

China Sajadian¹

THE DROWNED AND THE DISPLACED: AFTERLIVES OF AGRARIAN DEVELOPMENTALISM ACROSS THE LEBANESE-SYRIAN BORDER

Abstract

This article traces the layered significance of displacement for Syrians whose parents' and grandparents' villages were flooded after the Euphrates Dam in Tabqa was completed in 1973. Known as *al-maghmurin* (the drowned), many of the dam's displaced descendants are now living as refugee farmworkers in Lebanon. Based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at the Lebanese-Syrian border, the article analyzes how these refugees grappled with the struggles, promises, and losses associated with Syria's high modern era of agrarian reform against the backdrop of Syria's ongoing war. Facing the uncertainty of long-term displacement, their vernacular narratives about the dam resurrected Ba'athist ideals of state-led agrarian development and expressed a yearning for stability. Such expectations of material improvement, however, sat in tension with an intergenerational history of economic insecurity, decades of rural outmigration, and their everyday predicaments as refugee farmworkers. This article shows how these histories took form in the *maghmurin's* everyday talk about the dam: the servile agrarian past that Syria's land reforms were meant to overcome, the many unintended displacements these reforms unleashed, and the ways they contended with these past displacements in the present. In doing so, it argues that the displacement of these refugees was not a singular *event* triggered by war but rather a fractured inheritance and ongoing afterlife of agrarian developmentalism and Syria's long post-socialist transition.

خلاصة

يتتبع هذا المقال الأهمية المتعددة الجوانب للتهجير بالنسبة للسوريين الذين غُمرت قرى آبائهم وأجدادهم بمياه سد الفرات في عام ١٩٧٣. والعديد من هؤلاء المعروفين بلقب "المغمورين" هم الآن يعيشون في لبنان كعمال زراعيين لاجئين. استناداً إلى ثمانية عشر شهراً من العمل الميداني الإثنوغرافي على الحدود اللبنانية السورية، يحلل هذا المقال كيف تعامل هؤلاء اللاجئون مع الصراعات والوعود والخسائر المرتبطة بعصر الإصلاح الزراعي الحديث في سوريا على خلفية الحرب الأهلية السورية المستمرة. في ظل حالة عدم اليقين الناجمة عن نزوحهم الطويل الأجل، تحيي سردياتهم عن السد المثل العليا البعثية للتنمية الزراعية التي تقودها الدولة، وتعبّر عن التوق إلى الاستقرار. ومع ذلك، فإن مثل هذه التوقعات بالتحسن المادي تتعارض مع التاريخ المتوارث بين الأجيال عن انعدام الأمن الاقتصادي، وبعقود من الهجرة الريفية إلى الخارج، ومآزقهم اليومية كعاملين زراعيين لاجئين. يوضح هذا المقال كيف تبلورت هذه التواريخ في

China Sajadian is the Eveillard Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at Smith College and incoming Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Vassar College. Email: csajadian@smith.edu

حديث المغمورين اليومي عن السد: الماضي الزراعي الذليل الذي كان من المفترض أن تتغلب عليه إصلاحات الأراضي في سوريا، وحالات النزوح العديدة غير المقصودة التي أفرزتها هذه الإصلاحات، والطرق التي تعاملوا بها مع عمليات التهجير الماضية هذه في الوقت الحاضر. وبذلك، يقدم المقال جدلية بأن تهجير هؤلاء اللاجئين لم يكن حدثاً منفرداً سببته الحرب، بل كان إرثاً متصداً وتداعيات مستمرة للتنمية الزراعية والانتقال الطويل الأمد لفترة ما بعد الاشتراكية في سوريا.



INTRODUCTION

“Who are we in this big machine called the state?” Abdul-Salam Ojeili asks in his novel, *The Drowned*.² “We are mere bits of iron, screws, wires, or nails, both fine and thick. Scraps of metal that the machine must have, and at the same time are of no value or use, except in their place in the machine.”³ Ojeili penned this lament just a few years after the completion of the Euphrates Dam in 1973. A native of the city of al-Raqqa in eastern Syria, Ojeili focused on the immediate human costs of this ambitious project – namely, the flooding of dozens of villages and the mass relocation of their inhabitants. The pastoralists, farmers, and fisherpeople who were displaced by the dam came to be known as *al-maghmurin* (the drowned).

With extensive technical and financial support from the Soviet Union, the Euphrates Dam Project became the central pillar and icon of the Ba‘th Party’s plans for rural development.⁴ As part of a broader wave of socialist and state-led redistributive land reform spreading across the decolonizing world, Syrian state planners envisioned the creation of a modern irrigation network and the extension of electricity throughout Syria’s poorest province. By harnessing the hydropower of the Euphrates River, the dam promised to transform the downtrodden inhabitants of Syria’s Jazira region⁵ into revolutionary peasants on state farms, emancipating them from the forces of backwardness (*al-takhaluf*), tribal bonds, and servile labor.

Despite such lofty ideals of equality and progress, the enduring legacies of Syria’s agrarian reforms, like many other projects from this Cold War era of competing developmental regimes, have been partial, uneven, and often shot through with contradictions. Some of the *maghmurin* were given small tracts of land in compensation by the Syrian state and became employees of state-owned farms. Others never

received compensation. As Syria's state-led economy liberalized and became progressively embedded in global markets, these state-owned farms were eventually privatized and distributed in small parcels to their former employees in the early 2000s. After hundreds of thousands of Syrians sought refuge in Lebanon as Syria's 2011 popular uprising devolved into a devastating war, many of the *maghmurin* and their descendants can now be found scattered across refugee-labor camps in Lebanon, where they have joined the ranks of the lowest paid stratum of Lebanon's agricultural system.

Five decades removed from the heyday of land reform, the Euphrates region is better known today around the world as the former capital of the Islamic State and the heart of the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. Yet, the contested legacies of the Ba'ath Party's experiment with state-led agrarian development retained enduring significance among the *maghmurin's* descendants whom I met in Lebanon, as they struggled to forge a livelihood in the wake of the ongoing Syrian conflict. In this article, I present a series of ethnographic encounters with these children and grandchildren of the *maghmurin* who are now living as refugee farmworkers in Lebanon's Biqa' Valley. Drawing from eighteen months of research immersed in their everyday lives, I ask: In what ways is displacement inherited and reinhabited across generations? How have the struggles, promises, and losses associated with this high modern era of agrarian reform been resurrected under contemporary conditions of wartime displacement, particularly by those who stood to gain, or lose, the most from it?

Throughout this article, I argue that displacement of these refugees was not a singular *event* triggered by war but rather a protracted and ongoing *afterlife* of Syria's land reforms and its post-socialist transition. From the submersion of their villages to the decades of seasonal outmigration that followed it, the *maghmurin's* experiences of displacement long predated their status as refugees. Often shrouded in silence or subtly evident in dark humor, gesture, or poetic turns of phrase, the afterlives of Syria's land reforms were often present in narrative form: in what kinds of displacement became eventful, politically significant, and worthy of narration, and, in turn, what kinds of displacement remained unremarkable, latent, submerged, or relegated to the status of mere economic survival. Thus, by "afterlife" I mean the ways that displacements in the past endure within or are resurrected in the present—materially, emotionally, narratively, and ethically. More specifically, afterlives refer to the traces and ghosts of agrarian dispossession in Syrian refugees' everyday lives, the enduring

harms inflicted by those unresolved pasts in the present, and the ways they are inherited across generations.⁶

Whereas Karl Marx famously argued that “the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,”⁷ I draw from Jacques Derrida’s provocation to take seriously the very ghosts of Marxism themselves in the aftermath of the Cold War, expressed in this case as selective affirmations of the promises and losses associated with state-led agrarian reform in Syrians’ wartime present.⁸ As I show throughout this article, many of the *maghmurin* I met remained deeply attached to narrating eastern Syria’s agrarian history—and their place within it—in terms of the officially state-sanctioned history of Ba’thist development and progress, while their ongoing conditions as displaced refugee farmworkers resided subtly in the margins of these accounts. Vacillating between celebratory slogans and oblique acknowledgements of what they lost before and throughout Syria’s ongoing war, talk of the Euphrates Dam and Syria’s agrarian reforms stood in for a broader attachment to a pre-war life that was, as they so often put it, *maḍmūn* (guaranteed). These farmworkers often juxtaposed this idealized pre-war “guaranteed” life against one that was *mudayaqa* (stifling) in Lebanon, where the cost of living was extraordinarily high, as they struggled to navigate the uncertainties of long-term displacement.

These idealized attachments to the pre-war Syrian state as a guarantor of stability and harbinger of progress, however, sat in tension with the *maghmurin*’s inherited and ongoing material predicaments, including a history of economic insecurity, rural outmigration, and labor exploitation spanning generations. Compensated through waged work on state-owned farms or small tracts of rainfed land, most of the *maghmurin* were unable to derive a secure livelihood from state-led farming alone. Throughout the decades that followed the dam’s construction, they supplemented household incomes through migration abroad and the squeezing of women’s unremunerated labor in subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. These processes reflected Syria’s uneven agrarian development following independence and the progressive liberalization of its state-led economy, especially from the 1990s onward. Emblematic of what agrarian scholars refer to as the “migration-development nexus,”⁹ the *maghmurin*’s intergenerational struggles ultimately reveal an aspect of displacement that is often overlooked in studies of refugees: the decades-long interconnections between agrarian change, the making and unmaking of land reform, and rural displacement across the world.¹⁰

By approaching the *maghmurin's* displacements as an enduring afterlife and inheritance of agrarian development embedded within their everyday lives as refugee farmworkers, this article thus brings a critical agrarian perspective to a diverse body of scholarship on the mediation of memory¹¹ and the shifting afterlives of modern political imaginaries in the wake of crisis, conflict, and revolution.¹² In turn, by drawing attention to eastern Syrians' protracted, cross-generational, latent, and often uneventful forms of agrarian displacement, this article contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to move beyond the conventionally ahistorical figure of the refugee, whose circumstances are typically refracted through the presentist language of humanitarian crisis resolution.¹³ Ultimately, far from existing in relation to a foreseeable *end* as their refugee status would seem to imply, I show how displacement *endured* across decades for these farmworkers as a complex set of attachments to land reform's unfulfilled promises, expectations of material improvement, longings for stability, and ghosts from the past.

IN SEARCH OF A "GUARANTEE": THE INHERITANCE OF DISPLACEMENT

"Wherever you go, you have water all around you" (*wein ma timshī al-māy ḥawālich*), Umm Hassan¹⁴ declared proudly, as she pulled out her phone to scroll through dozens of images of her village in the eastern Syrian province of al-Raqqā. Many were photographs and video montages of the Euphrates Dam that regularly circulated on her TikTok network, some set to regional *dabke* music. Umm Hassan's bright blue eyes twinkled as she spoke, striking against her tanned, weathered skin. Though she was in her fifties, her sweet, girlish smile had a way of making her seem much younger.

It was a sweltering early summer day during the holy fasting month of Ramadan in 2019. I was visiting Umm Hassan's family in their tent in the refugee farmworker camp where she lived, which was run by a *shāwīsh*¹⁵ named Abu Sharif. We were seated on colorful cushions around the perimeter of her family's tent, as an occasional breeze passing below the tent's tarpaulin walls cooled our backs. Having spent the morning weeding a vineyard for a paltry wage while fasting, Umm Hassan and her teenage daughters were utterly exhausted. Yet we were gathered for a joyful occasion: Umm Hassan's younger brother, Abu Ibrahim, was visiting from al-Raqqā for the first time in several years. Unfortunately, as a Syrian national without refugee status, he had already overstayed his maximum three-day visitation rights in Lebanon. He had plans to return to Syria within the

coming week, and he was in touch with several smugglers on WhatsApp about the going rate, which seemed to fluctuate daily. Lacking the usual distractions of sweet tea and cigarettes to busy our hands, and trying to forget our growing thirst from the fast, we passed the time by scrolling through old photographs and telling stories.

Umm Hassan held up her phone for me to see a stock image of Qal'at Ja'bar, a castle perched on a hill overlooking the Euphrates Valley. Though the castle's fortifications extend back to the eleventh century, she explained that it was surrounded by water only a few decades ago when the Euphrates Dam was constructed. It is now an island in an artificial lake named after Hafiz al-Asad.

"That's where our village used to be," Abu Ibrahim exclaimed suddenly.

I looked at him, baffled.

"We are the *maghmurin*," he said with a smile, enunciating the word carefully. "Have you heard of us?"

"The drowned?" I asked.

"The drowned. That's what we're called. Our houses went away [būyūtna rāhu]. . . . Our village is under Lake Asad now." Abu Ibrahim was speaking with an air of pragmatism, even nonchalance, as though he were sharing something as banal as street directions. "If you ask anyone in Qamishli 'Where is the *maghmurin* land?' they will know it and point it out to you."

Their father's village was one of dozens that were submerged by the flooding of the dam in the early 1970s. The Syrian state relocated their family to a village further downstream and compensated them with five hundred *dūnam*¹⁶ (fifty hectares) of rainfed land in Qamishli, the Kurdish-majority region situated along Syria's northeast border with Turkey. This land was then split among five sons, including Abu Ibrahim. In addition to the land they received in compensation, their father, and eventually his sons, became employees on a state-owned farm in the countryside of al-Raqqa.

"Look at the floodgates!" Umm Hassan chimed in, as she turned her phone to reveal a video of water descending forcefully from the dam. This was the site of the flooded village of Tabqa that was renamed Medīnat al-Thawra (Revolution City) when the Euphrates Dam was completed. "See how powerful the water pressure is? It produces electricity," she said, grinning widely.

"But weren't people upset about being displaced?" I asked, somewhat taken aback by her enthusiasm.

“Ilaaaa,” Umm Hassan replied with a smile, a common *shāwi*¹⁷ linguistic interjection that usually means “of course” or “obviously,” but in this context conveyed a certain ontological resignation, meaning something like “well, that’s just how it is.”

“Honestly, the dam brought development [al-taṭawwur],” Abu Ibrahim added. “It brought electricity and irrigation. . . . Before the dam, all our houses were made of mud and straw [tīn u tībīn]. Raḡḡa was nothing before the dam came. Everyone stole in order to live [kānat al-‘alam tasruḡ u ta ‘īsh].”

“And now we have houses made of cement [baṭūn] with multiple floors [ṭawābiḡ],” Umm Hassan continued, scrolling through more pictures. “We cultivate everything where we’re from. Cotton, wheat, vegetables, chickpeas, olives, melon . . . flowers as far as you can see [‘ala mud nazriḡ tshūfi wurūd].”

She lingered for a moment over a slightly blurry picture of her late husband, Abu Hassan, who had suddenly passed away from a stroke earlier that year. It was a photograph of a photograph, likely sent to her by her son who had remained in Syria and cared for the family’s belongings throughout the war. In the picture, Abu Hassan was driving a tractor and wearing his signature *jimdāna* scarf.¹⁸

I remembered how Umm Hassan had told me in a previous conversation, leaning over a hoe as she took a short break from weeding, that Abu Hassan had started migrating seasonally to Lebanon because he was from a landless family and needed the extra income. Though her own family, as descendants of the *maḡhmurin*, had received some land in compensation from the Syrian state, I gathered that Umm Hassan had effectively renounced any claim to this land when she married, following patrilocal custom. And, as I learned later, even those families that had been compensated eventually depended on labor migration in the decades that followed the dam’s construction.

“May God have mercy on him,” she murmured, and moved onto the next photo.

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In my many conversations with Umm Hassan’s family and other descendants of the *maḡhmurin*, time was central to their narratives about rural life in eastern Syria. Umm Hassan’s and Abu Ibrahim’s highly stylized emphasis on the transition from “mud” to “cement” exemplified how official Ba‘thist slogans of progress shaped their ways

of talking about the past, as state-mediated ideals of rural development supplied the metanarrative framework through which they emplotted their family history. This was evident in their references to material transformations in the built environment and the electrification of eastern Syria, but also in Umm Hassan's enthusiasm about cultivating "everything," an implicit reference to the shift from rainfed agriculture to irrigated agriculture that the dam promised to enable. Notably, Umm Hassan's effusiveness about the dam's power was matched by a seemingly dispassionate attitude toward what it cost her family, as she calmly refused to perform pathos or dwell in tragedy when I pressed her in this conversation.

The iconicity and reproducibility of the photographs they shared, culled from their social media networks, stood in stark contrast to the intimate picture-of-a-picture of Abu Hassan. Taken in the 1990s when he started working seasonally in Jordan and Lebanon as a tractor driver to supplement the family's income, the image hung in silent abeyance, somehow painfully inscrutable in the flow of celebratory conversation about the dam. The image of Abu Hassan indexed two things: It revealed a history of outmigration from eastern Syria that subtly contradicted the economic security that land reform was, in principle, meant to guarantee for Syria's poorest agriculturalists. And second, it was a brief, poignant reminder of Umm Hassan's longing to return to Syria. Lately, Umm Hassan had been receiving nightly dream-visitations from Abu Hassan's ghost beseeching her to come back to Syria now that his soul was properly laid to rest. However, as she lamented to me time and again, she and her children were thousands of dollars in debt to Abu Sharif, the *shāwīsh* who served as the moneylender, patron, and labor broker of the camp where they were living, effectively preventing their return.

This moment signified to me how certain forms of displacement, especially in their quotidian forms, reside subtly in the interstices of more spectacular events. Like many other Syrians laboring as farmworkers in Lebanon, Umm Hassan and her husband had been migrating seasonally to Lebanon for years before the 2011 uprising-turned-war and the subsequent occupation of their village by the Islamic State until 2017. Though registered as refugees, they rarely, if ever, used this word to describe themselves. It was during those long Ramadan hours spent with Umm Hassan's family that I came to understand why that might have been the case: For them, displacement was much more than an uprooting by war. For the *maghmurin* and many other eastern Syrians who had migrated to Lebanon for decades, displacement was a layered inheritance of land reform whose afterlives

were deeply embodied in their everyday labor and long-standing dependence on seasonal migration. Unlike the idea of a refugee “crisis” as acute emergency or rupture in their lives, these inherited laboring conditions were generalized, protracted, and familiar to the point of being unremarkable. As a member of Umm Hassan’s camp put it to me with resigned simplicity, “From bed to work, that’s our life” (min al-farshe lil-warshe, ḥayātna haich).

By inheritance, I mean it both in the literal material sense of something bequeathed to an heir from previous generations and also in the more abstract sense that Derrida put forward—that is, a debt that is “never one with itself.”¹⁹ In Derrida’s formulation, inheritance implies that we remain in debt to others, to the struggles that came before us, whether this debt is acknowledged, unconscious, or disavowed. This fractured inheritance from the dam was subtly evident in Umm Hassan’s handling of the different photographs. While Umm Hassan and Abu Ibrahim recited narratives about rural development with almost script-like jubilation as they beheld iconic images of the dam, other histories of displacement—decades of labor migration abroad, everyday struggles with a loss of seasonal mobility, Abu Ibrahim’s dependence on a smuggler, and Umm Hassan’s mounting debts to the *shāwīsh*—remained hauntingly latent in the margins. If the submersion of their villages and their forcible relocation were somehow intelligible as the price paid for “progress,” this state-led metanarrative appeared to reach its limit when confronted with their ongoing material predicament as displaced former labor migrants.

That these conversations took place against the wartime backdrop of Ba‘thism’s twilight, and creeping retrenchment, was also significant. Circulated widely among Umm Hassan’s networks of friends and family as representations of pre-war stability, iconic images of the dam’s achievements demanded commentary precisely because they were in an ongoing state of destruction and withdrawal.²⁰ This particular conversation with Umm Hassan and Abu Ibrahim took place in mid-2019, after the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)²¹ had declared victory over the Islamic State’s caliphate and were consolidating their Autonomous Administration of Rojava in the Euphrates region. At the time, the SDF was receiving extensive, though ultimately short-lived, US military backing. Umm Hassan’s second-eldest son was working as a non-Kurdish Arab auxiliary member of the SDF. Though Umm Hassan did not seem especially committed to the Kurdish political project nor US military involvement in Syria, she was proud that her son was making, according to her estimate, around two

hundred dollars per month. That this wage was paid in US dollars was significant in Syria's sanctioned and cash-strapped economy.

For Umm Hassan and her family, talk about the Euphrates Dam represented a broader attachment to a pre-war life that was, as many Syrians often put it to me, "guaranteed." A "guaranteed" life encompassed social stability and safety, various notions of state welfare, and, for agriculturalists, the possibility of securing basic subsistence. This stood in contrast to a life that was "stifling" in Lebanon, where the cost of living was comparatively high. "Here in Lebanon, work is eating us up," Umm Hassan's son once lamented to me, exhausted from spending his days working intermittently with his mother and sisters in agriculture and his evenings DJing at weddings across Lebanon. "There's nothing and no one to catch you if you fall. If you don't work, you starve."

Umm Hassan and her family were among the countless number of former labor migrants to Lebanon whose seasonal migrations were upended by the war. Lacking the seasonal cross-border mobility on which her agricultural household provisioning had long depended, her family became deeply indebted to Abu Sharif, who was one of the hundreds of *shāwīsh* in Lebanon who lend credit, provide shelter, and broker work opportunities to destitute Syrian refugees through an elaborate agricultural labor-recruiting system. In this context, day-to-day talk about the war in Umm Hassan's camp often revolved around economic matters, such as the devaluation of the Lebanese lira and the Syrian pound, growing remittance obligations, the loss of income from their land in Syria, the costs of rehabilitating their homes, and, most importantly, their proliferating debts as they struggled to afford the cost of living in Lebanon.

Relegated to Lebanon's patchwork of privatized social services in a condition of exile, they constantly lamented the loss of free healthcare, schooling, and subsidized goods they used to enjoy during return migrations. "We wish we could return, but there is no source of livelihood in Syria right now [mā fī ma'isha al-ḥaz]" was a common sentiment repeated to me in different ways on many occasions. This refrain was often accompanied by impassioned, rose-colored references to pre-war economic security and comfort, evidenced by expressions such as "We were all comfortable before the war," "No one was in need except a few" (mā hada muḥtāj ila qalīl), and "Syria was the mother of the poor [umm al-faqīr]."²²

It was against this backdrop of wartime precarity that narratives about Syria's heyday of agrarian developmentalism became especially salient. While the submersion of Umm Hassan's

grandfather's village was a singular, final, and irreversibly tragic event that was legible, nonetheless, through a broader state-mediated narrative about agrarian progress, the conditions of her family's wartime displacement were multiple, structurally invisible to state narratives, and could not be encapsulated by the retelling of one event. The inscrutability of these latter forms of displacement resonates with other post-socialist contexts, where communities long accustomed to the socialist state experienced the end of the Cold War as a total collapse of signification.²³ Yet, Umm Hassan's dilemma was distinct in that it was not only an aftermath of the Cold War, but a proliferation of aftermaths: an uneven state-led agrarian transformation, the post-socialist unmaking of this promise, a crushed popular uprising, and a seemingly endless war. Her different displacements, quotidian and spectacular, large and small, were distinctly agrarian predicaments of rural household reproduction stemming from the uneven implementation of land reform and the progressive liberalization of Syria's economy. Born out of the shifting imperatives of agrarian survival spanning three generations, these afterlives were the material form through which different arcs of life histories could be morally countenanced, remarked upon, silenced, or mourned. Her condition of wartime exile was, in this sense, less of a rupture than a culmination of decades of cyclical economic instability and recursive loss, where the "end" of displacement remained in a state of continuous deferral.

THE SPECTER OF *IQTĀ'YYA*: DEVELOPMENTALIST FUTURES-PAST

A few weeks after this conversation with Abu Ibrahim and Umm Hassan, I met Ahmad, another descendant of the *maghmurin*, during the spring cherry harvest in a small village close to the Lebanese-Syrian border. I had been invited to join the harvest by a Lebanese contract farmer (*damān*)²⁴ named Abu Charbel, who seasonally recruited Syrian farmworkers for harvests throughout Lebanon's May to November high season. Though most of these workers were registered as refugees, some had been migrating seasonally to Lebanon for decades. I had come to know many of these women and men quite well over the past year as Abu Charbel had allowed me to shadow his work team during the autumn grape harvest six months earlier. Ahmad was a newcomer who had joined the cherry harvest that day to supplement his usual day job as a *blāt* (tiler).

Tall and lanky, sprightly but soft-spoken, Ahmad was seated high above me on the crook of a cherry tree, his legs straddling a thick branch on which his bucket of cherries hung before him. Fatima, one of

the other workers who knew me from previous harvest work, was seated on the ground, separating the under-ripe cherries from the juicy ones, as they would command different prices on the local market. Ahmad gently pulled the leaves aside to peer down at me as Fatima introduced my project to him in her own words. “She’s doing a sociological research project [baḥath ijtimā‘ī] about the struggles of Syrian workers,” she shouted up to him. “You know, how our life was before, how it turned out. . . . Right?” A broad smile spread across Ahmad’s face as Fatima spoke; he told me that he was relieved that I was not a humanitarian worker, as he was tired of their, in his words, “empty promises.” I shared more about my research and asked him if he could tell me about his work history and how he ended up in Lebanon, and he obliged. The three of us carried on harvesting as we talked.

Over the course of our conversation, I learned that Ahmad was from the flooded village of Tabqa, which was renamed Revolution City when it became the site of the Euphrates Dam. Ahmad used to work in a state-owned yogurt factory while saving up for bridewealth and land on which to build a house. To supplement his income, he began seasonally migrating to Lebanon in the early 2000s, where he could secure a higher wage for work in construction and agriculture. At the time we met, it had been more than five years since he had returned to Syria because he was *matlūb al-jaysh*—that is, he was avoiding army conscription amid Syria’s ongoing conflict.

“The state gave my grandfather an option,” he told me, when I asked if his grandfather was compensated for the flooding of their village. “He could choose between an urban dwelling [manzal] in Damascus or agricultural land in Qamishli.”

He paused and cracked a smile. “Well, *unfortunately*, my grandfather picked the agricultural land! And now I’m stuck with a few useless *dūnam* of rainfed land all the way in Qamishli!”

Like Umm Hassan and Abu Ibrahim, Ahmad countenanced his family’s displacement throughout our conversation in terms of the dam’s broader achievements for the region as a whole—the spread of electricity, irrigated agriculture, mass schooling, growing literacy, roads and infrastructure, and state employment opportunities—in contrast to a “backward” past marked by poverty and inequality.

“Before the dam, we had *iqṭā’iyya*,” he explained, referring to the Ottoman institution of large, landed estates that predated the spread of capitalism in the region.²⁵ “There were powerful tribal shaykhs with vast lands. Everyone worked for them as sharecroppers.

Including my relatives." Here, Ahmad was rehearsing the Ba'th Party's official rhetoric about eastern Syria's eastern Jazira province as "held back" by *iqṭā'īyya*. Though his discourse implied that this condition of agrarian servility was long-standing, he was likely referring to a relatively new class of sheep and goat herding tribal clan leaders who were enriched by the development of mechanized capitalist agriculture in the Jazira region through the expansion of cotton cultivation in the 1950s, known as "cotton shaykhs."²⁶

"And what changed after the dam?" I asked him.

"We became employees [muwazafīn] of the state, and they killed *iqṭā'īyya*," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Who killed *iqṭā'īyya*?"

"The state killed *iqṭā'īyya* completely," he told me, and then switched to the present tense, as though speaking of an enduring, ongoing condition. "What I mean is that from that point onward, you no longer have any relation to anyone [mā ilik ay 'alāqa bil-shakhs]. You're now under the care of the state [r'āyat al-dawla]."

Ahmad's personification of the state as the force that "killed" *iqṭā'īyya* and superseded personalistic, servile forms of labor conveyed the particular centrality of Syria's eastern Jazira province to the Ba'th party's agrarian developmentalist imaginary, and, in turn, the ways that Jazirans like him were interpellated as subjects of agrarian reform. Yet, until today, it remains Syria's poorest province, with some of the highest rates of illiteracy and outmigration in the region. Indeed, as Ahmad explained his own labor history over the course of our conversation in more depth, this neat division between an exploitative, servile past and a comfortable, equitable present began to break down, as it became clear that the land and employment they received in compensation was insufficient to cover a rising cost of living. It was also evident in Ahmad's darkly humorous reference to the uselessness of the tiny, rainfed tract of land that the state bequeathed to his grandfather, partitioned into smaller bits with each passing generation. Further, for all the talk of overcoming "backwardness," Ahmad, Umm Hassan, Abu Ibrahim, and the other eastern Syrians I met remained deeply attached to their tribal clans²⁷ as a form of collective self-identification.

The Ba‘th Party’s rise to power in 1963 was, above all, a rural rebellion against the inequalities of Syria’s traditional agrarian structure, a culmination of two decades of political tumult following Syria’s independence from the French colonial mandate.²⁸ As part of a broader global historical conjuncture of developmentalist planning and Cold War political alignments from the 1950s to the 1970s, land reform was at the heart of decolonizing states’ plans for food self-sufficiency and emancipation from colonial land tenure systems. The stakes of this struggle were high in Syria; according to one estimate, around the time of independence, the wealthiest 10 percent of Syria’s population claimed 87 percent of land as private property, two-thirds of whom were absentees, and irrigated land was even more unequally distributed.²⁹ Following a coup by a left-wing faction of the Ba‘th Party in 1966, Syria’s most radical phase of land reform led to the formation of expropriation committees and peasant unions.³⁰ It was against this backdrop that large-scale state-led plans for the Euphrates Dam took shape, after the USSR granted Syria a one-hundred-million-dollar loan for the construction of the dam.³¹

Yet in practice, many land-poor and landless Syrians objected that it was wealthy peasants who primarily benefited from land distributions.³² Delayed distributions of credit and inputs left many peasants dependent upon traditional clientage obligations to landlords and merchants or utterly destitute when expropriated landlords suddenly withdrew their pumps from irrigated lands.³³ To maintain incomes on smaller holdings, landlords began investing in advanced irrigation technology, sprinklers, improved seeds, and mechanized harvesters.³⁴ The families of Ahmad, Umm Hassan, and Abu Ibrahim were among the majority of smallholders in the region who remained dependent instead on undercapitalized rainfed crops, eking out a partial income by marketing wheat and barley to the state through price fixing arrangements, while pursuing off-farm employment and labor migration abroad.³⁵

This uneven process of land reform was exacerbated by another coup in 1970 led by Hafiz al-Asad, which consolidated Syria’s evolution away from any meaningful model of socialism. Setting out to broaden the base of the Ba‘th party while consolidating his cadre’s hold on power, Asad’s “corrective movement” curried favor with some segments of Syria’s wealthy classes by reversing some of the land reforms of the late 1960s. This rightward drift applied not only to Syria but to a range of decolonizing states that often fell short of their revolutionary promises.³⁶ Placing Asad’s Syria in the same league as Saddam’s Iraq, Boumeddiene’s Algeria, and Nasser’s Egypt, Samir

Amin argued that these states shared a self-styled commitment to socialism yet in practice were closer to state capitalism, marked by an overestimated faith in the Soviet-aided model of “catching up” through industrialization, in contrast to more autarkic models of independent socialist development.³⁷ Seen in this light, by the time construction of the Euphrates Dam began in earnest, it was already taking place in a socialist *aftermath*—or in Reinhart Koselleck’s words, a “future past.”³⁸

Insofar as it selectively adopted socialist principles of welfare and agrarian development, Hafiz al-Asad’s regime was effectively a regime of “communal corporatism,” wherein sectarian and tribal leaders were strategically incorporated into the state as mediators between their regional constituencies and the central state.³⁹ For the diverse rural inhabitants of eastern Syria, this legacy of state-led communal-corporatism has manifested in the enduring struggles over the dam’s significance. For example, among eastern Syria’s Kurdish population, the resettlement of the *maghmurin* in Qamishli is unequivocally remembered as the “Arab belt” (*al-hizām al-‘araby*), though I never heard Abu Ibrahim or Umm Hassan refer to it this way. In its most radical form, the Arab Belt plan envisaged a forcible demographic reengineering of the region through dispersion of the Kurdish population and their gradual replacement by resettled tribal Arabs along the border with Turkey. For many Kurdish activists, historiographers, and inhabitants of eastern Syria, the Euphrates Dam is, thus, inextricably bound up in this history of institutionalized discrimination and oppression.⁴⁰

The dam was formally inaugurated in July 1973, a culminating achievement of the 12,000 Syrians and 900 Soviet technicians who built it. Aspiring to double the total area of irrigated land in Syria, it was at once a symbol of the promise of agrarian development, the modern capacity of man-made infrastructures to harness nature, and the state’s power to meet the welfare needs of its inhabitants. Young cadres of different political stripes ranging from communist to nationalist flocked from all over Syria to work for the nascent General Administration for the Development of the Euphrates Basin as engineers, technicians, and agronomists. Many were filled with optimism that they were participating in a project that would uplift eastern Syria’s destitute inhabitants, serving as a model of postcolonial food self-sufficiency and rural electrification on the world stage.

Sixty-six villages were submerged by the flooding of the dam, displacing over 60,000 people.⁴¹ A minority of the *maghmurin* were relocated onto fifteen state farms originally conceived as “model communities” for a “new society” free from the “archaisms” of the

past.⁴² Some of the *maḡmurin*—especially those who could prove private property claims to land that had been submerged—were given land in compensation in forty-two villages along the Turkish border as part of the Arab Belt plan. The majority, however, did not leave the area, but attempted to continue sheep-rearing and dry-farming by migrating further inland into the steppe, away from the dam.⁴³ Abu Ibrahim and Umm Hassan’s family were among those who enjoyed compensation, both in the form of rainfed land in Qamishli and through employment on state farms. Abu Ibrahim narrated this transition evocatively to me as a moment when the state gave them “everything.”

“At the beginning, the state gave us everything, everything was on their dime, all the machines,” Abu Ibrahim explained to me, as we took respite from the heat in Umm Hassan’s tent. He was referring to the Syrian state’s monopoly in “strategic crops” (*al-muḡāsil al-istrātijīya*), including wheat, barley, dry fodder, cotton, sugar beets, and tobacco. Cultivators of these crops sold their harvest to the state at fixed prices, and the state took responsibility for marketing them locally.

“They gave us free housing. The whole family lived on the state farm. They subsidized the harvest. Life was good [zain]!” Abu Ibrahim continued. After reciting all the names of the state-owned farms that he could recall from memory, he pivoted to the present tense.

“And then all the land from the western side of Raqqa city to the dam was distributed,” he declared. “The state gave the land to the farmers. Everyone who worked in the state-owned farms received thirty *dūnam* (three hectares). We cultivate everything now: watermelons, flowers, wheat, cotton, vegetables for our *mouneh*. But now the state doesn’t give us inputs. It’s all on the farmer’s dime [‘a ḡisāb al-muzāra’].”

What he was referring to as “distribution” was actually privatization of state-owned land, which took place in the early 2000s during Syria’s liberalization period when the state farms were dismantled and redistributed in parcels to their former employees under the banner of “land to the tiller.”⁴⁴ Abu Ibrahim summed up the process pithily: “We were employees [muwazafin], and then we became owners [malkīn].”

I asked if he felt that these distributions were ultimately beneficial to the farmers.

“Yes, of course [Ilā!]. Our production used to have a fixed price set by the state. Like I told you, there were state-owned factories, like

the cotton factory of Raqqa and the sugar beet factory. Now, the whole harvest belongs to us. We're free to sell as we like."

He paused for a moment.

"And then, what happened?" he asked me rhetorically. "Da'esh came and stole it all. And now the Kurds are in power. Now all the traders are ruling over us [yījū tujjar yaḥkumū bīna]."

This short exchange, in its own way, summed up the tumultuous fifty-year arc of Syria's uneven post-socialist transition, which arguably began with Hafiz al-Asad's "corrective movement" in the 1970s, shifted toward austerity under 1980s sanctions, deepened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, formalized under Bashar al-Asad's leadership after 2000, and took unexpected turns in the long and painful aftermath of Syria's 2011 revolution-turned-war. Tellingly, Abu Ibrahim never explicitly described the breakup of state-owned farms in 2000 as privatization but rather adopted the euphemistic language of "distribution" (*tawzī*) found within official state proclamations as it pursued liberalizing reforms of "opening" (*infitaḥ*). From his perspective, it seemed, the state was merely "distributing" to cultivators their rightful share of the state's wealth. We see that tension at work in the way that Abu Ibrahim was celebratory about life on state farms and, at the same time, seemed equally supportive of their dismantling.

Abu Ibrahim's discourse of distribution left intact an idealized vision of the state as a benevolent provider, which sat in tension with a basic material reality: it was precisely throughout this long, uneven post-socialist transition that many rural Syrians, including members of his own family, were compelled to seasonally migrate to Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gulf to supplement their incomes. Yet I rarely heard anyone claim that the Syrian state bore responsibility for these slow, unspectacular processes of displacement. Resurrected like a "magical" state as though liberalization never happened,⁴⁵ the heyday of Syria's developmentalist promises remained vividly present in their narratives, eliding four decades of rural outmigration that intervened between the construction of the dam and the start of the 2011 uprising.

It was also significant that Abu Ibrahim described the privatization of the farms as a shift from his position as an "employee" to an "owner." It reflected the structural reality of the state farms: They were not truly collectivized. Rather, they were akin to state-owned company towns populated by employees receiving a wage to cultivate crops at fixed prices set by the state. Unlike the Soviet model, the Syrian state did not extract surplus from peasants but confined its role to

providing price supports. State-farm workers like Abu Ibrahim thus viewed the farms not as a site of revolutionary food self-sufficiency or even collective decision-making but rather more pragmatically as a steady wage in a region where access to hard cash was becoming increasingly necessary for household reproduction. This was symptomatic of a more general dynamic: while Ba'athist ideology glorified the peasant-smallholder as the base of development and progress, the figure of the "peasant" (*fellāh*) was a fraught self-designation for many eastern Syrians, even at the zenith of the Euphrates project. Reminiscent of Abu Ibrahim's portrayal of the state as a benevolent provider, Euphrates villagers referred to themselves as *fellāhīn* only to assert what the "powerful state" owed to a "powerless peasantry," such as inputs, irrigation, and land.⁴⁶ As the *maghmurin* grappled with the weight of past and ongoing displacements in wartime, such enduring attachments to an ethics of distribution were ultimately a means of contending with the stalled, unfulfilled, or only partially realized promises of agrarian development.

Coming to fruition under Hafiz al-Asad's corrective movement, which sought to build alliances in the private sector, state farms immediately fell short of any socialist ideal. Only about 10 percent of the employees of the farms were descendants of the *maghmurin*, while the rest were from nearby villages.⁴⁷ The farms struggled to yield returns on state investments even ten years after their implementation, as Syria's agricultural sector chronically lacked sufficient capital to remain productive or finance development. Syrian agricultural production remained highly dependent on foreign aid and loans from the Soviet Union, which contradicted the party's vision of food self-sufficiency.⁴⁸ Of course, there were also macrostructural reasons for Syria's ailing agricultural sector. An acute economic crisis began when the US government deemed Syria a "State Sponsor of Terrorism" in 1979 and placed the country under harsh sanctions. As Soviet aid began to dwindle and Syria drained its resources fighting a proxy war with Israel in war-ridden Lebanon, the crisis reached its peak in the period from 1979 to 1982, followed by a series of austerity measures.⁴⁹

It was against this backdrop of Cold War twilight that the agrarian developmentalist vision for eastern Syria began to unravel rapidly. This constellation of factors reconfigured Syria's "migration-development nexus,"⁵⁰ as many Syrian agriculturalists, including members of families employed on state-owned farms, began to migrate abroad in search of higher wages in that period. Syria's rural inhabitants were becoming dependent on cash remittances in order to survive rising costs of living. Young men like Ahmad were especially

motivated to migrate seasonally in order to get married, as flows of remittances and Gulf capital were driving up the rising cost of bridewealth.⁵¹ In short, many rural Syrians were facing a massive crisis of household reproduction throughout Syria's long post-socialist transition, which was especially acute in eastern Syria. According to one estimate, about half of all workers from the state farms left between 1976 and 1986.⁵²

These circuits of predominantly male seasonal labor migration were also predicated on the squeezing of women's labor in subsistence farming and animal husbandry. Umm Hassan's mother and sisters were not considered formal employees of the state-owned farms like their father and brothers. This stemmed from the division of labor on the state farms, where the male head of household received a wage, some young men migrated to cities or abroad, and women and children supplied their unremunerated labor during peak harvest seasons. In the case of Umm Hassan and Abu Ibrahim's family, they supplemented the family income by selling raw wool and dairy products to a door-to-door milkman. In some families, teenage girls and adult women helped support their families with seasonal cotton picking in nearby villages, which in eastern Syria is considered "women's work" paid at a piece-rate. When pooled together, a family's earnings could sometimes be significant enough to purchase land or make home renovations, especially when at least one of the young men of the household was sending remittances from abroad. The fact that most state farm workers maintained a side job in steppe agriculture and dairy production had the unintended effect of strengthening tribal clan affiliations – despite the promise that land reform would overcome them.

When Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war ended in 1990, labor outmigration from Syria increased considerably, as new jobs related to the reconstruction economy emerged in day labor, harvesting, construction, machine operation, services, metalwork, and garment-making.⁵³ This migration-development nexus consolidated after Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father in 2000, ushering in Syria's formal neoliberal transition, which included opening a stock market and forming private banks in Syria for the first time, slashing state-subsidized goods, and subjecting previously state-mandated food prices to a competitive market dominated by regional traders and agro-processing capital.⁵⁴

It was in this period of accelerated liberalization that Syria's state-owned farms were privatized and distributed in parcels to their former employees, between 2000 and 2002.⁵⁵ From the outset, the parcellation of land was fraught with confusion and ambiguity

regarding *who* was entitled to land and on what terms.⁵⁶ There were those, for example, who claimed rights to restitution based on kinship and others who claimed their entitlement through labor. Thus, when Abu Ibrahim remained attached to the idea of the state as a benevolent “distributor” of goods, he was not merely rehearsing Ba‘thist rhetoric but rather coming to terms with a changing field of values in which both persons and land had been positioned. The fact that so many state farm employees were dependent on off-farm labor migration added to the confusion, leading to intense struggles regarding the status and rights of former employees who had left the state farms or who happened to have been away for seasonal work at the time that the decree to disband the farms was announced.⁵⁷ Here, too, tribal bonds mediated Syria’s agrarian transition despite land reform’s promise to eliminate them; by the late 2000s, many state farm employees-turned-owners had reverted to tribal alliances in order to gain access to irrigation, as many contiguous plots were distributed to members of the same clan who collectively managed hydraulic works.⁵⁸

According to some estimates, between 2002 and 2008, Syria lost 40 percent of its agricultural workforce.⁵⁹ The devastating effects of these economic reforms on Syria’s poorest populations were exacerbated by a series of recurrent droughts from 2007 to 2012, leading to mass migrations of destitute rural populations in search of waged work to Syria’s cities and further west to Lebanon.⁶⁰ Umm Hassan, Abu Hassan, and their children were part of this wave of migration of displaced sharecroppers, agropastoralists, and subsistence farmers from eastern Syria. In an age where the specter of “climate refugees” tops headlines, there has been a temptation to make overblown claims linking anthropogenic climate change, mass migrations, and the origins of the Syrian war.⁶¹ Instead, viewed through afterlives of the Euphrates Dam, we see the untenability of isolating a single factor in the emergence of the Syrian revolution, its tragic devolution into war, and the complex ways that Syrian refugees grapple with their displacement until today. Ultimately, these migrations were intimately tied to the role of Syrian state-led agrarian policies and subsequent liberalization reforms in depleting Syria’s groundwater reserves and exacerbating rural inequalities. From an agrarian perspective, these droughts were, in short, “a neoliberal disaster” for eastern Syrians.⁶²

CONCLUSION: THE DROWNED AND THE DISPLACED
Throughout 2019, members of Abu Sharif’s camp began to discuss returning to Syria amid a growing right-wing backlash in Lebanon calling for Syrians’ repatriation. Emboldened by the xenophobic

rhetoric of several Lebanese parliament members, this backlash took the form of police raids and closures of Syrian-run businesses, increasing restrictions on Syrians' movement throughout the country, and nightly curfews.⁶³ In addition, for many eastern Syrians like Umm Hassan, the Kurdish-led defeat of the Islamic State's caliphate was finally drawing them back to Syria, especially as US military backing at the time was infusing dollars and some job opportunities into their cash-starved villages, however controversial and short-lived this support proved to be. Some members of the camp were paying smugglers to take them across the border for month-long visits to their villages, where they were beginning to make renovations and repairs to their houses or obtaining long-deferred medical treatments that were still more affordable in Syria.

As noted earlier, Umm Hassan also had deeply personal motivations to return to Syria: the ghost of her late husband, Abu Hassan, was begging her to come home. She was, however, deeply in debt to Abu Sharif, the *shāwīsh* of the camp where she lived. I first heard Umm Hassan express her intention to return to Syria, despite these mounting debts, on the last day of Ramadan in 2019, when an elderly friend from a neighboring camp, Abu Ayman, visited Umm Hassan for 'Eid al-fitr, the holy feasting day. Umm Hassan and Abu Ayman spent hours lamenting the rising cost of food in Lebanon and what they perceived to be Abu Sharif's increasing stinginess with lending and gifts.

"I swear to God, this life makes my heart swell" (Wallah warmat qalbī hal-ḥayāt), Umm Hassan exclaimed, clutching her chest. "Ever since Abu Hassan died, may his soul rest in peace, I feel my heart will burst. I swear, sometimes I go to work and I feel as if I want to explode. . . . Abu Hassan came to me again last night. He was wearing his grey *jalabiya* robe and his *jimdāna* scarf."

"What did he tell you, *ḥajjeh*?" Abu Ayman asked her.

"He told me it's time to go home. I swear, if he were still alive, he would curse Abu Sharif. God does not bless the arrogant. I cried from my whole heart when I saw Abu Hassan [bakayt min kul qalby]. May God have mercy on his soul."

The conversation digressed in many directions for the next hour, from camp gossip to complaints about Abu Sharif, to talk about the cost of fuel and the devaluation of the Syrian pound.

"The *shāwīsh* wants to plunder the world [yanhab al-dunyā]," Abu Ayman declared, as if preparing to give a speech or recite an epic. "People talk, people fight, people loot others, the workers toil for

nothing [yshtaghal al-'omal bi-balāsh]. There is no fear of God, no fear! See what the world has become? . . . Umm Hassan, are you with me?"

Umm Hassan looked up and nodded, half listening, while she scrolled through her phone.

Abu Ayman continued. "In the beginning, we had *iqṭā'īyya*, right? Before the Ba'th Party. I remember in the 1950s and 1960s, in the time of *iqṭā'īyya*, the shaykh had a guy [zalme] who was untouchable [mā ḥādā yaqdar yaḥakī]."

By "guy," he seemed to be referring to a strongman or mediator of sorts. He repeated "he was untouchable," literally meaning in Arabic "no one could talk to him." He then switched to the present tense, which gave me the sense that he was describing a more universal, or continuous, condition that did not necessarily pertain to a particular person.

"The guy watches over the peasant [al-fellaḥ]. The peasant stays all year working until the end of the season. And then the peasant turns up broke [ytla' maksūr]. For all the toil of the peasant and his family, what does the shaykh give? The peasant gets 20 percent, and the other 80 percent goes to the shaykh. And then the party [al-ḥizb] came in the 1970s and the peasant starts getting 40 percent!"

Abu Ayman had a penchant for allegorical digressions and flowery non-sequiturs, so Umm Hassan was, by that point, barely paying attention. She gave a perfunctory response and then resumed her earlier litany of complaints about the cost of chicken.

But the allegory stuck with me. The "40 percent" seemed a powerful metaphor for the sense of longing—and disappointment—that the Euphrates Dam and the broader agrarian developmentalist promises of the Ba'th Party evoked. That Abu Ayman subtly likened the *shāwīsh* to a pre-Ba'th era of tribal strongmen who oversaw laborers on behalf of wealthy landed shaykhs spoke to manifold temporal afterlives of agrarian developmentalism, where the presence of seemingly dead pasts continuously haunted the living. As many Syrians made a point of emphasizing to me: Lebanon never underwent land reform and thus, large *iqṭā'ī* estates were never broken up. Servile forms of agriculture were alive and well in Lebanon, mobilized in new ways through the *shāwīsh* labor recruitment system. That Umm Hassan and her fellow camp residents now found themselves working for poverty wages as an on-call labor force on an *iqṭā'ī* estate powerfully evoked a quotation from the Syrian peasant union lamenting that the *iqṭā'īyyīn* "who left by the door" were able to "return by the window."⁶⁴

As a dream-apparition, Abu Hassan's soul was also a direct participant in an ongoing process of reckoning with displacement and its layered temporal significance. The souls of the departed have a central place in peasant history and literature, often communicating that which is unspeakable, overabundant, unresolved, or enduring about a past filled with extraordinary loss.⁶⁵ The cruel paradox, in this case, was that it was the *shāwīsh* himself who ensured that Abu Hassan's body made it across the border to be properly buried in his village, a basic dignity afforded only to those few Syrian refugees with money or connections. Abu Sharif happened to be well-connected to a Lebanese border guard through his years of cross-border experience in pickup truck driving and labor recruitment.

As I listened to Umm Hassan recount her dream, I was reminded of the service that Abu Sharif had arranged in Abu Hassan's memory for the camp residents earlier that year. As I proceeded to Umm Hassan's tent to offer my condolences that day, Abu Sharif ushered me into his shaykhly guesthouse to sit among his honored guests. Two dozen men were seated cross-legged on plush red cushions around the perimeter of the tent, except for one person: the Lebanese border guard. He sat on a plastic chair elevated above the rest of the group, as Abu Sharif served *qahwa murra*, a traditional style of bitter coffee left unsweetened on such somber occasions. Presiding over the room as Abu Sharif's most esteemed guest, the guard had ensured that Abu Hassan's body was transported across the border and properly laid to rest despite the ongoing war. At that time, I had not yet learned about the *maghmurin* nor the full extent of Umm Hassan's family history. Looking back upon this tragic day in retrospect, I am haunted by the words of those who refused to be relocated when the Euphrates Dam was first constructed: "Buyūtnā qubūrnā." Our homes are our graves.

We are brought back to Ojeili's evocative description of the *maghmūrīn* with which I opened this article, as mere "screws" and "scraps" within the state machinery. Though it was a work of fiction, it captured the tragedy of the moment in which it was written, where displacement was the price to pay for state-led development. In pained prose, Ojeili opens the novel with a dedication to the *maghmurin*, "Those who, upon their submerged heads in the Euphrates Dam, glories were built and fortunes flourished."⁶⁶ Though the novel was written in a pastoral genre, Ojeili was far from nostalgic; even before the dam came, the peasants of the Euphrates Valley were already being sacrificed to a slow death by "the sun, the well, thirst, and the desert."⁶⁷

With its focus on peasant rootedness and belonging to the land, Ojeili's novel, *Al-Maghmūrūn*, was nevertheless criticized by some of his leftist contemporaries in the Syrian literary world as hackneyed and retrograde.⁶⁸ They lamented its emphasis on individualism rather than class consciousness, and that it valorized the small-scale ties of traditional village belonging rather than class struggle.⁶⁹ Ultimately, in their words, he proffered a vision "against progress" (*ḍud al-taqaddum*)⁷⁰ conjuring, according to Muhammad Kamil Al-Khatib, "a narrative world in the *iqṭā'ī* camp."⁷¹ These allegations, toeing in various ways the official Ba'ṯist line of developmentalist promise and a Marxian understanding of class antagonisms, speak to the stakes of this vision for the transformation of eastern Syria at that time.

Of course, the issues that plagued the making and unmaking of Syria's experiment with state farms, and broader ideals of agrarian developmentalism they represented, were not confined to Syria alone. While the specter of Marxism haunted zealous neoconservative pronouncements about the triumph of liberal democracy and the supposed "end of history"⁷² in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the ghosts of Soviet collectivization's internal critics seemed to haunt the left. For example, in his evocative essay on the "treble death" of Soviet agronomist Alexander Chayanov, Teodor Shanin recounts the uneven legacies of Stalin's collectivization in ways that echo eastern Syria's enduring predicaments: ecological decline, mass outmigration from rural villages, stagnating agricultural production, and authoritarian retrenchment.⁷³ So, too, do we see how developmentalism's stalled promises were refracted through the exigencies of the present in Omar Amiralay's iconic film, *A Flood in Baath Country*, and its powerful remediation throughout the war in Syria.

While there is no doubt that land reform, as part of the great tide of postcolonial liberation, was marked by real gains across the global South, these advances were often uneven, unequal, and incomplete. Decades removed from this heyday of progressivist state-led development, we are now contending with the complex aftermaths of these projects across the world: the post-Cold War unmaking of statist redistributive land tenure, a global wave of neoliberal land titling projects, and new frontiers of accumulation through speculation in land rents.⁷⁴ One of the most urgent manifestations of these contradictory legacies of uneven development is mass migration; between 1970 and 2012, the number of international migrants worldwide more than doubled.⁷⁵ Though often obfuscated by the economistic language of "choice," where "voluntary" economic

migrants and “involuntary” refugees are differentiated by virtue of the presence or absence of political coercion, the predicaments of the *maghmurin* vividly exemplify how these displacements structurally intersect.

Ultimately, as I have emphasized throughout this article, displacement for these refugee farmworkers was not a singular *event* of traumatic wartime uprooting but rather an ongoing *afterlife* of state-led agrarian developmentalism and its uneven effects. Ba‘thist developmentalist ideals supplied frameworks of intelligibility that made certain forms of displacement narratable or eventful, where others receded into the background of peoples’ daily acts of survival. In the lives of those like Umm Hassan, a history of dispossession, ethnonational division, and literal submersion at the hands of Ba‘thism ran up against enduring attachments to the dam as an icon of the pre-war Syria that was lost. Seemingly banished to the past by agrarian reform, the specter of agrarian serfdom continually haunted Syrian farmworkers in exile, in the figure of the *shāwīsh* and through their daily labor in the Biqa‘ Valley’s vast agricultural plains.

Alongside these specters stood another: that of the Syrian developmentalist state that may have been—or perhaps never was—but for which they nevertheless seemed to yearn as they prepared for an uncertain return. With the foreseeable end of displacement locked in a continuous deferral due to their mounting debts in Lebanon, these developmentalist hopes and losses were resurrected precisely at a moment when the *pastness* of this particular vision of agrarian futurity seemed most apparent. As the tragic centrality of electricity, food, jobs, and water to Syria’s ongoing war attests, the specters of unfulfilled socialist futures—and the pasts that refuse to be submerged—seemed to weigh heaviest upon the displaced.

NOTES

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² Abdul-Salam Ojeili, *Al-Maghmūrūn* (Beirut: Dar al-Sharq, 1979), 193. All translations in this article are my own.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Under the banner of "Unity, Freedom, Socialism" and "One Arab Nation with an Immortal Mission," the Ba'ath (Resurrection) Party was founded in 1942 by two urban middle-class intellectuals, Michel 'Aflaq, an Orthodox Christian, and Salah al-Din Bitar, a Sunni Muslim, as part of a broader wave of Arab nationalism spreading across the Levant throughout the interwar period. In the 1950s, the Ba'ath Party amalgamated with the Arab Socialist Party of Akram Hourani, which substantially expanded the Ba'ath movement's peasant base. John F. Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 5 (December 1, 1991): 1396–407; Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵ Located at the foot of the Anatolian Plateau between the Tigris and the Euphrates, the fertile Jazira region encompasses modern-day eastern Syria, western Iraq, and southeast Turkey.

⁶ Here, I am drawing inspiration from Watson and Wilder's framing of the "postcolonial contemporary" as "a substantive historical claim about such aftermaths" wherein "the 'after' is overdetermined by the before." Jini Kim Watson and Gary Wilder, eds., *The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 3.

⁷ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852; New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁹ Drawn from the critical political economy tradition of migration studies, the concept of the “migration-development nexus” shows how migration is not only about the pursuit of the “good life” or an exit from poverty but also deeply bound up in processes of capital accumulation and agrarian change. Henry Veltmeyer and Raul Delgado Wise, *Agrarian Change, Migration and Development* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2016).

¹⁰ There is a vast range of literature on the controversies, inherited legacies, and struggles shaping dam-building projects across the world, including mass displacement. See, by way of example, Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Katrin Bromber, Jeanne Féaux de la Croix, and Katharina Lange, “The Temporal Politics of Big Dams in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia: By Way of an Introduction,” *Water History* 6, no. 4 (2014): 289–96; Hussein M. Fahim, *Dams, People and Development: The Aswan High Dam Case* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981); Colin Hoag, *The Fluvial Imagination: On Lesotho’s Water-Export Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and Its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013); Arundhati Roy, *The Greater Common Good* (Bombay: India Book Distributor, 1999); James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Dzodzi A. Tsikata, *Living in the Shadow of the Large Dams: Long Term Responses of Downstream and Lakeside Communities of Ghana’s Volta River Project* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006); Katherine M. Weist, “Development Refugees: Africans, Indians and the Big Dams,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 8, no. 2 (1995): 163–84.

¹¹ The interdisciplinary field of memory studies shows that popular narratives about the past are not simply a transparent window onto “what really happened” but rather a dynamic social relation between past and present that is continuously mediated and transformed by the shifting material circumstances in which memories take form. Moving beyond the binary between “official” and “subaltern” narratives, this research draws attention to the performative nature of memory, including its silences and embodied forms. This approach helps us understand how Syrian farmworkers’ narratives moved back and forth between the official state metanarratives and other registers of telling. See Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2011); Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); Clara Han, *Seeing Like a Child: Inheriting the Korean War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020); Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Charles Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History: Islam, Romanticism, and Andalusia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Mandana Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); C. Nadia Seremetakis, *Sensing the Everyday: Dialogues from Austerity Greece* (London: Routledge, 2019); Mary Margaret Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope: Narrative Experience in Colonial and Postcolonial Karoland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). For an exemplary examination of the contested politics of memory in eastern Syria, see Katharina Lange, "Submerged Memories: Memory, History, and Displacement around Lake Asad, Syria," *Memory Studies* 12, no. 3 (2019): 322–35.

¹² Fadi A. Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 453–74; William Cunningham Bissell, "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia," *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2005): 215–48; Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent Into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Harry Harootunian, *The Unspoken as Heritage: The Armenian Genocide and Its Unaccounted Lives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Stephanie V. Love, "The Poetics of Grievance: Taxi Drivers, Vernacular Placenames, and the Paradoxes of Post-Coloniality in Oran, Algeria," *City & Society* 33, no. 3 (2021): 422–43; Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Deborah A. Thomas, *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Mareike Winchell, *After Servitude: Elusive Property and the Ethics of Kinship in Bolivia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

¹³ Anthropologists have long argued that a narrowly humanitarian framing of displacement overlooks the complex structural and historical conditions that compel people to migrate, artificially separating the "deserving" and

“undeserving” and the “free” from the “forced.” Some of this literature draws attention to the protracted, enduring, and cross-generational nature of displacement, in contrast to the bounded temporality of humanitarian emergencies. See Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Heath Cabot, “The Business of Anthropology and the European Refugee Regime,” *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 3 (2019): 261–75; Samuel Dinger, “The Sakan Shababiyy, or the World Improvised: Displacement and Masculine Domestic Space in Lebanon,” *Ethnography* (2022): 1–22; Foroogh Farhang, “The Poor and the Displaced in the Same Boat,” *Anthropology News*, website, 21 September 2022, <https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/the-poor-and-the-displaced-in-the-same-boat/>; Didier Fassin, “Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France,” *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2005): 362–87; Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *Refuge in a Moving World: Tracing Refugee and Migrant Journeys Across Disciplines* (London: UCL Press, 2020); Seth M. Holmes and Heide Castañeda, “Representing the ‘European Refugee Crisis’ in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death,” *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 1 (2016): 12–24; Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Georgina Ramsay, *Impossible Refuge: The Control and Constraint of Refugee Futures* (London: Routledge, 2017); Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁴ All names of interviewees mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

¹⁵ The term *shāwīsh* is drawn from the Turkish word *çavuş*, which refers to low-ranking military personnel vested with the responsibility to enforce discipline. In Lebanon, it is usually associated with individuals who oversee camps that are housing refugee farmworkers. For more information about the work of *shāwīsh*, which varies widely across Lebanon, see Jacob Cassani, “Bread and Salt: Labour, Reputation, and Trust between Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Hashish Farmers in the Northern Bīqā’a” (Program on Governance and Local Development Working Paper 43, University College London, 2021), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3848538>; China Sajadian, “The Agrarian Question in Lebanon Today: A View from a Camp in the Bekaa Valley,” *Jadaliyya*, 2020, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41585>; Sajadian, “Debts of Displacement: Syrian Refugee Farmworkers at the Lebanese-Syrian Border” (PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2022).

¹⁶ A *dūnam* was the standard measure of land area in the Levant region during the Ottoman Empire, originally considered the equivalent of one day’s ploughing. At that time, this amounted to approximately 1,000 square

yards, but in the nineteenth century the *dūnam* was standardized to the hectare. Today, it is the equivalent of one-tenth of a hectare.

¹⁷ The term *shāwi* (pl. *shawāyā*) refers to pastoralists who herd sheep as their main source of livelihood, usually of a lower status than camel herders, residing in northeastern Syria and western Iraq. Though it has pejorative connotations among Syrian urbanites, the word *shāwi* was a common self-designation among my friends from eastern Syria, who referred to their dialect of Arabic *shāwiya*. They explained the word's origin as a reference to the verb *shāwi* (to grill); a mark of their reputation for generosity as "those who grill meat." See Haian Dukhan, "From Shame to Pride: The Politics of Shawi Identity in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 15, no. 4 (2022): 377–84; Katharina Lange, "'Shawaya': Economic Mélange, Pure Origins? Outsiders' and Insiders' Accounts of Tribal Identity in Northern Syria," in *Shifts and Drifts in Nomad-Sedentary Relations*, eds. Stefan Leder and Bernhard Streck (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2005), 99–122; Lange, "'Bedouin' and 'Shawaya': The Performative Constitution of Tribal Identities in Syria during the French Mandate and Today," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1–2 (2015): 200–35.

¹⁸ Drawn from the Kurdish word *cemedanî*, *jimdāna* is the eastern Syrian Arabic dialect term for a black-and-white or red-and-white checkered scarf, most well-known by the Palestinian term *keffiyeh*.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 18.

²⁰ As anthropological research on visibility and memory shows, images are not simply windows onto the past but sensuous "events" that mediate how certain histories are activated, countenanced, reworked, or disavowed in the present. See Karen Strassler, *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). Further, as Lange argues in her illuminating research with eastern Syrians, repertoires of memory are deeply gendered, where women's ways of speaking about the past are often evoked in and through processes of labor and the handling of intimate objects, such as heirlooms and photographs. Lange, "Submerged Memories," 329.

²¹ Throughout the Syrian war, the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) have served as the primary fighting force against ISIS while establishing an autonomous administration in northeastern Syria. They have evolved over time into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic, multi-religious force.

²² As Lisa Wedeen suggests in her pathbreaking account of authoritarian retrenchment in wartime Syria, many Syrian citizens never fully abandoned a sense of entitlement and moral attachment to the welfare state, even as the state progressively retreated from this role long before the war began. Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*, 25.

²³ Sergej Aleksandrovič Ushakin, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁴ While the work of *damān* extends back to the Ottoman era, its contemporary form is akin to contract farming, a type of fixed-term agricultural agreement between cultivators and agricultural firms that has expanded significantly since the 1970s as a result of globalizing markets. For an extended discussion of how this work was reconfigured by Syrian farmworkers' displacement throughout the war in Syria, see Sajadian, "Debts of Displacement."

²⁵ The question of *iqṭā'* was central to debates over land reform in Syria. *Iqṭā'* refers to large, landed estates that consolidated in the Ottoman era, though it is often imprecisely translated to feudalism, given the presence of servile labor and the historical tendency for some of these properties to be undercapitalized. Sarkis Fernández aptly defines *iqṭā'* as "a kind of capitalist serfdom." Diana Sarkis Fernández, "'Amnarja' La Wara (We Are Going Backwards)': Economic Reform and the Politics of Labour in Agrarian Syria," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 49, no. 2 (2022): 363–80.

²⁶ For more on the role of cotton shaykhs in mediating the expansion of capitalist agriculture in the Euphrates region, see Abdullah Ḥannā, *al-Qaḍīyah al-zirā'īyah wa-al-ḥarakāt al-fallāhiyah fī Sūriyā wa-Lubnān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 1975), 32; Sulayman Khalaf, "Family, Village, and the Political Party: Articulation of Social Change in Contemporary Rural Syria" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981); Annika Rabo, "Change on the Euphrates: Villagers, Townsmen and Employees in Northeast Syria" (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 1986).

²⁷ The term *'ashīra* (pl: *'asha'ir*) refers to a segmentary lineage within a tribal confederation. The *shāwīsh* and the residents of Umm Hassan's camp hailed from a wide variety of tribal clans in the Jazira plateau of eastern Syria. See Haian Dukhan, "The End of the Dialectical Symbiosis of National and Tribal Identities in Syria," *Nations and Nationalism* 28, no. 1 (2022): 141–53.

²⁸ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989).

²⁹ Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy*, 87.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 91.

³¹ Hans Meliczek, "Land Settlement in the Euphrates Basin of Syria," *Ekistics* 53, no. 318/319 (1986): 202–12.

³² Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*.

³³ Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy*, 94.

³⁴ Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Ba'th's Agrarian Revolution (1963–2000)," in *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch, Atieh El-Hindi, Munzer Khaddam, and Myriam Ababsa (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011), 9.

³⁵ Noriko Sato, "'We Are No More in Bondage, We Are Peasants': Memory and the Construction of Identity in the Syrian Jazirah," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 7, no. 2 (1997): 195–217.

³⁶ Eqbal Ahmad, "Post-Colonial Systems of Power," *Arab Studies Quarterly* (1980): 350–63.

³⁷ Samir Amin, *Re-Reading the Postwar Period* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 112.

³⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

³⁹ Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 93.

⁴⁰ For more on the Arab belt, see Seda Altuğ, "Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915–1939)" (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2011), 90–94.

⁴¹ Myriam Ababsa, "Privatisation in Syria: State Farms and the Case of the Euphrates Project" (paper presented at the Fifth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence-Montecatini Terme, Italy, March 2004), <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00339057>.

⁴² Roman-Oliver Foy, "Enjeux sociospatiaux de la grande hydraulique: Cas de l'Établissement Al-Assad dans le projet de l'Euphrate (Maskané - Syrie)," *Journal des anthropologues* 132–33 (8 July 2013): 145–67.

⁴³ Rabo, "Change on the Euphrates," 34. As Lange states, as late as 2004, over half of the people displaced by the flooding of Lake Asad had not received compensation. Lange, "Submerged Memories," 326.

⁴⁴ Ababsa, "Privatisation in Syria."

⁴⁵ Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁴⁶ Rabo, "Change on the Euphrates," 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

⁴⁸ Khalaf, "Family, Village, and the Political Party," 178.

⁴⁹ Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy*, 171.

⁵⁰ Veltmeyer and Wise, *Agrarian Change*.

⁵¹ Katharina Lange, "Economic Change and Income-Generating Practices of Rural Youth in Northern Syria," in *Changing Values Among Youth: Examples*

from *the Arab World and Germany*, eds. Elke Kaschl and Sonja Hegasy (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2007), 65–71.

⁵² Ababsa, “Privatisation in Syria.”

⁵³ John Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 157.

⁵⁴ Sarkis Fernández, “‘‘Amnarja ‘ la wara.’’’

⁵⁵ Ababsa, “Privatisation in Syria.”

⁵⁶ As Katherine Verdery observed in property restitution in Romania, unmaking state-led redistributive property regimes generated struggles over different forms of *value*. Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁵⁷ Ababsa, “Privatisation in Syria,” 11–12. The Syrian state commission adopted a strict set of measures that, in practice, appeared quite arbitrary. As Ababsa states,

Any agricultural engineer present at his working station at the time of the publication of the decision, who could have left it for various reasons, but who again occupied it at the date of April 3, 2003, had the right to obtain land plots. On the other hand, any temporary worker having had a contract for the agricultural seasons of 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 had the right to obtain lands, but not those employed in the previous seasons. Any farm labourer having worked at least 180 days during 2000 could claim lands, but not those having worked the previous years (11–12).

⁵⁸ Foy, “Enjeux sociospatiaux de la grande hydraulique,” 158; Myriam Ababsa, “La recomposition des allégeances tribales dans le Moyen-Euphrate syrien (1958–2007),” *Etudes rurales* 184, no. 2 (2009): 65–78.

⁵⁹ Myriam Ababsa, “Syria’s Food Security: From Self-Sufficiency to Hunger as a Weapon,” in *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War*, eds. Linda Matar and Ali Kadri (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 253.

⁶⁰ Rami Zurayk, “Civil War and the Devastation of Syria’s Food System,” *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (19 March 2013): 7–9.

⁶¹ See China Sajadian, “Rethinking Climate Refugees and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: An Agrarian Perspective of Displacement,” *Arab Studies Journal* 30, no. 2 (2022): 74–81; Jan Selby, “Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War, Part II: The Jazira’s Agrarian Crisis,” *Geoforum* 101 (1 May 2019): 260–74.

⁶² Samuel Dolbee, “After ISIS: Development and Demography in the Jazira” (Middle East Briefs 121, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, August 2018), 1–9,

<https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb121.pdf>.

⁶³ Samuel Dinger, "Dispossessing the Displaced in Lebanon," *Contexts* 20, no. 1 (1 February 2021): 15–20.

⁶⁴ Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy*, 45.

⁶⁵ For more on ghosts and the mediation of memory, see Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Emily Ng, *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

⁶⁶ Ojeili, *Al-Maghmūrūn*, dedication page.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

⁶⁸ Niḍāl al-Ṣāliḥ, *Al-Mughāmra al-Thānia Dirāsāt Fī al-Riwāyat al-'arabīa* (Damascus: Al-manshurāt al-itihād al-kitāb al-'arab, 1999), 9–12.

⁶⁹ Riyāḍ 'Ismat, *Al-Ṣawt Wa al-Ṣada: Dirāsāt Fī al-Qisat al-Suriya* (Damascus: Dār al-tbā' wa al-nashr, 1979), 44.

⁷⁰ Bou Ali Yassīn, *Al-Idiulujyā Wa al-Ādab Fī Suriya: 1967–1973* (Damascus, 1985), 34.

⁷¹ Muhammad Kamil Al-Khatib quoted in al-Ṣāliḥ, *Al-Mughāmra*, 11.

⁷² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

⁷³ Teodor Shanin, "Chayanov's Treble Death and Tenuous Resurrection: An Essay about Understanding, about Roots of Plausibility and about Rural Russia," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 83–101.

⁷⁴ Amin, *Re-Reading the Postwar Period*; A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Saturnino M. Borrás Jr., and Cristobal Kay, eds., *Land, Poverty and Livelihoods in an Era of Globalization: Perspectives from Developing and Transition Countries* (London: Routledge, 2007); Utsa Patnaik, Sam Moyo, and Issa Shivji, *The Agrarian Question in the Neoliberal Era: Primitive Accumulation and the Peasantry* (Cape Town: Fahamu Books and Pambazuka Press, 2011).

⁷⁵ Veltmeyer and Wise, *Agrarian Change*, 1.