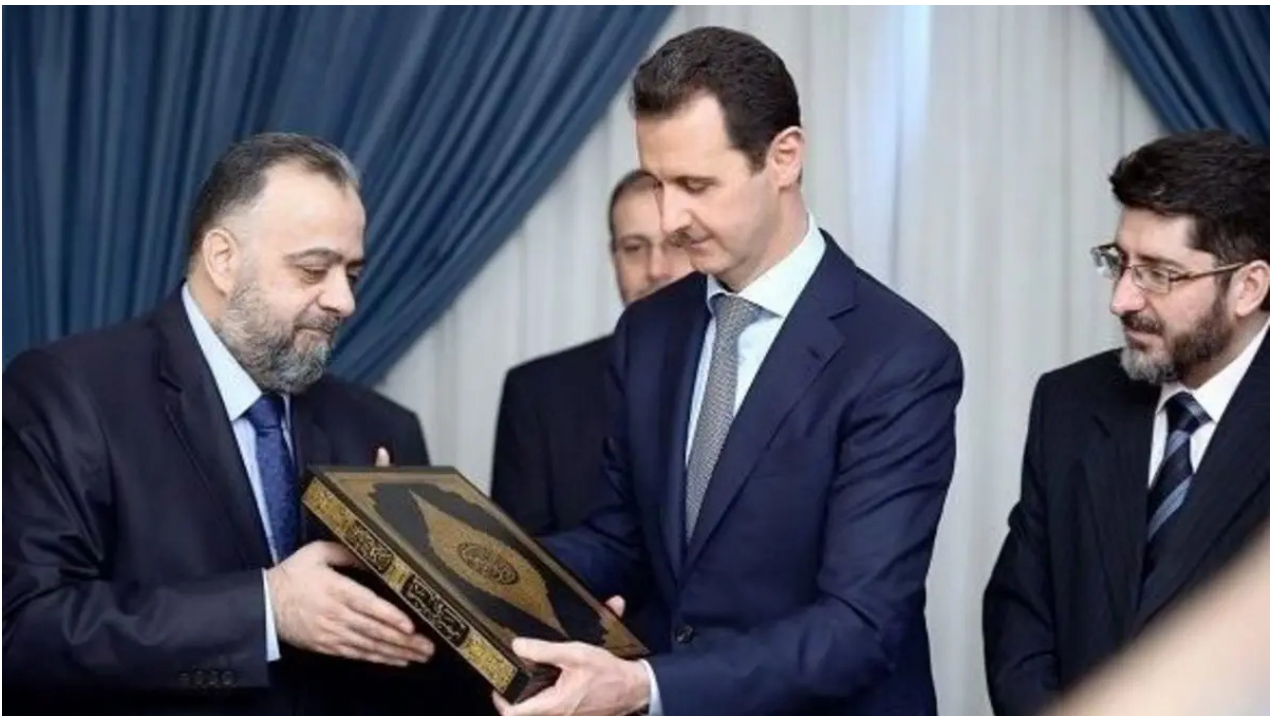


Waqf in Syria: Power Over Public Good



For centuries, Syria's religious endowment sector (awqaf) was far more than a religious institution managing real estate and channeling revenue to the needy. It served as one of the core pillars of social and educational life across the Levant. This rich legacy one that helped shape cities and funded the construction of schools, hospitals, and mosques underwent a drastic transformation with the rise

of Syria's security state under Hafez al-Assad and, later, his son Bashar.

What was once a vehicle of communal solidarity became a tool embedded within the architecture of power and its networks of influence.

Gradually, the waqf system ceased to function as an independent entity serving the poor, students, and travelers. It was instead absorbed into the regime's control apparatus, reshaping the religious and economic landscapes of the country.

As the state tightened its grip over the sector, this vast resource turned into a rent-generating machine benefiting select groups, while the social mission that had defined the waqf's history in Greater Syria faded into obscurity.

The contrast between meager revenues and massive holdings has since exposed a gaping disconnect that reveals just how deeply this institution has been hollowed out.

With the partial collapse of the state and long-hidden information finally surfacing, a pressing question has reemerged: how did one of the region's oldest community institutions devolve into an ineffective bureaucracy?

How did Damascus and other Syrian cities lose one of their most vital tools for social equity and development? Most importantly, can the spirit of the waqf be revived or has it become so entangled in the state's power structure that reform is now out of reach?

Repurposing of Waqf Assets

In recent decades, Syria's endowment sector has been subject to some of the most egregious exploitation, with its assets converted into a steady source of rent for elite power networks.

After the regime's weakening, a review of waqf contracts revealed a host of violations: a property near Umayyad Square was transferred and leased to a company linked to the Assad family at a fraction of its real value; the lucrative "Yalbugha" property was re-leased to a regime-affiliated party at minimal returns; and coastal lands in Jableh were granted to the Assad and Makhlof families at symbolic rents.

Investigations revealed systemic dysfunction in the leasing framework, with hundreds of properties in Damascus, Latakia, and Aleppo rented out at rates that grossly undervalued their market worth like the Bab Musalla property, which fetched an extraordinarily low lease.

Vast Holdings, Meager Returns

Official data estimates that there are roughly 33,700 waqf properties across

Syria, including tens of thousands with high investment potential, along with some 170,000 dunams of agricultural and commercial land.

Yet annual revenues barely exceed \$8 million a figure that starkly reflects the governance failures and the stripping of the waqf's social function.

Investigative reports highlight suspicious contracts, such as the lease of 207 dunams of coastal land for a mere \$4 to \$8 annually, underscoring how far the waqf system has strayed from its mission of serving the public good.

A Noble Legacy

Throughout history, the waqf played a foundational role in Islamic societies, sustaining educational and welfare institutions. At its core, the waqf system relies on dedicating fixed assets land, buildings, or other property for perpetual public benefit, prohibiting their sale or inheritance.

The founder relinquishes all ownership to ensure that revenues continually support sectors like healthcare, education, and housing.

This model enabled the financing of mosques, schools, and hospitals, along with critical infrastructure such as bridges and water stations demonstrating its extensive societal impact.

The practice dates back to the Prophet Muhammad, who dedicated orchards in Medina for the poor. His successors continued the tradition: Umar endowed land in Khaybar, Uthman turned the Ruma well into a public waqf, and Ali allocated portions of his land to support the needy and students.

In Greater Syria, especially Damascus, awqaf became integral to educational life. Properties were dedicated to schools, Qur'anic institutes, and mosques. They provided student scholarships, supported religious scholars, funded pilgrimages for the poor, helped brides prepare for marriage, freed prisoners, and cared for travelers.

Some waqf funds even repaired roads or compensated for broken kitchenware revealing how deeply embedded the institution was in daily life.

During the Ottoman Empire, the waqf's role expanded to fund large infrastructure projects. One prominent example is the bridge built by Sultan Abdulmejid Khan linking Istanbul to Galata, whose revenues funded a charitable hospital treating the city's poor an illustration of how awqaf financed essential services without burdening the state.

The Modern Decline

Despite this legacy, the waqf's status declined sharply in the modern era. Colonial powers often expropriated endowment assets for their own use, while

the adoption of Western administrative models marginalized the waqf's social role.

The modern state's expansion into the sector by nationalizing awqaf and turning them into rigid bureaucracies further eroded their independence and capacity for innovation. Once a powerful engine of social development, the waqf became an institution with limited effectiveness, detached from its historical purpose.

A Contemporary Continuation

The waqf's spirit persists in modern forms of social investment a concept that channels financial resources into projects with both social impact and sustainable returns.

Social investment operates on the principle that solving poverty, unemployment, and development gaps cannot rest solely on governments or charity. It requires innovative funding mechanisms that blend financial return with social responsibility.

This approach reflects a contemporary evolution of the waqf idea: assets are held for the public good, but managed through modern tools like social bonds, impact investment funds, and public-private partnerships.

These mechanisms allow for measurable outcomes, improved efficiency, and sustainable funding for development projects, maintaining the essence of the waqf while adapting to 21st-century challenges.

Reclaiming the Waqf as a Social Engine

In light of decades of neglect and expropriation, redirecting the waqf back to its foundational role is now more urgent than ever. Samer Bairaqqdar, the Director of Damascus Awqaf, has repeatedly emphasized that "waqf funds are God's funds, meant to serve society not to be exploited for private gain or symbolic rents."

He stressed that reforming the sector is not just an administrative task, but a path to restoring a social mission lost for generations.

Bairaqqdar explained that the ministry is working to digitize the entire waqf property database some 34,000 assets while uncovering over 600 previously undocumented properties and receiving 300 new donations.

This digital transformation will help prevent future violations and ensure transparent governance. He also announced plans for public auctions of recovered properties and new legislation encouraging voluntary disclosures of seized waqf assets, while punishing illegal appropriation steps aimed at reversing the damage done over decades.

According to Bairaqqdar, investment strategies must prioritize education,

healthcare, social welfare, and student support core missions the waqf has fulfilled for centuries. He noted that this revival goes beyond financial recovery; it is about restoring the waqf as an autonomous institution capable of advancing equity and development in Syria.

Reclaiming the waqf's historical place in society is not simply about paperwork or real estate it's about reviving a legacy of solidarity and service. This effort mirrors the broader ethos of modern social investment: merging financial sustainability with the public interest.

With reforms underway digitization, reassessment, and legal restructuring this vast real estate wealth can once again support education and public services, bringing the waqf back to its rightful social role.

Ultimately, awqaf can become launchpads for rebuilding Syria's social fabric not just as rent-producing assets, but as renewed beacons of hope, rooted in a centuries-old tradition of serving the common good.

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