

Leah Caldwell

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*Privileging the Private: Understanding development through the eyes of Syria's only "political" and privately owned daily, al-Watan*

*The private sector media as a "modern" media in Syria*

In 2001 Syria opened its media outlets to private ownership for the first time in over forty years. More than a year after coming to power, President Bashar al-Asad issued Decree 50, which overturned a 1963 revolutionary decree outlawing privately owned publications. While Decree 50 is often rosily credited with reforming the Syrian mediascape, it actually instituted more restrictions on publishers and journalists than ever before. This includes forcing journalists to reveal their sources, as well as imposing fines and jail terms for journalists or publishers who disobey the guidelines or publish without a license.<sup>1</sup> As details of Decree 50 make clear, opening the door for the privately owned press in Syria did not ensure a press free of restrictions.

Officials from the public media sector lauded the establishment of the private media as yet another "modernizing" reform enacted by Bashar that would "serve the nation."<sup>2</sup> Western news reports have focused on the historical momentousness of the emergence of the private press in Syria, remarking that even though the press may not be "independent" by Western standards, it could mark the beginning of a new era of press freedom.<sup>3</sup> Almost a decade later, the same English-language outlets have rejected elements of Syria's media

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<sup>1</sup> Thabet Salem. "Pushing For Reform." *Syria Today*, May 2009. <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/may-2009/312-other/743-pushing-for-reform>

<sup>2</sup> "Syria: SANA report on launch of new Syrian daily Al-Watan." *SANA via BBC World Monitoring*, November 8, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> "Private political daily hits Syria newsstands." *Agence France Presse*, November 5, 2006 and "Private Daily Launched in Syria." *Layalina Bi-Weekly Press Review on Public Diplomacy and Arab Media*, October 27-November 9, 2006. [http://www.layalina.tv/press/PR\\_II.23.asp#article7](http://www.layalina.tv/press/PR_II.23.asp#article7)

privatization as a fraud, reporting that the country's private outlets are owned by wealthy businessmen close to the regime, and while some outlets may be breaking social "taboos", their inability (or unwillingness) to criticize the regime strips them of credibility in the eyes of Western journalists.<sup>4</sup> Even while recognizing the remaining restrictions on Syrian journalists in a market-oriented media system, the subtext in the Western coverage remains: private ownership is the base qualification that the Syrian media must meet in order to become truly "developed" by Western standards.

Since Western news outlets immediately interpreted any move toward media privatization as a positive change in media structure, they neglected to report how Syria's media privatization was actually more indicative of the country's recent economic liberalization policies rather than a sign of intent to implement a Western-style media system. On the other hand, business-oriented groups such as the Dubai Press Club and the Oxford Business Group squarely characterized the inception of Syria's private media through the language of economic growth potential and the opening of new markets.<sup>5</sup>

In an April 2010 article for *Gulf News*, the editor of the privately owned Syrian magazine *Forward* Sami Moubayed wrote on the prospects of private media in Syria.<sup>6</sup> He interviewed a private-sector journalist who said, "Private media in Syria – and especially business journalism – is going through a golden era, thanks to the economic reforms under way." This quote set the tone for the article in its recognition of economic reform rather than media reform as the source of Syria's flourishing private media. In this way, the benefits of the private sector

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Amos, "New Media Strain Government Tolerance in Syria." *NPR*, September 15, 2010 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129706102> and Robert F. Worth, "Web Tastes Freedom Inside Syria, and It's Bitter." *The New York Times*, September 29, 2010 [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/world/middleeast/30syria.html?\\_r=1&ref=world&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/world/middleeast/30syria.html?_r=1&ref=world&pagewanted=print)

<sup>5</sup> Dubai Press Club. "Arab Media Outlook 2009-2010." [www.fas.org/irp/eprint/arabmedia.pdf](http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/arabmedia.pdf) and Oxford Business Group. "Media & Advertising" in *The Report: Emerging Syria 2008*, 131-136.

<sup>6</sup> Sami Moubayed. "An Upswing in Syria's Private Sector." *Gulf News*, April 16, 2010. <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/syria/an-upswing-in-syria-s-private-sector-1.611815>

are assessed not by its groundbreaking news coverage, but by the number of private publications on the market – 165 – and how these publications' subject matter ranges from luxury to entertainment.

### *Constructing development and progress in al-Watan*

As transformations in the Syrian media and economy have been blurred in both academic literature and news coverage, with excessive reliance on ownership as the primary characteristic, there has been little contextual analysis of the Syrian private media. Furthermore, both Western and Syrian sources have been too eager to discuss Syrian media privatization through an arbitrary framework of development that prizes economic privatization as a step toward progress.

Over five months in 2010, I looked at the economic content of Syria's only "political" privately owned daily newspaper, *al-Watan*, to determine some of the distinguishing trends in discourse and coverage.<sup>7</sup> Though there were numerous findings, I will discuss the one issue that pervaded nearly every economy-related news story: development.

The term development is highly problematic to say the least, yet *al-Watan* represents a unique space for the purveyance of development discourse. As a privately owned media outlet in a regime-defined "social-market" economy, it operates as both a symbol for Syria's latest economic opening and a continuity with certain pre-2000 socialist ideals. It is unquestionable that, though *al-Watan's* news coverage represents only a fragment of a larger Syrian discourse on economic development, it presents this discourse in many of its complexities. The central question of this article will be: how does *al-Watan* shape an overlying concept of "development" in its economic coverage and how does its private ownership status affect this conception?

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<sup>7</sup> *Al-Watan* began publication in November 2006 and its primary financial backer is President Bashar al-Asad's businessman cousin Rami Makhlouf.

## *Development Space*

*Al-Watan's* content structures what I call a "development space", meaning the abstract and actual space in which development takes place, as well as the individuals, institutions, and groups permitted to engage in development. *Al-Watan's* development space is created through the inclusion and exclusion of specific views on development in news and opinion articles as well as through giving centrality to views that advance specific narratives of development. The concept of development space will facilitate an understanding of discourse as a means of structuring the boundaries of permissible public speech on the topic of development.

Syria's public discourse has witnessed many dramatic shifts in the construction of development space. In 1963, a revolutionary Ba'thist discourse framed development as the purview of the state and of several "progressive forces" such as the peasantry (*fellaheen*) and workers.<sup>8</sup> The actors in this development space called for the nationalization of industry and import substitution as a means of progress while landowners were considered "backwards". Under the leadership of the late President Hafez al-Asad in the 1970s, the class-based interpretation of development ended and gave way to a view of development as a means to attain national security and promote solidarity in the face of Israeli aggression.<sup>9</sup> Today, development space is the purview of several select development actors, including Syrian ministers, businessmen, international financial institutions, and "civil society" participants.

## *Development Actors*

Syrian government ministers lead the discourse on development. Out of 245 articles from *al-Watan*, at least half base their entire premise either on a

<sup>8</sup> Aurora Sottimano, "Ideology and Discourse in the Era of Ba'thist Reforms: Towards an Analysis of Authoritarian Governmentality." In *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria*, 3-40. Fife: University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

minister's speech or a report released by a government ministry. In this sense, government views not only dominate the discourse on development, but they also envelop the entirety of *al-Watan's* economic coverage. Regardless of the ministry, the development of the national economy is an important theme in government ministers' statements. Ranging from ministers of tourism, oil, transportation, agriculture to industry, each contributes to the discourse by seeking to demonstrate their respective sector's contribution to the overall development of the national economy or, more accurately, how their sector is in the process of undergoing development itself. Effectively, these ministers typify development from a state perspective, but their views represent the brand of economic reform in implementation since 2000 – meaning they can simultaneously promote privatization/open-market policies and a robust public sector all under the banner of a social-market economy.

Yet there is a hierarchy as to which ministers' views dominate the development discourse. While one might assume Economy Minister Lamia 'Aasi would be given precedence in the coverage, it is in fact Deputy Finance Minister Abdullah Dardari who is allotted the most space in the economic coverage, especially coverage concerning economic development. In a brief comparison, 'Aasi is mentioned in 10 headlines while Dardari occupies 12. This seems to be a roughly equal amount of coverage, but there is a crucial difference: when Dardari is mentioned in a headline, the entire article becomes his soapbox, while the 'Aasi headlines only indicate shorter finance-related briefs. In many ways, Dardari emblemizes the social-market economy in *al-Watan's* coverage, but perhaps with more emphasis on the market. He is heralded as a straight talker on the economy who has implemented sweeping changes and is portrayed as someone who is pushing forward true progress.<sup>10</sup> Without a doubt, his pro-market leanings drive much of *al-Watan's* economic coverage.

In comparison with Dardari's discussion of economic development on a national

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<sup>10</sup> *Al-Watan*, Feb. 14, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73967>

scale, lesser ministers tend to speak of economic development only in relation to their individual sectors. The ministers establish the parameters of development discourse by defining the obstacles to development and how their ministries will overcome these obstacles, yet the inclusion of government ministers in the discourse serves a more practical function: it allows for the publication of officially sanctioned views on development so as to avoid overstepping the boundaries of acceptable speech.

The next set of permitted development actors is Syrian businessmen and investors. Their role as the financial backers and movers of development is a cornerstone of a development discourse that privileges certain pro-market economic reforms. The businessman's importance to the viability of the national economy is expressed in an article titled "[Syrian Prime Minister] Mohammad Naji Atri Woos Syrian Businessmen" where Atri tells Syrian émigré businessmen, "You are the birds that have flown away and now it is time to come home after a long time away and strengthen the revivals in the Syrian national economy. Now, [we are] beginning to harvest the fruits of development with the Five Year Plan and reap the benefits . . ." <sup>11</sup> Also emphasized is the Syrian businessman's potential to cultivate international ties and bolster Syria's international reputation. <sup>12</sup> The Syrian businessman cum investor is a steady player in development, representing a discursive solidification of Syrian engagement with private interests and a growing discursive space in support of individuals profiting from the economic development process.

The last significant player in the discursive development space is possibly the most complex. <sup>13</sup> It is the actors residing under the space of "civil society"

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Watan*, Feb. 9, 2010 <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73705>

<sup>12</sup> *Al-Watan*, Feb. 9, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73706> and *al-Watan*, Feb. 14, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=73961>

<sup>13</sup> While the ministerial and business views on development occupy over 100 articles, I want to briefly mention some minor actors in the development discourse. Syrian chambers of industry, trade, and agriculture are present in this discussion, as are industrialists and to a lesser extent, the peasantry (*fellaheen*). Syrian economists and "economic experts" are at times asked to discuss the country's development trajectory, but rarely in the same articles with ministerial views. Other

(*mujtama' ahli* or *qita' ahli*). As demonstrated in *al-Watan* discourse, the Syrian government has attempted to create a tightly controlled civil society that operates under government auspices and with the participation of select actors. One of the crucial steps in activating the concept of a new Syrian civil society in development discourse has been to introduce its tenets and new structures into the public discourse through conferences and the participation of sanctioned non-governmental development organizations.

The January 2010 development conference titled “The Growing Role of Civil Society (*Mujtama' Ahli*) in Development” received extensive front-page coverage over two days from *al-Watan*, which even reprinted an entire speech from the conference’s primary “organizer” Syrian First Lady Asma al-Asad.<sup>14</sup> Her presence at the conference is relevant in that it represents government approval of opening development to a newly conceived civil society. The discourse stemming from this conference involves solidifying the positions of the sanctioned development actors (many of them discussed above) in civil society, as well as setting boundaries for permissible actions in this civil society so as not to present a challenge to governmental authority. The function of discourse as power is clearly elaborated in the development conference’s ability to define the parameters of acceptability in civil society through discursive mechanisms.

In order to oversee a civil society, one must be able to define it. The conference participants presented several interpretations of civil society, but the views of Asma al-Asad and co-coordinator Omar Abdul Aziz al-Hallaj of the Syria Trust for Development, are given precedence in the discourse.<sup>15</sup> Asad’s vision of civil society is one which would operate under a new law establishing civil society as

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Arab economists are also brought into the fold, but not very often. The presence of these perspectives pales in comparison to the main development actors mentioned in the text.

<sup>14</sup> *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72621>

<sup>15</sup> Asma al-Asad is mentioned separately in two headlines while excerpts from her speech were put in the lead paragraphs and quoted the most extensively. Hallaj’s speech enjoyed similar attention, as did Abdullah Dardari. These facts are notable since the so-called keynote speaker of the conference, Lord Mark Brown, was barely mentioned in *al-Watan*’s coverage

the “third essential sector for development work” after the governmental and private sectors, since experience has proven that governments alone “lack the ability to confront [developmental] challenges without widespread and organized societal participation”.<sup>16</sup> Most notably, Asad directly attributes the strengthening of Syrian civil society to government policy, which is perhaps counter-intuitive in light of the government’s past restrictions on civil society.<sup>17</sup>

Other participants presented different interpretations of civil society, many encouraging more attention to the phenomenon’s neglected political aspects. Dr Ali Ghadir of the Arab Planning Institute in Kuwait noted, “Economic development in all of its meanings includes humans and political freedoms . . .”<sup>18</sup> In a similarly critical tone, a professor from Dubai was confounded by Syria’s interpretation of civil society, considering that the country is the “last of the Arab countries to turn to it”.<sup>19</sup> This multiplicity of views demonstrates *al-Watan*’s ability to act as a space for competing views on development, as long as these views operate within the permitted realms of speech. Some of the most definitive views on the meaning of civil society came from Deputy Finance Minister Dardari, who stated that civil society would function as a mediator between the state and the market since civil society is the only sector able to provide a level of “shared wealth in society”.<sup>20</sup>

Syria’s political reality – a state of authoritarianism buttressed by the 1963 Emergency Law – does not permit politically oriented activity outside the official sphere of power. Quite literally, all manifestations of civil society are funneled through the state through a process of permits and regulations designed to control any expression of popular will. Still, the regime discourse (with the help of *al-Watan*) insists on characterizing a new Syrian civil society as a third pillar of development that is separate from the government. In reality, Syria’s political situation precludes any possibilities of political activity in non-government

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<sup>16</sup> *Al-Watan*, Jan. 24, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72621>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72711>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



regulated channels.

### *The Paths to Economic Development*

In the discourse of *al-Watan*, there is no single path to economic development. Instead, we find an amalgamation of development goals from various sectors that offer their own solutions. Despite the disjointed nature of these plans, they include discursive links with the wider development goals of the national economy as outlined in the 10th Five Year Plan. The 10th Five Year Plan, which covered the years 2006 to 2010, represents a central discursive blueprint for developments in the national economy according to a vision of a social-market economy. The plan allows for flexibility in the nature of development solutions. For example, some sectors advocate government support, others government withdrawal, but this is indicative of the versatility of a Syrian economic discourse that promotes a social-market economy.

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

A constant factor cited in the failure of the 10th Five Year Plan is the drought in the East. Therefore, the element most to blame for lack of achieving

development goals was something unforeseeable and uncontrollable.<sup>21</sup> The second key constraint to development is administrative inefficiency in implementation of the Five Year Plan.<sup>22</sup> This is one of the many human-related factors that impede development as well as a favored topic of columnists who assail the slowness and inefficiency of local bureaucracy. In one opinion piece titled “In the Bed of Bureaucracy” columnist Ali Hamra describes how incompetent local officials hamper investments with their mountains of paperwork.<sup>23</sup> Hamra calls for the destruction of bureaucracy with a pick-axe. Deputy Finance Minister Dardari laments that this administrative inefficiency has contributed to Syria’s lack of competitiveness in the global market, which in itself is a constraint to development.<sup>24</sup>

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

Any path to development must incorporate elements of the social-market economy as explicated in the government’s Five Year Plan. For the most recent plan, pro-market moves such as investment, export strategies, and privatization are promoted alongside a public sector. The idea goes: if all sectors strategically adopt moves in line with the Five Year Plan, then this will in turn lead to national

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<sup>21</sup> *Al-Watan*, Jan 20, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72325> and *al-Watan*, Jan. 26, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72828>

<sup>22</sup> *Al-Watan*, Jan. 26, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72828>

<sup>23</sup> *Al-Watan*, Jan. 14, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=71934>

<sup>24</sup> *Al-Watan*, Jan. 26, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72828> and *al-Watan*, Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=72709>

economic development, which will then facilitate social development. Deputy Finance Minister Dardari said, “Whoever calls for the obliteration of economic reform so that social development can be realized, is like someone who wants to distribute a small cake – but it is not enough, you must have something to distribute.”<sup>25</sup>

Since the private media was relaunched in Syria in 2000, it has been situated in both the Western and Syrian presses in the center of a development framework where privatization is almost always represented as “progress.” In the Syrian private press, this idea of development permeates nearly all economic coverage, yet it is always discussed through a tightly controlled “development space” where a handful of participants are allowed to participate and determine exactly *what* or *who* needs to be developed. By examining how the private press constructs its own idea of development in its economic coverage, we can see how development is conceived as the perfect balance between the state and the market – an idea that adheres closely to the Syrian state’s conceptualization of economic and social development.

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