1: INTRODUCTION	13
Content	13
Structure	14
Clarifications	15
Part 2: THE SYRIAN STATE	17
Chapter I: Syria - General Considerations	17
Geography	17
Religion and language	18
Ethnic composition	21
History	22
The al-Assads in power	27
Chapter II: Syrian State Structure	31
Syrian political system	31
Syrian Foreign Relations and the Kurds	38
Kurds and other Minorities and the State	48
The Kurds of Syria	49
Chapter III: Women and the State	53
The Ba'ath and the legal status of Kurdish and other women	53
Education	56
Women and access to contraception	59

Patterns of employment	60
Women's voices	61
Part 3: THE EUPHRATES BASIN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MINORITY WOMEN OF THE REGION	65
Chapter IV: Jazeera and the Euphrates Basin Development Project	65
History of Jazeera	65
New Arabist and Socialist measures and their impact on the Kurds	67
The Euphrates Basin Development Project (EBDP)	69
Changes in the Jazeera	73
Syria, Turkey and Iraq: Sharing the Euphrates waters	76
Chapter V: Land Reform, Agrarian Reform, Irrigation and the Effect on Women	79
The Land Reform	79
The Agrarian Reform	80
Irrigation	84
Migration	85
Feminisation of poverty	90
Domestic and Public Spheres	91
Chapter VI: Dams, Pilot farms and Women	95
The Atthawra Dam	95
Displacement	101
Pilot Farms	105
The introduction of technology	108
Exclusion of Women from Technological Advances	112
Gender division of labour	113

Part 4: CITIZENSHIP	115
Chapter VII: Ba'ath Improvements for Kurds and Other Minority Women?	115
Gender issues in the Euphrates Basin Development Project	115
The feminist rhetoric: women and modernity	118
Tradition v Modernity	112
Nation and Citizenship	123
Recommendations	127
APPENDIX: General information and vital statistics	129
BIBLIOGRAPHY	133

FOREWORD

This report presents the findings of a two-year research analysis into the impact of Syria's development policies on the most disadvantaged groups including women, minorities and internally displaced persons (IDPs), complemented by a fact-finding mission to the Kurdish regions of northeastern Syria in February 2005.

During the 1960s the Syrian government implemented land and agrarian reforms and water management projects such as the introduction of an irrigation scheme. The mission revealed that these policies had various adverse effects on the daily lives of some of the most disadvantaged groups. Women faced increased responsibilities – with less support – as a result of the increased phenomenon of male migration away from rural areas in search of profitable employment. Discrimination in water distribution and property rights further aggravated this situation for women and Kurds.

Furthermore, the construction of the Attawra dam and Lake Assad led, among other issues, to the displacement of an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 people, the majority being Kurds. Kurds were denied the full rights to property, citizenship, loans, state employment and management, state benefits, access to health systems and education. The most fortunate were assigned plots of land in the east of Syria, often in dry and infertile areas. Others were relocated to northeast Syria as part of the Arabization campaign. Displaced groups were given no or very little compensation for their economic losses, paving the way for many displaced Syrian and Kurdish women into deeper poverty and further gender exploitation. Displacement also carried with it a loss of culture, an aspect that could not be compensated. For many Syrian and Kurdish women, the loss of kinship and community ties meant less freedom overall.

This analysis concludes that many of the state's agrarian reforms have discriminated on the basis of gender, and many of its development plans have been gender blind.

Recent political changes within Syria and Iraq as well as the change in relationships with other neighbouring countries and an improving relationship with the US, are having a fundamental impact on Kurdish women living in Syria. KHRP urges the authorities to address the problem of discrimination against women in any forthcoming reforms, particularly to address the imbalance between the situation of rural and of urban women. Certain developments currently in planning for

northeast Syria will provide an opportunity to rectify previous mistakes in gender-blind development projects and in the denial of citizenship rights.

Kerim Yildiz

Executive Director

SUMMARY

Development in Syria: a gender and minority perspective

This report presents the findings of a two-year research analysis into the impact of Syria's development policies on the most disadvantaged groups including women, minorities and internally displaced persons (IDPs), complemented by a fact-finding mission to the Kurdish regions of northeastern Syria in February 2005.

The recent withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the shifting situation in Iraq and the improving relationship with the US, are likely to prompt Syria into introducing new economic and social policies in near future. This may create an opportunity for President Bashar al-Assad to resolve the problem of gender-blind development planning and to implement fuller recognition of women's citizenship rights.

The Euphrates Basin Development Project introduced agricultural reforms, irrigation, damming and pilot farms and was aimed at increasing agricultural production and food security. Inspired by "socialist ideology", the Syrian Ba'ath government introduced policies in the fertile Jazeera region in the 1960s, aimed at bringing greater equality among citizens by ostensibly distributing the economic means to take part in constructing the future of Syria. However, this analysis has suggested that Kurds, the largest minority in the northeast, and women were excluded from this process.

The land and agrarian reforms increased migration of male farmers to cities, in search for more profitable jobs. During the early 1990s, major water shortages were experienced in regions including Jazeera as a result of a scheme of dams in southeast Turkey, the Southeast Anatolia Project, that impeded the cross-border flow of water. This had an impact on the sustainability of the region and its agricultural economy; today, eight in every ten men in a village close to Al-Bab migrate to cities to find work. With so many men migrating, the consequent impact on women's workload is evident. The lack of recognition of women's agricultural work at local, government and international levels creates daily obstacles for women, despite more than half of women labourers being occupied in the agricultural sector.

In order to sustain their families, many women additionally work as wage-labourers. Without protection of labour laws, many women and young children are exploited as cheap agricultural wage labourers. This analysis shows that women receive 75 per cent of the money male workers do and are sometimes forced to start unwanted relationships with men in order to survive. Despite having to work harder and longer, no improvements of women's property rights in law have been made. Male farmers are the only ones entitled to land and water access rights. Women generally rely on their husbands to obtain seeds, and other agricultural products, all of which are supplied by the State. They are sold only to the person officially in possession of the land. Combined a denial of citizenship rights affecting thousands of Kurdish women, many find themselves unable to own the land they work on. Furthermore, selling agricultural products is only permitted to men, as the State only buys crops from the land owners. This situation puts women in a disempowered position of legal and economic dependency. It is exacerbated by the fact that women and Kurdish groups face discrimination regarding water distribution. Distribution of water and other entitlements were often cancelled once the husbands migrate. Women are faced with uncertainty of a prosperous harvest due to their lack of security of regular water supply.

The construction of the Attawra dam, by 1974, was a means for increasing popular support for the Ba'ath government and creating a symbol of patriotism. It was supposed to produce electricity for industries and villages as well as maintain a reliable flow of water for fields. Its success was limited and led to environmental and health problems. Moreover, the dam led to the displacement of 60,000 to 70,000 Kurds in the Jazeera region. The Syrian State denied Kurds their rights to property, citizenship, loans, state employment and management, state benefits, access to health systems and education. Some who were 'lucky' were assigned plots of land in the east of Syria; often in dry and infertile areas while others were relocated in the northeast of Syria as part of an Arabization campaign. Displaced groups were given no or very little compensation for their economic losses leading to further impoverishment of displaced Syrian women and Kurdish groups.

The al-Hasake census expropriated land from 200,000 Kurds. Most of the land was rented out or sold to private owners. Those who received a plot of land had to abide to the farming laws of the State and buy seeds and fertilizers from the government. Procurement prices were often under the cost of production leading to greater poverty. Rather than creating greater equality, the land reforms made medium sized landowners more prosperous.

Women were excluded from receiving property during the displacement. Without official entitlements, women in particular, lost also all unofficial user rights held in

their community. These were not reimbursed and led to further disempowerment.

On an international level the Attawra dam proved a major leverage for power. Turkey used its' control of the Euphrates waters to exercise political pressure on Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, Syria used its support for Kurds to conduct water negotiations with Turkey. Nationally, the Ba'ath government used a discourse of natural scarcity to justify unequal water distribution, thereby affecting the lives of so many women and other minorities. In particular Kurdish girls experienced the most adverse social effects of Syria's development policies. Many Kurdish families cannot not afford to give more than one child school education; a privilege usually given to the son of the family. Many girls drop out of school to help their families take care of younger siblings, fetch water and do household chores. The lack of education reduces the options open to Kurdish girls who often end up marry at an early age.

Displacement carried with it a loss of culture, through change of diet, community and economic activities. Especially Kurdish communities, who rely on the holiness of natural places and were faced with xenophobic feelings of communities living there already, made resettling difficult. Although few Kurds actually settled into cooperative or pilot farms, those who did, had to alter their lifestyle drastically. For religions and cultural reasons women were obliged to stay inside the home thus limiting the contact with the new community. The isolation prevented new ties from being formed and increased women's feelings of stress, seclusion and loss of identity. With no space for growing vegetables and tending livestock, women could no longer provide diverse meals with meat and dairy products. As a result, women became more dependent on their husband's money for providing meals. Pilot farms disappeared once the ideological and agricultural outcomes did not meet expectations of the Ba'ath party.

Ba'athist nationalist discourse promoted gender equality over the past decades in practice by, for example, recruiting women on the armed forces and inscribing in Article 49 of its constitution that women and men have equal citizenship rights. This analysis shows that the reality for women, especially those living in the Kurdish regions looks different. The gender discriminating agrarian reforms and gender blind development plans meant that Syrian Kurdish women suffered doubly, through state discrimination and gender discrimination.

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Content

The following report looks at the impact that state development projects in the Euphrates Basin had on the women living in the rural areas of Syria and in particular, the adverse effect that they have had on the Kurdish population.

Since the 1960s the state has implemented a number of reforms and development plans in agriculture and water management that have deeply changed the life of the Syrian farmer. In analysing the difficulties encountered by these farmers particular attention has been dedicated to gender and minority issues. The report highlights the contradiction between the intentions stated by the Syrian government with regard to women's emancipation and the actual achievements obtained in that direction by the government development plans.

While speaking of the need to decrease the gender unbalance and consider the women as fully-fledged citizens, the state has implemented a top-down development scheme that has damaged their position in society and in the family with long-term consequences. The current problematic organisation of the agriculture in the north east of Syria mirrors those developments. Feminisation of poverty¹ and feminisation of labour in agriculture² are just two of the numerous processes that are adversely affecting women's lives today and that were initiated by the state development plans. These plans need to be analysed for a proper understanding of the root-causes that determine the difficulties rural women are facing nowadays.

In this vein the report challenges purportedly 'essential' approaches used to justify several problems in the field of water and gender. Delivery of water is too often 'depoliticised' and environmental unbalances are blamed to justify its scarcity. This is often caused by power influences over distribution that reflect gender, ethnicity and social status biases. Similar processes 'naturalise' socially constructed issues such as the role of women in society, definitions of nation and citizens, and of modernity

1 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London)

2 Abdelali-Martini M., P. Goldey, Gwyn E. Jones and E. Bailey, 2003, "Towards a Feminisation of Agricultural Labour in Northwest Syria" in *Peasant Studies*, (Volume 30, Number 2), p 71-94.

and traditions.

An effort is made to theoretically explain the gap between the state's feminist rhetoric and its implementation. This is based on the manipulation of women's roles in Syrian society through the idiom of citizenship. The complex and multi-layered definition of citizenship created by the Ba'ath party allows a wide range of identities to be applied to the women at different times and according to different needs, shaped by the interactions among all social actors. Women, in this frame, become the 'mediators' between the state and the civil society. Their rights are often 'sacrificed' to achieve internal stability.

Structure

This report is structured in four parts, subdivided into chapters. Part I is this introduction, whereas the second part of the report supplies some general information about Syria, women and minorities. Chapter I briefly outlines Syrian geography, religions, ethnic composition and history. The second chapter looks at the Syrian socio/political system, the economy, the legal system, foreign affairs and attitudes towards the minorities, with particular attention to the Kurds. Chapter III highlights the situation of women in Syria, their legal status, education, control over their bodies, employment, and general freedom.

The third part of the report focuses on the Euphrates Basin Development Project. Chapter IV gives an overview of the Jazeera region and its history, and the changes resulting from the Euphrates Basin Development Project. The latter was implemented through many phases that are analysed in the following two chapters. Specific attention is paid to the impact of each phase on the life of the women. Chapter V looks at the land and agrarian reform, the irrigation system, the male migration and the growing feminisation of labour in agriculture. Essentialising approaches to the concepts of domestic and public sphere are challenged. These in fact provide an improbable clear-cut definition of the socio-geographical borders between the "private" and the "public". Women's life is often wrongly assigned to the domestic and women's influence in the public space is disregarded. The sixth chapter focuses on the socio/cultural impact of the construction of the Euphrates dam and the pilot farms, highlighting the connections between power and water and shows the gendered dimension of technology in connection to the gender division of labour.

The last part deals with concepts of citizenship, nation and modernity. Chapter VII starts with a summary of the practical consequences of the Euphrates Basin Development Project as presented in the previous pages of the report. It compares them with the state feminist rhetoric and proceeds to analyse discourses of

modernity and citizenship looking at the way they are constructed and continuously manipulated in the Syrian context.

Clarifications

A few clarifications are indispensable to fully-understand the pages that follow.

As already mentioned the report looks at the implementation of feminist rhetoric in development plans by the Syrian state. The 'feminism' of the Syrian government has little to do with the complex movement that developed in the 1970s. Nonetheless the Syrian state has adopted, at least in language, the basic demands of the feminism movements in matters of citizenship rights and gender social unbalances.

In this respect it is also important to highlight that social class, ethnicity, race, religion, involvement in the political spectrum and so on are all factors that influence the government's attitude toward women. Syrian women are a very heterogeneous group based on all the distinctive factors just mentioned. The report focuses on the women of the rural areas, and dedicates special attention to women of the minority groups, in particular Kurdish women. These can be discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic belonging, religion and social class in addition to gender discrimination.

It is also important to mention that this report focuses mainly on the negative consequences of state development on women. Thus, it tends to adopt a unilateral point of view mentioning only briefly women's active roles. Nonetheless it is of fundamental importance to recognise women's agency to contrast a false image of female victimization by the state and at the hands of men. Female counter-discourses are not analysed in the specific but they are part of the collective interactions between the state and its citizens analysed in the last chapter. This depicts women's roles as 'bargaining chips' in the negotiations between the government and the civil society.

This leads to a further point, that of Syrian civil society. Many deny the existence of civil society in Syria since (almost) all forms of social organisations are connected to the state. Nonetheless in the sporadic confrontations between the government and its citizens it is possible to see the emergence of a popular cohesion opposed to the state that I call civil society. This has at times shown its activism openly as in the case of the 'Damascus spring'. However it usually deals with the government in more covert ways. It is in the adaptation of government policies to people's demands that the strength of the civil society is visible. These processes are often determined by power relations.

Finally this study is not meant to be an anti-development effort. On the contrary, self-

determination of all peoples is its informing ideology. Nonetheless it is important to acknowledge the specific problems Syrian women encounter in the development process. In this way future plans can learn from past mistakes. Many of the issues raised by the report about gender are of global value but are delineated exclusively in the Syrian context since this was the focus-area of the report.

PART 2: THE SYRIAN STATE

CHAPTER I: SYRIA - GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Geography

Syria is situated in the Near Middle East neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Israel. It covers a surface of 185,180 square kilometres with a population of approximately 18 million people. The west of Syria has 180 kilometres of access to the Mediterranean Sea. This coastal area situated between Turkey and Lebanon is mainly agricultural. Thirty or forty kilometres from the coast a chain of mountains runs from North to South establishing the border with Lebanon in the Southern part. Between the mountains in the West and the desert in the East a narrow vertical region contains the most urban areas of Syria. The cities of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo run from South to North and host more than half the Syrian population. The economy of this area is mainly agricultural with little industrial development around the capital. The southeast is a large desert area except for a few oases and the fertile green strip of land to either side of the Euphrates River. The northeast, the Jazeera, is the region delimited by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. During the last decades the state has tried to boost an agricultural economy here. Qamishli, at the border with Turkey is the most populous city of the Jazeera.

Syria has typically Mediterranean weather with cold winters and hot summers. The western areas and a strip of land parallel to the Turkish border enjoy enough rain³ to sustain the agriculture. The rest of the country relies on its rivers and complex irrigation systems.

The Euphrates is the major river of the country. It originates in Turkey and enters Syria at Karkamis, then flows into Iraq; its length is 2.700 km. Seventeen per cent of the Euphrates Basin lies in Syria (40% in Iraq and 28% in Turkey)⁴. The River is

3 The annual precipitation in these areas varies from 300 to 600 mm.

4 Daoudy M., 2000, *Water, Institutions and Development in Syria: a Downstream Perspective from the Euphrates and Tigris* <http://www.dams.org/kbase/submission.showsub.php?rec=env108>

the major reserve for the agricultural economy of Syria. The Tigris constitutes the border between Turkey and Syria for 39 km before entering Iraq. It extends for 1,840 km and Syria contains 0.2% of its basin (Turkey 12% and Iraq 52%)⁵. Other minor rivers are the Sajur River, the Balikh and Khabur Rivers, the Qweiq River.

Syrian maps include in its borders also the Golan Heights that were occupied by Israel in the June 1967 war. The region of Antakia, in the North of the country, was 'donated' by the French to Turkey, in 1939. Syria recognised the loss of that land only in January 2005.

Religion and language

The majority of the Syrian population speaks Arabic. Turkish, Armenian, Kurmanji are spoken by the minorities. Aramaic is spoken only in few villages. English and French are becoming more popular, particularly among the younger generations.

Religious groups are numerous in Syria. Muslims comprise roughly 86% of the population. Sunni Muslims make up 74% of the population while Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims are only 63%⁶. In fact the majority of the Kurds, Turcomans and Circassians are Sunnis. Yazidis, Alawis, Shi'as, Ismailis and Druse constitute the rest of the Muslim population. Jews are a small number and Christians are around 12%.

Muslim minorities

One of the Syrian Muslim minorities is the Shi'as. Scia's split from the Sunnis over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad and the interpretation of the Sunna (the sayings of the Prophet). Sc'ias believe that only descendants from Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, and 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin, can hold the Imamate (the spiritual leadership). This was the reason for the split among Shi'a and Sunni Muslims after the death of Mohammad. Abu Bakr, in fact, was elected as his successor instead of 'Ali, supported by the Shi'a. Since then the Shi'a have a different lineage of Imamate. They believe in the existence of twelve Imams; the last one having disappeared in 878. Contrary to the Sunnis they strongly believe in the role of the Imam as a mediator between the believers and God. Today Shi'as reside mainly in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran.

Further clashes over the line of Imams split the Shi'a into smaller groups. The Ismailis have a long line of Imams, or Aga Khan, that extends to the present day.

5 Daoudy M., 2000, *Water, Institutions and Development in Syria: a Downstream Perspective from the Euphrates and Tigris* <http://www.dams.org/kbase/submission.showsub.php?rec=env108>

6 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p 3.

Their detachment from the Shi'a developed after the disagreement over the sixth Imam⁷.

The Alawis are the largest minority belonging to Islam. They account for 12% of the population. Their religion is close to Sc'ia and it was founded in the tenth century. According to the Alawis the Sc'ia Imam, Ibn Nusayr, was the last one of the lineage. Before his death the last Imam transmitted his knowledge to a group of successors that ceaselessly passed it on to younger generations of the initiated. The Alawis are a secret sect that often conceals its nature to avoid persecutions. Their religious duties are very different from those of Islam and seem to resemble Christian influences. Finally, Alawi women are totally excluded from the cult and hold, generally, a secondary role⁸.

Druse constitute 3% of the Syrian population. They are present also in Lebanon and Israel. Quite close to the Ismailis the Druse believe that the caliph al-Hakim that ruled Egypt during the Fatimid period was the incarnation of God. Since his death, in 1021, the community is waiting for him to come back to earth as a *mehdī* (chosen by Allah the *mehdī* will appear to save humankind before Judgment Day). Like the Alawis the Druse are a sect with few people that hold the religious knowledge. They follow the *Taqwa*, the right to conceal one's faith in case of religious persecutions.

A small percentage of the Syrian population are Yazidis. This group is often wrongly referred to as "devil's worshippers" because of their cult of the Devil Angel. Yazidis have a complex belief made of Christian, Muslim and Pagan elements. They go to Christian churches, fast in the Muslim way and have Sufi dances. The sect is quite closed to the outside; Yazidis believe they are the only people of the world to derive directly from Adam himself⁹. Yazidis are spread mainly among the Kurdish population.

Christian minorities

Christians comprise roughly 12% of the population. The largest number are Greek Orthodox followed by Greek Catholics and Syrian Orthodox. Smaller groups are Armenians, Maronites, Syrian Catholics and Protestants. They mainly live in the biggest cities and in some cases they use the same churches.

7 Bausani A., 1995, *L'Islam*. (Milano, Garzanti)

8 Filoramo G., 1999, *Islam*. (Bari, Editori Laterza)

9 Their tradition narrates the story of Eve and Adam who, competing with each other about the creation, kept their semen separate during the gestation. After nine months Eve produced only parasites while Adam had produced the Yazidis. (Filoramo G., 1999, *Islam*. (Bari, Editori Laterza))

Among the Orthodox groups the Syrian Orthodox, or Jacobites, use Syriac for their liturgy. The Greek Orthodox use Arabic and the Armenian Orthodox use classical Armenian. Armenian Orthodoxy is usually associated with the Armenian ethnic minority.

Among the Syrian, Greek and Armenian Catholics the same linguistic differences apply. The Maronites trace their origins back to St Maron or Maro (Arabic Marún), a Syrian hermit that lived along the banks of the Orontes, in Syria, in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. Maronites are monotheists and preach in Syriac. During the Crusades they encountered Roman Catholics and keep very strong ties with them to this day.

Jewish minorities

Jews live mainly in Damascus. They are currently a very small number in Syria (see below). Information about their cult and liturgy is extremely hard to find. Statistics about the ethnic or religious composition of Syria often do not report a Jewish presence at all.

Clashes among the sects

Religious clashes are quite rare in Syria. Historically Muslim, Christians and Jews lived peacefully together. Only in 1860 the Muslim population violently rebelled against the European influences and their protégés, the Christians and the Jews. These had been privileged for quite a while in commercial exchanges with Europe¹⁰.

In 1982 a serious religious clash between the State and the Muslim Brotherhood took place. The Secular Ba'ath party was worried about the Muslim Brotherhood activities and particularly its opposition to an Alawi president, Hafez al-Assad. The army surrounded the city of Hama, main centre of the Brotherhood, and killed 25,000 people.

The most recent conflict happened in 2000 between Bedouin shepherds and the Druse, in the South of Syria. The violence that resulted was motivated by disputes over grazing land, and was transformed into a religious/ethnic confrontation¹¹.

The Syrian state is generally open to religious minorities on the basis of its secular ideology. The constitution safeguards all religions; the president, though, must be Muslim. The al-Assad family belongs to a Muslim minority, the Alawis (sometimes this sect is considered by the Sunna as close to heresy). This has driven Hafez al-

10 Pipes, D. 1990, *Greater Syria: the History of Ambition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p22-23

11 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p6

Assad to look for the political support of the other religious groups in the country.

Ethnic composition

Syria has a diversified social composition. Almost 90% of its population is Arabic including also Bedouin groups that live in the desert. National and ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Turcomans, Jews and Palestinians constitute the remaining 10%.

The Armenians are a small minority that came to Syria mainly to escape the genocide committed by Turkey during WWI. They are Christian, speak Armenian and live mainly in Aleppo. The Circassians came from the Caucasus and are Sunni Muslims. The Turcomans are Sunnis native from Central Asia who speak Turkish.

The Jewish community amounted to roughly 5000 people in the 1950s and lived mainly in Damascus. With the creation of Israel the situation of Syrian Jews worsened notably. Afraid that the community could support Israel and generally foreign infiltration in Syria the latter forbade the Jews to travel abroad and even limited their movement inside the country. In 1992 the government granted the Jewish community passports and visas and a large majority of it moved to the US or Israel. Many say this was a tactical measure Syria adopted to improve its foreign image. Nowadays only a hundred Jews are still present in Syria¹².

The Palestinians are part of the same kind of political manoeuvres. After the death of President Hafez Al-Assad the police forced all the Palestinians of Damascus to come out on the streets in mourning. These fake demonstrations of loyalty to the president are in contrast with Palestinian unhappiness about their situation in Syria. Despite Ba'ath official rhetoric, which supports the Palestinian cause, Syrian Palestinians are under strict surveillance. Particularly suppressed are those political organisations that do not support the president. Palestinians amount to 400,000 people and mainly live on the outskirts of Damascus.

The Kurds in Syria are approximately 1.5 million and constitute quite a compact and large minority. They mainly live along the border with Turkey; some villages are to be found along the Euphrates River. Smaller numbers also live in Damascus and Aleppo. They speak Kurmangi even though the language was officially banned in 1986.

12

George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London)

History¹³

The definition of “Syria”

“Historical Syria” was the name that European countries assigned in the XIX century to the area roughly including what nowadays constitutes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, a small part of Turkey and Iraq. The term derived from “vilayet Suriyya”, the name used for the Damascus province during the Ottoman Empire when the area had been divided in four vertical zones. The expression “Historical Syria” was officially used for the first time before WWI. “Syria” was introduced in the local use only at the beginning of the XX century, and included the borders roughly corresponding to what is Syria today. The definition of such borders that took place in 1920 is still subject of debate owing to their strategic manipulation by the European countries after WWI.

In the historical outline that follows, the term “Syria” refers to the wider area of “historical Syria” as before WWI. For the period following WWI “Syria” will refer to today’s borders.

Pre WWI

Recent archaeological excavations testify that Syria was one of the first areas of the world to be populated. The archaeological site of Ugarit dates back to 6600 B.C.

In the IV century Syria was part of the Roman Empire and then of the Byzantine Empire. In the VII century the Islamic predicament of Muhammad in Saudi Arabia started to gather followers that expanded the Islamic message through their quick conquests of parts of the Sassanid and Byzantine territories. The new Empire that was formed, called the Caliphate, covered a huge area the geographical borders of which went from central Asia to Spain. Syria was also included.

Muhammad’s first successors, the so-called “Rashidun” (well-guided ones) were followed in 660 by Mu’awiya who was declared fifth caliph. Mu’awiya founded the Umayyad dynasty; after him, in fact, the role of caliph became hereditary. Under the Umayyads the capital of the new Arabic and Muslim Caliphate was moved from

13 In the second half of the XX century new tendencies in historiography began asserting the right of all social spheres to have a role in the traditional historical narrative. At the beginning of the 1970’s feminism lamented the marginalisation of women in the official history and in general, the exclusion of half the human race from the role of agents in history. New subjects of inquiries were developed and old ones were revisited in a movement strongly opposed to the old male dominance of “culture” and “history” performed by few men, on men, for men. A study that deals with gender issues should indeed make use of a non-patriarchal history. Nonetheless lack of alternative material meant that the historical paragraphs rely on a traditional history based on big dynasties, few heroes and wars.

Saudi Arabia to Damascus.

At the beginning of the VIII century the Umayyads were slowly losing power and in 750 they were defeated by the Abbasids. The Abbasids, part of the family of Muhammad, moved the caliphate to Baghdad, in 750. The end of the Abbasid caliphate is generally dated 1258 but the dynasty was already losing power in the X century when a number of opposing families were autonomously ruling small regions¹⁴.

From the X century the caliphate was divided into three main areas. The eastern regions were still under the Abbasid caliphate officially, while in fact they were governed until the XIII century by the Seleucids¹⁵. In the central regions the north of Syria was ruled by the Sci'i Hamdanidi while Egypt and southern Syria were under the Fatimids¹⁶. During this period, in the X and XI centuries, the crusaders arrived in the Holy Land; here, thanks perhaps to the lack of a centralised and strong local power, they managed to create four states, one of which was Jerusalem, and managed to construct a number of castles in Palestine and along the Syrian coast that helped them keep their fragile power until the XII century. The battles headed by both the Turk Nureddin and the Kurd Salahuddin defeated the Crusaders. Salahuddin moved further south towards Egypt and substituted the Fatimids in 1169 establishing the Ayubbid dynasty that ruled over southern Syria and Egypt and survived until 1252.

In the XIII century the Mongols from East Asia defeated the Abbasids and reigned over Iraq and Iran for almost a century. When they tried to expand towards Syria they were blocked by the Mamluks. The latter were an Egyptian army of slaves that had been brought to Syria by the Ayyubidi; they had then defeated the Ayyubidi remaining in power from 1250 to 1517.

The western regions, where a member of the Umayyads had created a new caliphate, were split among smaller families that fought against the Christian pressures from the north of Spain. The Christians defeated the last Muslim Arabs in 1492; and Spain became completely Christian. From then the western areas of North Africa were reigned over by the 'Alawiti while the eastern areas were reigned over by the Hafside family. The Hafside lost their power with the arrival of the Ottomans in the XVI

14 Despite this political fragmentation the area shared a common language, Arabic and a common religion, Islam, that coexisted together with other religious and linguistic minorities.

15 Seleucus I Nicator, one of Alexander the Great's generals, at the death of the latter, in 323 BC, took power founding the Seleucid dynasty.

16 The Fatimids came to power when 'Ubaydullah, who declared himself to be the son of 'Ali and Fatima, became caliph in Tunisia. Expanding his reign towards the East 'Ubaydullah defeated the Abbasids conquering Egypt; he centred his power in Cairo and extended his conquest to the southern areas of Syria, including Damascus.

century.

In the XV century the Ottomans, a Turkish dynasty of Anatolia, grew in power and expanded towards the south and then the west. The Ottomans occupied parts of the Byzantine Empire (the Byzantine Constantinople was renamed Istanbul) Syria, Egypt and western Arabia (having defeated the Mamluks) to eventually reach the Maghreb. Their huge Empire lasted officially until 1922. During the XIX century and already by the end of the XVIII century, the Ottoman Empire was losing its cohesion with a decentralisation that brought local groups to dominate some regions and eventually fall under the influence of Europe. Only the regions that were close to Istanbul were strictly under the sultan's rule.

From WWI to Independence

During the XIX century, the Ottoman Empire was greatly influenced by European countries. These started to interfere with the politics of its regions that were strategic commercial points. Some areas of the Ottoman Empire became totally autonomous from the central power; others fell under the control of European States, particularly those at the margins of the Empire. From 1798 to 1801 Napoleon occupied Egypt. Great Britain, France, Russia and Italy colonised many regions in the following years. France conquered Algeria in 1830 and Egypt fell again to Great Britain in 1882. At the end of the XIX century the whole of North Africa was under European control. European countries established economic links particularly with the religious minorities of the Ottoman Empire. Russia protected the Orthodox Churches and France had a strong link with the Maronites and other Catholics. Some segment of these minorities, mainly the merchants, managed to gain significant power in the local structure due to the protection by the Europeans. As a result in 1860 in Lebanon and Syria the population rebelled violently against the new economy monopolised by Europe, the European political influences and their favouritism towards Christians and Jews. In Damascus the population massacred the Christians, an isolated event in the history of the country¹⁷.

In 1914 rivalry among the European countries over the control of the areas that used to belong to the Ottoman Empire peaked. When Austrian and Russian interests in the Balkans clashed, WWI ignited. The Ottoman Empire sided with Austria together with Germany; while Russia was backed by England and France. The territory of Turkey and Greater Syria was one of the battlefields. England had strong bases in Egypt that allowed its allies to fight the Ottoman Empire from the south¹⁸. After a

17 Hourani A., 1991, *Storia dei popoli Arabi*. (Milano, Mondadori), p263-314

18 The English supported and pushed Faisal of Egypt (son of Hussein, sovereign of Mecca) to defeat the

few years of battles the Empire was left with Anatolia and a small region of Europe. The Ottoman Empire and its allies had lost the war; England was the winner with its allies.

The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between England and France was to decide the future of the Ottoman Empire. The agreement established that most of its territories were to be removed from Turkish control. Russia, Greece and Italy were assigned some areas as a reward for their cooperation. In 1922 Iraq, Palestine and Jordan were finally assigned to Britain while Syria and Lebanon were under French control¹⁹. Armenia, Georgia and Kurdistan²⁰ were under English influence. The treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, marks the official end of the Ottoman Empire, with England and France gaining control of the area.

The French Mandate

In 1920, Faysal tried to become king of Greater Syria and declare autonomy. The French crushed this revolt and officially took control of the region. They divided Greater Syria into four areas, the Christian Lebanon, the Muslim Syria, Latakia and Jebel Druse. During their Mandate the French maintained the local social structure that was dominated by Sunni urban notables with a smaller leading role reserved for the merchants. At the same time they favoured the minorities economically, Christians most of all, exacerbating social tensions.

In 1925-26 the population rebelled against the foreign occupation; and the French violently put down the protests. At the end of the 1930s the tension was at its highest. In 1939, in fact, the French assigned to Turkey the Alexandretta province (later named Hatay) as a way to secure Turkey's non-aggression to the mandate powers. Syria has never recognised that loss and to this day, Syrian maps include that area in its territory. Because the promised immediate departure of the French was 5 years overdue, the Syrians rebelled again in 1945. France reacted by bombing Damascus. Only in 1946 was Syria declared independent.

Ottomans in Aqaba. The English Lawrence of Arabia became a heroic character for convincing Faisal to conduct the troops via the desert from Egypt to Jordan.

19 Both Lebanon and Jordan were created by France and Britain in this period. France created Lebanon as a Christian area after crushing Faysal's attempt in 1920 to declare autonomy. Lebanon became autonomous only in 1946 with some Muslim areas annexed. Britain, on the other hand, assigned an area of Palestine to Hussein's second son, Abdullah. This was called Transjordan, today's Jordan.

20 Kurdistan, the land of the Kurds, is a territory that extends in present day Iran, Armenia, Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Despite never becoming a unitary state Kurdistan used to be and is a distinctive area. After the Treaty of Lusanne Kurdistan was split among those five countries and Kurds are still fighting to see their nation recognised.

From Independence to the present day situation

After independence Syria was a new state that had been created by WWI and the imperialist interventions of France and Britain. No common feeling of national cohesion had replaced the foreign occupation and no strong party or figure took the lead during the first years of independence. A Syrian civil government was toppled in 1949 by a coup that was followed by many others. These were organised by military forces and the elites of merchants and landowners.

In the 1940s the Ba'ath party was founded; its ideology included almost all religious and ethnic groups in the idea of the "Arab Nation". Its slogan was "Unity, Freedom, Socialism" with a strong emphasis on socialism, Arab Nationalism and anti-imperialism. During the 1940s and 1950s the Ba'ath ideology gained ground, as did pan-Arabism.

In 1958 Syria and Egypt created the United Arab Republic alliance that boosted Arabism to the detriment of domestic policies towards non-Arabs like the Kurds²¹. The UAR was interrupted in 1961 when a coup took power in Syria that was called the "Syrian Arab Republic"²². In 1963 the Ba'ath staged a further coup bringing Hafez al Assad into the government of Amin al-Hafez as a general of the air force. The social organisation of Syria was radically changed. For the first time the political landscape was not dominated by elites but young people from the military; and middle or lower classes of the peasantry came to the fore. With the 1963 coup a state of emergency was declared which is currently still in place. In 1966 an intra-party putsch assigned the power to the most radical wing of the Ba'ath. These, in fact, were unhappy about Amin al-Hafez's pan Arabism and his support of foreign interventions in Syrian politics.

The new government of 1966 started a huge State development plan, which aimed to develop the economy, reduce imports and increase infrastructure. However, in the following years the power of the Ba'ath and its internal structure was greatly weakened by numerous fights with Israel. In 1967 Israel conquered the Golan Heights, one of the most fertile areas of Syria; and in 1973 Syria and Egypt tried in vain to recover the losses. These events increased the anti-imperialist pro-Arab tendencies of the Ba'ath.

21 Arrests and repression of Kurdish groups and parties was very strong during the UAR.

22 Again the Kurds had to face policies of discrimination. The al-Hasaka census of 1962 annulled the citizenship of 150 000 Kurds.

The al-Assads in power

In 1971 Hafez al-Assad carried out a coup dubbed “Corrective Movement”²³ Once in power Hafez al-Assad worked to gain control of all social spheres and establish internal stability. The Ba’ath structures were opened to include all the citizens. Numerous groups, organisations and unions were created on Ba’ath ideology and formed part of its hierarchies. Bureaucracy expanded to all levels of society to classify, control and “syrianise” the population. The president assumed more and more power guaranteed by the new constitution of 1973. Internal opposition was not welcome and repression became its deterrent.

Nonetheless in the 1980s semi-independent organisations and other dissidents started striking to challenge the state power. The organisations were disbanded and their leaders arrested. The Muslim Brotherhood organised an armed opposition to fight against a secular state and an Alawi, al-Assad, in power. In 1981, association with the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed. In 1982 the city of Hama, centre of the opposition and venue of a revolt, was surrounded by the army that killed between 10,000 and 30,000 people in three weeks²⁴.

The domestic policies of Hafez al-Assad focused on strengthening his power and limiting all forms of opposition, but also on improving the economic situation. Self-sufficiency became the target of the many agricultural plans that shaped the rural areas of Syria. Modernisation of infrastructures for both urban and rural areas was a further priority.

In international politics al-Assad focused on bringing Syria to the centre of regional affairs. Close ties were established with the Soviet Union. After the latter fell, in the 1990s, Syria has worked to improve its international relations and particularly that with the USA. In 1990, Syria sided against Iraq and its invasion of Kuwait joining the US-led coalition against Iraq, with Al-Assad showing astute diplomatic skills. During the Iran-Iraq war Syria sided with Iran but managed maintain good relations with the Gulf States that were important supporters of the Syrian economy.

During the Lebanese civil war Syria managed to establish itself as the main power in the country. Its support of Hezbollah served to keep pressure on Israel while talks were attempted in the Madrid Peace Conference and in the following years.

In 2000 Hafez al-Assad died. To enable his son, Bashar al-Assaf to succeed him, changes had to be made to the constitution. Bashar presented himself as a new

23 The late President Hafez al-Assad was elected with an absolute majority for four elections consecutively. Elections take place every 7 years. Al-Assad always reached almost 100% of the votes.

24 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London)

leader of modernity and technology in domestic affairs. He spoke of the need to increase transparency, accountability, and development. He supported “constructive criticism” as a means of augmenting a Syrian style democracy. He also added that “Western democracy” was the result of a historical process different from the Syrian one: “We have to have our democratic experience which is special to us, which stems from our history, culture, civilisation and which is a response to the needs of our society and the requirements of our reality”²⁵.

After Bashar took office and in the subsequent six months, groups of civil society started to organise in Syria giving birth to the “Damascus Spring”²⁶. These groups met in private houses to speak of the need of freedom of information, dialogue with the government and a more robust democracy. In September 2000 the daily al-Hayat published the request, by ninety-nine intellectuals, for the end of the state of emergency²⁷, freedom for political prisoners and other requests. In June and July many political prisoners were freed but the other requests were ignored.

In 2001 the situation changed dramatically. The meetings were prevented from happening and some activists were arrested in what is now called the “Damascus winter”²⁸. The burgeoning civil society was quickly crushed. Questioned about the contradiction between implemented economic liberalisation and the denial of political liberalisation the government argued that the former was the first step to achieve the latter. The president maintained that political freedom was only acceptable as long as the national security and stability of Syria were not in jeopardy. Economic reforms, on the other hand, had no limitations²⁹.

On the occasion of the 41st anniversary of Ba’ath rule, on the 8th of March 2004, a hundred people demonstrated in front of the parliament to ask for the end of the state of emergency rule. The police intervened to disperse the demonstrators and six were arrested. That same month a new petition presented by the Syrian committee for human rights asked for the end of the state of emergency, the end of the extraordinary military tribunal, the end of arbitrary arrests, the respect of democratic liberties, the liberation of political prisoners, the return of the political opposition in exile, the carrying out of inquiries into missing people, the indemnity

25 *At-Thawra*, 17 July 2000.

26 Some argue that this birth of the civil society included only educated middle classes and in no way the ‘common people’.

27 The State of emergency has been declared in 1962. It was renewed in 1963 after the Ba’ath party coup. Emergency law guarantees extraordinary powers to the president and the deputies. It furthermore restricts freedom of assembly and basic human rights connected to arrest and detention.

28 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London)

29 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p49

for victims of repression and finally the possibility of creating autonomous parties and associations³⁰.

In foreign policy Bashar al-Assad encountered an increasingly difficult situation. During the Iraqi war Syria became more and more isolated. The US accused it of supporting terrorism, approving in 2003 the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (SALSA). This accused Syria of supporting the Iraqi resistance, of hiding Weapons of Mass Destruction, of occupying Lebanon and of supporting terrorists groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. On this basis the US imposed in May 2004 a number of sanctions on Syria, and banned US exports to Syria (food and medicines excluded) as well as flights between the two countries.

In April 2004 a bomb in a building in Damascus was reported as an al-Qaida terrorist attack by the Syrian government. The unclear circumstances of the event seem to suggest that it is quite unlikely that al-Qaida attacked Syria. Many commentators insinuated that Syria was trying to disengage itself from global terrorism by presenting itself as one of its victims.

At the end of 2004 the outside pressure on Syria to reduce its prominent role in Lebanon and Iraq had grown strong. Syria was also accused of hiding members of the late Iraqi Ba'ath party who were declared by the US to be a serious threat to US forces and the new Iraqi government. In December 2004 Syria asked to open peace negotiations with Israel with no preliminary conditions. Previously Syria had always demanded the return of the Golan Heights as a precondition for opening dialogue.

At the beginning of 2005, Syria reiterated its invitation to Israel to join peace talks. It also expressed a certain willingness to withdraw troops from Lebanon if the latter requested it. Subsequently a two-year timeframe for the withdrawal was suggested and non-interference in the Lebanese elections of May 2005 guaranteed. In early 2005, a new relationship with Russia was initiated. Putin and al-Assad met to deal with the issue of debt and of weapons trade (see below). Putin, furthermore, openly expressed his scepticism towards the accusations of terrorism that the US made against Syria.

In February 2005 circumstances quickly changed in Syrian foreign politics. Accused of killing Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri, Syria has undergone extreme pressure from the US, some countries of the EU and few Arab countries to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Accused by Israel of being responsible for a new suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, Damascus was also under threat of Israeli attacks. In March 2005, Syria

began withdrawing its troops from Lebanon.

In the last months the US has continuously mentioned Syria and Iran as possible future targets in the war against terror. But Syria could be the first on the list. Many see the government of Bashar al-Assad as weaker than that of the Iranian Mullahs. “Top army and security service posts are in the hands of a minority sect. Long-standing unrest from banned Islamic fundamentalist groups, as well as Kurds, can be manipulated”³¹. Furthermore Israel’s concern over Hezbollah’s activities creates a strong pressure on the US for limiting Syrian power.

31 Steele J, “Now Syria tops bad guys’ list” in *The Guardian Weekly*, 4-10 March 2005

CHAPTER II: SYRIAN STATE STRUCTURE

Syrian political system

For the last 34 years Syrian politics has been shaped by the al-Assad dynasty. Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar have ensured strong apparent stability in the country in the wake of numerous coups after independence. Their political focus constantly moved towards the avoidance of causes of instability. On the one hand the government has ensured its own stability by including key people in powerful positions. The government also employed a large number of people, 685,000 in 1991³². This guarantees popular support for the government in spite of the very low salaries paid. This process of inclusion has been quite broad, expanding also to the middle classes of the rural areas. On the other hand the power of the Ba'ath was derived from its repressive measures that have prevented free expression and the spontaneous creation of people's organisations.

The state organisation, in fact, based on patronage, does not allow any space for extra-governmental alliances among social groups. Its bureaucracy, extended to all spheres of daily life, is the best way to organise, include and control the population. Many forms of civil society life, also, have been institutionalised to the extent that the very existence of a Syrian civil society is in question. The Constitution affirms in article 9 that: "Popular organisations and co-operative associations are establishments which include the people's forces working for the development of society and for the realisation of the interests of their members". This definition limits all activities to those approved by the Ba'ath. Popular organisations - in effect a subtle form of state control.

Popular organisations and civil society

The role and even the existence of a civil society in Syria have long been questioned. According to some the government's centralising reforms, which began in the 1960s, completely transformed the social composition of Syria. The new structure that derived saw the state as the only mediator of social relationships; in fact it was the state that created popular groups, unions and all civil society organisations³³.

32 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p20

33 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London); Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria" in Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. (London, Routledge)

Furthermore, the state has created and run all civic spaces leaving little or no possibilities for individual initiative.

Many popular organisations spread under Hafiz al-Assad. Since their creation these organisations have been of corporatist character and have worked under the direction of the Ba'ath. The Peasants' Union, the Women's Union, the Revolutionary Youth Organisation, the Artists' Union, to mention but a few, are presented by the government as a means of closing the gap between the people and the state, and increasing participation. But far from being a means of expression for civil society they subject people to the control of the state. They substitute and prevent, with their existence, the birth of non-state organisations and movements. They "verticalise" the social dialogue making social groups deal directly with the government; horizontal confrontation and cooperation among organisations is not allowed. Such organisations reproduce from within the hierarchy of the Syrian state and are an important tool of Ba'ath power. To ensure a wide reach in the population, membership has been made a prerequisite for state employment. Furthermore enrolment in the "Ba'ath Vanguard", a para-military youth organisation, is compulsory in primary school; the same goes for the "Revolutionary Youth Union" in secondary school. At University there is the "National Union of Students" that is then followed by a Union connected to the professions.

This central role taken by the state in the creation of popular organisations has been paralleled by the simultaneous denial of spontaneously emerging public initiatives. The emergency law, in fact, forbids popular gatherings. Only religious group meetings are legal. These groups can be considered a form of civil organisation notwithstanding their specific character. Nonetheless the space for organised expressions of civil society is chiefly absent.

The Damascus spring that took place after the election of Bashar al-Assad showed an effervescent need for freedom of expression and organisation of civil society. After its suppression in 2001 the potentialities of citizen engagement in Syria have been visible only in occasional outspoken protests and other sporadic media manifestations of dissent. However, with the outbreak of the second Iraqi war popular feelings again came to the fore. Mainly through the Lebanese press, members of the opposition urged the Syrian government to move towards democracy and respect for human rights. Fearing a US war on their country these Syrian voices urged the government to take a different path than that of Iraq and commence internal reforms towards democracy to avoid a US-led war and occupation. Syrian TV even aired some

discussions over the need for a “national reconciliation” between the people and the government³⁴.

In 2003, the government took some steps towards democracy by dismantling many Ba’ath organisations. More space has also been created for NGOs dealing with issues of women’s rights and the environment and registration of these organisations has been made easier. However in 2004, there were still only 500-600 NGOs in Syria.

Nonetheless in 2004 and 2005 news emanating from Syria reported that increasing numbers of women choose to wear the veil to express disillusionment with Ba’ath policies and the government. The religious spheres seem to be gaining ground, accelerating a process that began in the 1970s. An increasing number of mosques are being built and there is a growth in Islamic charity organisations. Muslim groups and clerics are asking for more space and access to political roles. And the government seems to have a more permissive attitude towards these religious claims as a way of increasing its popular appeal and particularly its approval by the youth.

The Ba’ath party

Membership of the Ba’ath party follows the same lines as the civil society organisations. The party is an instrument of control made popular through political and financial privileges connected to the membership. These incentives push many to accept the pan-Arabist rhetoric and deny their other ideologies or ethnic identity. In fact anyone can become a member of the Ba’ath, and enjoy the privileges connected to it, regardless of religion or ethnicity, but on condition of their acceptance of the Arab nation as their only ideology. Despite this moral compromise the Ba’ath membership in 2001 was estimated at 1.8 million with an increase of 22.5% since 1963 (when it was around 8,000).³⁵ Part of this success is due to the process of familiarisation with the Ba’ath that starts in school through the popular organisations.

In 2003 the government reduced the number of Ba’ath youth organisations. It opened important state offices to non-Ba’ath members. It also allowed more flexibility towards non-secular movements. These events show a change in the rigid monopoly of the Ba’ath as a political and social ideology or party. Bashar al-Assad seems to realise, in fact, that the internal solidity of Syria could crumble into pieces if the social situation collapses due to international pressures, domestic problems and further deterioration of the economy.

34 International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, p10, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2516&l=1>

35 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London), p154

Patron-client relationships

Being a member of the Ba'ath means entering a thick net of patronage relationships. The whole of Syrian society is interwoven with the “*wasta*”. This Arabic concept describes a set of relationships – the “right connections” - needed to obtain anything from jobs to political favours to daily achievements such as loans, documents, and subsidies. *Wasta* works with the exchange of personal favours or through bribes. Loyalty to the regime and the Ba'ath are very important as well. This individualisation of politics renders the system extremely uneven since ethnic, kinship ties and social status play a fundamental role in accessing the *wasta*. Needless to say some minorities and the marginalized groups of society are often subjected to patronage relationships that render them dependent on more powerful people.

The military and the secret police

The moral and political blackmail, imposed by the state, is also entrenched in daily life through the military. A basic instrument to instil the fear of the state's presence has been the *Mukhabarat*, or secret police. The state of emergency and the internal threats, due to the supposed activity of dissident groups, have motivated the extension of the secret police to all levels of society. Government intelligence, relying on the patronage system, involves normal citizens in spying on their neighbours, friends and relatives and reporting any activity that could be viewed as being prejudicial to the state. Present in all forms of social organisation, even the family, the *mukhabarat* is the most effective tool of political self-censorship. In fact, despite the fact that the extent of the network is unknown³⁶ the reputation it has gained over the years together with its invisibility is sufficient to discourage any freedom of expression.

Preventing political and cultural association among people has been paralleled by military repressive measures adopted in case of social unrest. Since Hafez al-Assad came to power, the military apparatus was transformed from threats to the institution of the president, as during the coups of the 1950s and the 1960s, into an institution of political stability. To do so al-Assad professionalised the military career and opened it to the middle class. Marginalized sectors of society found in the army a way of upward social mobility; and soon constituted a bloc loyal to the president. This bloc was made even more solid with the inclusion in strategic positions of the loyal 'Alawis. The extreme violence of the army was displayed in the case of the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1980, during which they killed between 10,000 and 30,000 people to stop the activities of the religious group.

36 Some estimates speak of a ratio of one full-time secret agent per 257 people (George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p2)

Recently, as mentioned above, in March 2004 the army killed more than twenty-five Kurds, and imprisoned roughly 2,500 after a protest. More generally the use of torture, intimidation and unfair trials have served as a silencer and deterrent for all alternative voices.

Power of the President

Apart from securing the loyalty of the military, Hafez al-Assad went further in his centralisation of power. As soon as he became president he started the “Corrective Movement” that allowed him to restructure the social organisation with the declared aim of improving the economy and of increasing equality. Al-Assad gathered the executive, legislative and judicial powers; and headed all the major institutions. He was the commander of the armed forces and of the Regional and National Command of the Ba’ath Party. Since the Ba’ath party is by charter dominating the Progressive National Front (PNF)³⁷ al-Assad was *de facto* heading the PNF. He was head of the executive branch. The government was answerable only to the President. He, furthermore, appointed a vice president, prime minister, all ministers; and also the highest military offices and judges. The Parliament’s power was basically limited to a consultative role and a majority of its 250 seats are held by the PNF.

Before dying the President also appointed his successor and the constitution was changed to accommodate his decision. After Hafez al-Assad’s death in 2000, the minimum age for candidacy to the presidency was lowered from 40 to 34, the age of his son Bashar al-Assad at that time. When Bashar took power, unlike his father he had to share his authority with other power holders such as the political and economic elite, the army and the security service. As a matter of fact in June 2003 Bashar had to cancel the promise he had previously made of granting amnesty to exiled opposition-members³⁸.

Hafez Al-Assad was famous for his diplomatic skills. Following his father’s line Bashar al-Assad has demonstrated a strong ability to manipulate state rhetoric to his own ends. The discourses of Arabism and Syrian nationalism, in particular, have been manipulated for decades to support government policies. Soon after his election, in 2000, President Bashar expressed his will to allow the creation of new

37 The PNF was created in 1972 as a formation that included six major nationalist parties of the left. The Syrian Communist Party, the Democratic Socialist Unionist Party, the Movement of Socialist Unionists, the Arab Socialist Party and the Arab Socialist Union have accepted in the charter of the PNF, the decisional supremacy of the Ba’ath Party. On a few occasions the communists have criticised the decisions taken by the government. (George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London) p87-88)

38 International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, p12, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2516&l=1>

political parties. In 2001 no measures in that direction had been taken. During an interview, he declared that that intention was still present but with no specific deadline. He maintained that before embarking on new developments it was important to consolidate and understand the current situation. In 2003, the crushing of the Damascus Spring was in sharp contrast to the president's earlier declaration of openness towards "constructive criticism", "creative thinking" and democracy. In an official speech, Bashar al-Assad declared that the opposition had misunderstood his words interpreting them as freedom from morality and control and that this had damaged the national interest.

The Economy

Syria has high unemployment (more than 20%) due to a stagnant economy, an annual 2.5% growth in population and a malfunctioning economic system. Corruption, heavy bureaucracy and poor development planning have contributed to the situation.

According to the World Bank, Syrian economic growth is 3.1% while according to the Syrian Minister of Information the growth is at about 7% or 8%. Syrian GDP was 21.9 billion dollars in 2002. Its economy is mainly agricultural (32% of the GDP) even though 65% of the country is desert³⁹. Since the Ba'ath came to power, land reforms and agricultural reforms have changed the agricultural production. A high number of peasants (25% of the labour force) cultivate small lots of wheat, barley, cotton, sugar beets, olives, tobacco, vegetables and citrus fruits. In spite of development plans to increase irrigated land, agriculture is still vulnerable to droughts, that have in some cases devastated the economy. Industry accounts for only 22% of the GDP and employs more workers than agriculture (29% of the labour force). Textiles and food processing are its outputs. Crude oil export is a consistent revenue (in 2002 it amounted to 70% of export earnings). Petroleum supplied 40-50% of the state budget until 2003. This was due to both the expansion of oilfields (discovered in the 1970s) in the northeast of the country, and to the illicit oil trade with Iraq.

Remittances from migrants mainly working in Lebanon and the Gulf States are also an important income even if unstable. Large funds, received by the Soviet Union until its collapse, also helped the Syrian economy. Moreover the Gulf States offered grants and soft loans to Syria but these were always highly dependent on the country's foreign policy. During the Lebanese war and the Iran-Iraq war these economic supports were cut to be re-established during the first Gulf War. During the most

39 According to the Syrian government statistical abstract 2003 32% of total Syrian land is used for cultivation; 20% is uncultivated land, 45% is steppe and pastures and 3% is forests.

difficult periods, Syrian economy relied on contraband traffic and smugglers. This unofficial economy is said to have constituted 30% of the GDP in 1987⁴⁰.

Hafez al-Assad saw economic stability as a means of strengthening Syrian power in the region and increasing internal popular support. During his presidency, the economy was boosted by a series of measures that aimed at self-sufficiency in terms of food production for Syria. Centralised plans restructured the agricultural production and the economy in general. Nonetheless, the economy has always fluctuated between periods of standstill and periods of slow growth. To improve the situation, the government partially liberalised the economy in the 1970s and 1990s. This liberalisation or *infatah* opened some space for private investments, mainly in tourism and agriculture, but to very limited extent only.

Bashar al-Assad's government, however, seems to be more open towards economic liberalisation. Recently Syria has accepted foreign banks and private investments in tourism and agriculture. In 2001, in fact, Syria legalized private banking that slowly entered the country. Private investment also received incentives through tax breaks and customs duty concessions⁴¹.

Corruption, though, has taken advantage also of these new revenues. Privileging the most influential people it has caused the concentration of the new riches in the hands of a few. As is the case with the two operators for mobile phones that together hold the monopoly in the new market⁴². The interests of these people have become as sacred as the old political or powerful personalities. Old patronage systems that assign lucrative contracts to key figures of the regime continue to dominate the Syrian scene. The political struggle should tackle this elitism but this would mean undermining the structure Syrian society is based on. Many have underlined the need for political liberalisation in order for economic reforms to be effective. Corruption and inefficiency that hinder Syrian economy can be defeated with more accountability, free media and transparency⁴³.

Legal system and the constitution

The Syrian constitution was introduced in 1973. It is based on the principles of Arabism and socialism that are the ultimate aims of the state. The constitution also

40 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p25-26

41 Centre for Administrative Innovation in the Euro-Mediterranean Region (CAIMED), 2004, *Policies for Business in the Mediterranean Countries: the Syrian Arab Republic*. <http://www.caimed.org/>

42 Atassi A. M., "Voices of dissent in Damascus" in *An Nahr*, Lebanon, March 2004

43 International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, pi, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2516&l=1>

declares the state's dedication to popular democracy based on freedom of expression and education. The constitution combines the *shari'a* law and the civil law. The *shari'a* law is used on issues of personal status connected to marriage, divorce, and custody of children. The civil law is modelled on the French system for criminal and civic issues. The penal code establishes the freedoms of expression, association and assembly. It also condemns abuses of authority, and mental and physical torture. Together with these fundamental principles Syria has signed a number of international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights, the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination.

The enforcement of these laws, though, is generally lacking. Sometimes the laws are openly violated as in the case of torture (the use of torture in Syrian prisons is notorious). In some cases the laws are even enforced as an instrument of repression against those they should defend. In fact, minorities in Syria, particularly Kurdish, are often charged with racial bigotry and accused of provoking conflict among communities. This violation of the laws is possible and even justified by the state, because of the State of Emergency in force since 1962.

Citing the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, the Syrian government has reiterated the State of Emergency and its martial law. This guarantees extraordinary judicial powers to the president and justifies suppression of free expression, restriction of free assembly, censorship of individual mail or media. Furthermore, it legalises preventive arrests and denial of human rights to those arrested. Political prisoners are judged by the Supreme State Security Court and the martial courts. They have no right to appeal and they are discriminated against during the preparation of their defence. Not surprisingly thousands of political prisoners are held in Syrian jails with undetermined sentences⁴⁴. The State of Emergency has officially sanctioned state violation of all basic freedoms. Human rights, minority rights and children's rights are all violated on a daily basis.

Syrian Foreign Relations and the Kurds

This section analyses Syrian foreign relations with countries in the Middle East and beyond. States with Kurdish populations in particular, influence Syrian foreign and domestic policies to no small extent. The domestic affairs of Turkey, Iraq (states with

44 Bashar al-Assad has released a number of political prisoners during his election but also in the following years. In 2004 a number of political prisoners were released at different stages (January, July and December). See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/middle_east/4076807.stm

a Kurdish population which border Syria), Iran and Armenia (states with Kurdish minorities) have important consequences for their bilateral relationships with Syria and for Syrian domestic politics.

Russia

Syria was strongly supported by the Soviet Union until its collapse and its regime has taken much of its shape from the Soviet model⁴⁵. Apart from the political model, military and economic support linked the two countries. Billions of dollars of Soviet military equipment were supplied to Syria for its confrontation with Israel. A large amount of funds were also donated for the Euphrates Basin Development Project. In 1987 a twenty-year treaty of friendship and co-operation was signed between the two countries. Nonetheless, Syria always kept its autonomy and never allowed Soviet bases on its territory. When the USSR collapsed, Syria not only lost its most powerful supporter but was also asked by Russia to repay the money that the USSR had donated.

At the beginning of 2005 a meeting between Putin and Bashar al-Assad increased bilateral negotiations between the two countries, in particular with regard to political and economic issues. Russia wrote off more than 70% of the Syrian debt⁴⁶ and an agreement was also reached about the sale of Russian missiles to Syria despite the fact that Israel and the US had been opposing the deal during preceding months. The US and Israel felt that selling weapons to Syria meant supporting international terrorism. Putin later pronounced the US accusation of terrorism as “futile.” He also described the charges as counterproductive for the peace and security of the Middle East⁴⁷.

The United States

After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, Syria looked for new possible allies. Relations with the US have since continued in an erratic manner. Both the US and Syria aim to stabilise the regional situation through an Arab-Israeli peace-deal. The US believes Syria to be a fundamental actor in the area whereas Syria needs US mediation for the peaceful recovery of the Golan Heights.

The US and Syria maintained a sort of balanced relationship during the 1990s

45 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p54

46 Turkish press, *Syria's Foreign Debt Cut to 10% of GDP after Russia Deal*, 27 January 2005, <http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?ID=36524>

47 ArabicNews.com, *Russia Criticises the American Accusations against Syria*, 22 January 2005, <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/050122/2005012212.html>

despite periodical flare-ups⁴⁸; Syria partially accommodated US requests and the US decreased its pressure. In 1991 Syria joined the US-led coalition against Iraq. In the period following 9/11 Syria helped the US with information about Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, relations have deteriorated in the last few years.

The US has moved from a 'constructive engagement approach' with Syria to the imposition of diplomatic and economic pressures. During the Iraqi occupation the US has accused Damascus of supporting the Iraqi resistance and of hiding chemical weapons. Furthermore Syria has been accused of sustaining Hamas, Jihad, the Popular Front and Hezbollah, all of which are proscribed terrorist organisations in the US.

The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (SALSA) was passed by the White House in 2003. The bill accused Syria of supporting terrorism, of occupying Lebanon, of supporting the Iraqi resistance and of hiding weapons of mass destruction. In May 2004, a number of sanctions were imposed on Syria. All US exports to Syria have been banned to the exclusion of food and medicines.

At the end of 2004 and beginning of 2005 the US has expressed growing unease at the way Syria has dealt with the issues raised by SALSA. Syria, in fact, has refused to stop its support for Hezbollah on the ground that the latter is a liberation movement and not a terrorist group. Syria had initially declared it would only consider withdrawing from the Lebanon within a two year time frame. Finally, the border with Iraq, that had been declared closed, is/was clearly very porous as people and products were constantly smuggled between the two countries.

The relationship between Syria and the US deteriorated rapidly in February 2005 when the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed, and popular demonstrations on the streets of Beirut demanded the departure of Syrian troops. Syria, after receiving increasing international pressure has begun withdrawing troops, a process which will be completed in the coming months.

The European Union

Syria has worked to improve its relationships with the European Union as a possible alternative to the Soviet support, and as an alternative to an unlikely new alliance with the US. The EU has maintained until now a strategy of engagement towards Syria, often against the wishes of the US.

In 1995 Damascus took part in the Barcelona Process that launched the development

48 International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004, *Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges*, p2, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2515&l=1>

of bilateral trade agreements based on political and economic collaboration with the EU. This would offer assistance to the states of the Mediterranean on condition of their respect for human rights and acceptance of the liberal market⁴⁹. In 2001 the Barcelona Process became the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The Partnership is an important step for Syria because of the clear contrast between the economic liberalisation the agreement imposes, and Syria's socialist and centralised state⁵⁰. Furthermore, the EU requires the respect of human rights laws, even if it does not have enforcement mechanisms, and has in many cases condemned Syrian infringement of human rights. In some instances the EU has cut its financial aids to Syria and obtained from the latter new measures of judicial transparency.

In 2003 the EU also devolved large funds for an administrative reform of Syria⁵¹. Furthermore during the imposition of SALSA the EU reported a more pro-active approach than that of the US, declaring its attempt to collaborate with Syria on issues of human rights, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the fight against terrorism through signing the Association Treaty. This includes a large spectrum of economic, political, social and cultural issues even if no monitoring mechanisms are put in place.

Turkey

Relationships between Syria and Turkey have been compromised by many unresolved territorial claims. Syria considered the Alexandretta province, donated by the French to Turkey in 1939, an occupied territory. This dispute has been paralleled by that over the Euphrates River. Sharing its waters, a fundamental element in the economy of both countries brought Turkey and Syria to the brink of war in 1996 and 1998. Turkey is the up-stream riparian of the Euphrates and controls much of the water's flow due to the dams it constructed as part of the GAP (Güneydogu Anadolu Projesi), the vast South-eastern Anatolian Development Project. Official agreements between the two countries established the quantity of water that should flow into Syria but Syria claims the actual quantity of water entering from Turkey is much less than agreed. Turkey, while rejecting this claim, maintains that the decreasing levels of the Euphrates water are due to natural causes and not deliberate.

49 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p18

50 As a matter of fact, in 1996 the Syria-European Business Centre (SEBC) was established to increase competitiveness of Syrian business institutions in view of a transition towards a market economy and the integration of Syria into the EU-Mediterranean Free Trade Area by 2010. (Centre for Administrative Innovation in the Euro-Mediterranean Region (CAIMED), 2004, *Policies for Business in the Mediterranean Countries: the Syrian Arab Republic*. <http://www.caimed.org/>)

51 International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, p20, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2516&l=1>

Contradictorily, though the Kurdish issue has always been on the negotiating table. In fact, Syrian support of the Turkish Kurds and Turkey's military cooperation with Israel in the 1990s have marked the relationship between the countries. In 1989, for example, Turkey promised to release more water if Syria would stop its support for the Kurdish PKK organisation. In 1998 Syria decided to close PKK training camps and expelled the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, who was at the time in exile in Syria. The water disputes finally entered a new phase of dialogue.

Since the Iraq war in 2003, Syria and Turkey have begun cooperating. In 2004 Bashar al-Assad visited Turkey (he was the first Syrian head of state to do so) and an agreement was reached for a common fight against terrorism and towards collaboration to increase security. Many Kurds were returned to Turkey, and in March 2004 Turkey even deployed its tanks to support the suppression of the Kurdish uprising in the Syrian Jazeera. Since the meeting the trade exchanges between the two countries have reached 1 billion dollars⁵².

Furthermore, both Syrian and Turkish opposition to the war in Iraq brought the neighbours closer. Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul said "Ankara's relations with Syria and Iran are in the interest of Turkey politically, economically and strategically as they serve security, stability and peace in the region.[...] Washington knows well that these relations are in the interest of all"⁵³.

In January 2005 a new trade deal between Turkey and Syria settled the dispute over their borders. Syria acknowledged that the Alexandretta province belongs to Turkey; and both countries reciprocally recognised their borders⁵⁴.

Iraq

Syria and Iraq have been rivals, historically, for the domination of the region. In 1963, both countries saw their Ba'ath parties seize power. But the different interpretations of the Ba'ath ideology precluded any common ground. Conflict over the sharing of the waters of the Euphrates River further poisoned the relationship for more than three decades. In 1973, Syria started to fill the Lake Assad, created by the newly constructed Tabqa Dam, reducing the flow entering Iraq. Tensions were very high and in 1995 the two countries almost engaged in a war when Iraq accused Syria of

52 Aji A., *Syria, Turkey Improving Ties*, <http://www.bakusun.az:8101/cgi-bin/ayten/bakusun/show.cgi?code=5149>

53 ArabicNews.com, *Turkey Develops Relations with Syria and Iran*, 1/26/2005. <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/050126/2005012608.html>

54 Al-Jazeera, *Syria-Turkey settle 66-year-old territorial dispute*, 1/10/2005 http://www.aljazeera.com/cgi-bin/news_service/middle_east_full_story.asp?service_id=6619

blocking the flow of the river.

The Kurdish issue has been one more reason of hostility. Syrian Kurds have supported the Kurds of northern Iraq, and Syria has hosted the offices of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)⁵⁵.

In the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) Syria sided with Iran and communications with Iraq were completely stalled. Again in 1991, during the first Gulf War, Syria positioned itself against Iraq motivated by the hope of financial support from the allied forces and by the hope of weakening its neighbour.

In 1997, under Hafez al-Assad, relations with Iraq improved and the borders were re-opened. With Bashar al-Assad the process of collaboration between the countries was accelerated and in 2002 Syria continued to buy Iraqi oil and other goods infringing the UN sanctions. Discussions commenced also regarding the establishment of joint industrial projects. These economic ties were paralleled by political ones in 2003 when Syria supported Saddam Hussein and strongly opposed the US invasion, condemning also the Kurdish support of the US. In effect, a second war in Iraq would have meant a stable presence of the US in the region during and after the war. Moreover the US was likely to install a new Iraqi government of its choice before withdrawal. Such a strong US influence in the region would constitute a threat for Syria.

The beginning of the war confirmed these fears. Superficial associations between the Iraqi and the Syrian Ba'ath became a serious threat aggravated by the US depiction of Syria as a destabilising element in the region. Syria has been accused by the US of supporting the Iraqi resistance by sending troops, hiding its dissidents and by buying its oil. The US also suspected Syria of hiding weapons of mass destruction. In 2003, Syria declared its borders with Iraq closed. There is, however, much evidence to the contrary. During that same year it organised many meetings that called for the withdrawal of the US from Iraq⁵⁶.

The war in Iraq has further destabilised Syria in relation to the Kurdish issue. The creation of an autonomous Kurdish zone in northern Iraq, in fact, increased concerns regarding the demands of its own Kurds⁵⁷. Even if the Syrian Kurds have never aimed for national autonomy, they could have used the example of their neighbours

55 In 1970 and 2003, though, Syria thought that the neighbouring Kurds were gaining too much strength; and fearing for the consequences on its domestic situation, it sent troops against the Iraqi Kurds.

56 International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004, *Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges*, p20 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2515&l=1>

57 The violent events of March 2004 in Qamishle stadium and later in the Jazeera are a demonstration of Syrian fear of a possible strengthening of Kurdish demands.

as a strong leverage to have their rights as citizens recognised by the Syrian state. Finally, together with popular support for its opposition to the invasion of Iraq, the government of Syria had to face people's pressures for internal democratic reforms that would prevent Syria from facing a destiny similar to that of Iraq.

Lebanon

Lebanon was created by the French during their mandate in the 1920s⁵⁸. Three areas of Syrian territory formed Lebanon. Mount Lebanon was populated by Christian Maronites, Druse and Christians; the coastal areas had a mixed population of Muslims and Christians; and the southern area was mainly Shi'a. During the early years these religious communities agreed that more power had to be assigned to the Christians that were in majority. In the 1960s and 1970s the Muslim population had outgrown the Christians and the original power arrangement was challenged by the Muslims, creating a certain level of social unrest. Tensions became extremely fraught when anti-Israel organisations that had been defeated in Jordan moved to Lebanon (see below). The Kata'ib, the Christian political movement, disliked the new Palestinian organisations that supported the local Muslims and provoked Israel's resentment towards Lebanon. When in 1975 the tensions exploded in a war the Kata'ib found support in Israel while the Palestinians relied on Syria. After one year the truce was signed with the strong intervention of Syria. During this year Syria had changed its initial alliance with the Palestinians to support the Kata'ib and avoid the creation of a leftist Muslim government in the neighbouring country⁵⁹. Following a request from the Lebanese government, Syria sent its troops to Lebanon in 1976, with the approval of the US and other Arab countries in order to keep the situation stable.

In 1978 and again in 1982 Israel invaded parts of Lebanon and, apart from imposing the withdrawal of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) from Beirut, obtained the election of a government dominated by the Kata'ib⁶⁰. An agreement was also signed (with the intervention of the US and a multinational force) according to which the Israelis would leave the country but keep the political control of Lebanon. Syria opposed the agreement together with the Druse and the Shi'a. The new government, initially supported by the US, cancelled the deal with Israel. In 1984 Amal came to power and Israel withdrew from most parts of the country⁶¹. In 1990 Syrian manoeuvring and that of the Hezbollah managed to give more power to the

58 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p65

59 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), p21

60 The assassination of the first Kata'ib president motivated Israel to further occupy Beirut. This caused the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Chatila at the hands of the Kata'ib.

61 Hourani, A. 1991: *Storia dei popoli Arabi*. (Milano, Mondadori)

Muslims. Syrian troops remained in the country even after the areas occupied by Israel were freed in 2000. Lebanon and Syria signed a cooperation agreement in 1991 with Syria basically assuming a leading role. Syria speaks at times of 'two countries and one nation' when referring to itself and Lebanon. Syria, in fact, exercises a strong influence over its neighbour through the support of the Hezbollah party, which has large popular support. Also, the Syrian and Lebanese intelligence agencies work closely together. Syria has usually had a basic say in the formation of the Lebanese governments which many call a "Syrian puppet"⁶².

In 2004, UN resolution 1559 demanded Syria's departure from Lebanon on the occasion of the Lebanese elections of May 2005. Both Syrian and Lebanese governments criticised the resolution as "interference in relations between friendly countries"⁶³. And Lebanese President Emile Lahoud officially defended the Syrian presence in the country together with other figures of the government that have called resolution 1559 "a blow to democracy". Lebanese opposition headed by Jumblatt, on the other hand, has started an intense campaign for the departure of the 15,000 Syria troops in their country.

Syria had initially declared its willingness to comply with UN requests. Later it indicated a possible departure in two years time and no interference with the May election. International pressure increased in February 2005 when former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated. Syria rejected accusations of involvement with the killing. Nonetheless, popular demonstrations brought tens of thousands of Lebanese protesters on to the streets to demand the withdrawal of Syrian troops. Contrary to their Syrian-friendly government, in fact, many Lebanese loathe the presence of the Syrian army in their country. While reiterating their commonalities with the Syrian people many Lebanese express their dislike for the Syrian government. The latter's departure from Lebanon is seen by them as a basic means for achieving real democracy in the country⁶⁴.

As a consequence of the February street protests and general strike the Lebanese government of Omar Karami resigned on February 28, 2005. At the same time Israel claimed to have evidence that linked Syria to those responsible for the suicide bombing in Tel Aviv that killed five Israelis and injured dozens more. Under increasing international pressure Syria started withdrawing its troops in March 2005. As a reaction Hezbollah supporters took to the streets of Beirut in hundreds of

62 The Guardian Weekly, Lebanese government falls: Protesters force out pro-Syrian PM as Damascus feels heat from US and Europe, 4-10 March 2005

63 Assyrian International News Agency, January 2005, <http://www.aina.org>

64 Interviews in Syria and Lebanon, February 2005

thousands to demonstrate against outside interference in matters that they regard to be between Lebanon and Syria only. Demanding full sovereignty for their country, and an end to foreign impositions of all kinds, Hezbollah seemed to suggest a possible departure of Syria but at a time agreed by the two countries together. Hezbollah chief Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah challenged the UN resolution that calls for the withdrawal of Syrian troops on the basis that Lebanon is still in a state of war with Israel and needs the support of Syrian troops⁶⁵. He also mentioned the important help that the Syrian army offered to Lebanon in the past.

Jordan

Jordan was created after the end of the Ottoman Empire when its territory was divided by the European Forces that had won WWI. Jordan is a monarchy with pro-Western tendencies; it is little interested in pan-Arabism and has “strong (if secretive) ties with Israel⁶⁶”. Its decisions have always been quite different from those of Syria.

The Israeli and Palestinian issues have greatly influenced the Syrian-Jordanian relationships. After the occupations by Israel in 1948 and 1967, many Palestinian refugees moved into Jordan. In 1970, the Jordanian government fought against the Palestinian organisations that were trying to take power during the so-called Black September. Syria intervened to defend the Palestinians but withdrew soon after as Jordan was backed by the US and Israel⁶⁷. In 1994 Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty, making relations with Syria more and more difficult. In the recent years the situation has improved and in January 2005 presidents Bashar-al Assad and King Abdullah of Jordan held talks about peace plans with Israel⁶⁸.

Israel and Palestine

Israel became officially independent in 1948. Its creation started from the growing requests of Jewish immigrants that slowly arrived in Palestine. Already in the 1880s Jews from Europe started moving to Palestine following the desire to create a new Jewish nation in the area⁶⁹. During the British Mandate the number of Jews kept

65 Aljazeera, *Hizb Allah rally draws thousands*, 8 March 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4A02EB97-5B87-4F28-8B91-523CCAA3FE92.htm>

66 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London), 22

67 In a backfire Jordan supported the Muslim Brotherhood that was opposing the Syrian government in 1980

68 BBC news, *Syria and Jordan talk about Peace* 2 February 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4230871.stm

69 In 1897 the Ottoman Empire refused to accept the request of autonomy made by the Zionist Congress.

growing (in 1949 they were 30% of the population). Tensions between the Arabs and the Jews were growing with Britain caught in a difficult intermediary position also because of the pressures by the US in favour of Jews. In the 1930s the Arabs were more and more worried about the size of the immigration; whereas Jews felt the increasing threat of the Nazis in Germany, and wanted more Jews to be allowed in Palestine. This pressure was made more urgent by the beginning of the holocaust in Europe. Britain suggested two solutions that were both unsuccessful.

In 1948 Britain decided to leave the area. Israel declared its independence although it had no clear borders. Fights between Arab and Jewish forces sparked immediately with Israel demonstrating its superiority. Many Palestinians became refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria; the latter being one of the strong supporters of the Palestinian cause. With the intervention of the UN a number of armistices were declared. Israel opened its borders to the Jewish immigration and legally helped the assignment of the land to its non-Arab population. The mid-1960s saw the active resistance of Palestinian groups (PLO, al-Fatah) that began attacking Israel. Syria and the Ba'ath supported them as the Ba'ath had made the Palestinian issues one of its priorities.

In 1967 a new conflict erupted and Israel was once more militarily superior. Egypt and Syria lost new land (Syria lost the fertile Golan Heights and Egypt the Sinai Peninsula), as did Palestine. In 1973 both Syria and Egypt, backed by the Soviet Union, tried to regain the losses of 1967 but did not manage to reclaim any of the lost land. UN Security Council Resolution 338 was accepted as the end of hostilities. Syria signed it, thereby recognising the existence of Israel. Since then Syria has tried to recover the Golan Heights through diplomacy. In 1977, following further clashes, Egypt signed a peace deal with Israel and was expelled from the Arab League. Many other Arab countries and the Palestinians did not recognise the Egypt-Israel agreement. In the following years Israel and Syria confronted each other in the Lebanese war. In 1983 Syria encouraged the expulsion of Yasser Arafat from Lebanon.

In 1988 the first Intifada started. During that year the Palestinians officially acknowledged the existence of Israel. In 1994 Jordan signed a peace agreement with Israel. In December 2004 Syria opened dialogue with Israel without the precondition of the restitution of the Golan Heights. Its core demands, though, will still be Israel's withdrawal to 1967 borders. Solving the situation with Israel would also facilitate Syrian compliance with US demands for halting its support to Hezbollah. The Clinton administration in fact, had relied on the peace negotiations as the only way

Nonetheless the number of Jews was growing to become in 1914, 12% of the total population.

to indirectly stop Syrian support for terrorism.⁷⁰ In February 2005 Israel threatened to attack Syria in retaliation for a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. At the same time the Israeli foreign minister Silvan Shalom asked for the EU to include the Hezbollah movement in its list of proscribed “terrorist groups”⁷¹

Kurds and other Minorities and the State

Whether Syrian minority-based governing is just an instrumental cover for the central power or an actual network of religious minority alliances is almost a conundrum. Nonetheless, religious minorities are quite safe in Syria. Ethnic minorities, on the other hand, have their basic freedoms curtailed to differing degrees. The government policies towards different groups depend on the threat each constituency represents, supposedly, for the Ba’ath party and its ideologies. Private education, national languages and traditions undergo a number of restrictions in most cases; but religious minorities are generally less disfavoured in Syria than ethnic ones. In fact, the secular Ba’ath, headed by a family that belongs to a Muslim minority, protects freedom of faith by defining the latter part of the private sphere, thereby simultaneously keeping religion out of the state but also the state out of religion.

Groups like ‘Alawis occupy strategic economic and military positions in Syrian society, constituting in large numbers military commanders and part of the security system. They are generally strong supporters of the regime since the al-Assad presidential family is ‘Alawi. On the other hand the Arab nationalism of the Ba’ath does not protect ethnic rights; and the Syrian constitution does not even recognise the existence of ethnic or cultural minorities. But as long as groups with different cultural identity accept the idiom of “Arabism” and “Syria” and show no political involvement, the government applies few restrictions to the use of their national traditions and languages. As soon as cultural issues are the basis of a political non-Arab nationalistic stand, these minorities are highly discriminated against and controlled, and their activities are suppressed.

The Kurds are the most mistreated minority of Syria. Their non-Arab, strong and consistent national identity has been considered a threat for the state that has completely suppressed them, in political, cultural and basic human rights terms.

The following paragraph will outline some of the Kurdish issues with particular focus on Syria. This will be exemplary of the problems encountered by Syrian

70 **International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004**, *Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges*, p2 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2515&l=1>

71 **Aljazeera**, *US gives Israel “go-ahead” to strike Syria*, 3 February 2005, http://www.aljazeera.com/cgi-bin/news_service/middle_east_full_story.asp?service_id=7210

minorities even though, as already mentioned, the nature and degree of restrictions vary according to the minority in question.

The Kurds of Syria

The Kurds are a nation of thirty million people that have lived, since the second millennium B.C., in the Middle Eastern area historically known as Kurdistan. During WWI this area was divided among Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria and a small part of Armenia. Since then the Kurdish population has been split among these four non-Kurdish nation-states. Struggles for independence or, more recently, struggles for national recognition and rights have characterised the modern history of the Kurds; but no Kurdish nation, in any of these states has obtained full autonomy. Only in Iraq virtual autonomy was guaranteed to the Kurdish area in 1990, during the Gulf War⁷².

The richness in oil and water, and the fertility of the Kurdish region have surely been one of the reasons for the denial of autonomy to the Kurds by the states they were annexed to. These adopted common policies to weaken the Kurdish movements that are easily identifiable. Among them denial of citizenship and all of the rights connected to it; denial of national identity; prohibition of the Kurdish language; political oppression; arabisation of Kurdish areas through forced displacement and resettlement of Arabs; ethnic cleansing, resulting in mass deportations and killings.

Unfortunately these discriminatory measures have been often successful in abating nationalistic movements and fights for self-determination. Nonetheless the Kurds share a history, a culture and a language, and on these bases they have struggled for the recognition of a nation of their own.

The Kurdish languages belong to two main branches, Kurmanji and Pahlawâni, with many local dialects. The North, West and East Kurdistan (corresponding respectively to Turkey, Syria and Iran) use the Kurmanji dialect. Southern Iraqi Kurdistan and Iranian Kurdistan use the Sorani dialect. These two main dialects are very similar.

The Kurds are not religiously homogeneous. Three fifths declare themselves Muslims. The majority of them are Sunnis belonging to the Shaf'i school (and not the more widespread Hanafi school). Many Kurds, on the contrary, identify Islam with the religion of their oppressors. Those often adhere to religions influenced by

72

During the Iraqi war the US had encouraged Kurdish and Shi'a rebellions against the regime with the promise of supporting them. When the Iraqi government harshly crushed the Kurdish revolts no support was supplied by the US. The humanitarian disaster that followed urged the creation of safe haven, later no-fly zone in Northern Iraq.

Zoroastrianism, a religion dating back to 5th or 6th century B.C. that is usually believed to be traditionally Kurdish⁷³. Alevi, Yezidi, Ithna 'Ashari Shi'i and Sufi are religions diffused among the Kurds that show rituals belonging to pre-Islamic traditions. A smaller minority of Kurds belongs to Christian, Jewish, Davidian, Naqshbandi and Gelani Qadiri religions.

Figures about the population of Kurds are generally unclear because of the political implications of underestimating or overestimating the size of the community by respectively the State and the Kurdish minorities.

In Syria the Kurds are estimated to number between 1.5 and 2 million, constituting between 8.5% and 12% of the Syrian population of 8.5 million people. They live mainly in the northern area close to the Turkish border. Some small villages spread also along the Euphrates River and small communities live also in Damascus and Aleppo.

Because of their numeric weight and strong nationalist specificity the Kurds have a good basis for territorial claims. Their non-Arab identity and their trans-state loyalties are a strong threat to the Arab and Syrian Ba'ath ideology. Thus the Kurds have been considered a double menace to the Syrian state, which has constantly tried to control and weaken them.

The Ba'ath resolved to recognise the Kurds as a nation and an ethnicity of its own right; but believes them to have migrated from Turkey and Iraq thereby declares them not indigenous. A number of Kurds did migrate from the Turkey of Attatürk in 1920s and 1930s and from Iraq in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s but the presence of the majority of the Kurdish population dates back to thousands of years, and mentions of Kurds in Syria appear in the literature of the last centuries⁷⁴.

In line with its thesis, or as a basis for it, the Syrian government conducted an exceptional census in 1962 that, in a completely arbitrary way, stripped 150,000 Kurds of their citizenship. The assumption being that these people had the citizenship of the country they supposedly migrated from. The arabisation plan of the 1960s and 1970s included displacement of Kurds and settlement of Arab groups in Kurdish areas. In 1963 and then 1986, the use of Kurmanji was forbidden and publications in this language was banned in 1958. In 1988 a new law prohibited non-Arabic

73 This, as a matter of fact, seems to be the root of Newros, the Kurdish New Year celebrated on the 21st of March.

74 Under the Ottomans the Kurds were a nomadic group governed by tribal chiefs with a great deal of autonomy from the central power. In the XIX century they were reported to live in the South of Syria. In the XX century they were a well-established community in Quneitra. In the 1930s members of the Kurdish community of Damascus held important positions in the government and were politically very influential. Galletti M., 2004, *Storia dei Curdi*, (Roma, Jouvence).

songs and music during weddings and parties⁷⁵. Since 1992 no Kurdish name can be registered for newly born babies. As a result Kurds suffer from cultural, economic and political discriminations.

The Syrian government has tried to cancel the Kurdish identity denying all expressions of it. Repression, censorship, imprisonment and general violence have been a daily reality for Kurdish communities. At the same time the government has tried to force the assimilation of Kurds on an individual basis. In the 1980s the Kurds formed the Ba'ath party "special bodies" that controlled the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in a period when the government was challenged by domestic, fundamentalist Muslim groups. These measures for assimilation, however, did not help the Kurds secure cultural or human rights. On the other hands they increased the Kurdish marginalisation vis-à-vis the Muslim majority.

The Syrian government has also strategically supported the activities of the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq. Many members of the Turkish PKK lived in Syria for quite some time and among them also, the leader, Abdullah Öcalan. This was leverage for Syria with Turkey and a way to weaken its neighbours. The government attitudes towards domestic Kurdish parties, on the contrary, were quite different. There are currently twelve illegal Kurdish political parties in Syria. None of them has embraced violent tactics in their endeavour to convey Kurdish interests to the state. Their focus is on cultural recognition and securing human rights for the Kurdish minority and since the 1970s these parties do not refer to Kurdistan to avoid implications of separatism. Nonetheless in June 2004 they were asked by the Military intelligence to stop all their activities.

Since 2000, when Bashar al-Assad came to power, some progress on freedoms has taken place, but the situation has failed to improve dramatically. There is still no freedom of expression and other human rights are consistently violated. In 2003 and 2004 international pressure by both Europe and the US helped make the Syrian judicial system more transparent. Nonetheless torture remains a widespread practice, arrests are still arbitrary, and activists are generally oppressed and judged by military courts when arrested.

In 2002 Bashar al-Assad was the first president to visit the al-Hasake province, in the Kurdish area. He promised to take into consideration Kurdish demands recognising the Kurds as an integral part of Syrian history. No official report of the event, though, mentions the Kurds. Some months later, on 10 December 2004, a group of Kurds peacefully demonstrated in Damascus on the occasion of the International Human

75

Galletti M., 2004, *Storia dei Curdi*, (Roma, Jouvence), p286

Rights day. Their demands for more rights for the Kurds resulted in arrests and violence by the police.

In March 2004 Kurdish protesters lamented the killing of Kurds in clashes in Qamishli Stadium during a football match. Disproportionate measures were adopted; the police ended the protest surrounding the town of Qamishli, invading its streets and controlling the population with a number of helicopters. As mentioned above, more than twenty-five Kurds were killed, many injured and roughly two thousand five hundred were imprisoned. Some of the detainees started a hunger strike in December to protest against ill-treatment and torture and some of them will be tried in early 2005. They are accused of “involvement in cells seeking to weaken nationalist consciousness and to stir up racial sectarian strife”, “aggression aiming to incite civil war and sectarian fighting and incitement to kill”, “affiliation to a secret association” and “attempting to sever part of the Syrian territory to annex it to a foreign state”. According to Amnesty International they can be charged with the death penalty.

CHAPTER III: WOMEN AND THE STATE

*The Ba'ath and the legal status of Kurdish and other women*⁷⁶

The Ba'ath party was partially born out of an attempt to revive the "Arab nation" free from Western colonial influences. The rhetoric of the 1960s often referred to the need for resurrecting Arab pride, moving towards modernity in ways autonomous from the Western model. Modernity had to be achieved whilst retaining specific Arabic and Syrian characteristics. On this basis the new nation could keep its distinctive role in the construction of civilization and progress. Nonetheless, the Syrian path to modernity has paralleled those followed by European nation-states. The introduction of technology has been the pride of the country. The liberation of women became one of the symbols of Syrian development. As president Hafez al-Assad said: "The progress of the woman in our country, the restoration of her rights, and the practising of her tasks, constitute a fundamental factor in pursuing and speeding up of our steps on the road of advancement and progress"⁷⁷.

The Ba'ath rhetoric often refers to feminism particularly concerning the Syrian path towards modernity⁷⁸. Modernising attempts often meant banning 'traditional' gender ideologies that represented old patriarchal structures. "Study groups for adult women, which are organised by the Ba'ath-controlled Women's Unions, are seen by the Party as an important instrument to train women to 'rid themselves of traditional attitudes"⁷⁹.

Suffrage for women was introduced in 1949. In the 1970s women were recruited for the armed forces, and a parachuting unit for women was created⁸⁰. In the Eighties TV showed women parachuting from airplanes while declaring "they could do anything for Syria, the Ba'ath and the comrade president"⁸¹. Generally the Party has

76 This part has been extensively based on Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*.

77 The National Committee of Women's Affairs Post-Beijing www.arabwomenconnect.org/docs/SY_GWU_strategy.doc

78 Hann, C & E. Dunn (eds) 1996, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. (Routledge, London), p163

79 Hann, C & E. Dunn (eds) 1996, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. (Routledge, London)

80 United Nations Development Programme & POGAR, *Gender: Syria*. <http://www.undp-pogar.org/countries/gender.asp?CID=19>

81 Rabo A., 1991, "State and Gender in the Middle East" in *Gender, Culture and Politics in Developing Countries*, p14

promoted gender equality. Its effort towards the latter is illustrated by the fact that the government statistics are gender disaggregated.

Article 45 of the Syrian constitution guarantees women “all opportunities enabling them to fully and effectively participate in the political, social, cultural, and economic life. The state removes the restrictions that prevent women’s development and participation in building the socialist Arab society”. Thus equality of women and men that enjoy citizenship is enshrined in the constitution. During the founding congress of the ruling Ba’ath party in 1947 it was declared that “the Arab woman enjoys all the rights of citizenship. The party struggles to raise up woman’s level [...]”

However, the civil law regarding nationality is gender discriminating. Women, in fact, cannot pass their nationality on to their children; only their fathers can. This is particularly discriminatory for ethnic minorities that do not possess citizenship, as in the majority of Kurdish cases. A Syrian woman married to a man who does not possess Syrian citizenship will be unable to register her son or daughter as Syrians.

Furthermore, personal status and labour laws are gender-biased. Despite the state’s supposed secularism, Article 3 of the constitution states “Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of legislation”. It is the Islamic law that regulates matters of personal status in Syria (inheritance, divorce, marriage, paternity, custody of children). However, the civil, commercial and criminal laws are based on the French legal system. Both the *shari’a* and the civil codes have been partially changed, over the years, to improve the status of women. The *shari’a* law was reformed particularly regarding inheritance matters⁸². The civil law was modernized to improve gender equity but its implementation has been slowed down by social conventions⁸³. Both religious concerns and national ones seem to be the reason for Syrian non-ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) acceded to on March 23, 2003. Many Arab states, in fact, submitted their reservations about accepting the CEDAW, on the basis of the incompatibility between the international human rights law and the *shari’a*, or national law, in particular regarding women. They argued that the introduction of the new law was in contradiction with the Islamic teachings and countered national legislation⁸⁴.

82 World Bank 2003, *Syrian Arab Republic Data Profile*, www.worldbank.org

83 United Nations Development Programme & POGAR: *Gender: Syria*. <http://www.undp-pogar.org/countries/gender.asp?CID=19>

84 United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) 1999, *Report of the Round Table Workshop: CEDAW and Islam and the Human Rights of Women*, <http://www.unifem.org/index.php>

The Personal Law

The Personal law is based on the *shari'a*. This guarantees women some rights but is generally gender biased. According to the *Surah Al-Nisa* 4:34 “Men are the (*Quawamon*) protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given one more than others, and because they support from their means”. In fact, women over 17 need the approval of their guardian for getting married. Without this approval the marriage could be annulled (unless the couple had already conceived a child).

The law allows women to get married, as early as 13, if they can show that they have attained puberty. No consideration has been taken for women's psychological and emotional readiness for such an early marriage. Before getting married, women can ask for some conditions, based on the *shari'a*, to be respected in the marriage. If the husband does not comply with these his wife has a legal basis for filing a divorce. Divorce can be initiated by both the husband and the wife but the man obtains it without appealing to the court and proving he suffered damage, as a woman must do. The woman owes her husband respect and he has to support her economically. If the divorced wife lives in extreme poverty she can ask her ex-husband for three years of alimony. Polygamy is allowed in Syrian law as long as the man can prove his economic ability to support all his wives. *Shari'a* courts mandate child support from husbands if the wife is awarded custody. Women are not allowed to marry a foreigner. Marriages between a Syrian woman and a man not holding a Syrian citizenship are illegal. This is highly discriminatory for women. If the couple decide to get married illegally the children will not be registered, and will hold no official identity. Thus, these children will not even be able to inherit the family's land.

The labour law

The national labour law is supposed to safeguard women from exploitation; but it actually applies some gender-biased restrictions on women's employment. Women can work only during the day and only in occupations which do not damage their health. But the law adds that women cannot be hired for jobs that threaten their morals, with no further specifications; men are not subject to any moral discrimination. This 'morality' issue could prevent women from accessing a number of jobs. FAO comments: “is it the state prerogative to determine what are the occupations which are morally accepted or not? And is it acceptable for males to have occupations which are not morally accepted?”⁸⁵ This morality preoccupation of the state subjects women to social perceptions of “appropriate female behaviours” reinforcing gender biases.

Women cannot be fired during certified maternity and illness. While guaranteeing two and a half months of maternity leave and thirty minutes of rest, twice a day, for the first year after giving birth, the law assigns the care of children to women only, thus reproducing one of the most common gender- biases. Female wages are generally 75% of the male ones. The state has tried to address this unbalance and, in fact, government jobs pay women 91% of male salaries. It is the private sector that lowers the average. Nonetheless, the 10% disparity in state female wages testifies a gendered approach to working issues.

Women that do not hold a citizenship, as in the case of many Kurds, are excluded from these state protections. They are also excluded from government jobs because of their status; thus, they are generally obliged to take low paid, insecure jobs. This holds for minority men as well.

The criminal law

The criminal law is autonomous from the *sharia*; but this does not imply more gender correctness. Discrimination against women in criminal law is particularly evident in the case of adultery and honour killings. Adulterous women can be imprisoned from a minimum of three months to a maximum of two years. Their male partners, if unmarried, can be sentenced from a minimum of one month to a maximum of one year. Furthermore, the law indirectly supports honour killings performed by men. A male relative who has killed a woman suspected of adultery (including cases of the woman being raped) will be freed immediately with a six months suspended sentence. Women who committed the same crime are subjected to normal criminal law. The situation of women is even worse in the Kurdish areas. Young Kurdish girls are particularly subject to violence, rape, and honour killings. Inaccessibility of the legal system and its inadequacy, indifference of the police, and indirect legal justification of violence, particularly in the case of minority women, renders these girls extremely vulnerable. Their rapists and killers, in fact, are very rarely persecuted and often marry their victims; the violence is usually protracted also during the marriage. Women in some cases resort to prostitution to escape these forced marriages.

Education

Education is understood, almost universally, as a means to reach development, as well as an indicator and a product of development. Thus, education has often

been connected to the state and its modernity. In fact, the birth of nation-states has been paralleled, in the majority of cases, by the creation of programmes for mass education⁸⁶. State rhetoric often refers to investment in education as investment in the citizens. The students are supposed to constitute the future productive generations and repay the benefit of their education by using their knowledge to develop and modernise their country. The individual thus becomes a citizen through state education. He or she is pulled out of kinship links to be introduced to the wider society, the state. Education is both a duty and a right of good citizens. This line of thought equates modernity with education and associates individual knowledge with the well being of the state. Education becomes the connection between the citizen and the state. These concepts are basic in order to understand the Syrian state policies towards education.

Education has held an important position in Ba'ath policies. The Constitution states that education is a means to achieve Arab unity, freedom and socialism. And in fact, schools are indeed a place of ideological indoctrination. Children are obliged to take part in the Ba'ath groups from the first year of school. The schoolbooks are based on Ba'ath ideology and thus, also, Ba'ath vision of history and society. More problems afflict Syrian education. Students' success is highly dependent on connections to the party or powerful people. Corruption compromises both the quality of teaching as well as study. In the last years some private schools have been opened. These are generally considered good. However the very expensive fees necessary to access them makes them open only to the richest students.

The Ba'ath has strongly encouraged education and made it compulsory and free for boys and girls between six and eleven. Figures indicate that at the beginning of the 1970s the average level of illiteracy was 60%. In 2000 male illiteracy was 11.7% and female 39.5%⁸⁷, a noteworthy improvement particularly in light of the high population growth in the country. Unfortunately, this increase in educated people does not correspond to better employment levels (see below). The government of Syria, as in many other countries, continues to push its citizens towards higher levels of education without being able to provide adequate jobs. As a consequence, more and more people are frustrated about the gap between expectations they have as students and the job they finally obtain. Rabo interprets this state policy, in the case of Syria, as an instrumental means of social control. She maintains "Putting the young into schools and keeping them there for as long as possible is the goal of policy-makers in [...] Syria. Youngsters can be socially and politically controlled.

86 Rabo A., *Tapping A Potential For The Good Of All*, <http://crm.hct.ac.ae/events/archive/tend/AnRP.html>

87 WB 2001, *World Development Indicators Database*, www.worldbank.org

They stay out of trouble and can be nationally moulded.”⁸⁸

Ba'ath and education of women

Ba'ath modernist ideology emphasises the importance of women in education. Socialist rhetoric has underlined the importance of women in the workforce in the construction of the state. Thus a modern state needs modern educated women. In fact women's illiteracy is often connected to high fertility and poverty rates. Furthermore, female education has generally become a symbol of modernity. But the full acceptance of women's access to education is still contested both at state and family level. State rhetoric, in fact, depicts women as the keepers of cultural and traditional values. But, at the same time, it speaks of the emancipating effect of education. Schoolbooks, moreover, are not gender neutral but reproduce sexualised stereotypes rendering education conservative rather than emancipating.

At the social level girls are believed to belong to the domestic sphere and priority is given to boys in education. It is commonly believed, in fact, that the boys will sustain the family in the future, thus they have to study to increase the chances of a better job. The girls once married will be part of a different family and their education will be of no use to their parents. Finally, education of women of lower classes, is not considered an asset profitable for the 'bride price' since many husbands complain that literate women are more assertive and less willing to stay at home.

Statistics reveal that rural areas have a much lower degree of education, particularly among women. Even if primary education is free, many families are unable to meet the expenses for the dress code that is compulsory. Extreme poverty, furthermore, obliges children to start working at an early age preventing them from going to school. Girls quit school more readily than boys since they are needed for domestic duties. In rural areas almost 80% of working women are either totally illiterate or have a minimum education, while men's illiteracy is 16%. In the area of the Euphrates, in 2000, girls accounted for only 36% to 39% of the student population. Secondary level schools present an even bigger gender and rural/urban gap. Rates of female high school attendance in the rural areas can be as little as 18%. Female teachers are 47% of the total with much lower rates in rural areas.

Higher education presents very strong gender biases with very few areas open to female students. The only research fields women can access are medicine and pharmacy. Otherwise they study teaching and administrative work, which believed to be “naturally” women's tasks. Poor women find it impossible to choose their

education freely because of these social pressures and because of lack of funds. Funding is rarely allocated to them and the few funds are available only for accessing didactic careers. In fact, women represent a high percentage of the teachers but only in lower education. At university they amount to only 39 % of the seats⁸⁹.

Education of women in minority groups

The situation of the minorities of the rural areas is extremely poor in education, particularly that of women. Girls, in fact, are the most disadvantaged since they suffer from the gender discrimination illustrated above, in addition to ethnic discrimination.

Unregistered people or people without citizenship, as are the majority of Kurds, are generally denied access to school. If some children manage to obtain special permission and are thus able to attend primary school classes they are not awarded the standard diploma at the end of their studies. Therefore they cannot go on studying past the first grade. Classes are taught in Arabic and many children do not speak the language⁹⁰. Kurdish publications are forbidden and Kurdish children have to study with nationalistic Syrian Arab textbooks. These policies of discrimination clearly exclude Kurds from the symbolic citizenship that is education. They deny minorities the means to participate in the construction of a modern Syria. Primary schools, accessible to few, introduce minority children to an Arab nationalistic version of history and society that denies the existence of a Syrian Kurdish ethnicity.

All of these discriminatory measures render education for minorities extremely difficult to achieve. Furthermore, minority girls are very rarely educated even compared to minority boys. As a consequence these girls have very limited job opportunities and even fewer chances of escaping early forced marriages or prostitution.

Women and access to contraception

Education has also a strong influence on female body management. Contraception is used by 28% of illiterate women and 45% of those with basic education. The discrepancy between rural and urban dwellers is also very evident in fertility rates.

89 United Nations Development Programme & POGAR, *Gender: Syria*. <http://www.undp-pogar.org/countries/gender.asp?CID=19>

90 In 1986 Kurdish language was forbidden and continuous restrictions were applied to Kurdish culture. Kurdish teachers are assigned teaching positions in non-Kurdish areas and Arab teachers usually work in Kurdish areas. These measures are part of a policy of arabisation.

In urban areas 49% of women use contraception methods, mainly modern ones such as intra-uterine devices (IUDs) and the contraceptive pill whereas in rural areas only 27% of women use birth-control methods and usually traditional ones.

Apart from education, also the number and sex of living children influence the use of contraceptives. Couples usually start preventing new births after they have had four or five children. Having at least one boy among the children further diminishes the likelihood of wanting to have more children.

Patterns of employment

The government has tried to include women in the political life since the Ba'ath came to power. Women in Syria were granted the right to vote in 1949. Since then women can also stand for office. Their presence in the parliament has been growing steadily over the last years so that in 2004 Syria had the highest rate of women in Parliament compared to other Arab countries⁹¹. In 1981 women held 6.6% of the seats, and in 1996 constituted 9.6%. In 1999 women parliamentarians were 10.4% and in the 2003 elections they retained 30 out of 250 seats. As early as 1976 there was a female Minister of Culture and women have also been appointed to the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of the Expatriates and Health. This high rate of female participation in politics, in comparison to other Arab countries, was obtained through the creation of special seats for women.

Although these results are remarkable compared to other Arab countries they are somewhat inconsistent. Females account for one fifth of government employees but mainly working as clerical staff. Women judges constitute only 11% of the total. Women comprise 57% of teachers below university level, and 20% of university professors. These jobs are inaccessible to lower class women since the school system and the social pressure exclude them from higher education.

Patterns of employment for the lower social classes show that women are predominantly unpaid workers and female employers amount to less than 2%. Official rates speak of 10% of females contributing to economic activities and 65.5% of males⁹² but these statistics rely on the general assumptions that women's domestic work is not an economic activity. In Syria many women work in the household since they are kept from working outside. Thus, if their domestic work was taken into consideration, rates of female economic activities would be much higher. In rural

91 UN 2004: *Where do Arab Women stand in the Development Process? A Gender-based statistical Analysis*, <http://www.escwa.org.lb/information/publications/sdd/docs/sdd-04-booklet.1.pdf>

92 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*.

areas, rates of women working in the fields, hunting and fishing is close to 50% of all women. Added to this, their domestic work shows that rural women contribute disproportionately to economic activities and substantially in non-domestic work, such as agriculture.

Women in agriculture are estimated at 55.4% in Syria while male involvement is at 25%⁹³ of all workers. Women are absent from the marketing part of the agricultural process. This means that they are excluded from the management of the economic returns of their agricultural work and possess a very small percentage of land and animals. Landowners in the Jazeera are 95% male and 5% female. Ownership of domestic animals is 92% for the men and 8% for the women. Technology is 99% in the hands of the men in spite of the fact that it is usually acquired with the “daughter’s price”⁹⁴. Female control over economic decision making, in fact, seems to be very low.

Women’s voices

According to *shari’a* law women are subordinate to their husbands as long as they provide for their economic support. Thus, household power dynamics are strongly connected to bread winning. By not having their domestic or agricultural work recognised as productive, and by not possessing property women have little decision-making power. According to a survey by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO),⁹⁵ men take decisions about the number of children the couple will have, and the latter’s education and marriage. Husbands are perceived by their wives as autonomous managers of the family income. On the other hand a consistent and increasing number of households, particularly in the rural areas, are female headed due to male emigration (see below). As a consequence single women’s autonomy and decision-making power usually increases.

Narratives that depict women as actors in the domestic and the public contradict stereotypical images of the victimised oriental woman. Women’s decision-making power is often exercised among other women within fields that are exclusively female, such as *hammams* (Turkish baths), parts of the mosques reserved to the women or even kitchens. Through these channels mothers usually have a basic, even if unofficial, say in choosing the partners for their children. Also, stories of the

93 UN 2004, *Where do Arab Women stand in the Development Process? A Gender-based statistical Analysis*, <http://www.escwa.org.lb/information/publications/sdd/docs/sdd-04-booklet.1.pdf>

94 The “daughter’s price” is the money a woman obtains from her future husband and that is supposed to stay in her hands as a guarantee of economic security for the future

95 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*.

strategic use by the women of female repressive means have clarified that women are not just passive receivers of external impositions. For example, Iranian women use the anonymity of the *burqa*, symbol of their suppression, as a means for achieving more freedom. Unrecognisable under the veil they are not afraid of being caught while acting in ways their family would not approve of. In the 1980s Syrian women used the headscarf to express their opposition to the Ba'ath party and its secular modernising measures. In 2004 and 2005 more and more women have started wearing the veil as a means of criticising the government, according to some media. They used a silent symbol of the oppression of their bodies, the veil, to show their political opposition in the face of society. The power of this provocation was testified by the violent reaction of some Ba'athists. They forcefully unveiled the women on the streets of Damascus in 1983, forcing the President Hafez al-Asad to publicly condemn the violent act.

Despite these demonstrations of female activism, it is important to recognise that social pressure and gender biases greatly limit women's freedom and space of action both in the family and in public.

If women's voices are little heard in the domestic sphere, the public one presents them with even greater challenges. Despite the state's endorsement of feminist issues, at least in its rhetoric, women find some education channels closed, particularly if they belong to poorer social classes or minorities. Thus, women holding high positions are still an exception and their employment in public offices is still low (minority women are legally excluded from them).

Women's exclusion from decision-making positions continues to hinder a proper understanding and approach to women's role in society.

In the 1960s the Ba'ath government tried to give women a political voice. In 1965, representatives from the Women's Union were part of the first parliament. In 1967, the General Union of Syrian Women was founded together with the Women in Development section of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. After the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Conference of 1995, the government established a Post-Beijing Follow-Up of Women's Affairs to receive recommendations towards gender equity⁹⁶. These two bodies still have limited impact and moreover have little independence from the State both economically and politically. Thus these government organisations do not provide for a forum for political discussion for women and do not constitute an arena of empowerment or free expression.

96 The Post-Beijing Follow-up of Women's Affairs also provides the UN with reports about the situation of women in Syria.

Women's public life suffers from this general lack of freedom, and from suppressive patriarchal structures that pervade the whole of Syrian society. The boundaries between governmental, non-governmental and civil society organisations in Syria are extremely blurred since all these sectors have been artificially created by the state and are controlled by it⁹⁷. This extension of patriarchal structures to all public domains limits state feminist policies to superficial and incomplete measures.

PART 3: THE EUPHRATES BASIN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MINORITY WOMEN OF THE REGION

CHAPTER IV: JAZEERA AND THE EUPHRATES BASIN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

History of Jazeera

The Jazeera is the area situated between the two rivers Euphrates and Tigris, part of northeastern Syria and western Iraq. Historically labelled as the “cradle of civilisation” Jazeera has always been an island⁹⁸ of fertility. In Syria the Jazeera is the foundation of the agricultural productivity of the country due to its water and fertility.

The Euphrates is of fundamental importance for the Syrian agricultural economy. Roughly 95% of Syrian use of its water is for agriculture. Only 3.3% is for domestic use and 1.8% for industry. The Syrian state has developed since the 1960s an extensive plan, the Euphrates Basin Development Project (EBDP), for maximising the use of its waters. This has strongly affected the geographical and social landscape of the Jazeera

Until the end of WWI the region was mainly inhabited by Bedouin nomads and Kurdish groups with few sedentary villages. Nowadays the number of these villages has increased substantially. All economic activity takes place in the main towns of Raqqa or Deir-Azzor.

In the 1970s several oilfields were discovered in the northeast. These oil fields have been quite significant for the national economy and have further increased the importance that the Jazeera holds for Syria.

Only towards the end of their mandate, in 1943, did the French gain interest in the

98 Jazeera is the Arabic name for “island”

Jazeera. Trying to stabilize the border areas of the country the French initiated a series of policies aimed at settling the nomadic Bedouins that were populating the desert⁹⁹. These groups had always kept a degree of autonomy from the central powers. In the 1920s, however, because of the penetration of state power and of capitalism they had undergone a slow process of assimilation¹⁰⁰. During the 1940s the French granted economic concessions to those Bedouin sheikhs who registered in their own name the lands that had always belonged to the tribes. Many sheikhs accepted losing their authority over the tribesmen as a consequence. These tribesmen, in fact, felt betrayed by the sheikhs' appropriation of common land. The solidarity links between the chiefs and the Bedouin tribes was further weakened by the inclusion of the sheikhs in the political life of the country. Some of the sheikhs became parliamentarians and adopted a style of life that distanced them more and more from their tribes¹⁰¹.

The local governments that took power after independence enforced those same policies of settling the nomads and substituting tribal with state networks. The Jazeera saw a gradual creation of large estates in the hands of the sheikhs. Establishing their newly-acquired territories, they shifted from a herding to a farming economy and slowly employed their tribesmen for the cultivation of the land. As a result, an increasing number of tribesmen, called *fellahin*, settled down in the landowner's property creating small villages of peasants submitting to the sheikhs. The power of the sheikhs increased constantly mainly to the detriment of the exploited tribesmen.

These policies of the forties and fifties created a big economic expansion in the Jazeera area, mainly to the advantage of a few new landlords. In the 1940s they started combining resources with the urban merchants into the mechanization of agriculture¹⁰². Towards the end of the 1940s they were able to install private pumps that irrigated the land for the cultivation of cotton. This resulted in a real boom in the 1950s. The sheikhs' wealth and power increased constantly. Apart from owning the land and managing the water, in fact, the sheikhs were well represented among the parliamentarians that influenced government's decisions in their favour. At the same time, though, the tribal networks weakened to the point that the sheikhs

99 In 1930 the Bedouins were 13% of the population. Their number steadily decreased in the following years and in 1982 they had become less than 1%.

100 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development* (Westview Press, London), p208

101 Sheikhs' responses to the state sedentary policies were anyway very diversified. In a few cases they chose to maintain their nomadic life; others became semi-nomadic shepherds; others converted to agriculture. Some sheikhs moved to the city and sent their children to school thus abandoning their nomadic life.

102 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development* (Westview Press, London)

lost any social leading role¹⁰³. This disempowerment of the sheikhs, together with the striking economic gap between them and the peasants caused general popular discontent¹⁰⁴.

The socialist Ba'ath party, supported by these lower classes, claimants for social change, gained many votes in the elections of the late fifties. When in 1963 the Ba'ath seized power it started implementing Arab, socialist agrarian reforms that soon changed the social and economical composition of the Jazeera. These economic changes took the shape of state promoted measures, starting with the land reform, aimed at enhancing agricultural production.

New Arabist and Socialist measures and their impact on the Kurds

The Ba'ath government's assumption in the 1960s was that Syria is a country with scarce mineral resources but with hydraulic and thus agrarian potentialities. Agriculture became the means for economic development¹⁰⁵, and socialism its structural model. The land reform was the first step of the agrarian transformation. Having already began in the 1950s under the United Arab Republic (UAR), the land reform was further implemented by the Ba'ath. The Government expropriated the landowners' estates to assign the land to the *fellahin*, the peasants. The ideological basis of this policy was the socialist principle of equality among all the people through redistribution of land ownership. However its actual implementation was not radical since the expropriations were only partial and the *status quo* was somehow maintained.

These socialist measures changed the economy of the Jazeera whilst Arabist measures affected its social composition.

In the 1950s Arab national unity had been the basic principle to rule the newly independent Syria, together with anti-colonialist and pro-soviet sentiments. All non-Arab and non-Muslim minorities suffered from the expansion of discriminatory laws. Arabic was the only language to be used in public. Non-Arab cultural associations were banned and other histories and cultures denied. The use of non-Arabic traditional clothes was forbidden. During the period of the UAR, Arab nationalism targeted in particular the Kurds and the communists who were

103 The elections of the Fifties, in fact, showed the loss of power by Sheikhs who had to 'buy' the votes for the parliamentary elections.

104 Khalaf, S. N. 1981, *Family, village and the political party: articulation of social change in contemporary rural Syria*. (University of California. Ph.D. thesis: unpublished), p137

105 Metral F., 1992 in Van Tuijl, W. 1992, *Improving water use in agriculture: experience in the Middle East and North Africa*. (The World Bank, Washington), p336

arrested and generally persecuted. The Ba'ath followed and reinforced this line. The government denied the existence of a Kurdish population in Syria; and crushed its expression. It enforced Kurdish assimilation into the Arab nation, particularly in the Jazeera.

While implementing the land reform, the Ba'ath started a campaign of Arabisation of the Jazeera, particularly its northern borders, changing in actual fact or simply on paper the ethnicity of the local population. On 5 October 1962 an exceptional census in the northeastern regions of Syria, the al-Hasake province, had been conducted by the previous government in just one day. The census was officially meant to verify the number of Kurds that had migrated to Syria from Turkey and Iraq in the 1920s. These had to be distinguished from the Kurds that already inhabited the area and had a legal Syrian citizenship. Without prior warning the families of the al-Hasake province were asked to prove their residency in the area before 1945 through specific identity and land documents that were quite unusual at that time. Many managed to provide some papers but many others did not. Those that had recently acquired documents were accused of having obtained them illegally. During that day between 120,000 and 200,000 Kurds were stripped of their Syrian citizenship.

Losing citizenship meant not being able to enjoy the rights connected to it. Still today these Kurds do not receive state health support or economic subsidies. They are excluded from employment in the state sector and state education. They cannot own any property and thus cannot open a business. They are not issued official documents and they do not have legal rights. Restrictions on marriage prevent them from becoming citizens. The assumption that they have Turkish or Iraqi citizenship excludes them from acquiring some rights as immigrants.

The land reform reached the peripheral areas of the Jazeera only after the al-Hasake census had legalised its composition. Deprived of their citizenship the new Kurdish *ajanib* (foreigners) had their land expropriated¹⁰⁶. The latter was redistributed among Arab Syrians resettled there by the state. In this initial phase of Arabisation of the Jazeera, the Kurds were also evicted and forbidden to work the land. A number of Kurds were forcibly displaced to Arab areas; and economic incentives persuaded a large number of Arabs to move to Kurdish parts of the country. This policy called "Arab Belt" was implemented in the 1970s under Hafez al-Assad and aimed to alter the ethnic cohesion of the regions with a Kurdish majority, particularly along the borders with Turkey. The Kurds of Iraq and Turkey had to be separated from those of Syria with a cordon of Arab settlements. The Syrian Kurds would lose their strength

106

The government statistical abstract 2003 shows that in the al-Hasake province, a Kurdish area, 466.600 ha of land were expropriated. This constitutes more than one third of all expropriated land.

as a nation being dispersed in different parts of the country and assimilated into the Arab population, and being deprived of all means for political action. Furthermore, the creation of the Belt coincided with a period of very strong clashes between Iraq and Syria over the water of the Euphrates. On that occasion Iraq accused Syria of withholding the flow of the river and threatened to bomb the Tabqa dam. The two countries moved their armies to the border and war was only avoided with foreign mediation. In this light the Belt seems to have also prevented infiltration attempts by the Iraqi intelligence into Syria through the potentially dissident Kurdish population.

The Euphrates Basin Development Project (EBDP)

With the land reform the Jazeera had acquired a new social composition and economic system. But the land reform was only the first step of a longer process of transformation, the Euphrates Basin Development Project. This was a governmental long-term plan for developing the north-eastern areas of the country with the main objective of boosting the agricultural production and ensuring national food security. During the decade 1946-1956 private pumps and mechanisation had increased the harvests but by the mid-fifties the economy had already slowed down. The government decided to take a leading role in increasing the production again. During its numerous Five Year Plans the state invested enormous sums, granted mainly by the Soviets and the Gulf States, to implement the Euphrates Basin Development Project. This consisted of four steps: agricultural reforms, irrigation, damming of the river, and pilot farms.

The agricultural reform was the starting point of the agrarian reform. Once (almost) all the peasants had been assigned a plot of land by the land reform they were supplied with seeds and fertilisers from the state. The crops were wheat, cotton and sugar beet, to be cultivated in specific timeframes. The harvest was then bought by the state that would take care of marketing it. During the many Five Year Plans different approaches were introduced, intensification of crop cultivation, “scientific rotation” and crop diversification. The state always held a complete monopoly of the system. Water distribution was state-controlled as well.

In the fifties the state began the construction of irrigation canals to diminish the autonomy of the private pumps. The latter, in fact, were enriching the few wealthy landowners and merchants from the cities that could afford to buy them. Furthermore, the use of those private pumps caused a high degree of salinity¹⁰⁷ in the fields and

107

Salinity is connected to the mineral salts that are naturally contained in the water. If irrigation water is not properly drained from the fields the salts will emerge on the surface rendering the land uncultivable.

lowered the level of many wells. The new irrigation system reduced the power of the pump owners but increased the problem of salinity. As a consequence of salinity the expansion of irrigation remained only on a par with the growing number of fields that was going out of production. Only in the mid eighties did the canal network begin irrigating more land than in the fifties. The state's effort to substitute the private ownership and make up for the unproductive land demanded large funds.

The pilot farms were a further step in the realization of the Euphrates project. They consisted of villages constructed anew on state land where peasants could move with their families and cultivate the land in a cooperative manner. The idea was that these villages would unite the peasants and simultaneously pool access to credit, water and machines. On this basis agricultural production would be increased. The cooperatives' land also had to produce experimental crops with the expertise of agricultural technicians. Knowledge of this expertise would slowly be passed down to all the peasants along with the modern means of production and agricultural production plans. The cooperative model was to be extended outside the pilot farms. The peasants were supposed to pool their finances to be able to invest in new machinery for their farms. The first cooperative style of village was constructed for the building of the Athawra dam in 1968.

The construction of the dam marked a fundamental step in the Euphrates Development Project. The dam was built in the upper part of the river and completed in 1974. It was planned to produce electricity for pumps, industries and villages and for export. It was supposed to guarantee constant water for the fields, also doubling the surface of the irrigated area. Furthermore, it was the solution to control the floods that annually inundated the fields when the Euphrates burst its banks.

The symbol of the Ba'ath party

In 1979 Hinnebusch praises the project: "This is the great Euphrates Dam and Basin Development Project around which the greatest hopes for the future of rural Syria are focused"¹⁰⁸. The huge Euphrates development project was, in fact, considered the hope for the future of the country. Through the practical achievement of irrigating the fields, bringing electricity, and employing a large number of people, the project was the starting point for economic improvement and self-sufficiency in terms of food. But its intended effects did not rest there, it was meant to expand the state's control over the whole country. It was a way for the Ba'ath government, then only recently in power, to demonstrate its dedication to the people and thereby garner

108

Hinnebusch, R. A. 1979, *Party and peasant in Syria: rural politics and social change under the Ba'ath*. (Cairo, The American University), p62

popular support. The plan was to create a national feeling in the people of the most remote areas of the country; and generally increase national pride and bridge the gap between cities and countryside. It helped, furthermore, diffuse socialist models of production and social organisation. In fact, a new rural society would emerge destroying the backwardness of the eastern provinces. The project was important also for the pan-Arabist ideology of the Ba'ath. The modernisation Syria would go through would serve to regain the Arab pride at international level¹⁰⁹.

Unofficially, the new agrarian plans aimed to weaken the old elites that did not support the Ba'ath and favoured the peasantry that had constituted the party itself since its inception. In this way, the ethnic minorities would be better controlled leading to increased internal stability and a step further in the Arabisation process.

The roles of the bureaucracy and of the people

The EBDP soon became the symbol of the Ba'ath. Its planning and implementation were realised on a grand scale. Many new state bodies were created following a highly bureaucratic model.

The High Committee for the Euphrates was heading the mechanism that managed the EBDP. The Ministry of the Euphrates was created with its two branches, the General Administration for the Construction of the Euphrates Dam and the General Administration for the Development of the Euphrates Basin (GADEB). These were subdivided into departments, which were made up of a large number of different bureaux. Many state-run construction companies were also founded. The irrigation sector was organised by the Ministry of Irrigation, Major Project Administrator, the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of the Euphrates Dam¹¹⁰. The Higher Agricultural Council, the State Planning Commission and the Ministry of Agrarian Reform were further spin offs of the EBDP. The Peasant Bureau was the body that was supposed to represent the people together with the government-sponsored Peasant Union.

There is little evidence to suggest that common people had a stake in all this planning. Even the Peasant Union has always been perceived more as a means for the state to

109 Allan T., 2001, *The Middle East Water Question: Hydropolitics and the Global Economy* (London, Tauris), p225

110 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London); Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria", in Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. (London, Routledge), p19

introduce agrarian policies than as a voice of the peasantry¹¹¹. Perthes¹¹² argues that the creation of the union served to include in the state system the poorer classes most disadvantaged by the reforms, thus avoiding possible revolts. Others argue¹¹³ that the extension of bureaucracy and *wasta* to all sectors of Syrian society helped include the population in the state affairs. They claim that everybody was able to exercise some pressure on decision-making through relatives or friends that had been recruited by the system. However, if people made use of unofficial, personal connections to have a voice in the plans for the Euphrates, all official forms of local participation in the EBDP seem very limited and in no way served to empower women's groups, minorities or the poor.

The peasants of the Jazeera, in fact, certainly had very little say in the planning of the EBDP. The gaps between officials and peasants were conspicuous during all phases of planning and implementation. Little communication and deep mistrust characterised the interactions between the two parties. During the planning the bureaucrats and technocrats were preoccupied merely with technical issues and little concerned about their impact on the locals. Local participation in this phase was absent and people's needs were not taken into consideration. During the implementation the locals were neither consulted nor informed of the plans to be executed. They faced the imposition of displacement, changes, new restrictions and rules and sometimes they reacted with strong means, such as squatting on the land, and refusing to leave.

In one case Hinnebusch reports of a village that emptied out when a French team approached to perform a survey. The villagers, in fact, had not been told about the project that had been planned for their area; and once they had been told, they did not believe that the state would do something positive for them¹¹⁴.

According to many people interviewed in February 2005¹¹⁵ the complete inexistence of popular consultation still characterises development plans in Syria today. The government complains about the farmers' reticence to buy improved seeds. The farmers on the other hand are not willing to risk a whole year's harvest on seeds they have never seen before, and prefer to plant crops they have known for years. They also complain about the complete lack of involvement in government decisions

111 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London), p120

112 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London)

113 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London)

114 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p246

115 Interviews in Syria and Lebanon, February 2005

regarding their agricultural work. This longstanding absence of consultancy by the Syrian state means that women and minorities were not included in the consultation process.

Particular inattention towards women and minorities is evident in the diffusion of information by the government. All government communications are exclusively delivered in the Arabic language, marginalizing those minorities that do not speak the language. Armenians, in fact, study and use the Armenian language in their daily life. They are exposed to Arabic only when dealing with non-Armenians or when entering into university. Since chances of contact with strangers are very limited for the women, they usually do not speak Arabic but Armenian, Kurdish or other dialects. This gender discrimination by language deprives women of equal rights to access information on projects or measures implemented by the state that often affect them directly.

Changes in the Jazeera

When the work on the Athawra dam started there was huge enthusiasm. Employees were recruited from all over the country 'to participate in the building of the future Syria'¹¹⁶. But these great expectations were not fulfilled in the long term. The realization of the vast project was continuously stalled by an infinite number of problems. Unrealistic plans, technical incompetence, ecological problems¹¹⁷, scarcity of money, inefficiency of the bureaucratic system, corruption of the system¹¹⁸ were all contributing factors.

Since the 1940s the Jazeera has undergone deep transformations. In the 1940s and 1950s its agrarian economy was characterised by concentration of capital and land in the hands of a few people. Some sophisticated machinery was bought by the richest landlords, which expanded production somewhat. After the land reform imposed by the state, the Jazeera was characterised by numerous smallholdings, state properties and cooperatives. State management and investments had substituted private entrepreneurs that were left with little autonomy. Subsistence crops were transformed into mandatory monocultures.

This gradual but radical transformation of rural Syria created waves of economic growth that alternated with periods of stagnation. Enormous state expenditure

116 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm: Akademitryck), p130

117 Gypsum in the soil and salinity were among the most deleterious ecological problems of the irrigation system.

118 Hinnebusch R. A., 2001, *Syria: revolution from above*. (London, Routledge)

was devolved as a substitute to private investments, to give the peasants a basis for cultivation of their new land and for the building of infrastructure¹¹⁹. But results were often disappointing and new measures were adopted. The government faced up to these phases of change by always privileging the public sector, opening only small spaces for private initiative.

The late sixties' stalemate was followed in the Seventies by two waves of liberalization that, together with the preceding oil revenues, helped to create an economic force. When the situation collapsed again in the eighties, due to, among other factors, financial shortages, there seemed to be no alternative to liberalization. But in the nineties Syria stood against Iraq and thus received generous rewards from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. At the end of the nineties, the Syrian economy was again stagnating and still characterized by indecisive measures between the private and the public sectors¹²⁰.

The plans for the development of the Jazeera were influenced by this instability. Over the years they changed to increase the agricultural production that had only alternate phases of success. Since irrigation was not producing the expected results, modern systems were introduced in an attempt to develop all the potentialities of the Euphrates Basin. Private wells for irrigation have been spreading particularly in the last five years. The Pilot Farms were declared unsuccessful and dismantled. Their land was assigned to farmers or former employees of the farms. Compulsory crops have been reduced even though the distribution of seeds, fertilisers and herbicides today is still monopolised by the state together with the marketing of the harvest. The production of cotton has been intentionally diminished by the state. Being a water-demanding crop, cotton endangers the already scarce water resources of the country

The village

The villages of the Euphrates were reshaped during the many social changes imposed by the state. The settling of the sheikhs in the 1930s and 1940s drastically reduced the Bedouin nomadic life, transforming the tribes into small agricultural communities. The cotton boom of the following years considerably increased the number of the villages. But the land reform once again changed the wealth distribution and the economy. The beginning of the Euphrates Basin Development Project introduced strong state control, new rules and enforced displacements - measures that often

119 In the 1960s the state had planned to invest 51% of its total annual budget on agriculture but ended up spending one third less.

120 Hinnebusch R. A., 2001, *Syria: revolution from above*. (London, Routledge)

proved unpopular. These developments also brought some new infrastructure, electricity, hospitals and schools but the process was slow and selective. By the mid-1990s roughly 56% of households had access to piped water, 92% to electricity and 29% had a modern sewage system¹²¹. Few minority villages enjoyed these basic services. In 2002 the principalities of al-Raqqa and al-Hasake in the Jazeera, had the smallest number of hospitals in the country (the ratio of patients to beds was 941:1 in al-Hasake and 653:1 in al-Raqqa, whereas in Damascus the ratio is 165:1)¹²². Al-Hasake is mainly a Kurdish area.

In many minority villages, particularly in the north, the ethnic distribution has altered since the areas occupied by non-Arab majorities became, after the reforms, characterised by mixed communities. The large number of Kurds defined *ajanib* by the al-Hasake census were excluded from all the assignments of land, loans, and state funds. They were also precluded from starting any economic enterprise. They could access the new schools only with many difficulties. They could not enjoy, in general terms, the improvements brought by the EBDP but they were the first to suffer from its negative impact.

The economy of the villages was naturally affected by these changes. Neither the land reform nor the cotton boom had been sufficient to guarantee peasants' economic well-being. The reforms that had liberated the peasants from the landowners brought them under strict state rules. The new small landowners, in fact, could only cultivate the land with their family. No subletting or other forms of transactions were allowed. They had, furthermore, to follow the mandatory process of production: the state provided seeds, fertilizers and water and bought the crops while at the same time fixing the price. The state had, thus, endowed the farmers with private land, shielded them from the risks of the market but, with these same means, curtailed their possibility of social improvement. In fact the state's introduction of cotton improved the country's wealth but not raised the average standards of living¹²³.

The socialist reform, in conclusion, did not level the social inequity but on the contrary, favoured the middle classes to the detriment of the poorest ones. As a consequence the men started looking for cash-paying jobs in the cities or abroad. This process has been growing in the last decades altering the structure of the villages that are now depending on the agricultural work of the women.

121 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*.

122 Syrian government statistical abstract 2003

123 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London)

Syria, Turkey and Iraq: Sharing the Euphrates waters

The Euphrates Basin Development Project also had consequences for the regional politics. The implementation of different development plans by the three riparians, Turkey, Syria and Iraq became the determining factor in their foreign policies.

Historically the Syrian use of the Euphrates was quite limited since the population could rely on other sources of water such as the Yarmouk River and the Orontes. After independence Syria became more concerned about its rights to share the Euphrates River with the two co-riparians, Iraq and Turkey. In fact, the water demand had increased due to a growing population, the extension of agriculture, industries, and the pollution and over-exploitation of other rivers. Syria planned the construction of the Atthawra dam and of a wide irrigation network in the 1960s. Funded in great part by the Soviets, the dam was finished in 1973 and the lake Assad filled up. In the 1980s, with the help of the Gulf States, Syria expanded the irrigation network.

Iraq had already constructed a number of dams in the 1950s and 1960s for irrigation and hydroelectricity. Turkey received funds from the United States and Israel to implement the Southeast Anatolian Project called by its Turkish acronym: GAP. This project was aimed at constructing a large number of dams and hydroelectric power plants along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers.

None of the three countries ever consulted each other about their plans for using the Euphrates. On the contrary all of them developed unilateral projects that became the symbol and pride of their nation. The plans to create the Atatürk dam in Turkey, the Lake Assad in Syria and the Mosul or Saddam Dam in Iraq, conflicted with the uses by the co-riparians. These conflicts were never dealt with in a peaceful way despite the agreements signed bilaterally during the mandates. In 1926 under the French mandate, Syria and Turkey had agreed to a completely equal approach to solving conflicts over sharing the Euphrates. In 1930 Iraq and Turkey had signed a pact that guaranteed consultation over the use of the river which was reconfirmed in 1946. But conflicts arose in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1965 the Joint Technical Committee was created. The representatives of the three states met to solve the disputes but were not successful in doing so. Their meetings throughout the 1980s and 1990s were of little help.

In the 1970s and 1980s Syria accused Turkey time and again of cutting off the flow of the river. During the negotiations of 1987 Turkey openly connected the sharing of the waters to Syrian support for the Kurds. The Kurds, in fact, have been the 'bargaining chip' in the Turkish-Syrian negotiations over Euphrates water for many years¹²⁴. In

124

Lupu Y., 2002, "Law and the Water of the Euphrates and Tigris", *The Georgetown Int'l Envtl. Law review*. Vol.

1990 Turkey impounded the river for nine days to fill the Ataturk dam. The two countries avoided a conflict by reaching an agreement over the Kurdish issue. Only after Syria expelled Öcalan in 1998, did the relationship with Turkey improve. In 2001 the two neighbours agreed to cooperate on the GAP. However the attitude of Turkey is clear, in the words of its Deputy Prime Minister, Mesut Yilmaz:

“We do not want to be in conflict with Syria and we do appreciate the role played by Damascus in expelling members of the Kurdistan Workers Party, but the Euphrates reservoir is very important for the future of economic development in Turkey [...] We have completed works on almost 50% of the infrastructure and we are in the meantime working in the final stages and we will extend the invitation to Syria to accept the inevitability of this project and to join negotiations on a rational use of waters. We are ready to deal fairly and generously, but the division of waters will not be equal as the Euphrates like any other Turkish river should be basically used for serving the interests of the Turkish people”¹²⁵

In 2002 Turkey and Syria signed a Memorandum of Understanding that establishes joint research over irrigation and agricultural plans. Despite the fact that the river rises in the Kurdish south-eastern area of Turkey, Kurds have never been informed or consulted about proposed development plans for the Euphrates.

In 1973 Syria began filling Lake Assad reducing considerably the water flowing into Iraq. The two countries avoided a military conflict because of Soviet and Saudi mediations¹²⁶. In 1990 the two countries signed a treaty to establish that 58% of the water entering Syria would have to flow into Iraq. In 1995 Iraq accused Syria of impounding the water. Again Saudi mediation helped reach an agreement and relations have improved since. During the following years Iraq and Syria found in Turkey a common enemy and became allies signing a secret water-sharing agreement in 2001.

The Turkish GAP project threatens both down-streamers for the extension of its impact on the Euphrates. Syrian officials maintain that Turkey is planning to use half of the river's discharge, leaving Syria and Iraq to share the other half. Furthermore,

14.; McCully, P. 1996, *Silenced Rivers: the ecology and politics of large dams*. (London, Zed Books); Elhance, A. P. 1999, *Hydropolitics in the Third World: Conflict and Cooperation in International River Basins*. (Washington, United States Institute of Peace).

Special notice has to be given to Elhance's solution to the hydropolitical conflict of the Euphrates. The latter, in his opinion, will remain highly contentious: 'as long as the riparian states are unable to fully suppress (or eliminate) the Kurdish people' (Elhance 1999: 139).

125 'Asharq Al-Wasat 2001

126 Lupu Y., 2002, "Law and the Water of the Euphrates and Tigris", *The Georgetown Int'l Envtl. Law review*. Vol. 14., p354-355

11% of this half will be Turkish return irrigation water, thereby of a very low quality.¹²⁷

Moreover, Syria and Iraq do not approve of the deal Turkey is making with Israel for selling its waters. They view it as support to a common enemy and also fear that selling the waters of the Manavgat River will oblige Turkey to use more water from the Euphrates. Finally, Syria and Iraq are unhappy about the support for the GAP by the US. Together with its accession to the EU, this places Turkey in a strong bargaining position. In fact, Syrian and Iraqi officials believe that Turkey has already taken advantage of the sanctions against Iraq. According to them Turkey pushed ahead with implementing the GAP on the assumption that opposition from Iraq would be ignored due to its weak international standing¹²⁸. The latest war in Iraq and the worsening of Syrian foreign relations have further diminished the credibility of these countries vis-à-vis the international community.

127 Interview with Syrian officials. Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP), *Downstream Impacts of the Turkish dam construction on Syria and Iraq: Joint Report of Fact-finding Mission to Syria and Iraq*.

128 Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP), *Downstream Impacts of the Turkish dam construction on Syria and Iraq: Joint Report of Fact-finding Mission to Syria and Iraq*.

CHAPTER V: LAND REFORM, AGRARIAN REFORM, IRRIGATION AND THE EFFECT ON WOMEN

The Land Reform

The land reform and the agrarian reform transformed the economic and social landscape of the Jazeera. Women were highly disadvantaged by these new measures and this is particularly true for minority women.

In 1969 the state expropriated 17% of Syrian total fertile land from those landlords who owned more than 120 hectares of irrigated land or 460 hectares of rainfed land. In 1980 a new phase of land reform reduced the extension of these big plots to 200 hectares. After estimating the amount of private property by including that possessed by the landowner, his wife and children, the government distributed the land in excess among the landless male peasants. However the landlords were allowed to keep a large share of their original fields and this was usually the most fertile and water-fed part of the estate. Furthermore the land was in some cases not assigned to landless peasants but to sons of landlords, merchants, and members of the military. As a result the expropriated land was too little to endow all the farmers with land. Hinnebusch reports: "In post-reform Deir ez-Zor, 1% of holders controlled 23% of the land in parcels over 50 ha while 88% of holders controlled only 29.2% in holdings under 6 ha., 12.2% of holders rented their land, and 12% of the agricultural population were landless workers"¹²⁹.

Twenty per cent of the peasants, corresponding roughly to 180.000 families, were not included in the land reform and remained landless labourers. Many households were allotted 2.5 ha of land and some even less. The law, in fact, established the assigned plots could be of maximum 8 hectares of irrigated and 45 hectares of rain-fed land. It did, however, not specify the minimum size¹³⁰. These small plots were insufficient to sustain the families since according to FAO a minimum of 4 ha is necessary for the survival of a small household.¹³¹ The new small-holders were not allowed to rent

129 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p234

130 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London), p81

131 A survey by the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas confirms this data www.icarda.cgiar.org/Publications/AnnualReport/2000/Project%204.2/Project4.2.html

out or sell their properties to escape poverty. The land assigned through the reform could only be cultivated by the owner. This precarious economic situation was worsened by the lack of community and kinship support. The state, in fact, had tried to further modernize the country by eliminating traditional forms of tribal links. Thereby related families had been intentionally assigned plots far away from each other and were no longer able to rely on the social capital of the community¹³².

Over the years the land was further fragmented among heirs. This made it almost impossible to satisfy all the needs of a family with the products and income of agriculture.

The Agrarian Reform

The Agrarian Reform complemented the Land Reform. This was a comprehensive plan that centralised the agricultural system of Syria through a top-down structure. Those that received land from the state had to join the Peasant Union, had to be part of a cooperative and pay a fee for the land received. The cooperatives and the local authorities mediated between the Higher Council of Agriculture and the farmers. The Council established the kind of crops to be cultivated each year, specifying the quantity and the timing. The compulsory crops for some years were cotton, sugar beet, maize, silk, peanuts, and wheat. Peasants have to follow the Council's decisions but are also allowed to grow some products for their subsistence. All seeds and fertilisers are received from the state which buys all the harvests at the end of the season for a procurement price.

During the 1970s and 1980s these procurement prices were in many cases below production costs¹³³. Poor rural families encountered severe economic problems. Many of them tried to illegally escape the cultivation of state crops and grow more profitable ones. But only by abiding by the rules regarding the compulsory crops were they entitled to receive loans from the Agriculture Cooperative Bank. Loans were the only means to access machinery and water. In most cases the poorest farmers were, in any case, not granted loans since they were unable to provide the necessary guarantees.

The land and agrarian reforms were a means of improvement for medium-sized landowners only. In fact, the big landowners had their property partly reduced and the small holders were assigned a plot of land insufficient for their family. The

132 Metral F., 1992 in Van Tuijl, W. 1992, *Improving water use in agriculture: experience in the Middle East and North Africa*. (The World Bank, Washington), p348

133 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London)

medium-sized landlord, on the contrary, acquired sufficient economic assets to go beyond mere subsistence through the reform. These landlords also had strong political leverage since the founders of the Ba'ath belonged to the same social class and so they slowly became a solid base of support for the regime.

The voices of discontent that rose during the 1970s from the poorest smallholders were little heard. The Peasant Union, in fact, apart from being strongly connected to the regime, included peasants from all social classes. The demands of the smallholders were different from those of the richer or medium landlords and it was the latter that had more leverage to impose their agenda. Inclusion in the Union basically served to silence the protests of a growing landless movement that started to organise in the 1970s¹³⁴. As a result many poor farmers accrued debts, migrated to big cities abandoning their fields, or illegally rented them out while working as wage labourers.

Male migration from rural areas has become the norm today. The small changes in the organisation of the agricultural system, in fact, have not improved the situation of the poor farmers. Nowadays the role of the state in selling seeds, fertiliser, and herbicides and in buying harvests is still central. The state does not oblige the farmers to deal with its system in any legal way. However, the procurement prices it offers are not advantageous. They have been static since 1997 whereas the cost of living has increased. There is no alternative market available and apart from a very limited number of purchases, all farmers rely on the state.

Women and the Reforms

The land reform was a fundamental cause of disempowerment of women. In fact the state expropriated women of their land but excluded them from the assignment of plots, even when they were the head of the household¹³⁵. Lack of property and general poverty coincide with little political and social power, particularly for women. This results in little possibility for women of autonomous economic upgrading.

Women who find jobs receive smaller salaries compared to the men. Landless women have no access to loans and no chance of investment. They are excluded from allocation of other assets connected to property such as seeds, fertilisers or water. Discrimination based on social status adds to gender discrimination in the

134 Hinnebusch reports of peasants squatting the fields or violently rebelling against some landlords. Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'athist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London),

135 FAO reported in 1999 a ratio of 95% male landlords. Women owned only 5% of the land. (Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*.)

daily lives of poor women.

Landless women have little power also in intra-household dynamics. According to the *shari'a*, women have to obey their husbands as long as they are the breadwinners. Thus, poor women have little decision-making power in family spending. The threat of poverty also limits their free choice in matters of marriage and divorce since economic constraints can push women to accept marriage agreements they would otherwise refuse. Social rules also limit female self-determination since women often have to rely on men for many activities such as travelling, getting married, or driving, to name but a few.

Women that are the head of a household because they are widows or their husbands have left them to find work in the cities, are often obliged to accept jobs that are considered unsuitable for females by the community. Women whose reputation is damaged do not enjoy any form of community support but, on the contrary, they are usually discriminated against and exploited¹³⁶. Extreme poverty and family duties force women to accept very low salaries and degrading jobs and poor women, particularly if they are heads of households, are obliged to enter unwanted relationships with men.

The agrarian reform increased the poverty of many families and thus caused an increase in the above-mentioned problems. Furthermore, the compulsory crops that substituted subsistence production with monocultures obliged women to find alternative ways to secure the ingredients of their traditional diet. In many cases the women had to make do with the produce of their fields. The women also lost their traditional responsibility of selecting the best seeds for the following year's sowing once the seeds were supplied by the state. Poverty affected young girls who dropped out of school early to help their families. In a report by FAO it is stated that "elder daughters help in agricultural production and in the carrying out of household chores, especially taking care of younger siblings. This leads to higher illiteracy between young rural females and higher drop-out rates from schools."¹³⁷

Young girls have usually lesser chances of surviving illness in poor families as their health is of smaller concern than that of their brothers. In the Jazeera, though, the same FAO survey reports equal health treatment for children and no selective pregnancy based on the foetus' sex. However, this is in contradiction with the actual use of contraception. Women who have already given birth to a boy make much more use of birth control than those who are 'only' mothers of girls. This practice is clearly indicative of gender bias.

136 Chambers R., 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. (Harlow, Longman)

137 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*, p11

The Women working in the Development section of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform which was founded by the government to deal with women's issues did little to resolve these problems.

Kurdish minority women

The al-Hasake census in 1962 deprived almost 200,000 Kurds of their land. In many cases state land in the Jazeera was sold or rented out by the state to private owners. In other cases it was assigned to landless Arabs or kept for cooperatives or pilot farms. The Kurds lost their property and, furthermore, their entitlements to holding rights. They were, in fact, forbidden to farm the land. Kurds had their every means of economic improvement curtailed as from then on they were denied loans, state employment, state benefits, access to state health system and education. They could not possess property and holding rights, and enjoy any other citizens' rights, such as travelling within the country or abroad. The situation of Kurdish women was particularly deplorable since the discrimination based on gender and social status that applies to landless Arab women was worsened by ethnic discrimination.

Kurdish landless women who live in Arab communities have extremely limited political, social and economic power. They are often exploited by the community, and have few working choices and very low salaries. State discrimination against Kurds is applied to Kurdish women as well as gender discrimination.

Extreme poverty affects Kurdish girls strongly. State ethnic discrimination prevents the majority of children from accessing schools. Families almost always favour boys' education over girls'. As mentioned in the previous page, poverty makes this bad situation even worse. Kurdish families often cannot provide for the clothing necessary to go to school and certainly cannot afford to educate more than one child, which will usually be the boy. Instead of attending classes girls start to work to help their families economically. Labour laws that protect women and children do not apply to agriculture. Children below 12 can be employed in the fields¹³⁸ and women are not shielded against gender exploitation when working in agriculture. Thus they are usually subject to exploitation as agricultural wage labourers. Lack of education reduces the range of jobs girls can obtain in their future life.

Having such a reduced number of options, Kurdish girls get married very early. Consequently they have to bear the physical consequences of early pregnancy, and the psychological implications of family duties from a very young age. Many of them get married before 15 and often to a relative. Marriage to older relatives is usually

138

Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London), p125

forced on the girls if they have been raped. The violence continues in most cases over the years. Girls that undergo sexual violence and are not married by their rapists encounter extreme social discrimination and often death at the hand of their male relatives whose honour has been compromised¹³⁹. In numerous cases many young women resort to prostitution in other cities to make a living, to avoid community ostracism and to avoid death. Poverty, lack of education and employment are further causes of female prostitution.

Irrigation

Water is a basic requirement for agriculture and for survival, even more so in arid parts of the Jazeera. Old systems of irrigation had always existed but only in the 1940s did private pumps guarantee a reliable water supply and served to increase production. Problems of salinity, though, and over-use of wells had already demonstrated the limits of the private means. In the 1950s the state decided to develop an irrigation scheme that could increase the discharge of water; this would allow an extension of the cultivated land and favour a general improvement of the harvests. Furthermore, losing the monopoly of the water the few wealthy landowners would lose also their power. Irrigation was thus considered by the party as an important step towards social equality.

In the 1960s, the state invested substantial funds in spreading irrigation networks and the number of the private pumps was drastically reduced. In the 1970s, private investments in irrigation devices increased again while the efforts of the state slowed down. Enormous problems of salinity were affecting the fields, damaging the quality of the soil. As a consequence the increase in newly-irrigated land was offset by increases in newly-unproductive fields. In 1975 the state had managed to irrigate 550,000 ha of land when in the 1950s it had reached 600,000 ha¹⁴⁰. By the mid 1980s the system was irrigating only as much as it had done in the 1950s.

Lack of maintenance and technical expertise rendered the irrigation ineffective but a hugely expensive enterprise. While up until the 1970s water was almost completely subsidised by the state, now cost-recovery schemes were introduced. The prices rose for agricultural and domestic as well as industrial consumption¹⁴¹. However charges for water in Syria have always been nominal.

139 Similar cases are analysed by the Kurdish Human Rights Project in Turkey.

140 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p218

141 Daoudy M., 2000, *Water, Institutions and Development in Syria: a Downstream Perspective from the Euphrates and Tigris*, p6 <http://www.dams.org/kbase/submission.showsub.php?rec=env108>

In the north-eastern areas of the Jazeera after the land reform, water was not provided by the state and peasants had to find a way to secure it for their fields. Private investments had been encouraged by the state through loans by the Agricultural Bank. But smallholders were unable to float loans for irrigation systems that could improve their harvests¹⁴². Also they had no economic means to secure access to water.

In recent years many farmers have started using private wells again with incentives by the state. "As pumped water is free, the only investment expense required is the well and a suitable pump. Farmers obtain credit at preferential rates of interests to purchase fuel and imported pumps at subsidized prices"¹⁴³. The farmers furthermore prefer to be autonomous in water management. In 2002 the number of private pumps was 170,729 according to the government statistical abstract.

Migration

Land reform, agrarian reform and irrigation plans have not helped secure the survival of the poor peasants of the Jazeera. Small plots, lack of economic and political means, strict agrarian rules, low procurement prices and lack of water rendered agricultural production insufficient to sustain poor families.

Rabo reports that in the eighties a village of the Jazeera called Sabgha had one third of its villagers without land. Only sixteen percent of the male-headed households could live from agriculture and sheep rearing. As a consequence, a quarter of the male-headed households were migrating abroad. Those that were not migrating abroad needed sources of income alternative to agriculture¹⁴⁴. However, the state's plan to assimilate the local population in the workforce for the Euphrates development plan had been highly over-estimated. Many villagers started commuting to the closest towns in search of employment. Others became seasonal workers in the area to sell their labour. Only a few were able to buy shares of tractors or cars and rent them out to support their families. Most families struggled for survival.

Rural-urban migration was not very big in the 1970s. In the 1980s, however, the crisis of the agricultural economy brought a large number of people from the countryside to the biggest towns in Lebanon or the Gulf States. Perthes refers to a flow of 50,000

142 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London), p89

143 Syria Times, 1 March 2005, <http://www.teshreen.com/syriatimes/>

144 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm: Akademitryck), p50-52

to 100,000 migrants per year¹⁴⁵.

In recent years the rapid growth in family size paralleled the decrease in land tenures. This is due to the fact that every heir inherits only a fragment of the original plot. Family agriculture has been increasingly unable to sustain the households and more and more men migrate to look for a job. Their families stay in the villages and their wives take care of the fields¹⁴⁶. Recent statistics about migration are not available but it is surely a growing phenomenon. However, the experience of the fact-finding mission in February 2005 is a good indicator. In a group of men of a village close to Al-Bab, east of Aleppo eight out of ten were working either in Lebanon or Jordan. The day of the visit some of the men were in the village to spend the weekend. Those working in Lebanon had returned for a short time because of the difficult situation with the neighbouring country. The two men that usually lived and worked in the village were the director of the local school and a man in charge of managing the tractors and the other machinery for the fields of those working abroad. According to them, that was quite a usual pattern in the area.

Women and Migration

Together with the land and agrarian reforms, the scarcity of water makes agricultural production very difficult for peasants. As a consequence, a large number of men have had to look for off-farm sources of income and the women have had to 'take on the bulk of men's roles and activities in farming'¹⁴⁷. The new activities assigned to women added to those that they previously had has resulted in a heavier burden of work. Furthermore, the general decrease of the agricultural production was in some cases parallel to insufficient incomes from husbands¹⁴⁸ causing a general worsening of living standards. Perthes maintains that the women were increasingly working the land as an additional income to their husband's wage-labour¹⁴⁹.

The agricultural work left to the women was also particularly heavy due to the scarcity of water and other constraints related to the state-run agriculture that had urged the men to look for alternative jobs. Moreover, the government has increasingly demanded agricultural products to satisfy the needs of a fast-growing

145 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London), p94

146 Abdelali-Martini M., P. Goldey, Gwyn E. Jones and E. Bailey, 2003, "Towards a Feminisation of Agricultural Labour in Northwest Syria" in *Peasant Studies*, (Volume 30, Number 2)

147 Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) 2000, www.prgaprogram.org/download/working.documents/wd13.pdf.

148 Zwarteveen Z. M., 1997, 'Water: from basic need to commodity: a discussion on gender and water rights in the context of irrigation' in *World Development*. (Vol. 25 n. 8), p1344

149 Perthes V., 1995, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, (I.B. Tauris, London), p85

nation. The farmers have been trying to render their small plots more productive to also satisfy their family's needs. This agricultural intensification demands more and more labour, which in the absence of men, falls to the women, together with all the other activities. Many women have started to work as wage-labourers in the neighbourhoods.

In the early 1990s¹⁵⁰ the agrarian situation deteriorated and migration became more widespread. The decrease of the Euphrates waters due to the Turkish South East Anatolia Project¹⁵¹, and problems of the Syrian irrigation system, cast doubt over the sustainability of the Jazeera agriculture, which is so highly dependent on irrigation. Male immigration became the norm, causing a majority of household plots to be cultivated by women. These are basically in charge of the family although supervised by at least one male figure that usually remains as head of the household¹⁵².

The women that were taking care of the households and the fields were afflicted by many practical problems. These were mainly caused by the general lack of acknowledgment of women's work, especially agricultural work. FAO speaks of the underestimation of feminisation rates in agriculture due to the "invisibility" of women's work in the fields. Housework and agricultural work, in fact, are generally considered part of the female gender roles and thus they are not taken into consideration¹⁵³.

During a conversation with the men of a village close to al-Bab, east of Aleppo, one of them declared that the women were just 'sleeping and eating' while their husbands were working abroad. When questioned about who was taking care of the fields in absence of the men, the same person replied that it was the women that were doing all the agricultural work¹⁵⁴. This anecdote shows an attitude that is quite widespread among farmers.

FAO reports an increase of 15% in female involvement in the agricultural field from 1994 to 1998. This number has risen by another 12% in 2002. Now more

150 Whitaker, B. 2003: 'One river's journey through troubled times' in *The Guardian* H2O, Saturday, August 23, 2003.

151 Kolars J. F. & W. A. Mitchell, 1991, *The Euphrates River and the Southeast Anatolia Development Project*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press); Allan T., 2001, *The Middle East Water Question: Hydro-politics and the Global Economy* (London, Tauris); Lupu Y., 2002, "Law and the Water of the Euphrates and Tigris", *The Georgetown Int'l Envtl. Law review*. Vol. 14.

152 Interview with Malika Martini from International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), Aleppo, Syria, 24 February 2005.

153 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*, p16

154 Interview with Syrian family, village close to Aleppo, February 2005. Names withheld by KHRP

than half of all women labourers are working in the agricultural sector¹⁵⁵. This data indicates clearly a feminisation of labour in agriculture¹⁵⁶. The same survey states that women undertake half of the agricultural work for each household. A curious consequence of female involvement in agriculture and wage labour is the increasing delay in marriage for the women of the Jazeera in comparison to the urban areas¹⁵⁷. More economic independence gained through agricultural work pushes women to postpone marriage.

Women's work was unrecognised and underestimated at local, governmental and international levels. As a consequence, there was no practical adaptation to women's needs in the local organization of the agricultural work or in the construction of infrastructures by the government or by foreign engineers. According to Rabo:

'The planners of the Euphrates scheme, like the male villagers, never discuss the role and importance of women in agriculture. Planners and those in power never view the village economy on a household level, nor in relation to larger economic processes. The Scheme is planned by men for a family economy of which they have only a very vague idea'¹⁵⁸

This is in spite of women's essential role in the economy of the families. In Sabgha village

'Women are responsible for all household work: baking, cooking, washing, cleaning, fetching water, gathering fuel and care of the children. They milk the sheep, take the care of the sheep-products, and attend to weak and sick animals. They weed and clean the fields and pick cotton. [...] There is no direct male recognition of female contribution to the survival of the household'¹⁵⁹.

Zwarteveen studies the situation of the numerous *de facto* female farmers caused by the temporary migration of men. In those cases, official titles to land and water are often connected with the men because of the general lack of recognition of women as irrigators, water users and farmers. Women, thus, are not able to independently

155 Syrian government statistical abstract 2003.

156 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*

157 According to a survey by FAO "the heavy workload of young rural females has also led to a unique phenomenon, specific to Syria. Early marriage is more prevalent in urban areas than in rural areas, especially for the age category (10-14) years of age. The percentage of females in this category reaches 9.3% for urban areas, while it does not exceed 7% in rural areas" (Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women In Agriculture*, p18)

158 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm: Akademityrck), p57

159 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm: Akademityrck), p52

manage the fields they cultivate but have to rely on the decisions of their absent husbands. Rabo comments about Sabgha village that 'women do not control the land and in the last resort men make the financial decisions concerning agricultural activities'¹⁶⁰. Furthermore the women are excluded from the rights connected to property. According to Michael Michael from ICARDA¹⁶¹ seeds, fertilisers and all products supplied by the state are sold only to the person officially in possession of the land. Thus the women have to rely on their husbands to obtain the basic means for their agricultural work. Moreover the women are excluded from the marketing of the harvests they have produced since the state deals only with the owners of the fields when buying their crops.

Women also experience difficulty in accessing water. Water distribution is deeply embedded in social issues and has often little to do with technical problems. In most cases, allocation of water is the product of inequitable power relations. These are influenced by "ethnic rivalry, racism, and xenophobia; nationalism of every kind"¹⁶² but also by gender biases, class rivalry and struggles for cultural, economic and political hegemony. Thereby women, the poor and the minorities are likely to be discriminated against in water distribution at many levels.

Since social dynamics can be much more influential than technical, legal or official rights, unofficial agreements are often more effective than the official ones. Not surprisingly unofficial agreements of water distribution in the Jazeera follow the same path as official ones: many women lose their husband's rights to a share of water as soon as the latter leave.

A further gap is that between rights to allocation of water and its distribution¹⁶³. Official or unofficial rights to water, in fact, can be discarded by social judgment. This means that some households can be guaranteed water delivery on paper but not receive any under the influence of community dynamics. Women are the first to suffer from social ostracism, particularly when their honour is not defended by their absent male relative and their social status does not support them¹⁶⁴.

As a consequence poor single women often lack the security of a successful harvest due to the insecurity of irrigation water delivery. To solve this problem they have

160 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm: Akademitryck), p57

161 Interview with Michael Michael from ICARDA, Aleppo, Syria, February 28, 2005.

162 Petrella R., 2001, *The Water Manifesto: Arguments for a World Water Contract*. (London: Zed Books), p43

163 Zwarteveen Z. M., 1997, 'Water: from basic need to commodity: a discussion on gender and water rights in the context of irrigation' in *World Development*. (Vol. 25 n. 8), p1340

164 In many cases however, seclusion is directly proportional to richness and honour so that in poor families women are often more free to move in public than in richer families.

to rely on social and political networks to obtain access to irrigation¹⁶⁵. Thereby they are forced to enter relationships of dependency with powerful men or other unwanted relationships. In other cases they have to secure an income working as wage-labourers in other peasants' fields.

The non-recognition of women's role in agriculture has even deeper consequences than the impossibility to use a husband's entitlement over land and water. In fact, the specificity of female farmers' demands is completely overlooked. Female-run agriculture needs reliable water delivery, compatible with the daily care of children and other domestic duties. It needs, also, early arrangements in the irrigation schedules. Women have, in fact, to rely on external labourers for much of the work in the fields; and they have to organize the hiring of the labour in accordance with the arrival of water. Finally women require different machinery and technology than that produced for men and used exclusively by them.

Feminisation of poverty

Male migration in Syria has meant an increase in women's duties but not in their rights. Land rights, holding rights, and rights over resources rest solely with the men. Furthermore, since a man of the family always stays at home to head the household¹⁶⁶, female domestic freedom is very little augmented by the absence of their husbands. Women's expanding responsibilities in agriculture are paralleled neither by an extension of their legal status¹⁶⁷ nor by an acknowledgment of their economic role. Hinnebusch concludes:

'Rural women work longer and harder at both household and field tasks, have the least access to schooling opportunities and services, are paid less than men for agricultural labour, and despite increasing responsibility, remain under the authority of the husband and his family. This threatens a growing "feminization of poverty", the creation of an exploited female proletariat.'¹⁶⁸

The phenomenon of "feminisation of poverty" is spreading in the rural areas of the Jazeera. An increasing number of the women that were the sole support for

165 Zwarteeven Z. M., 1997, 'Water: from basic need to commodity: a discussion on gender and water rights in the context of irrigation' in *World Development*. (Vol. 25 n. 8), p1343

166 Abdelali-Martini M., P. Goldey, Gwyn E. Jones and E. Bailey, 2003, "Towards a Feminisation of Agricultural Labour in Northwest Syria" in *Peasant Studies*, (Volume 30, Number 2)

167 Cleaver, F. & D. Elson 1995, *Women and water resources: continued marginalisation and New policies*. Published by Sustainable agriculture programme of the international institute for environment and development. (Series n. 49), p10

168 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p282

their households became low-paid daily labourers in the fields or in commercial farms in the neighbourhood¹⁶⁹. The increase in female inter-regional migration¹⁷⁰ is highlighted by recent data from IFAD's surveys. These show that 'On average, in a household of eight, two adult males migrate to Lebanon for 4-6 months each, and two to three women within the governorate and in nearby governorates for 6-8 months each.'¹⁷¹.

Women's wage-labour is seriously affected by gender-biased wages. Rabo maintains that women and girls who work in agricultural activities receive half the male wage.¹⁷² FAO data shows that women receive on average 75% of men's incomes. "The lowest rate is obtained in the mixed sector, followed by the informal sector (64% and 65% respectively), while the highest rate is again obtained in the government sector (91%)"¹⁷³. Poor women often have no choice but to work for very low prices.

A comparable situation is reported by Chambers who interviewed a group of peasant women in Kerala working 'in the pouring rain who said that they had no idea what they would be paid for their day's work, but that they had no choice but to work'¹⁷⁴. Chambers also analyses the difficult situation of migrant labourers. According to his study, women that were known to be destitute had no bargaining possibilities and were thus exploited by their community. Some decided to migrate but migration caused the loss of all support from their village community. It, furthermore, dramatically affected their situation because wage labourers' employers usually do not accept responsibility for, or obligations towards migrants¹⁷⁵.

One of the root-causes of the feminisation of poverty is the association of women with the domestic sphere, and of the domestic sphere with unproductive work.

Domestic and Public Spheres

Boserup's findings show that women, in many agricultural societies, carry out the

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- 169 Sontheimer S. (ed), 1988, *Women and the Environment: a Reader. Crisis and Development in the Third World*. (London, Earthscan Publications), p120
- 170 International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) www.icarda.cgiar.org/Publications/AnnualReport/2000/Project%204.2/Project4.2.html, p2
- 171 International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) www.ifad.org/gbdocs/eb/77/e/EB-2002-77-R-26-REV-1.pdf, p4
- 172 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm: Akademityck), p52
- 173 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women in Agriculture*, p5
- 174 Chambers R., 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. (Harlow, Longman), p135
- 175 Chambers R., 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. (Harlow, Longman), p136

main bulk of the agricultural work¹⁷⁶. Rassam and Tully's study of women in rural north Syria highlight that men's and women's contribution to agricultural labour is equal¹⁷⁷. Female agricultural work adds to their domestic duties making the women the major contributors to family economy. This contradicts the stereotypes about rural life of Arab women too often represented as restricted to the private sphere¹⁷⁸.

Rabo's picture of the women of Sabgha village clearly shows that the border between private and public is very blurred in daily life. 'Not only do women and men mix socially, but women entertain and receive male guests, even non-villagers or total strangers, if their husbands are not at home [...] they are not veiled and they shake a man's hand. They speak and voice their opinion¹⁷⁹. The inconsistency of the distinction between private and public, after all, has already been shown in much literature¹⁸⁰. But, in spite of the actual reality, the association between women and the private is often assumed at the level of social discourse, shaping policies and behaviour. The damaging effects of this have already been highlighted in the previous paragraphs and can be summarised as follows.

Morality discourses envisage the girls in the house and not in the public school and many girls drop out of school more easily than boys. Women receive little education also because studying is considered superfluous for the domestic work they are assumed to be confined to. Women's role in agriculture is overlooked so women farmers are discriminated against in decision-making and allocations of basic agricultural assets such as water. For this reason the success of their harvest depends on social scrutiny and approval. Women's rights as wage-labourers are minimal since their contribution to the labour market is considered insignificant. In addition, their domestic work is naturalised as 'female duty' and often portrayed as being in contrast to productive male work. Thus, household work is considered non-productive or non-economically rewarding. Women's independence is constantly challenged on the basis of them relying on the male-earned money. Finally, the definition of women's roles as generally unproductive is a basis for their marginality

176 Boserup E., 1970, *Women's role in economic development*. (London, Allen & Unwin)

177 Rassam A. & Tully D., 1988, "Gender related aspects of agricultural labour in northwestern Syria" in *Gender Issues in Farming Systems Research and Extension*. Poats S. V. & M. Schmink & A. Spring (eds.), (Boulder, Westview Press), p290

178 El Katsha, S. & S. Watts, 1993, "The Empowerment of women: water and sanitation initiatives in rural Egypt" *Cairo Papers in Social Science*. (Vol. 16, summer 1993), p13

179 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, Townsmen and Employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm: Akademityrck), p56

180 Robertson A. F., 1991, *Beyond the Family: The Social Organisation of Human Reproduction*. (Berkeley (USA), University of California Press, Polity); McClintock A., 1995, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. (London, Routledge); Joseph S. (ed), 2000, *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*. (New York, Syracuse University Press)

in obtaining many of the same rights that men enjoy.

A further step to be taken, then, is criticizing the too often recurring use of the terms 'domestic' and 'productive' because of the assumption that the former is unproductive. The attention that Cleaver and Elson¹⁸¹ pay to productive activities performed by women in the house, such as brewing beer or brick moulding for sale, is once more strengthening the assumption that the other 'traditional' domestic jobs are actually unproductive. Wijk-Sijbesma¹⁸² looks at women's contribution in agriculture and highlights their 'productive activities' connected to water such as irrigation, fisheries, animal-care and so on.

More interestingly Zwarteveen criticises the common association between women and domestic water use¹⁸³. In her opinion reducing women's multiple water-related roles to the domestic ones only is not just imprecise. This reductionism, on the contrary, harms women at a deep level. It means reifying the idea of the female private sphere causing a strengthening and naturalisation of private/public boundaries. Zwarteveen charges water development projects that adopt these policies, with dangerous gender superficiality. This superficiality is concerned with guaranteeing water rights to women in the domestic sphere thus satisfying their basic needs to the detriment of their strategic needs. She maintains that this

'has allowed projects to conveniently add women on [...] without having to question and challenge the assumptions underlying current irrigation management policies and practices, and without having to question and challenge women's rights and positions within the gender division of labour'¹⁸⁴

It is imperative to recognise that the rural women of the Jazeera usually work in the house and in the fields contributing fundamentally, in both activities, to the economy of the households. Overlooking this fact is to perpetuate the deep discrimination against women inherent in development measures and social rules. The threat of a 'feminisation of poverty' Hinnebusch refers to, becomes then, very real.

181 Cleaver, F. & D. Elson 1995: *Women and water resources: continued marginalisation and New policies*. Published by Sustainable agriculture programme of the international institute for environment and development. (Series n. 49)

182 Wijk-Sijbesma, 1998, *Gender in water resources: management, water supply and sanitation; roles and realities revisited*. (The Hague, International water and sanitation centre)

183 Zwarteveen Z. M., 1997, 'Water: from basic need to commodity: a discussion on gender and water rights in the context of irrigation' in *World Development*. (Vol. 25 n. 8)

184 Zwarteveen Z. M., 1997, 'Water: from basic need to commodity: a discussion on gender and water rights in the context of irrigation' in *World Development*. (Vol. 25 n. 8), p1337

CHAPTER VI: DAMS, PILOT FARMS AND WOMEN

The Atthawra Dam

‘Perhaps more than any other technology, massive dams symbolize the progress of humanity from a life ruled by nature and superstition to one where nature is ruled by science, and superstition vanquished by rationality. They also symbolize the might of the state that built them, making huge dams a favourite of nation-builders and autocrats. When a dam is given such a powerful symbolic role, its economy and technical rationale and potential negative impacts fade into insignificance in the decision-making process.’¹⁸⁵

The Euphrates’ huge dams are clearly nationalistic symbols. Turkey constructed the Atatürk Dam and Iraq the Saddam Dam, whereas the Syrian Atthawra Dam embodied the essence of the modern Syrian nation. Its name (Atthawra means “revolution” in Arabic) symbolised the socio-economic revolution that the dam was supposed to bring. The lake created by the Dam, lake Assad, was named after the President thereby directly connecting the project to the regime’s pride and to Hafez al-Assad’s personal prestige.

At the time of its construction the Atthawra dam was one of the ten biggest dams in the world. Its length stretches to 4.6 km, its height to 60 m and it boasts a width of 500 m¹⁸⁶. This huge project was a socialist pillar financed by the Soviet Union and constructed for the good of the Syrian people. It was supposed to produce electricity for industries, villages and for export. It would power the water pumps doubling the surface of the irrigated areas and guarantee constant water for the fields and control the floods. Its planning and construction was also supposed to improve local skills and technical expertise. In the international arena it would position Syria and, by extension, the Arab nation, at the forefront of modernity.

In 1968 the city of Atthawra was built to start the construction of the nearby dam.

185 McCully P, 1996: *Silenced Rivers: the ecology and politics of large dams*. (London, Zed Books), p237

186 Fisher W.B. 2004, “Syria: Physical and Social Geography” in *The Middle East and North Africa 2004*. (Europa Publications), p1049

The new city was to host all the workers employed in planning and erecting the dam, and their families. “The city was the greatest concentration of workers in the country, with 12,000 possessing 100 different specialties. [...] By 1973, 71% were considered skilled, a unique level in Syria”¹⁸⁷. The city itself was a model of efficiency and modernity with its schools, hospitals, recreation spaces, day care centres, kindergartens and other infrastructures.

The unions’ role in organising the workers was much stronger than that of today. In fact salaries in Atthawra were the highest in the country. Voicing their political stance, on one occasion, the unions asked for the elimination of private contractors in the project. The women’s union was active in organising cultural activities and courses taught by women. The euphoria connected to such a well-functioning centre attracted volunteers from all over the country¹⁸⁸.

In 1979 Hinnebusch reflects this enthusiasm maintaining “Without the Dam, Syria would probably face continued agricultural stagnation relative to population growth-with incalculable social consequences”¹⁸⁹. His later book, in 1989, however, shows a great deal of disappointment. In fact, even towards the end of its construction, in 1973, the dam was showing a number of technical problems.

The optimistic estimates of its potential for electricity and irrigation were soon to be drastically reduced. Initial Soviet plans spoke of 850,000 ha to be irrigated and the Germans estimated 650,000. Syria reduced this figure to 640,000. The extent of the actual irrigated land is difficult to establish but it is much lower than the predictions¹⁹⁰. Mitchell speaks of a ‘very small’ irrigated area¹⁹¹. The quantity of electricity produced in comparison with expectations is also quite small. However, these technical and economic problems, publicly acknowledged by the state, have never been accompanied by an analysis of social and environmental impacts.

Academics and activists have widely demonstrated in the last few years that big dams have huge negative impacts that deeply affect society and the environment¹⁹².

187 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba’thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p237

188 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba’thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p237-238

189 Hinnebusch, R. A. 1979, *Party and peasant in Syria: rural politics and social change under the Ba’th*. (Cairo, The American University), p63

190 The Syrian government statistical abstract 2003 speaks of 214.800 ha of modern irrigation; 314.000 ha of land irrigated by dams and others; 817.300 ha irrigated by wells.

191 Kolars J. F. & W. A. Mitchell, 1991, *The Euphrates River and the Southeast Anatolia Development Project*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press)

192 KHRP, *Campagna per la Riforma della Banca Mondiale, the Corner House, Platform, 2003 International Fact-Finding Mission: Baku-Tblisi-Ceylan Pipeline- Turkey Section*. (KHRP, London)

Dams evict many people from their homes, and disempower them. Minorities and women are particularly affected. Large dams, in fact, reinforce social inequalities and impoverish the poor. They cause international and domestic conflicts. They spread diseases, submerge places of cultural value and damage the environment. They evict endangered species from their habitats and prevent the floods providing the fields with fertilizing sediments. Furthermore they can cause coastal erosion, destroy fisheries, release gases and cause earthquakes. Dams cause numerous kinds of damage to downstream countries, both from a social and environmental perspective. In McCully's words dams are a 'necessary evil'; 'evil' because they cause more misery than they are worth; 'necessary' because government and corporation propaganda impose them as such¹⁹³.

Environmental impact

The Atthawra dam caused a large number of environmental problems. Salinity was among the most serious ones. Huge areas of land were left useless since salinity rendered them uncultivable. Soil deterioration amounted to a loss of 31,000 ha¹⁹⁴ of very fertile land submerged by the lake. Erosion and salinity are still constant threats to the availability of land. Many farmers have increased the use of chemical fertilisers to combat the soil impoverishment. As a consequence depletion of water and deterioration of its quality¹⁹⁵ has become a growing problem. This is aggravated by the presence of the dam that reduces the self-purification capacity of the river.

The increasing use of chemicals and the rise of pollution levels are also due to the dam's control of the floods. This deprives the soil of the natural fertilisers and chemical products are used more and more to keep the soil productive. Agricultural use of water connected to the Attaturk Dam in Turkey has already caused an alarming rise of pollution levels in the water flowing into Syria. The waters that reach Iraq have even higher levels of pesticides and fertilisers since the water has also been used for Syrian agriculture. Furthermore, the quantity of water reaching Iraq is very small. Large dams, in fact, store water for irrigation with a reduction of downstream flow since much of the water used in the fields never returns to the river.

Dams also regularise the natural and usually irregular discharge of the rivers altering the natural rhythms of flora and fauna. This is particularly true for the Euphrates

193 McCully P., 2003, 'Big dams, big Trouble' in *The New Internationalist* (issue 354), p14-15

194 Kolars J. F. & W. A. Mitchell, 1991, *The Euphrates River and the Southeast Anatolia Development Project*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press), p155

195 Daoudy M., 2000, "Water, Institutions and Development in Syria: a Downstream Perspective from the Euphrates and Tigris", p6 <http://www.dams.org/kbase/submission.showsub.php?rec=env108>

River. Its exotic nature¹⁹⁶ creates very particular ecosystems.

Social impact

The environmental problems have had a serious effect on the people. Salinity obliged many farmers to abandon their fields. Soil impoverishment due to lack of natural fertilisers by the floods, was initially remedied by chemical fertilisers. These have, in the long run, compromised the quality of the land and that of the water. Low productivity of the fields, due also to scarcity of water, has pushed many farmers to abandon agriculture. But water pollution has also important consequences for the health of the rural people. People are forced to eat food irrigated with polluted water and even drink that water.

The alteration of the natural flow of the Euphrates, due to the control of the water through dams, has affected also those living downstream. These people, in fact, cannot match the expected flooding to their agricultural needs. Furthermore since the agricultural conditions of co-riparians are often similar down streamers receive little water when it is most needed, such as in a dry period, since their necessities are secondary to those upstream. Turkish dams have had such consequences on Syrian farmers.

The problem of water reliability is particularly relevant for the female farmers that need a very precise water delivery. The time they dedicate to agricultural activities, in fact, is conditional on duties connected to child rearing and other domestic obligations. It is the women, also, who suffer most from water decrease and water pollution. These diminish the productivity of the fields obliging those men that own the smaller plots to migrate in search of other sources of income. The women are left at home to take care of the household and cultivate unproductive fields. The consequences of migration on the women has already been analysed in the previous chapter.

Dams have detrimental effects on women also in connection to health. As mentioned above, the deterioration of water quality due to the pollution levels has negative consequences on the health of those that use it. The water stagnating in the lakes preceding the dams also breeds many diseases. Malaria and related infections appeared in the Jazeera right after the construction of the Athhawra Dam¹⁹⁷. Taking

196 Exotic rivers are characterised by seasonal extremes in the water flow. The Euphrates can reach 28 times its lowest amount in May. (Kolars J. F. & W. A. Mitchell, 1991, *The Euphrates River and the Southeast Anatolia Development Project*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press), p80)

197 International Day of Action against Dams and for Rives, Water and Life (IDA)1999, *Campagna Internazionale contro la Costruzione della Diga di Ilisu in Turchia*, <http://www.irn.org/dayofaction/1999/ital990311>.

into consideration that 80% of world diseases are waterborne, as established by the World Health Organisation, it is easy to imagine the consequences of the Euphrates unhealthy waters on the physical condition of the people living along its banks. Women, once again, pay the highest price of unhealthy families. Since they are usually in charge of the sick, women are highly exposed to the infections. Furthermore looking after the sick is a very time-consuming activity that adds to other domestic duties.

Women often use their daughters' help when overworked with domestic duties. As a consequence girls often stay at home to help their mothers instead of attending school. This is not the case for boys. FAO remarks "The inactivity of males is mostly due to schooling, while the inactivity of females is mostly ascribed to their status as homemakers."¹⁹⁸ Through looking after their sick relatives, girls are exposed to the infection. Girls who fall seriously ill are less likely to be cured than their brothers. Statistics show a recurrence in gender discrimination connected to the health of children in rural areas. Parental promptness to look for medicines or doctors for sick boys is higher than for their sisters. In the Syrian countryside, however, FAO reports equal treatment towards children's health. This data clashes with other statistics mentioned in this same survey. According to the latter the number of young men in the Jazeera is higher than that of young women. FAO explains this ratio pointing to gender discrimination in registration of the children. "In some remote areas, where registration might require travel to the nearest post, the birth of a girl does not warrant the effort."¹⁹⁹

Poverty and Power

Chambers has rightfully drawn the connections between illness and poverty maintaining, "the main asset of most people is their bodies"²⁰⁰. Polluted water is a cause of impoverishment, since it damages people's health. But there is a more direct economic impact of water pollution. In the Euphrates River, pollution causes depletion of fish stocks. Alteration of the normal water discharge affects also the local fauna. This implies an adaptation of rural women's activities since rural women spend part of their time hunting and fishing²⁰¹. Apart from changing women's daily tasks, fauna depletion impacts on the family diet. Women have to look for alternative

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198 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women in Agriculture*, p2

199 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women in Agriculture*, p30

200 Chambers R., 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. (Harlow, Longman)

201 Feminisation rates (i.e. rates of women to men) in agriculture, hunting and fishing is 20% in rural Syria (Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women in Agriculture*)

sources of food or change their cooking patterns. It is particularly poor families that rely heavily on the local fauna for their diet.

Dams impoverish the already poor. When water is as important as in dry areas its control embodies power relations. This is very clear at the level of the community. In one village of the Jazeera four water pumps had been installed for domestic use. Three of them were immediately appropriated by the richest families of the village. The other one had to serve all the remaining households. This caused fights at the water pump among the women. In some cases the women started using alternative sources of water that were unhealthy and far away.

These issues are present also on a wider scale. Dams make it possible for one group in society to gain control over the water supply at the expense of another. "Dams fundamentally alter rivers and the use of a natural resource, frequently entailing a reallocation of benefits from local riparian users to new groups of beneficiaries at regional or national level"²⁰². Subsistence farmers, indigenous groups, women and ethnic minorities have felt the consequences of pollution, loss of land, displacement, increased poverty and illness. They have also least enjoyed the potential improvements of dams. It is the richer sections of society that enjoy electricity and water availability without suffering any damage from the dams.

Moser²⁰³ emphasises how large-scale projects, such as dams, are economically rewarding for donors and big institutions. The latter conceal the disadvantages that affect weaker groups advertising how the project's benefits will 'trickle down' to reach the poor. Moser comments: 'Yet low-income population may not be able to pay for the water or electricity. [...] Since it is women in the low-income households who take primary responsibility for water fuel collection such projects are unlikely to meet their needs'²⁰⁴.

At the international level dams become political weapons for upstream countries. Turkey has extensively used its control of the Euphrates waters to exercise political pressure on Syria and Iraq. Water negotiations between Turkey and Syria, as already referred to in the previous chapter, have been based on Syrian support for the Kurds. Syria and Iraq accuse Turkey of constructing its dams with storing capacity well over the national water need. According to them this is a way for Turkey to secure the possibility of impounding water to exercise pressure on the down streamers when needed. In 1990 Turkey, in fact, completely blocked the flow of the Euphrates for nine days, because it was filling the Attaturk dam reservoir, but Syria and Iraq

202 World Commission on Dams 2000: p. xxvii

203 Moser C., 1992, *Gender Planning & Development*. (Routledge, London)

204 Moser C., 1992, *Gender Planning & Development*. (Routledge, London), p158

perceived it as a manifestation of the threat.

According to a study by UNESCO the global reserve of water, in terms of volume, guarantees enough fresh water for each individual²⁰⁵. Thereby water distribution is not so much a matter of quantity as a matter of access and quality. In this sense big dams are a major cause of conflict, both at international and local level because they allow powerful players to control the water distribution. Curtin maintains that the discourse of natural scarcity is simply politically convenient. "It is more comfortable to speak of water scarcity, flooding, pollution etc, as causes of conflict than of outright man-made constructs, of which dams are the most visible and destructive example"²⁰⁶. Dams regulate the flow towards the most powerful nations, the most influential regions, and the richest social classes; their "waste" is dumped on minorities, women and the poor.

Displacement

The choice of location for dams reflects the power relations mentioned above. Influential groups can manipulate the distribution of water and its management. McCully asserts, ironically, that areas where well-off people live are always inconvenient reservoir sites. On the contrary, areas where marginalized ethnic minorities live are always elected the best reservoir sites²⁰⁷.

This view is echoed by the World Commission on Dams: "These groups, who are the poorest segments of society, tend to be over-represented in the numbers of people who are displaced from reservoir sites or lose access to their traditional livelihoods"²⁰⁸. The Attaturk dam displaced mainly Turkish Kurds. The Mosul or Saddam Dam in Iraq displaced the indigenous Marsh Arabs to such an extent that their number reduced drastically²⁰⁹.

Lake Assad displaced between 60,000 and 75,000²¹⁰ people flooding 38,000 ha of

205 Green Cross International 1997

206 Curtin, F. 2000: "Transboundary Impacts of Dams: Conflict Prevention Strategies", Working paper prepared for the World Commission on Dams, in Millington, P. 2000: *River Basin Management: Its Role in Major Water Infrastructure Projects*. World Commission on Dams Thematic Review V.3 prepared as an input to the World Commission on Dams, Cape Town, 2000. Available from www.dams.org, p113

207 McCully P., 2003, 'Big dams, big Trouble' in *The New Internationalist* (issue 354)

208 World Commission on Dams 2000, p124

209 Human Rights Watch reports that displacement reduced the Marsh Arabs from more than 250.000 to 40.000. <http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/01/iraq012503.htm>

210 Kolars J. F. & W. A. Mitchell, 1991, *The Euphrates River and the Southeast Anatolia Development Project*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press), p145

land²¹¹. Many of the displaced were poor farmers from minorities, mainly Kurds. Some were assigned plots of land in the east of the country, in often arid and infertile areas. Some were reallocated in the northeast among Kurdish communities, as part of the arabisation campaign. Together with the new plot the state assigned them a rifle²¹². Many were supposed to be resettled in the 15 pilot villages that substituted the 59 submerged ones. But only 9% of the population accepted to move to these farms where they were actually able to secure an income similar to the one they had before displacement. The farmers felt that moving to the pilot farms would have limited their freedom. The houses they were supposed to live in, furthermore, were not suitable for their needs (see below).

Roughly 55 % of the farmers constructed houses above the new shores of Lake Assad. However, as reported by Hinnebusch their economic position deteriorated²¹³. Most people, in fact, lost their old houses, their fertile land, the pastures for their animals (82% of them owned sheep and 60% owned goats), and also the use of common lands, submerged by the lake. They received little or no economic compensation for the loss. Furthermore many families lost the security of their kin and community support. The state, in fact, tried to weaken these “traditional linkages” by breaking up families and spreading their members in the resettlement process. This caused economic insecurity but also sentimental and cultural losses (see below).

The World Bank expresses concerns about resettlement maintaining that

“[...] involuntary resettlement under development projects, if unmitigated, often gives rise to severe economic, social and environmental risks: production systems are dismantled; people face impoverishment; people are relocated to environments where their productive skills may be less applicable and the competition of resources greater; community institutions and social networks are weakened; kin groups are dispersed”²¹⁴

Displacement for the Atthawra dam took place with an almost total absence of people’s involvement. The locals were not consulted about the construction and location of the dam and lake. They did not participate in the planning of resettlement programmes, or their implementation. Hinnebusch comments that the sociological insensitivity of the resettlement scheme was “hardly an auspicious beginning for a

211 Kolars J. F. & W. A. Mitchell, 1991, *The Euphrates River and the Southeast Anatolia Development Project*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press), p145

212 Interviews in Aleppo, Syria, February 2005. Names withheld by KHRP

213 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba’thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p242-243

214 World Bank 2001, Operational Manual: Operational Policies; Involuntary Resettlement.

project supposed to be in the vanguard of ‘socialist transformation.’²¹⁵

Women and minorities

The World Bank recommends: “displaced persons should be compensated for their loss at full replacement cost and assisted in improving their former living standards, income earning capacity and production levels or at least restoring them”²¹⁶

Resettlement in Syria did not improve the living standards and the economic conditions of the displaced people and it did not even manage to restore the conditions they lived in before the displacement. In some cases the state made up for the damage caused by the flooding by paying a lump sum of money corresponding to the official plots people owned.

Compensation has generally been based on ownership of land and assets, not impact on livelihoods; and it was considered in cash and not in replacement of lost resources²¹⁷. People were never compensated for the loss of income, of holding rights or of using land.

Vulnerable groups have been damaged by displacement since the state tended to marginalize their specific needs. These groups were unable to seek better compensation from the government since the latter has always criminalized even their attempts to gain basic citizens rights. While in some instances villagers displaced by the Atthawra refused to resettle and follow the plans imposed by the state²¹⁸ women, ethnic minorities and the poor had no chance to take such a firm stand. Their weak position prevented them from opposing the enforcement of state plans.

Since only formally registered landowners were compensated by the Syrian state, resettled women, the poor and the landless, faced major losses. As already shown in the previous chapter, women and Kurds had their properties expropriated by the land reform. Thus women, Kurds and the poor did not own any land at the time of displacement; and had no legal basis to claim for their economic losses. They lost the use of the common land and all their sources of income.

215 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba’thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p243

216 World Bank 2002: Operation Directive 4.30. *Involuntary Resettlement*, p3

217 KHRP, *Campagna per la Riforma della Banca Mondiale, the Corner House, Platform, 2003 International Fact-Finding Mission: Baku-Tblisi-Ceylan Pipeline- Turkey Section*. (KHRP, London)

218 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba’thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p244-246

Official property titles, in fact, are often parallel to numerous forms of unofficial use. Those with no property titles are greatly dependent on common property. They usually have tenants' rights or make use of big landowners' lands. Once displaced this most disadvantaged groups lose the right to use these properties and are left completely empty-handed. If resettled in a new area they will have to establish new networks and carve out new spaces for themselves. Establishing rights to the use of common land is particularly hard when the resettled people move into an already organised community.

In some cases the state cancelled also the rights of widows whose land was in the name of their late husband. Compensation for the land was assigned to their sons that officially inherited the land. Holding rights, tenants' rights and communal rights are all cancelled by resettlement to the detriment of the lower social classes.

Cultural displacement

McCully underlines the various important cultural, religious, and economic factors linked to irrigation technologies of 'water communities'²¹⁹. Displacement causes a deep cultural eradication of these villages often resettled in dry areas or, more often, flooded away without receiving new land or any compensation.

Resettlement in arid areas, as in most Syrian cases, means for the poor women a loss of their expertise in hunting and fishing. A different fauna and geographical landscape, in fact, requires different skills and knowledge. As a consequence, women will be deprived also of important sources of food, and in many cases women will spend hours looking for alternative ones. In other cases women switch to a new diet for the family making do with local products. However change of traditional diet can be an important cultural loss. Minority women are often caught between the social pressure of maintaining the distinctive characters of their community through their diet and their need for adaptation to the new environment. Food is, in fact, usually charged with strong feelings of ethnic belonging, particularly when displaced communities lose their spatial and cultural niche and have to create a new one.

Displacement eradicates people from places of sentimental and religious value. As a

219 McCully, P. 1996: *Silenced Rivers: the ecology and politics of large dams*. (London, Zed Books), p172 see also Hobart M., 1982, "Padi, Puns and the Attribution of Responsibility" in *Natural Symbols in Southeast Asia*. Milner, G. B. (ed.). (London, SOAS); Geertz C., 1980, *Negara: The Balinese Theatre State in the Nineteenth Century*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press); Wittfogel, K. 1957, *Oriental despotism: a comparative study of total power*; Lansing S., 1987, "Balinese 'water temples' and the management of irrigation". *American Anthropologist*, 89.

matter of fact many Kurdish communities have pantheistic belief systems that assign holiness to natural sites. Religion and ethnicity are reasons for even deeper concern when well-established communities are scattered in new areas among different communities. Xenophobia and racism can characterise the relationship between the newcomers and those that were already living on the land. This can render adaptation to new circumstances very hard.

Life in new communities is particularly hard for the women. Religious and cultural restrictions, in an ethnically diverse setting, can oblige the women to stay inside the house. The privacy of the house guarantees women's reputation by preventing them from meeting the new male neighbours. Isolation and lack of community or kinship ties can cause psychological stress. These can be increased by loss of territorial identity. Flooding and resettlement cut off ancestral ties and other socio-economic relationships with the land.

During the construction of the Atthawra dam "the government invited archaeologists from all over the world to help save as much as possible of human legacy for future generations"²²⁰. Enormous quantities of archaeological sites were discovered such as the first human settlement in Syria. Some of these were removed while the majority were lost²²¹. The cultural loss of the dam is of international significance due to the extent of the archaeological sites that were lost in the submerged area.

Pilot Farms

'Activity was hectic in the early 1970s with the building of the dam and the Pilot Project, where people from the flooded areas were to be housed in fifteen villages. [...] then came a new directive. The Pilot Project was no longer to be a resettlement scheme; the fifteen villages were instead to become state farms run by GADEB on an experimental basis, and those resettled were to be wage-labourers on the farms'²²²

The Pilot farms were model villages created anew on state land and land expropriated from private landowners. They were structured in a cooperative way and were meant to be the fulcrum of the socialist development ideology. People would work and live in them sharing a communal ideology. High production would be guaranteed by labourers' strength through unity and through the introduction of new technology and highly productive crops. Agricultural scientists were to experiment to improve

220 Syrian Airline magazine, February 2005

221 "Archaeology of the upper Syrian Euphrates, the Tichrin Dam". Proceeding of the international Symposium, Barcelona, January 28-30, 1998.

222 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm, Akademistryck), p34

crops in the pilot farms and provide all the farmers with the best selection. As a matter of fact in 1979 Hinnebusch speaks of a miracle wheat that produced very good results²²³. The new mechanized technology the cooperatives were supplied with would be the perfect complement to the production system. The cooperatives, in the end, would constitute the state-peasants symbiosis²²⁴.

In spite of those grand premises the peasants were not very inclined to move into the villages. As a matter of fact only a small percentage of those displaced by the lake moved in. The first resistance was caused by the structure of the villages. The communities that were moving from the inundated areas would have to break up since the villages were planned to accommodate a limited number of non-kin people²²⁵. The modernist state ideology wanted to eliminate traditional forms of kinship. With this aim the cooperatives were to be populated by people of different villages and diverse confessional origins²²⁶.

The breakdown of village unity was particularly negative for women since they are generally less mobile than men and depend largely on community linkages²²⁷. Furthermore, particularly in the case of women resettled among new communities, due to religious and cultural restrictions the female members of the family are only allowed to be seen openly by their male closer relatives, and by the women. Thus the presence around the house of new non-kin neighbours obliges women to wear the veil and subjects them to continuous surveillance²²⁸. Such changes in body management represent a strong curtailment of women's freedom. The new dwelling structure of the villages aggravated the problem. The lack of privacy due to the absence of a courtyard, in fact, secluded women even more.

The villages were made of prefabricated, concrete houses that lacked light and space. The toilets were attached to the houses and this made the peasants consider them

223 Hinnebusch R. A., 1979, *Party and peasant in Syria: rural politics and social change under the Ba'ath*. (Cairo, The American University), p62

224 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'athist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p295

225 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'athist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p242

226 **Metral, F. 1992 in Van Tuijl, W. 1992: *Improving water use in agriculture: experience in the Middle*, p341, p348. This same model was applied during the land reform when the state tried to break the kinship links dispersing the households in individual plots. After fifteen or twenty years these isolated households had almost disappeared since people regrouped under family solidarities.**

227 McCully P., 1996, *Silenced Rivers: the ecology and politics of large dams*. (London, Zed Books), p81

228 Abu-Lughod E., 1989, 'Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World' in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18.

'unclean'²²⁹, since the farmers usually construct the toilets ten or twenty metres from their house. These sanitation issues were, once more, mainly a female concern. Women had to spend long hours to make 'clean' the dirty toilets. They also had to walk long distances to look for privacy since toilets did not offer enough. These long walks were particularly problematic at night for reasons of personal safety both sexual and physical. Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) reports "an increased incidence of sexual and physical assault when toilets are in remote locations"²³⁰

Changes in female economic activities were once more caused by the house structure that did not provide accommodation for the animals. The women no longer performed activities such as looking after the livestock, or producing dairy products²³¹. They also had to change their traditional cooking. As food producers women faced numerous challenges. Not having livestock or poultry meant a lack of meat and dairy products. These had to be purchased by women, now, together with the vegetables. The houses had no land to grow vegetables for the meals. Women thus were more dependent on their husbands' money for daily cooking. Women had also to adapt the diet to the new experimental crops and the mandatory crops that the state was imposing as part of the agrarian reform.

Despite these problems, according to Rabo, the village organisation of agricultural work was quite good for women. Women were supposed to work on the village fields with the men. Male wages were higher than female ones but the gender gap in income was not as dramatic as in ordinary villages. Men, furthermore, were forced to participate in the cotton-picking, heavy work, traditionally reserved for women. According to some employees of the Pilot farms these measures contributed to the increase of independence for the female agricultural labourers²³². Notwithstanding these changes the division of labour was still very strongly gendered.

The Pilot Farms disappeared over the last decades having failed to produce the supposed ideological and agricultural results. The land that belonged to the farms was distributed among landless peasants and the employees of the same pilot farm.

229 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p242

230 Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) 2003, *Untapped Connections. Gender, Water and Poverty: Key issues, Government Commitments and Actions for Sustainable Development*, p4

231 Rassam A. & Tully D., 1988, "Gender related aspects of agricultural labour in northwestern Syria" in *Gender Issues in Farming Systems Research and Extension*. Poats S. V. & M. Schmink & A. Spring (eds.), (Boulder, Westview Press)

232 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, Townsmen and Employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm, Akademityrck), p141

The introduction of technology

New technologies were introduced in the Jazeera in the 1960s. Huge expenditure was devoted to the dams and the irrigation devices such as pumps and the like. But many more technological steps characterised the agricultural revolution. In the 1970s the pilot farms experimented and diffused the miracle wheat adapted to Syrian conditions²³³. A new factory started producing tractors, almost unknown to the Syrian countryside. The farmers could access them through cooperative owning. In these years also fertilizers and pesticides were produced locally and increasingly used by the farmers²³⁴. In the 1970s and 1980s the use of fertilisers doubled. The improved 'Mexican' wheat was used systematically but herbicides were still not common. Ploughing and harvesting were increasingly mechanised while weeding was slowly becoming so.

Among the recent techniques introduced to improve agricultural productivity there are "chemical fertilizer, chemicals for weed and pest control, and improved high yielding varieties [...], substitution of low value crops by higher value crops, increase in productivity of land (irrigation), water resources development and mechanisation"²³⁵.

This technology boom in agriculture corresponds to Bashar al-Assad emphasis on modernisation and technology, according to George²³⁶. In spite of the fact that women have been defined as important "actresses" of modernity by the Syrian state (see chapter 7) technology has not been available to them.

State intervention focused almost exclusively on technology for men. "Because men's work is considered a part of the productive economy of paid labour, it is generally seen as more worthy of infrastructure investments. As a result, there may be infrastructure for irrigation, but not safe drinking water"²³⁷. On the one hand women are always assigned to domestic work and as this is considered unproductive, no technological investments are made to improve female domestic work. On the other hand women's work in agriculture is always overlooked, thus agricultural technologies are designed for male users and are unsuitable for women. For example, tractors are too high for

233 Hinnebusch, R. A. 1979, *Party and peasant in Syria: rural politics and social change under the Ba'ath*. (Cairo, The American University), p60

234 Hinnebusch, R. A. 1979, *Party and peasant in Syria: rural politics and social change under the Ba'ath*. (Cairo, The American University), p62

235 Abdelali-Martini M., P. Goldey, Gwyn E. Jones and E. Bailey, 2003, "Towards a Feminisation of Agricultural Labour in Northwest Syria" in *Peasant Studies*, (Volume 30, Number 2), p73

236 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London)

237 Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) 2003: *Untapped Connections*. Gender, Water and Poverty: Key issues, Government Commitments and Actions for Sustainable Development.

women to reach the seat. The gear and other levers are too heavy for women to push, and handles are too wide for a female hand thus women cannot have a strong hold on them. The design of these technologies usually assumes a strong, male user.

Water and sanitation by the state

Availability of drinking water, sanitation and provision of electricity were part of the Ba'ath plan to tackle the gap between rural and urban areas. State development brought drinking water in the village of Awal-Ali, in the Jazeera in 1977²³⁸. There were no individual taps in the houses but four taps in the 'watering place' which had to serve the whole village. Three of them were soon monopolised by the powerful families of the village. The other women had to fight over the water that the last tap only worked for a few hours a day. 'This arrangement led to confusion and competition among village women: noise, hot tempers, loud voices, and improper language all flare[d] up.'²³⁹ After two years the pipe broke and the water was cut off and never brought back, in spite of the villagers' efforts to contact the offices that provide the technicians. People returned to drinking the 'unsanitary water from the Euphrates' as Hinnebusch defines it²⁴⁰. In 1970 only 13% of the Kurdish villages of al-Hasake, northeast of the Jazeera, had piped water. In 1999 56% of the rural families had access to piped water.

The burden of water collection is almost always a duty assigned to women. As Al-Jayyousi²⁴¹ maintains, women in Islamic tradition have always been those charged with fetching water from springs and wells. Spending hours to fetch water on a daily basis reduces women's potential engagement in decision-making or other political roles. This causes a greater absence of women from those positions that could make policies relevant to their needs. On a more pragmatic level, women usually make up for time spent on water collection reducing the time they spend on food preparation, childcare and breast-feeding. Female education is also compromised since young girls very often stop going to school to help in the domestic duties that can be too much for their mothers. Many girls simply drop out of school because they have to fetch water for their family. Women's health also suffers from the heavy loads of

238 Khalaf, S. N. 1981, *Family, village and the political party: articulation of social change in contemporary rural Syria*. (University of California. Ph.D. thesis: unpublished)

239 Khalaf, S. N. 1981, *Family, village and the political party: articulation of social change in contemporary rural Syria*. (University of California. Ph.D. thesis: unpublished), p596

240 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p249

241 Al-Jayyousi 2001 in Faruqui, N. I. et al 2001, *Water management in Islam*. (New York, United Nations University Press), p36

carrying water from an early age.

Hygiene also suffers. Because water has to be carried, often over long distances, less is available for washing and cleaning. Subsequent deterioration of health conditions, also connected to the lack of sanitation facilities, is a further burden for the women who are usually considered responsible for family health²⁴². In 1977 only 8% of the villages of the Jazeera had sewage systems²⁴³. This number had grown to only 29% in 1999²⁴⁴. Apart from the care of the sick people, scarce sewage systems affect women's privacy and safety. As in the case of the 'dirty' toilets of the Pilot Farms, women of villages with improper sewage system have to walk a long way to find the privacy suitable for a female. Night walks can be stressful particularly for reasons of personal safety. Lack of facilities in the schools is among the first reasons for high female drop-out rates together with poverty. Girls do not go to school during menstruation and often quit the school after puberty because of the absence of adequate sanitation facilities.

Mechanisation and domestic work

The mechanisation of the agricultural work affected women's lives in various ways. However, it did not improve their working conditions since technology has always been confined to the male domain. Rabo maintains: 'Cotton cultivation became fairly mechanized quite early, and when the land reform established family farming and co-operatives, the men took over the mechanized side of cultivation, leaving the continuous routine work to the women'²⁴⁵. The gender division of agricultural labour in the Jazeera assigns to men the technical duties such as land preparation, mechanical harvesting, and the control of chemical products. Among the manual chores performed by men are chemical fertilizer application and seeding. Women are assigned manual work such as spreading manure, selecting seeds, planting summer crops and hand weeding²⁴⁶. When household female resources are insufficient for the manual work in the fields, the families hire labourers since the men would prefer to pay the latter instead of helping in hand labour. These workers are usually women

242 As already analysed above looking after the sick has a number of negative effects on the women.

243 Hinnebusch R. A., 1989, *Peasant and bureaucracy in Ba'hist Syria: the political economy of rural development*. (Westview Press, London), p281

244 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women in Agriculture*

245 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, Townsmen and Employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm, Akademitryck), p56-57

246 Rassam A. & Tully D., 1988, "Gender related aspects of agricultural labour in northwestern Syria" in *Gender Issues in Farming Systems Research and Extension*. Poats S. V. & M. Schmink & A. Spring (eds.), (Boulder, Westview Press), p290

since also imported female labour is predominantly manual, whereas hired labour for mechanical work is always male²⁴⁷.

A FAO survey observes:

“Gender Division of labor in agriculture indicates that women are completely responsible for caring for the livestock and poultry, except for grazing where males have a share (of 37.5%). In agriculture production, where females participate in all phases, their major contribution is in weeding and cropping (tasks, which require a lot of endurance and patience). Women disappear from marketing (only 0.5% of cases). In addition to the above, females are responsible for the majority of household chores. They are completely responsible for house cleaning, childcare, getting wood for fuel in 56% of households, baking bread in 77% of households, etc. Males (Father and son) are predominately performing the task of marketing (in 91% of households)”²⁴⁸

Technology usually needs high labour and capital investments and women are less likely to have either of these. Illiteracy rates are higher in women than in men and women do not have access to loans from cooperatives or banks. All agricultural machines are only available to poor farmers through the cooperatives that pool their resources and through loans by the Agriculture Cooperative Bank. Since cooperatives are connected to land owning and bank loans to membership in the cooperatives, women are excluded from both. They make up only 5% of cooperative members²⁴⁹. Momsen speaks of a gender-based exclusion of women from loans that can buy technological inputs since ‘local political and legislative attitudes make women less credit-worthy than men’²⁵⁰.

However more important than contingent factors such as money availability and literacy, is the perception that technology belongs to the male sphere. Rabo reports that in Sabgha village, some fathers use their daughter’s *mahr*, the bride wealth, to buy tractors, regardless of the fact that legally that money is property of the bride. The ‘family’ money, or women’s money, is often invested in technology that is useful for men but women do not benefit from the purchase. In the Jazeera 99% of the owners of machinery are males. In 1995 “only 11 females own machinery”²⁵¹.

247 Rassam A. & Tully D., 1988, “Gender related aspects of agricultural labour in northwestern Syria” in *Gender Issues in Farming Systems Research and Extension*. Poats S. V. & M. Schminck & A. Spring (eds.), (Boulder, Westview Press), p299

248 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women in Agriculture*, p4

249 Centre for Administrative Innovation in the Euro-Mediterranean Region (CAIMED), 2004, *Policies for Business in the Mediterranean Countries: the Syrian Arab Republic*, p7, <http://www.caimed.org/>

250 Momsen J. H., 1991, *Women and the development in the Third world*. (London, Routledge), p51

251 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1999, *Situation Analysis: Syrian Women in Agriculture*

Technology for improving the domestic duties of the women was little developed in the Jazeera since domestic technology is always considered a low priority²⁵². Khalaf²⁵³ maintains that in Awal-Ali, modernity brought cars, tractors, and refrigerators for cold water in summer, and televisions. Although his analysis is not very gender-sensitive, he underlines the fact that no electric kitchen appliances had appeared

Exclusion of Women from Technological Advances

Feminist literature has generally strongly criticised male-dominated science and technology that excludes women.

Vandana Shiva²⁵⁴ looks at technology and development from a feminist, environmentalist perspective. In her opinion, scientific discourse is 'reductionist' since it takes strength by denying other knowers and ways of knowing. Shiva argues furthermore that "reductionist science is a source of violence against nature and women because it subjugates and dispossesses them of their full productivity, power and potential"²⁵⁵.

Chambers²⁵⁶ highlights how technological improvements are often directed towards male needs. As a matter of fact cash crops, according to his study mainly of male concern, have received more research attention than subsistence crops, a female concern²⁵⁷. In some cases, Chambers maintains, technology can re-evaluate the agricultural production. As a consequence there can be a shifting of roles. Men that had looked for jobs elsewhere return to the fields, taking the mechanised part of the work and leaving the heaviest part to the women. This was the case with the introduction of mechanisation in the Jazeera.

As powerful technology, such as tractors, is usually charged with powerful and masculine images, male engagement with mechanised agriculture usually increases their power in intra-household dynamics. According to Boserup²⁵⁸ intra-

252 Chambers R., 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the last first*. (Harlow, Longman), p80

253 Khalaf S. N., 1981, *Family, village and the political party: articulation of social change in contemporary rural Syria*. (University of California. Ph.D. thesis: unpublished)

254 Shiva V., 1988, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. (London, Zed.)

255 Shiva V., 1988, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. (London, Zed.), p22. Technological improvements, like those of the Green Revolution, are, according to Shiva, a conscious choice of the West to make profits to the detriment of women, poor regions and poor classes (ibid. 116). Her fieldwork confirms, once more, that women lose their traditional basic roles in agriculture when new technologies are introduced. This causes a decline in their social status and a general worsening of their lives.

256 Chambers R., 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. (Harlow, Longman)

257 Chambers R., 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. (Harlow, Longman), p80

258 Boserup E., 1970, *Women's role in economic development*. (London, Allen & Unwin)

household distribution of power derives from individual economic contribution. The introduction of new technology weakens, generally, the female position since technology, being controlled by men, increases male productivity and thereby power²⁵⁹.

Poor women's work is sometimes substituted by technology and the women are left with no alternative jobs. The mechanization of post-harvest production, for example, affects poor landless women who make an earning out of that activity.

Gender division of labour

Gender division of labour and use of technology seem to be strongly interconnected. The creation and use of technology is deeply implicated in socio-cultural factors as highlighted by Pinch and Bijker²⁶⁰. Science and technology, they argue, are clearly the products of historical, socio-cultural factors²⁶¹. Society creates science and is created by it at the same time and "techniques shape our relationships, but our relationships also shape techniques"²⁶². According to Latour²⁶³ new techniques create new social roles, new knowledge, new relationship with the environment and to other people, and new behaviours. Science and technology, thus, are not only culturally relative in their creation but also in their application. They are furthermore very powerful means of social change.

Technology is always implemented in ways that reflect the organisation of society, mirroring and powerfully reinforcing, in the first place, gender inequalities. The use of technology is shaped by the gender division of labour, yet reinforces it at the same time.

Moghadam²⁶⁴ focuses her study of the gender division of labour on the Middle East.

259 Boserup's argument doesn't question at all the reason why men tend to control technology. Furthermore, I would criticise her assumption that power is directly connected to economic contribution on the basis that the latter's evaluation can be gender biased.

260 Pinch T. & Bijker, 1984, "The social construction of facts and artifacts: or how the sociology of science and the sociology of technology might benefit each other" *Social Studies of Science*, 14

261 Many scholars show the absolutely non-neutrality of technology and conversely its power, its deep social, political, and economical implications. Yapa L., 1996 in Peet, R. & M. Watts (eds.) 1996, *Liberation ecologies: environment, development and social movements*. (London, Routledge); Agrawal A., 1995, 'Dismantling the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge' in *Development and Change*, 26; Latour B., 1996, *Aramis, or the love of technology*. (London, Harvard University Press); Aronowitz S., 1988, *Science as Power: Discourse and Ideology in Modern Society*. (Houndmills, Macmillan).

262 Eriksen T. H., 2001, *Small Places, Large Issues: an Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London, Pluto Press), p200

263 Latour B., 1996, *Aramis, or the love of technology*. (London, Harvard University Press)

264 Khoury, N. F. & V. Moghadam, 1995 (eds.), *Gender and Development in the Arab World: Women's Economic*

In her opinion, the gender division of labour is the product of cultural as much as social and economic factors. This is influenced, furthermore, by development policies together with state and international policies. Moghadam's fieldwork shows how patterns of employment that exclude Syrian rural women from the technical jobs reflect 'capital industries and technologies [that] tend to favour male labour' as much as technical jobs²⁶⁵.

The planning and implementation of technological advances such as dams and canals should include women but it is particularly these massive plans that exclude poor women, at all stages. Plans are made by technical staff that generally lacks any gender awareness. No consultation is usually made during planning. Women are excluded from the construction phase since a gender division of labour associates men with bigger building works. Finally, women are not included in the maintenance either. Thus they often have to rely on male help if malfunctions occur.

More attention should be paid to women's active roles in agriculture. Mechanization and other technologies such as irrigation should not marginalize and disempower women; rather they should adapt to female needs and become means of life improvement. Women should be involved in the process of decision-making and implementation of those technologies. Improvements in domestic technology should be considered priorities to improve life in the rural areas. A new approach should be adopted to technology in general with a view to women's actual utilisation and needs.

Participation, Patterns and Policies. (London, Zed Books)

265 Khoury, N. F. & V. Moghadam, 1995 (eds.), *Gender and Development in the Arab World: Women's Economic Participation, Patterns and Policies.* (London, Zed Books), p15

PART 4: CITIZENSHIP

CHAPTER VII: BA'ATH IMPROVEMENTS FOR KURDS AND OTHER MINORITY WOMEN?

Gender issues in the Euphrates Basin Development Project

The Syrian state has implemented a development plan in the Jazeera that has been fundamentally blind to gender issues. Reforms and government measures could have at least partially improved the situation of women but the modernising measures, on the contrary, have often damaged it. In all phases of the Euphrates Development Project women found themselves in numerous predicaments with far-reaching consequences.

The land revolution, the first step of the Ba'athist modernization project, was meant to bring equality among the citizens of the new Syrian nation. It was supposed to endow all citizens with the economic means to take part in constructing the future of Syria. But women and minorities such as the Kurds were excluded and were thereby indirectly classified as 'second-class citizens'.

The state expropriated the land from female owners and at the same time excluded women from assignment of property. Women, in this way, were denied the basic means of autonomy and citizenship. Excluded from land owning, they were placed in a position of legal and economic dependence on their male relatives. Women were considered "wives of" and not farmers or individual citizens themselves. Thereby all agricultural and societal structures that were reformed to found anew the future of Syria overlooked women's roles, rights and needs. This resulted in economic impoverishment, increase in workload and numerous shortfalls for the women. Moreover, these radical changes in property ownership deprived women of the basic means for self-empowerment, with repercussions in the following decades.

The expropriation of property from the Kurds, actuated by the state just before the land reform, excluded many Kurdish women and their families from receiving a share in the construction of the future agricultural Syria. Apart from being officially stripped of their citizenship and of their property the Kurds were also excluded from

taking part in any other economic activity and relegated to the margins of the new Syrian nation.

After both the land and agricultural reform had been carried out, the very poor faced economic shortages. Some did not receive any land and thus remained poor. Those that were included in the reforms received allotments too small to sustain their families and were subjected to state control of production and prices that further impoverished them. The poorest sections of male farmers started to migrate to look for other sources of income, causing an increased burden of work on women. Females had to take care of the households with more duties added to the ones they previously had but no corresponding improvement of their legal ownership or holding rights. Since their active role in agriculture was still unacknowledged, all titles stayed with their husbands together with the user rights. Thus women's work in the field was constantly dependent on men's intervention for buying products and selling them through the state.

Distribution of water and other entitlements connected to agricultural activities were often cancelled once the husbands left. Women had to cultivate already ill-fated fields now deprived of basic means of agricultural production, such as water, seeds and fertilisers. This non-recognition of women's roles in agriculture relates to other fundamental deficiencies of the new system - the non-adaptation of agricultural rhythms, crops and technologies to female needs. The agricultural revolution imposed the monoculture of mandatory crops demanded by the state. These substituted subsistence farming and forced women to cope with scarcity of cooking products and monotonous, poor diets. Alternatively, women had to arrange for different ways of providing traditional ingredients. This required time and energy. In some cases women had to buy food and rely on their husbands for the money. Technology such as tractors and irrigation devices were introduced for the men only. They in no way improved female agricultural activities but, on the contrary, they relegated women to the hardest, most monotonous routine jobs.

The construction of infrastructures such as the Atthawra dam meant the displacement of many peasants, mainly poor people and ethnic minorities. Some ousted people were offered new land usually qualitatively poorer than the fertile banks of the Euphrates. Women were again excluded from the assignment of property. Compensation plans were based on official titles. Thereby women and minority women in particular, lost all the unofficial users rights they held in their community. These were not reimbursed and the women encountered extreme economic hardship. Compensation plans focused only on economic issues and completely disregarded all cultural, social and psychological losses connected to displacement. Since displaced households that were spread all over the northeast

of Syria women often lost the security of their kinship and community networks and encountered solitude and psychological problems. When they moved amidst foreign and compact communities, women saw a drastic reduction of their freedom, particularly in the case of ethnic minority women. Resettlement in arid areas also changed food availability and customs, burdening women in their daily duties.

The women that were resettled in the Pilot farms had to come to terms with the inconvenient organization of the villages. The state farms were engineered without taking into account women's needs. The houses did not secure enough privacy from the other villagers and women were subjected to restrictions of movements and increased body control. Lack of proper toilets exposed women to uncomfortable hygiene problems and issues of personal safety. The absence of space for the livestock deprived women of their animal-care activity such as feeding, milking, making cheese. The houses also lacked space for private gardens. Thus shortage of dairy products and meat added to that of fresh vegetables diminished women's supplies for cooking. The reliance on shopped products made women dependent on their husband's money. Apart from disregarding these practical organisational issues, the cooperatives failed in their attempt to reduce gender unbalances. Salaries were not equal; technology and mechanization were introduced without envisaging women as users.

The new technology invested in by the state included high-level hydraulic infrastructures that damaged mainly poor and minority women. Women's drudgery was in no way lessened either in the fields or in the household. No attention was paid to domestic technologies and little money was spent to bring electricity and water in the houses.

These gender insensitive policies are strikingly in contrast with the official feminist rhetoric of the Ba'ath party. The socialist modernist measures of the party, in fact, have always emphasised the importance of considering women a fully-fledged part of society. And the party has generally stressed its efforts to promote gender equality on a path towards modernity. The constitution guarantees women as citizens the same rights and duties as men. Suffrage was guaranteed to women in 1949. Women vote and are employed in the public sector. Measures were taken to increase female education. Six years of school are mandatory for both boys and girls. The government augmented employment opportunities in state offices and provided equal salaries. Political measures were taken to increase women's presence in higher positions. A quarter of seats in parliament are occupied by women and this number is growing.

In spite of this commitment to feminist issues, development plans missed the opportunity to implement policies that would radically improve the situation of the

women. Moreover, they constantly failed to guarantee women's legal status, increased their drudgery and made them more and more dependent on men.

This gap between state rhetoric and implementation of policies aimed at gender equality is due to both government gender blindness and to domestic, popular pressures.

The feminist rhetoric: women and modernity

Contemporary international politics seems to show the existence of a world hierarchy based on degrees of 'national civilisation'. The level of development of each country is often measured on the grounds of female emancipation. The west uses the condition of 'oriental women' to glorify that of the 'occidental ones', and even to justify wars. The most recent cases are the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq; the motivations for declaring war on both mentioned the liberation of the local "oppressed women". These preoccupations about gender issues are too often a rhetoric that creates more injustice than it solves.

The Syrian Ba'ath party has adopted the discourse that makes women's emancipation the yardstick of progress towards national modernity. Both in internal and foreign politics the party has flagged its push towards modernity with women becoming the emblem of the renewal. All Syrian citizens, according to Ba'ath ideology, men and women alike, are actors in building a new Syria. These new female roles in society supported by the Ba'ath were in tune with its socialist ideology.

Kandiyoti²⁶⁶ argues that modernist States in the East often use women's bodies to promote their image abroad adopting what is usually considered to be the epitomes of the West: democracy, secularisation, women's emancipation. Syrian nationalist propaganda, for instance, has published unveiled women using technology, thus equating them to western women. This 'modernisation' means, often, opposing traditional identities based on kinship, custom and religion²⁶⁷. Modernisation of women, in fact, was also meant to eradicate traditional institutions such as patriarchy and tribal links that were said to oppress women and weaken the state. Ba'ath-controlled Women's Unions organized study groups for adult women for years to train them to 'get rid of traditional attitudes'²⁶⁸.

266 Kandiyoti D., 1991, 'Identity and discontent: women and the nation' in *Journal of International Studies* (Vol. 20 (3))

267 Kandiyoti D., 1991, 'Identity and discontent: women and the nation' in *Journal of International Studies* Vol. 20 (3), p433

268 Hann, C & E. Dunn (eds) 1996, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. (Routledge, London)

However Ba'athist 'modernity' rests uneasily with 'tradition', the guarantor of Syrian nationality. The new Syrian Arab republic is part of the Arab nation containing at the same time a more local, Syrian identity. Religious and kinship ties, in state rhetoric, represent Syrian traditional particularity. They belong to the private spheres and are not supposed to intermingle with the public domain.

'Modern' and 'traditional' become categories to classify behaviour, ideas, and people. In the Syrian context 'modern' and 'traditional' are reified by the state rhetoric with a specific political rationale that is morally charged, future and modern – good; old and traditional – bad²⁶⁹. The state, in fact, legitimises its power by defining its policies as 'modern' and 'progressive'. These same policies informed the land reform that purposely tore apart communities connected by kinship. By assigning to related farmer families allotments that were far away from each other, the state tried to weaken tribal links in favour of modernity. However, this forced separation was unsuccessful because people slowly moved back to previous groupings. While speaking of modernity, in fact, the state cannot eradicate or cancel tradition as long as that is the distinguishing character of national and popular identity. In this light, 'modern' can only maintain its positive shine as long as 'tradition' is partly maintained.

Syrian women in this frame are captured in a complex web of identities. They are Arab citizens, active constructors of modern Syria, as declared in the constitution, but also custodians of its traditional identity, as mothers and wives. Women have the right but also the duty as citizens to work, often in the public sector, for the state. Their jobs, though, are always coupled with domestic, traditional duties and women are 'squeezed between the ideal of the good woman and that of the good employee or worker'²⁷⁰.

In much national propaganda, particularly that of minorities in foreign countries, women are those who maintain traditional distinctive food, clothes, language and culture since their life is supposed to take place in the privacy of the house. Men, on the contrary, are 'naturally bound' to public roles and are, thus, influenced by the wider society. Since kinship and religion, and so tradition, were declared private by the Syrian state, women were indirectly placed beyond the reach of the state in their role of mothers and wives. In fact, the privacy of the household has always been guaranteed by the state and often to the detriment of women. The state has always assumed the household to be a compact entity. This gender bias has informed the

269 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm, Akademitryck)

270 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm, Akademitryck), p162

land reform. As a consequence the men were entitled to land for the whole household with a complete curtailment of women's means of empowerment.

This government attitude that counters modernity with tradition and public with private can be explained relying on a simplistic, linear history of the creation of the Syrian state based on western historical models²⁷¹. According to this, the Syrian government privatised the land, through the agrarian reform, and freed the peasants from patron/client relationships. It then placed itself at the centre of all social transactions. In fact it organised state run unions and popular organisations annihilating any spontaneous creation of civil society²⁷². This creation of citizenship exclusively from above was complemented by a 'participation from below' that took the form of *wasta*. People could reach the state using personal kinship ties and favours: 'The state has not been available for all, and its sources have been allocated intentionally or unintentionally via patronage networks stretching down to village level'²⁷³.

State interventions were often a result of lobbying, thus becoming unequal and unpredictable; the kinship structure was indirectly institutionalised. This reification of kinship structures involved also a stabilization of its internal, 'traditional' hierarchies, especially in respect to patriarchy and women. Women's rights, in this light, were easily overlooked in everyday practice 'despite declarations by successive governments about their commitment to women's rights, and various forms of policy interventions to achieve greater gender equality'²⁷⁴.

Part of the Syrian state's failure to implement its own feminist rhetoric is, indeed, due to the misconception by government that women belong to the private sphere and the family. From this follows, in fact, that women are also classified as non-independent and involved in non-productive, domestic activities, as demonstrated during the land and agricultural reform. Women's domestic identity compromises

271 Kabeer's article points out, as a starting point, the double nature of citizenship based on different ways of intervening in Society: the 'societal citizen' is the one who participates in social life from below (social organisations, community life and so on); this is opposed to the citizen whose social life is acted through the state, from above (voting and taking part in state activities). Modern states were created balancing the state power and these two kinds of citizenship. (Kabeer N., 2002, *Citizenship and the boundaries of the acknowledged community: identity, affiliation and exclusion*. (Brighton, Institute of Development Studies), p2).

272 George A., 2003, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. (Zed Books, London); Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria" in *Civil Society: challenging western models*, Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), (London, Routledge)

273 Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria" in *Civil Society: challenging western models*, Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), (London, Routledge), p19

274 Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria" in *Civil Society: challenging western models*, Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), (London, Routledge), p20

their citizenship. Being unproductive and dependent on men, women are “half-citizens”. And, in fact, Syrian women cannot pass their citizenship to their children. This shows that women have only ‘almost’ the same rights as men.

Technical issues can also be mentioned among the reasons for the gender-blindness of Syrian development plans since “water-related projects usually have strong technical components and are implemented by engineers who rarely have requisite skills and training to integrate gender concerns. This is especially true in watershed or irrigation development projects”²⁷⁵

But a further reason for the failure to transform feminist rhetoric into reality is popular pressure towards the state. Civil society, in fact, uses women’s bodies to define the limits of state intervention and to reinstate the privacy of the domestic sphere.

Tradition v Modernity

Women have become symbolic the passage from tradition to modernity. Since modern measures have come to be associated with state intervention, people’s opposition to government often takes the shape of support for tradition. In other words women’s traditional identities can become, when people clash with government, the very means to define a popular, ‘national’ identity opposed to western modernity and the government itself. In cases of “growing popular discontent [...] governments may make the tactical choice of relinquishing the control of women to their immediate communities and families, thereby depriving their female citizens of full legal protection”²⁷⁶.

Kandiyoti has summarised two basic approaches the state has utilised in dealing with gender issues. One emphasises the modern state as a progressive agent in transforming women’s traditional roles. The other underlines the ‘purely instrumental agenda of nationalist policies that mobilize women when they are needed in the labour force or even at the front, only to return them to domesticity or to subordinate roles in the public sphere when national emergency is over’²⁷⁷.

Rabo explains the Syrian state failure to guarantee legal rights to women and to

275 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 2003, *Dry Taps...Gender and Poverty in Water Resource Management*.

276 Kandiyoti D., 1991, ‘Identity and discontent : women and the nation’ in *Journal of International Studies* Vol. 20 (3), p440

277 Kandiyoti D., 1991, ‘Identity and discontent : women and the nation’ in *Journal of International Studies* Vol. 20 (3), p429

generally improve their situation in Marxist terms. In her opinion the state keeps the women disadvantaged because they constitute convenient cheap labour.

Kandiyoti and Rabo's approaches are based on an 'economic utilitarianism' that is missing a 'social dimension'. The state's failure to implement its own rhetoric is not intentional in the first place. On the contrary it shows the compromising effort of the government faced with dissenting voices. The state, in fact, emphasises, supports or imposes numerous female roles according to the various demands it is facing at different times. These are shaped by both international and domestic issues. The state has to negotiate numerous pressures and prioritise some for reasons of legitimacy and often to avoid social unrest.

Women's roles in Syrian society are split between contradictory identities. As citizens, women are victims of social backwardness and emblems of modernity, as mothers and wives they are icons of tradition. 'Women have been and are still used to represent symbolically both the progress and the cultural tradition of societies throughout the Middle East. The struggle for power in new states continues to be expressed through a discourse in which women are important symbols'²⁷⁸. Civil society and the state use women's roles as the symbol of the struggles between modernity and tradition, government and people. The state has intermittently tried and failed to intervene in the legal system towards a more secular personal status law. Such a law would forbid polygamy and give equal inheritance rights to women and men. These reforms, though, were opposed within the Ba'ath party and by the citizens²⁷⁹. State failures to change the personal status law in favour of women were actually, according to those interviewed by Rabo, 'political concessions' the state was granting to the 'traditional constituencies' in periods of social turmoil.

The boundaries between women as citizens and women as mothers and wives are difficult to draw; and the state can overstep its role. Such a case happened in 1983. Towards the end of the 1970s the Ba'ath party's socialist, secular policies clashed with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The latter contested the State's corruption and un-Islamic attitude. The government declared membership of the Brotherhood illegal and women wearing the veil then became the symbol of the families' dissent towards the Government. In the city of Hama, the centre of the Muslim opposition, many women started to wear the veil. Even Christian women were veiled as a silent, powerful, public sign of the opposition to the Ba'ath. In 1983 female shoppers were violently unveiled in the bazaars of Damascus by members of the Ba'ath Youth

278 Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria" in *Civil Society: challenging western models*, Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), (London, Routledge), p159

279 Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria" in *Civil Society: challenging western models*, Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), (London, Routledge), p170

Organisation that ripped the scarves off their heads.

People's deep shock paralleled the President's speech that condemned the 'improper behaviour' of the young members of the Youth Organisation. The president declared the veil to be a private choice and added "that customs and traditions could not be overcome by violence"²⁸⁰. The President, thus, emptied the veil of any political and public implication and relegated it to a 'left over' of traditional patriarchy. At the same time the president marked again the boundaries between state and civil society declaring women's traditions as being a private matter. His speech therefore represented a step back from the government's modernist intervention. Declaring the veil a private choice the state withdrew from its modernising measures that had forbidden head scarves in schools²⁸¹; it backtracked on what could have been perceived as an intrusion in family matters²⁸². Radically opposed to those western policies and to the government in general the veil is still, at present, a symbol of women's silent resistance, and the strength of their political commitment.

Nation and Citizenship

As previously noted, the denial of full citizenship rights to women has detracted from the implementation of gender sensitive policies. The idiom of citizenship has also been the means of the manipulation of women's bodies between modernity and tradition. The Ba'ath has implemented all its reforms in the name of the Syrian Arab nation. Nationalism and the related concept of citizenship have been used to motivate different attitudes demanded of the women at different times. This was possible only because 'nation' and 'citizenship' are extremely malleable terms.

Post-modern theorists have fragmented any essentialist approach to 'identity' into a fluid convergence of infinite perceptions of the self as defined by the subject or by others. The concept of nationalism has received an even more radical dismantling. Historical approaches have been criticised in favour of an emphasis on the arbitrary and political nature of the "nation". Nation is narration, in Bhabha's terms, that is an ongoing process

'where meanings may be partial because they are in *medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural

280 Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm, Akademityrck), p14

281 Female teachers could even lose their jobs if they covered their hair (Rabo A., 1986, *Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, townsmen and employees in Northeast Syria*. (Stockholm, Akademityrck).

282 Rabo A., 1996, "Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria" in *Civil Society: challenging western models*, Hann C., E. Dunn (eds), (London, Routledge), p170

authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'composing' its powerful image"²⁸³.

Alonso²⁸⁴ applies an equally fluid concept to the definition of "state" that becomes in her words an 'exercise in legitimating and moral regulation'. The State's strength derives from the imposition on its citizens of a national discourse based on a strong national identity. The latter is the product of a 'common discursive framework'²⁸⁵ based on specifically selected categories of class, gender, ethnicity, and age. The nationalistic discourse so defined is imposed and reconfirmed through everyday routines, policies and activities. These face continuous challenges by other moralities or points of view. It is through an authoritarian denial of the latter that the State gains its power as an institution²⁸⁶.

The Ba'ath concept of citizen is a concoction of Arab nationalism, Syrian nationalism, and socialism. Syrian citizens are in the first place part of the Arab nation and then they have a more local Syrian identity. Both identities converge in the socialist ideology. Respecting these characteristics is quite important since no other political affiliation is permitted, no other ethnicity allowed. Religious minorities and tribal networks are accepted as private dimensions of society, while other ethnicities or political ideologies are considered external.

The creation of a 'national individual' initiates a further process that involves the disciplining of its citizens by marginalizing the 'different' and essentialising the 'normal'. In Bhabha's words, nationalist discourses are based on the 'other', a fictitious entity that defines the borders of inclusion, affiliation, cohesion as much as exclusion, displacement, and contestation. The citizen is generally identified in opposition to this 'other'. In the Syrian case the women are often defined as the opposite to those of the west. Women are criticised as backward, or labelled traditional when they are part of modernising policies. They are praised as virtuous and as a model of the Syrian nation when needed to protect domesticity. The state has also reified Syrian citizenship denying the latter to ethnic minorities. These become then 'the other' rendering the Syrian nation more compact.

The creation of the citizen implies also complex processes of internalisation of

283 Bhabha H. K., 1990, *Nation and Narration*. (Routledge, London), p3

284 Alonso A. M., 1994, "The politics of Space, Time and Substance: State Formation, Nationalism, and Ethnicity", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23.

285 Alonso A. M., 1994, "The politics of Space, Time and Substance: State Formation, Nationalism, and Ethnicity", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, p380

286 Gramsci has an interesting approach to hegemony seen as a dynamic, continuous historical confrontation between classes. The dominant ideology is, according to him, just a temporary victory of one class identity over the others. (Gramsci A., 1976, *Lettere dal carcere*. (Torino, Einaudi))

identities, behaviours and roles. After defining how the 'right citizen' should be, the state needs people to comply with that model. The state, in fact, has to guarantee the citizens' respect of the rules for its power to be effective. For that aim new laws, rules and acceptable behaviours are created that slowly mould the citizens. Through them the individuals internalise the paradigms of right and wrong established by those in power and control their behaviour accordingly²⁸⁷. The citizens, thus, subject themselves to the body-management patterns established by the state. The law takes care of those who do not follow the pattern.

According to Hoy the point of the penal system is 'not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity, perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body'²⁸⁸. Through the penal system the modern State inculcates in its citizens a discipline of controlling and manipulating their behaviours according to state's selected discourses. Adhering to these discourses frames people's minds, transforming them into citizens. In Syria the strong pressure exercised by the *mukhabarat* (secret police) is indeed an effective means of instigating people toward self-control. The idiom of the nation, though, is equally strong and more subtle.

Joseph²⁸⁹ analyses the creation of female citizenship. She sees in the state's reification of religion and the kinship family the first step for the creation of the nation. Religion and kinship family are presented by the Syrian state as a primordial, national and distinct character preceding the state itself. Religion and kinship are also the most obvious emblems of a hierarchical power. Reifying them as primordial means naturalising the patriarchal model and extending it to the whole nation and society. Women in this discourse are addressed in the sole role of mothers and wives²⁹⁰. These roles are emphasised as 'natural', 'instinctive' and 'pre-social'. Women as mothers of citizens become also mothers of the nation. Thus self-sacrificing love for the children and the nation is expected and even demanded.

It is through the naturalisation of the national feeling that the nation is powerfully able to transform the 'obligatory' into the 'desirable'. In fact, as Joseph maintains, personhood in Syria is embedded in communities, families and social groupings. Syrian women are citizens but not in abstract, universal terms. They belong to their ethnicity and more specifically to their kinship. In this context women are related to

287 Foucault M., 1991, 'Governmentality' in Burchell G. et al. (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf)

288 Hoy D. C., (ed.) 1986, *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. (London, Basil Blackwell), p136

289 Joseph S., (ed) 2000, *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*. (New York, Syracuse University Press)

290 Joseph S., (ed) 2000, *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*. (New York, Syracuse University Press), p15

the state not as individuals but through the mediation of their family kin men. This process of female ‘infantilization’²⁹¹ is a precondition for or a result of the control of women’s bodies and sexuality by men and/or the state. Nationalism becomes in this light an ideology that the state uses for self-legitimation and also as a means to govern. In a similar process, the family goes from being a model of government to an instrument of government.

Nations often base their legitimacy on their smallest unity, the family. They present themselves as big, complex families. Thus the nation presents itself as a ‘natural’ and ‘biological’ hierarchy. Reifying religion and kinship and creating its own history, furthermore, the nation creates a sense of a primordial link between individuals, their land, and their culture. Alonso speaks of the nation presented as a collective subject ‘a super-organism with a unique biological-cultural essence’²⁹².

Naturalising patriarchal blood bonds implies a definition of citizenship that mirrors a ‘familial model’. Thus citizenship becomes a top-down, masculine enterprise that manipulates women’s bodies in the name of the nation.

‘The iconic category of “woman” as a stand-in for “nation” [...] has meant the imposition of forms of bodily discipline and behavioural control on “women”, in the name of the nation, in the name of liberation and progress, and in the name of God’²⁹³

In the Syrian case these concepts of citizenship are appropriated, negotiated and used by the citizens themselves for their demands. It is precisely in the negotiations between the state and the citizens that the power of the citizens is visible. It is in the discrepancy between personal status law and political rhetoric that it becomes apparent that the Syrian state, in order to satisfy people’s demands, and in order to reach an agreement within the Ba’ath and the government, must find its legitimation in abandoning parts of its socialist, Ba’athist, and feminist ideologies instead of enforcing them.

Women embody the means of these negotiations but they also actively manipulate these imposed roles to their own benefit. Women do in fact make very different life-choices between imposed roles of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. Nonetheless, women’s freedom of choice and potentiality for empowerment is hindered by institutional limitations.

291 Joseph S., (ed) 2000, *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*. (New York, Syracuse University Press), p17

292 Alonso A. M., 1994, “The politics of Space, Time and Substance: State Formation, Nationalism, and Ethnicity”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, p384

293 Joseph S., (ed) 2000, *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*. (New York: Syracuse University Press), p6

Denial of citizenship, as in the case of many Kurdish women, or lack of fully granted citizenship, as for all Syrian women, does impact on their lives. As discussed earlier, it is a result of gender-blind development policies. As a consequence women's empowerment is restrained and so are their potentialities in political and economic development. Moreover their daily life encounters numerous disadvantages that further threaten their possibility of achieving a better life. Denial of full citizenship is the root-cause of numerous shortfalls, particularly for women, which deserves more in-depth research. This analysis has only focused on the problems connected to water management and agriculture in the Euphrates Basin Development Project.

Recommendations

Women, belonging to minorities or majorities, should be granted full citizenship both in rhetoric and practice. Their rights should be equal to those of men in all respects; furthermore their particular needs should be tackled through women specific rights. Such a solid legal basis should allow women to make their own political and ideological choices. Freedom of association, and speech if supported by the law will guarantee a strengthening of their bargaining and decision-making power. Since the household seems to be the primary locus of negotiation and sometimes exploitation and disparity and very rarely a nest of equal relationship and economic redistribution, it is important to consider women as individuals and citizens even within the household. Their rights should be autonomous from those of men.

Women's productive roles in the domestic and the public space, particularly agriculture, should be fully recognised. Women's capabilities should be improved together with that of men in all fields, also those traditionally male, such as technology. Women's individual choices should always be respected. All policies regarding activities that involve women should be gender-sensitive. Women's needs should be tackled particularly in all those cases where social discrimination is stronger and more subtle. Women are not to be considered a compact group but their situation and needs change according to ethnicity, religion, social class and age. No discrimination should take place on the basis of ethnic belonging, religious belief, social status and other social stereotypes. Gender is not to be envisaged in isolation from other issues; on the contrary being a cross-cutting issue it should be a constant concern of any policy. Finally, gender should be interpreted in its full meaning, revealing patriarchy as a social construct based on unjust power relations.

APPENDIX: GENERAL INFORMATION AND VITAL STATISTICS

Most statistics about Syria are to be treated with caution. In fact they are often 'political' statements either by the government, or by the community leaders, or even by the international bodies. The 'ideological' element that informs many of the statistics renders them variable according to the agenda of the agent. Thus the data of this report should be seen as an indication of some wider tendencies and not considered for their exact numeric value.

Name: Syrian Arab Republic (Al Jumhuriyah al Arabiyah as Suriyah)

Type of government: Republic, under Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party since March 1963.

Capital: Damascus (5 million people)

Independence: April 17, 1946 from a League of Nations mandate under French administration.

Constitution: March 13, 1973.

Head of State: President. Bashar al-Asad was elected in July 10, 2000

Parliamentary seats: 250 (UN 2004)

Women in parliamentary seats: 12% (2004 UN)

Population: 18.2 million

Kurdish Population: 1.5-2 million

Population growth: 2.4% (2002 WB)

Rural population: 48.5% (2002 WB)

Population under nineteen: 60% (2004 UN)

Literacy rates 15-24: women 93.0% and men 97.1% (2004 UNESCO)

Unemployment: 11.2 of which 23.9% women (2000 WB)

Gross domestic product (GDP): \$20.5 billion.

Real growth rate: 3.3%. (2004 US State Department)

Per capita GDP: \$1.165. (2004 US State Department)

Natural resources: mainly crude oil and natural gas

Main industry: petroleum (Syria is the 17th oil exporter in the world UNDP 2004), mining, textiles, food processing, and construction.

Exports: \$5.145 billion from petroleum (45% of total), textiles, phosphates, antiquities, fruits and vegetables, cotton. (2004 US State Department)

Imports: \$4.800 billion from foodstuffs, metal and metal products, machinery, textiles, petroleum. (2004 US State Department)

Agriculture 30% of GDP (2004 US State Department)

Agricultural products: cotton, wheat, barley, sugar beets, fruits and vegetables.

Agricultural labour force: 25% (2004 CAIMED)

Land area: 185.170 sq. km., including 1.295 sq. km. of Israeli-occupied territory (2004 FAO)

Arable land: less than 33%,

Forest: 3%

Badia: 44%

Non-arable land: 20%

Precipitation: from 1200 mm in the coastal area to less than 200 mm in the dry

plains and steppe in the east. (2004 FAO)

Cultivable area: 5.905.000 hectares (2001 Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria)

Cultivated area: 5.352.000 hectares (2001 Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria)

Irrigated area: 1.350.000 in 2001 (2004 FAO)

Renewable water resources: 26.260 million m³/yr (2004 FAO)

Total quantity of water available: 16.754 million m³ (2004 FAO)

Total quantity of water consumption: 17.566 million m³ (2004 FAO)

Agricultural usage of water: 88% (2004 FAO)

Urban population with access to drinking water: 94% (2002 UNICEF)

Rural population with access to drinking water: 64% (2002 UNICEF)

Urban population with access to sanitation: 97% (2002 UNICEF)

Rural population with access to sanitation: 56% (2002 UNICEF)

Telephone lines per capita: 12.3% (2004 UNDP)

Mobile phones subscribers per capita: 2 (2004 UNDP)

Personal computers: 1.94% (2001 ITU)

Internet users: 1.29% (2001 ITU)

Membership in International Organizations:

United Nations: October 24, 1945

International Monetary Organization (IMF): April 10, 1947

World Bank: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD):
1947

International Finance Corporation (IFC): June 28, 1962

World Trade Organization: not a member

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC): signed November 29,
2000, but not ratified.

Human Rights Conventions:

Universal Declaration of Human rights: December 10, 1948

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): April 21, 1969

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR): April
21, 1969

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Torture and Other Cruel,

Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT): not ratified

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial
Discrimination (ICERD): April 21, 1969

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against
Women (CEDAW): not ratified

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): July 15, 1993

The International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of
Apartheid: November 30, 1973

The International Convention against Apartheid in Sports: December 1985

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