
The State Farm of Al-Assad between Rejection, Adaptation and Re-Appropriation (1971-2010): Revisiting the Authoritarian Construction of a Territory in the Syrian Countryside

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The expressions 'rationality' and 'emancipation' often come up when dealing with the "modern" ideal that prevailed during collectivisation across the world, and that was translated in land use into regular grid patterns. Looking at concrete results from the point of view of official objectives, and noting the individual and collective arrangements that seem to make the system lose its rationality, we could be tempted to consider that, generally, these colossal projects end up failing. Looking at these developments from inside, in the long term, makes it possible to see beyond the simplistic notions of success or failure peculiar to public policy assessments. In these developments, people simply live and adapt if necessary.

While in the 1960s and 1970s, the agrarian policy of the Ba'ath Party was mainly reformist, a few State farms were established, with two of them belonging to a huge hydro-agricultural programme entitled the Euphrates Project. This development represented an important share of the public investments of the time, and was partially financed thanks to Soviet bilateral assistance. That is why the collectivist structures in force at the time benefitted from sizeable means, which placed these farms in a class of their own for two reasons: firstly because they were the perfect examples of the modern control aspiration peculiar to many authoritarian places (e.g. Soviet-inspired sovkhoses in particular); secondly because they benefitted from territorial exclusivity, i.e. most of the objects situated inside their borders depended on only one ministerial agency, thereby excluding all other public administrations competent in the rest of the Syrian territory.



Sukkariya: a Model Village Reflecting the Emancipatory and Rationalistic Ideal in a State Farm in Syria

The “model village” on which we comment in this article, is a functional centre in one of the two major State farms of the Euphrates Project. Consisting of around thirty thousand hectares and called Al-Assad Settlement, it was developed in the 1970s (while in 2000, collectivised lands were dissolved and redistributed to private individuals in plots of three hectares per nuclear family). Rationality and social emancipation were the main ideas behind the design of Al-Assad. All the more since, at the time, the rural development policy conducted by the Ba’th Party consisted in limiting rural exodus, by offering residents the economic and social conditions allowing them to live decently, without having to go to town.

In a functionalist approach, the designers of Al-Assad wanted to offer residents amenities that were considered indispensable. Every house, divided into two apartments, was connected to the water, drainage and electricity grids. In addition, the model village included many services such as a primary and high school, a community clinic, a cultural centre, a mosque and sometimes small businesses, all of these seeing to the daily needs of the residents who, as a result, did not have to travel far. A decent life also meant salaried employment. To benefit from an apartment in the model village, it was necessary to be an employee of the State farm. The community formed by the residents of Sukkariya was, as such, reinforced since their daily life, at work or at home, was located in one place only.

This being the case, the rationality sought after by the designers of Al-Assad entailed that every resident was to stay put in order to be rigorously controlled socially as well as economically. The organisational structure of the State farm was mechanistic, which means that the design, which depended on engineers and technicians, was separate from the execution, which was passed on to the workers. This hierarchy of individuals was then reproduced in the model village, and the apartments intended for cadres were separate from the others. The community was well structured, since individuals had different statuses and did not mix outside of work, except in shops, at school and at the mosque.

Resisting the Spirit of Al-Assad

Al-Assad was built with a view to constituting a new society, a new man on a new land, according to the design reports. In this light, the idea was to put the past behind. Sukkariya was established on the ruins of a village that was destroyed when the State farm was being built. Whence the violence experienced by some residents, such as this forty-something teacher who, as a child, had to move out when his village disappeared: *“Of course it was hard! I should say so! For example, I remember when we came here to build, people didn’t have any money; they didn’t have any money to build here. (...) On top of that I remember that we had to leave in winter, and we had not built a house yet. It was very difficult.”*

Under these conditions, some residents did not want to live within the borders of Al-Assad, or work for the State farm. This is the case of a sixty-something woman who at first refused to live with her husband and children in the model village, even if it was offered to her: *“We didn’t like the houses. The houses were small. We are used to the steppe. We didn’t*

like the houses. (...) They were small, too small. We wanted houses like the one we have at home." She moved to another village at the end of the 1970s, outside of Al-Assad Settlement, and her husband left for Saudi Arabia to work in the building trade for a few years.

Putting the past behind did not only concern buildings, but also social relations that were explicitly considered as being "*archaic*" in some of the design reports. The Constitution of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party which has been in power in Syria since 1963, associates tribal structures with a sort of feudalism that needs to be eradicated, so that individuals can only claim membership to Arab nationalism. The prestige that came with lineage, as the main source of clan and tribal notability, was to be replaced in the State farm by levels of education, from which everyone's place in the professional hierarchy and therefore everyone's status in the community were to follow.

Nevertheless, residents only partly followed the ambitions of the State farm designers. Indeed, while tribal structures were certainly weakened, they did not disappear altogether. According to the residents of model villages, although these villages included a mixture of individuals from various geographical origins, some clans were overrepresented compared to others. Solidarity between the members of groups claiming a common lineage is still alive today, whether in the discourses or matrimonial practices of residents.

Towards the Re-Appropriation of State Farms

Despite their resistance, residents progressively dealt with the disruptions experienced. Part of those who saw their villages being destroyed during the building of the State farm, came back after a few years and settled in the model villages, like the abovementioned sixty-something woman whose husband came back from Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the 1980s to work for Al-Assad Settlement. In this instance, even if she was critical about the houses at first, she became used to them, modifying even what was unacceptable to her, such as the toilettes which she had placed outside the apartment.

Moreover, a sense of belonging to the same community (non-exclusive to tribal membership) and solidarity to match began developing among the residents of the model villages, as remembered by this former supervisor in the State farm: "*Social relations at the beginning, in the 1980s (...) up until 2000, were extremely good, we stood together. For example, someone's head was sore? Then I would go and visit him. He needs a doctor. We bring a car and money for the doctor.*"

All the more since some of the people appreciated the fact that there was geographic diversity in the model villages, in that diversity made it possible to avoid promiscuity, as explained by this Sukkariya resident: "*On the farm here, people originally come from different regions. They respect one another. Between relatives, in a normal village, people don't respect one another. (...) Here it's better, personally, I feel better here. If you don't want*

to see me, if you don't want to come to my house, then you don't come. You're free. In the villages where there is only one family [only one clan], where everyone is a relative, you must go to people's houses, otherwise [they ask you]: "why? Do you have a problem with him? (...)" There are obligations. Here, if you like me, you want to come to my house, I welcome you; if you don't want to, then you are free."

Progressively, one feels attached to this place, and one invests in it. During an informal discussion, a Sukkariya resident explained that, when he arrived there in the 1980s, he thought that he would not stay long in Al-Assad Settlement. Some told him to plant fruit trees for which the State farm supplied the seeds, but he had replied by making sarcastic remarks, because he was certain that his job was temporary and that he would leave the place soon afterwards. After a few years, in the 1990s, he built two additional rooms next to his apartment in the model village, and planted olive trees. Today, he exclaimed, there is a forest!

Maintaining the Community despite the Disappearance of the State Farm

In 2000, the State farm was liquidated and the land redistributed to private individuals. The community facilities that, up until then were within the competence of the Management of Al-Assad Settlement, were no longer provided, as could be seen from the rubbish lying around Sukkariya and the lack of refuse collection and adduction network maintenance. People began to talk about the generalised corruption and economic losses potentially caused by the running of this heavy structure. It appeared that the rationalistic and emancipatory ideal claimed by the State farm designers in the 1970s had failed.

Yet, the community that emerged in each model village endured. People were still investing in their houses. As soon as land use control disappeared with the dismantling of collectivised lands, people began to build walls to create small private gardens, new floors or annexes for their growing families. Furthermore, residents were prepared to replace the State farm as far as managing community facilities was concerned, by supplying the Ministry of Local Communities with applications for the creation of municipalities as relocated structures with limited territorial jurisdiction.

Investment was not only material but also affective, where many residents, younger ones in particular, only felt at home in the model villages, as explained by this family man living in Sukkariya: *"I prefer to be here, it's better. I live here. Look at people, how we live in the region. Today, it will be thirty years that we live here. Most children were born here. They became used to the environment, to the people. When they go to their villages, where their relatives live, they feel that... the people... I mean... that habits and customs are different. They are not so distant, but they are different. They prefer to be here. The children prefer it here. They don't want to go back to their villages. Because they go there as guests, for two or three days, and they want to come back."* Even the abovementioned sixty-something woman from now on prefers to live in the model village rather than near her "relatives", i.e. the

members of her clan: "Here [in Sukkariya] it's better. (...) I know my neighbours; I got used to the place. (...) Here, it's better than at my relatives!"

As such, even if the public policy conducted by the Ba'th Party in Al-Assad Settlement since the 1970s did not fulfil all its objectives, its emancipatory and rationalistic ideal was not without consequence on the daily life of the residents. Social change did take place, even if it had not occurred in exactly the same terms initially imagined by the designers of the State farm. During an informal discussion, a resident of the region made an analogy between Al-Assad Settlement and having a nightclub next door. At first, because he is Muslim, he is going to be suspicious of it. Nonetheless, he continued, progressively, he is going to get used to its presence, and perhaps one day he might even visit the place, by curiosity, before actually appreciating this type of entertainment. All the more since, if in the end he can re-appropriate the nightclub and adapt some of its characteristics to his own desires. This has been the case for many large State projects where the voluntarism behind their foundation faded progressively, enabling residents to remodel the facilities.

Moreover, if the said emancipatory and rationalistic ideal did not make perfectly disciplined individuals, it did not generate citizens at odds with the regime either. Whereas a major wave of contestation spread over a vast portion of Syria from March 2011 onwards, there were few demonstrations in Al-Assad Settlement against the Ba'thist regime¹. This observation certainly does not mean that Al-Assad residents were unfailingly loyal to the national political authority, nor can it be explained in detail through the agrarian policies of the last forty years only. Nevertheless, we cannot neglect the effects the Party's official rhetoric had on people, especially in the context of a model village whose residents tended to live in seclusion.

During 2013, Al-Assad Settlement came under the yoke of the Islamic State in Iraq and the East. What happened to the community that emerged in the model villages following the voluntarist policy of the Syrian Regime during the 1970s? Have the residents originating from other regions gone back home? Do they still feel attached to the former State farm where some lived for over thirty years and others were born? In a few years or a few decades, when this tragic crisis will find a sustainable outcome, what will remain in the memories and landscapes of this territory that was built and carried by an authoritarian power that no longer exists in the region?

¹ FOY Roman-Oliver, 2014, *Habitants and territoires dans un grand périmètre irrigué en Syrie. De la création à la liquidation d'une ferme d'État*, Thèse de géographie, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, pp. 572-580

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