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Privatisation in Syria: State Farms  
and the Case of the Euphrates Project

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## **Abstract**

Between December 2000 and December 2001, the Syrian Ba'th party promulgated a series of political decisions (*taqarir*) that aimed at privatising the state farms in Syria. The main one, decision number 83 of 16 December 2000, put an end to 43 years of collectivist experiments in the field of land reform. The main region targeted by the decision 83 of 2000 was the Syrian North-East, the Jazîra, where the Euphrates Project, was implemented. According to decision 83, land was parcelled out in shares of 3 ha for irrigated land and 8 ha for non-irrigated land. It called for land to be distributed to, in order of priority, the former owners, the farm workers, and employees of the General Administration of the Euphrates Basin (GADEB). The paper explores the legislative principles of this decision and its impact on agrarian structures and social hierarchies in the Syrian Jazîra. I analyse this process as a case of counter-revolution that marks the end of the socialist ba'thist ideology.

## **Keywords**

Agrarian reform, State farms, Privatisation, Syria.

## Introduction

Between December 2000 and December 2001, the Syrian Ba’th party promulgated a series of political decisions (*taqarir*) that aimed at privatising the state farms in Syria. The main one, decision number 83 of 16 December 2000, put an end to 43 years of collectivist experiments in the field of land reform, including 38 years under the aegis of the Ba’th party. Those reforms had established state farms and, more generally, the replacement of the traditional tribal social allegiances by a collectivist system. The main region targeted by the decision 83 of 2000 was the Syrian North-East, the Jazîra. It is there that the massive irrigation scheme, the Euphrates Project, was implemented, consisting in the construction of a major dam (1974) and the subsequent irrigation of 150,000 hectares (on the 640,000 scheduled) in the valleys of the Euphrates, the Balikh and the Khabour.

Decision 83—and the move towards privatisation that it represents—should be seen against a broader backdrop of controlled economic liberalisation (*infatih*) underway in Syria since the early 1990s. More specifically, however, the decision was a response to decline in agricultural production and intense corruption in the state farms. The land was parcelled out in shares of 3 ha for irrigated land and 8 ha for non-irrigated land. It formally allocated ‘right of use’, and not property. It called for land to be distributed to, in order of priority, the former owners, the farm workers, and employees of the General Administration of the Euphrates Basin (GADEB). The decision triggered considerable tension and competition among these three categories, as each feared being excluded from the land redistribution process. As implementation proceeded through four phases (discussed below), more than 250 complaint letters were addressed to the Syrian Presidents office and a peasant revolt took place in the village of Disbi Afnan on the 14-12-2002. Nevertheless, the reform and its consequences have failed to attract broader attention, and were hardly mentioned in the economic columns of Syria’s daily press.

This paper explores the legislative principles and the objectives of the *taqirir* 83 of 16-12-2000. It also explores the impact of the decision on agrarian structures and the social hierarchies in the Syrian Jazîra. I suggest that, to a greater degree than the political liberalization process announced in 1991, this land reform has marked the end of the socialist ba’thist ideology. However, it has done so while simultaneously renewing the clientelist political system. I will test the assumption developed in February 2002 by Syrian intellectuals and civil servants of the Raqqa Mohafazat, according to which this reform would reinforce the existing power structures. As Ray Bush suggested, this reform is a case of counter-revolution (Bush, 2002). But, as we will see, its beneficiaries are not the expected ones.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. State Farms in Syria and the Euphrates Project

State farms were created in Syria as a result of successive land reform laws in 1958, 1963 and 1966. These laws offered the state the opportunity to rationally manage agricultural resources that had been previously ‘plundered’ by absentee landowners. When the land reform was completed in 1970, 1,513,000 hectares had been expropriated by the State, including 443,000 ha that had been handed over to private individuals, 338,000 ha distributed collectively to peasants in cooperatives, 38,000 ha sold and 140,000 ha reserved for the state farms. Notably, 351,400 hectares in arid areas were not been distributed. 306,000 ha of this arid land was located in Jazîra. Here, it was decided that the population was insufficient to allow for meaningful re-distribution (Hinnebusch, 1989: 96).

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1 Fieldwork was conducted in Raqqa in September and December 2003, with a grant received from the *Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies*, as a winner of the 2002 *Middle East Research Competition*. Interviews with employees and land owners made in Raqqa this October 2004 helped me to update the data. From 1998 to 2004, I wrote a Ph D in Geography entitled ‘*Ideologies and Territories in a Pioneer Front: Raqqa and the Euphrates Project in the Syrian Jazîra*’, with grants from Tours University and the CERMOC (now Institut Français du Proche Orient). I thank these institutions for their help. Special thanks are due to Prof. Dr. Pierre Signoles and Prof. Dr. Ray Bush for their advice and assistance with regard to my case, and also to Dr. Christopher Parker for his suggestions and help in correcting my English.

### 1.1. Creation and Evolution of the State Farms in Syria

State farms were conceived as *avant-garde* structures to train farm labourers with modern techniques of production and to diffuse the ba'thist socialist ideological principles. The first State farms were established in the sixties. Standard acreage ranged from 100-155 ha in Deir ez Zor and Aleppo, to 14,000 ha in Raqqa, and to 36,000 ha in the northern Jezireh city of Qamechlia. The state farms quickly became associated with low productivity and heavy production costs. In 1972, nine out of fifteen farms lost money, and the milk production cost two and half times the retail price (Hinnebusch, 1989). At the beginning of the 1980's, 72,000 ha of State farm land was distributed (Hinnebusch, 1989: 118; table 1). In the north-eastern Mohafazat of Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir ez Zor and Hassaka state farms covered 68 146 hectares of which 21 011 ha were irrigated in the Pilot Euphrates Project. A further 45 862 hectares were uncultivable lands that were also included in the state farms in 2002 (*Teshreen* article, 23-6-2003).

**Table 1: State Farms Surfaces Evolution (1970 – 2000)**

Year	State farms total surface	Cultivated surface
1970	138,000 ha	64,132 ha
1983	67,666 ha	10,378 ha
2000	68,146 ha	21,011 ha
2000	68,146 ha	21,011 ha

Source: Hinnebusch, 1989: 203 and GADEB, 2001, *Teshreen*, 2002

### 1.2. The Pilot Project State Farms in the Euphrates Project

In all, fifteen Pilot Project farms and villages were created as part of the large Euphrates Project. That project constituted the major Ba'thist enterprise of the 70s. It created a new agro-alimentary sector and an abundant electric power supply. From a social point of view, engineers and workers acquired new skills as they were engaged in the substantial projects of dam-building and the construction of the new city of Thawra. The Euphrates Project was as much a political as an economic project. The land reform was to assist in the new socialist order as a substitute for the tribal structures dominant in Jazîra and with it the political control of a long insubordinate area. More than half a million hectares of new irrigated perimeters were planned that included 450,000 ha to be gained on the steppe and improvements to 160,000 ha already irrigated land to be made (Maps. 1 and 2 in Appendix).

The creation of lake Assad in 1973, submerged 66 villages and 126 hamlets located on fertile lands in the Euphrates banks. Sixty thousand people from the Walda semi-nomadic tribe had to be moved. The Dam Ministry created 15 State farms for the displaced in the Pilot Project and 42 colonization villages at the Turkish border, in the Kurdish area of Hassaka Mohafazat to form an 'Arab belt'. The fifteen state farms of the Pilot Project were built on lands expropriated by the State in the *barriya*, a zone of pasture and dry culture. Most of its land belonged to members of the Hleissat, a formerly semi-nomadic tribe that settled near Raqqa in the 1940's. Each state farm constituted a model village where farm labourers were paid and governed by a '*council of production*' (Hannoyer, 1985: 32).

**Table 2: Population, Housing and Services in the Pilot Project Fifteen State farms in 1996.**

Name of the farm	Number of inhabitants	Men	Women	Number of peasants houses	Number of engineers houses	Number of school classes	Number of shops
Andalous	2 561	1 255	1 306	330	10	6	5
Rachid	3 120	1 529	1 591	404	12	2	3
Ansar	4 960	2 420	2 540	636	10	8	5
Yarab	3 104	1 521	1 583	497	10	6	3
'Adnanya	4 159	2 038	2 121	516	10	8	5
Qahtania	4 119	2 018	2 101	514	12	8	5
Rabi'a	4 048	1 981	2 065	500	12	8	5
Hittin	3 759	1 842	1 917	466	10	6	5
Assad	6 127	3 002	3 125	468	16	12	5
Badr	3 344	1 639	1 705	408	10	6	5
Qadissiya	3 200	1 568	1 632	396	10	6	5
Mudar	2 640	1 293	1 347	336	14	6	5
Mohamdia	3 040	1 490	1 550	390	10	6	3
Ghassania	2 561	1 255	1 306	340	10	6	5
Yamana	2 800	1 372	1 428	356	10	6	5
total				6 768	166	104	69

Source: internal data from the GADEB, Raqqa, 1997.

Only 9 % of the 60,000 Walda people whose villages were submerged by the Assad Lake agreed to be reinstalled in the Pilot Project (Meyer, 1990). The displaced people who joined the farms obtained an average of 3,3 ha of land in private property as a compensation for lost lands. But as experts of the United Nations noted, this allocation was insufficient. In order to realize one of the social objectives of the project—namely the destruction of tribal relations—the displaced were dispersed over several farms. Thus in the farm of Rabi'a, 260 families were installed that originated from 67 different places—half of from areas submerged by the lake (55 %) (Hinnebush, 1989).

### 1. 3. Pilot Project State Farms in 2000

The Pilot Project along the Balikh river was carried out relatively quickly. Between 1972 and 1973, the cement channels and the pumping station for 20,000 ha were installed. Twenty four thousand ha were scheduled, but because of soil salinisation and the collapse of the main channels built on gypsum, only 9,000 ha were still exploited in the mid 80's (Hannoyer, 1985, 32). Between 1976 and 1985, 4,000 ha of arable lands became salified per annum (Hannoyer, 1985: 29). At the beginning of the 1980's, 20,000 ha of fields irrigated but not drained were salified and unsuitable for agriculture, and 35,000 ha had lost half of their productivity because of salt formation (Hinnebusch, 1989: 236).

**Table 3: Implementation Percentage of the Euphrates Project (1973-1986)**

zone	Superficie announced (hectares)	Superficie cultivated (hectares)	Implementation percentage
Balikh	186,000	34,000	18,4 %
Moyen Euphrate	165,000	27,000	16,4 %
Rassafa	25,000	0	0
Mayadin	40,000	0	0
Meskene Alep	155,000	21,000	13,5 %
Lower Khabur	70,000	0	0
Total	640,000	82,000	12,8 %

Source: GADEB statistics YOUNIS, 1992: 168.



About half of the workers from the Pilot Project farms left them between 1976 and 1986. Population declined from 39 200 to 20 100 people during this time. That was due to the low productivity of the lands, which quickly became salified because of inefficient drainage. The workers went to Raqqa to find daily employment in the building sector. To fight against the exodus of workers, more lands were allocated to them in private property in the project of Bir Hachem in 1986. Yet marketing was still organized by a cooperative. The six farms built between 1983 and 1986 in Bir Hachem, offered improved housing for the peasants. Each village counted 400 inhabitants, that is to say 2400 people for whom the services were improved. In Bir Hachem Project, 10,000 hectares were cultivated at the end of the Eighties.

Evidence suggests that state farms produced little benefit for the farmers and failed equally in their ideological role of peasant training. The production costs were higher than revenue from the beginning. Thus, in 1980, the income of the GADEB farms was 25 million Syrian pounds whereas the production costs were 50 million (Hinnebusch, 1989: 241; Hannover 1985: 33). In July 2001, I obtained an internal document from the general administration of the Euphrates Basin which described the assessment of production in the whole Euphrates Project. The results, highlighted in table 4 offers an explanation why the government decided to put end to the farms. In 2000, the benefit of the whole of the state farms and the projects of Euphrates managed by the GADEB were 25,5 million Syrian pounds, whereas the production costs reached on the 645 million Syrian pounds: they had been multiplied by 13 in twenty years ! Meanwhile, the number of temporary workers was scarcely reduced between 1999 and 2000, in spite of low production and a rumour that the state farms would be closed (table 5.)

**Table 4: Production Cost and Incomes in the Euphrates Bassin Projects (1999-2000) (thousands Syrian pounds).**

Project Name	Total production	Production expenses	Salaries	Total expenses	Incomes or deficits:
All Projects	<b>645 821</b>	<b>300 267</b>	<b>297 358</b>	<b>620 271</b>	<b>25 550</b>
Pilot Project:	540 811	241 326	246 938	504 720	36 091
Cultures	485 792	190 468	230 248	436 881	48 911
Milk farm	38 535	35 830	11 882	47 953	- 9 418
Bovine farm	16 484	15 028	4 808	19 886	- 3 402
Meskene west <sup>2</sup>	4 922	1 798	1 906	3 704	1 218
Experiment Center	2 238	1 736	4 574	6 345	- 4 107
Middle Euphrates	66 381	31 024	33 182	68 306	- 1 925
Bir Hachem	31 469	24 383	10 758	37 196	- 5 727

Source: Syrian Irrigation Ministry, GADEB, May 2001.

2 Meskene is divided into two zones, Western Meskene and Eastern Meskene. Both are located in Aleppo Mohafazat, with an extension in Raqqa Mohafazat, especially the Bassal Assad farm, created in 1994.

**Table 5: Evolution of the Number of Workers and Employees in the General Administration of the Euphrates Basin between December 1999 and December 2000.**

Academic level	Position	Production	Technical Assistance	Services	Administra.	Number 31-12-1999	Number 31-12-2000
University (engineers)		71	5	9	13	102	98
University (specialties)		3	-	13	-	16	16
University (humanities)		2	-	1	32	37	35
Intermediate Center		198	15	8	33	252	254
Technical High School		86	6	2	23	116	117
General High School		21	4	4	42	71	71
Pre High School		39	5	9	41	81	94
Primary (simple worker)		123	15	28	49	228	215
Primary (technician)		155	140	20	30	341	345
Primary (driver)		373	135	30	23	570	561
Permanent agricultural worker		182	6	6	2	222	196
Temporary worker		2 740	135	80	20	4 200	2 975
Total		3 993	466	210	308	6 236	4 977

Source: Irrigation Ministry, GADEB Statistics, May 2001.

In the face of the evidence indicating the failure of the State Farms, the government was forced to act within the framework of its campaign against corruption and for the cleansing of national accounting. It is in the context of economic opening (*infitah*) accelerated after 1991, and especially after the death of the President Hafez el Assad in June 2000, that the decision to distribute the lands of the state farms was adopted on December 16, 2000.

## 2. Decision Number 83 (16-12-2000) on the Distribution of State Farms

Since the beginning of the economic opening in 1991 (*infitah*), the Syrian State launched the renewal of private economic initiative. At the same time it also insisted that some sectors be protected from liberalization for geopolitical reasons. In 1992, a new production system was introduced in the state farms. This allowed the exploitation or hiring contracts, which gave 20 % of the production to those who signed it. A new category of owners thus appeared alongside farm labourers and the various engineers and technicians: that of the holders of an exploitation contract (*mucharikin*).

### 2.1. The Legislative Principles of Decision 83 (16-12-2000)

Ten years of economic liberalization, severe decline in agricultural production, and extensive corruption in the state farms led to the privatisation of all Syrian state lands by decision n° 83 (December 16, 2000). Critically, this decision was taken executively rather than from within the legislature. Indeed, it is not a ministerial decree, nor a law, but a political decision enacted by the Ba'th Party, and then transmitted to the Agriculture Ministry and to the Irrigation Ministry (and the GADEB).

*Taqir* 83 – December 16, 2000 ( Ba'th Party):

'The State Farms General Administration Land Distribution'

1. - Cancellation of the property of the lands which were not exploited and for which no counterpart was paid.
2. - Distribution of the lands exploited by lots of 3 ha irrigated and 8 ha not irrigated (ba'l) by family according to the following order of priority:
  - holding right: owners and agrarian reform beneficiaries (*malik wa muntafi'*);
  - the holders of a contract who live in the farms, then those who do not;
  - the farm labourers who live in the farms, then those who do not;
  - the agricultural technicians who worked in a permanent way in the State farms.
3. - Sale of the State farms housings to those who occupy them and who obtained lands. And the sale of the production tools and materials in priority to the agricultural cooperatives with a payment in several expiries, and finally the sale of the sheep herds.
4. - The two Agriculture and Irrigation Ministries keep what they need in term of housing and agricultural tools, 10% of the agricultural surfaces, the irrigation networks, and the bovine farms entrusted to the general administration.

Source: Extracts of the Official text, obtained in Raqqa, October 2003.

Decision n° 83 was intrinsically political. It came from the Ba'th Party. It was not subject to deliberation within the legislature; and it was not accompanied by the cancellation of the preceding decrees (1971 and 1983 (n° 1033)<sup>3</sup>) which related to the distribution of ownership. It led to the confusion between the rights of the owners, the agrarian reform recipients, the workers and the technicians.

Many employees tried to obtain rights to the property with some contracts dating back to before 16-12-2000. For these, strict measures were adopted by the commission of distribution. 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.

While the Pilot Project involved the management of public property, the redistribution of the lands to the citizens was privatisation—although the term does not appear officially. This process of privatisation was strongly criticised by some GADEB communist employees I met in Raqqa. As one of them recalled it, decision 83 has being taken without any preliminary study on the consequences of such a redistribution in the Pilot Project, nor on the property structures. In this context of legal inaccuracy and

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3 In 1983, decree n° 1033 limited the private property in the State Irrigation Projects to 160 donoms. 3 100 hectares were expropriated and transformed as State land that was rented for 75 S.P. a donom a year (Bauer, 1990: 38).

conflict between administrations, many owners, recipients and heirs started to assert their rights to the land, and many complaint letters were sent to Damascus, addressed to the President of the Republic.

## **2. 2. *Complaint Letters about Decision 83***

Several petitions were signed by owners and recipients opposed to the application of decision 83.<sup>4</sup> The biggest group of protesters was those of former owners who claimed that the government applied to them the former agrarian law n° 3 (1984) and protested against the iniquity of the political decision to give them a maximum of only 3 hectares. They wrote a complaint letter to the president of the Republic, the 7-1-2001, accompanied by property documents. Copies were sent to the secretary-general of the Ba'th Party, to the Prime Minister and to the Ministers for Irrigation and Agriculture, and in Raqqa, to the governor, and to the Ba'th secretary.

A second group of protesters was comprised of owners and recipients whose properties within the Euphrates Project were lower than 3 hectares. They asked to obtain complete lots not proportionate with their already insufficient properties.

A third group of protesters comprised heirs of the landowners. Legally, the heirs are classified in several categories according to the date of death of the legatee. The heirs to a legatee deceased before the application of the law on the agricultural property n° 244 of 1972 are divided into two categories: those whose names were recorded on the land registers and who could obtain up to 3 hectares each; and those whose names were not recorded and who collectively obtained only one plot of 3 hectares. In cases where the legatee is deceased after law 244 of 1972, the heirs collectively obtain only 30 donoms, unless they undertook to be recorded personally on their behalf. However, the cost of personally recording the land is, in this case, higher than the price of the land. These heirs disputed the application of the decision. They considered that it contradicted the 1984 land law, and even 'the divine law' (to use their words) with regard to property according to which all heirs have right of ownership, even if they do not make a request for it.

In 2002, a new decision was enacted that excluded owners of more than 80 donoms, (which is the ceiling of lands given to the agrarian reform recipients), of the land distribution process. Thus a fourth protester group appeared: owners who claimed that the government should adopt the property ceiling of 160 irrigated donoms in the State Irrigation Projects, rather than that of the agrarian reform recipients (which was 80 donoms). Moreover, the difficulty arose with the families in which several members were employed in the Pilot Project, for each one could not claim to obtain 30 donoms irrigated and 80 donoms ba'l insofar as the law limits these equipments to a plot by family. The decision was taken to grant them to up to 60 irrigated donoms for the whole family.

The government took into account the complaints of these various groups, and particularly those of the temporary workers and the civil servants employed an insufficient number of years by the GADEB. Thus, as of December 2003, the implementation of decision 83 had proceeded in four phases.<sup>5</sup> The 1st phase of application took place from October 2001 to March 2002, and concerned the owners and the recipients of the land reform, as well as the employees and contractual workmen specified by the text of December 2000. The second phase of application began in April 2002 with an amendment that included amongst the recipients those who had worked at least three years in the GADEB. The third phase of application of decision 83 proceeded from October 2002, benefiting those who could show that they had worked one year for the GADEB. The fourth phase primarily concerned those choosing to retire from the GADEB and take a state pension: from September 2003, every employed GADEB can take his/her retirement and obtain 3 ha of irrigated land in addition to the standard monthly allowance. This last measurement aims reducing manpower of the GADEB whose

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4 I base this paragraph on the paper of a conference held in Raqqa in August 2003 by a communist intellectual.

5 This is the result of my interviews in Raqqa in October and December 2003.

major functions are now to provide water at flat price and to prescribe the types of agriculture in conformity with the Plan. A fifth phase of distribution has been envisaged since 2004 to allow everyone employed within the secretariat and administration of the GADEB to profit from a plot of ground if he/she voluntarily leaves employment.

Yet, the main complaint is that some land was given—via false GADEB contracts—to powerful persons close to a former Raqqa Ba’th Secretary who had served in Raqqa in the 1990s. This person is considered by many to be the brain behind decision 83. The perception of injustice was a primary factor triggering a big peasant riot in the Raqqa Mohafazat on Peasant’s day 2002.

### **2. 3. Dibsi 'Afnan December 2002 Peasant Riot**

The 15 December 2002, a peasant revolt took place in Dibsi Afnan, one of the new villages built by members of the Walda tribe whose former lands and homes were submerged by the Assad lake. Dibsi Afnan lies 90 km west of Raqqa, on the Alep-Deir ez Zor road. On the occasion of the National Peasant Day, the village mayor, Abu Jabal, a charismatic Ba’th member, had invited Raqqa Ba’th Party Secretary, ‘Issa Khalil, the Peasant Union Secretary, the head of Raqqa Agriculture Directorate, and several deputies. But at the beginning of the official festivities, peasants and village inhabitants protested against the corruption of Raqqa Agriculture Direction and the existence of many thieves in this administration. They started to shout ‘*Corruption is sucking peasant blood!*’. The Ba’th Secretary asked, in vain, the villagers to calm down. But they started to throw stones at the officials, who had to retreat quickly to their cars and speed back to Raqqa. It was the first time that a revolt directly involved Ba’th officials in Raqqa Mohafazat. The same day 15 peasants were arrested and brought to Raqqa ([www.thisissyria.net](http://www.thisissyria.net), 15-12-2002).

Tension had been high in the village for several months. Tens of letters had been sent to the Republic President, the Agriculture Ministry, and to the Ba’th Party, without answers. The grievance was that a huge area used as a pasture land by Walda ancestors, had been falsely registered as State land, and then illegally sold or rented by the Raqqa Agriculture Direction and high commissions to persons foreign to the village. 500 Walda families were affected by this illegal sale or hiring. When the newcomers arrived on their rented land, a fight occurred during which a young Walda man died. Two weeks after this revolt, according to my interviews, the 15 arrested men were released and a trial ordered by the President Bachar Al Assad sentenced many civil servants of Raqqa Agriculture Direction.

### **3. The Distribution of State State Farm Land in the Euphrates Project**

My evidence for studying the distribution of state farm land in the Euphrates rests on two types of documents: newspaper articles (official ones, like *Teshreen* and *Ba’th*, but also opposition ones, like *Akhbar al Charq* daily published on line) and internal statistical and documents produced by the General Administration of the Euphrates Basin GADEB, obtained in Raqqa in summer 2001 and winter 2003. This data has been supplemented by substantial interviews.

According to the director of the Distribution Committee, Mohammed ‘Abd el Latif, who is a lawyer at the head of the Agriculture Direction legal department), 9,000 hectares, located into 18 farms, were distributed to more than 4,000 recipients. However as the total surface of the Pilot project is 22 500 hectares, 11 500 hectares remain to be distributed in a second phase. The Syrian Web Newspaper *Akhbar Al Charq*, [www.thisissyria.net](http://www.thisissyria.net), published on June 24, 2002 an article on the state farms distribution, based on a *Teshreen* article of this same month. According to this article, 16 200 hectares including 15,000 irrigated and 1 200 in dry agriculture were distributed to 5 758 recipients. The *Teshreen* newspaper specified 11,000 irrigated hectares will be given to the State company for agrarian improvement and mechanization, to be exploited starting from 2003.

Furthermore, 6 274 irrigated hectares, and 36 753 non irrigated (*ba'l*) hectares, remained to be distributed in Hassaka, Deir ez Zor, Raqqa and Aleppo Mohafazats. The distribution of 10 386 hectares poplar planted in the Pilot Project and the Assad farm was postponed. As a result, the total figure of the recipients amounted to 5 758 to June 23, 2002 (according to the *Teshreen* newspaper) which includes 4 907 recipients in the Pilot Project. Among this 4 907 recipients, 1 086 are women: they are 653 Project Pilot workers, 253 administration employees and 180 GADEB employees.

**Table 6: The Recipients of Decision 83 on State Farms Distribution in the Euphrates Project in August 2003**

Types of recipients:	Recipient number
Owners and agrarian reform recipients	2 392 48,7 %
Holder of an exploitation contract ( <i>mucharikin</i> )	1 379 28,1%
Holder of a location contract	69 1,4 %
Temporary agrarian workers	349 7,1 %
Annual agrarian workers and shepherds	208 4,2 %
Independent workers	510 10,4 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>4 907</b>

Source: interview with a GADEB employee, Raqqa, October 2003.

The detailed list of the recipients for the pilot project is given according to their contract or relation to the GADEB. The owners and the agrarian reform former recipients, 2392 in August 2003, were endowed in priority during the first distribution phase. They were followed by the holders of exploitation contracts (*mucharikin*) follow: 1 379 people. Finally, 1 067 workers and GADEB contractual employees were given lands.

**Table 7: The Recipients of the Pilot Project State Land Distribution in December 2003 According to the 4 Implementation Phases**

Phase	Recipients number	Surface distributed (donom)	Type of recipients
1st	2 361	48 689,5 d.	Owner and farmer
	1 290	38 600,2 d.	Holder of a exploitation contract
2nd	334	9 963,3 d.	Holder of an exploitation of location contract, workers and shepherds
	194	5 793,6 d.	
3rd	696	20 785,1 d.	Contract holder
	26	62,8 d.	Heirs
	5	28,6 d.	Punctual indemnity
4th	51	1 530 d.	Retired
	46	1 920 d.	Retired
<b>Total</b>	<b>5 021</b>	<b>127 346,1 d.</b>	

Source: internal GADEB documents, Raqqa, December 2003.

At the end of the four implementation phases, in December 2003, 12,734 hectares of irrigated lands were distributed to 5,021 recipients. Half of these beneficiaries are made up of owners and agrarian reform beneficiaries, and more than a third are comprised of exploitation or leasing agreements. The remainder are farm labourers. For comparison, 10,000 ha were distributed to 3,500 recipients in the large Meskene farm, the Bassal Assad farm, located in Aleppo Mohafazat. The following table gives the detail, farm by farm, of the recipients and the surface distributed at during the first phase, in April 2002.

Table 8: Surface and Number of State Farm Plots Given during the First Distribution Phase in the Euphrates by Recipient Type

Farm	Owner and farmer		Contract Holder Mucharikin		Retired		Worker with con-tract		Annual worker		Temporary worker and shepherds		TOTAL	
	Nbr.	Surface	Nbr.	Surface	Nbr.	Surface	Nbr.	Surface	Nbr.	Surface	Nbr.	Surface	Nbr.	Surface
Andalous	196	3 547,925	48	1 410	9	270	4	120	1	30	10	300	267	5 677,925
Rachid	38	1 077,091	52	1 560	18	540	1	30	1	30	4	120	114	3 357,091
Ansar	79	2 367,4	58	1 740	23	690	2	60	6	180	5	150	173	5 187,4
Yamama	246	2 099,975	78	2 328	32	960	4	120	1	30	3	90	364	5 627,975
Yarub	206	4 862,785	42	1 257,8	1	11,9	-	-	7	210	1	30	257	6 372,485
'Adhanya	106	3 018,675	50	1 500	25	750	22	660	7	210	7	210	127	6 348,675
Qahtania	88	2 083,780	40	1 200	29	870	7	210	1	30	7	210	172	4603,780
Rabi'a	203	4 869,926	43	1 290	16	480	8	240	1	30	4	120	275	7 029,926
Hatin	177	3 583,731	45	1 250	27	810	10	300	3	90	3	90	265	6 223,731
Assad	253	2 942,112	28	840	32	960	11	330	2	60	5	150	331	5 282,112
Mudar	85	2 274,15	52	1 590	4	120	1	30	2	60	4	120	149	4 194,15
Qadissiya	48	1 328,05	33	990	5	150	3	90	5	150	9	270	103	2 978,05
Badr	250	3 110,699	40	1 200	2	60	4	120	-	-	8	240	304	4 730,699
Mohamadia	241	5 657,482	51	1 525,688	6	180	2	60	5	150	3	90	308	8 662
Ghassania	48	1 220,25	23	690	2	60	-	-	4	120	3	90	80	2 180,25
Gurnata	3	67	29	806,85	17	510	5	150	-	-	2	60	56	1 593
Najid	3	76	4	120	4	120	-	-	-	-	2	60	13	376
Wahida	91	2 501,15	39	1 170	33	990	17	510	12	390	9	270	203	5 861,15
Total	2 261	48 689,581	755	22 568,33	285	8 531,9	101	3030	59	1 770	90	2 700	3 651	87 289,869

Source: GADEB internal documents, Raqqa December 2003

By autumn 2003, nearly 500 requests for lands were submitted to the GADEB on behalf of employees working in this administration or in the engineering departments; and also on behalf of disappointed owners.

### ***3.1 Social Consequences of the State Farm Distribution: Enrichment and Feelings of Injustice***

In spite of government pride regarding the speed of the distribution process between December 2001 and April 2002, many doubts have been raised among intellectuals and employees about the implementation of this measure in the Syrian East. For some Raqqawî, this reform will reinforce the local power structures and not change the land inequity in the region. Some people think it served only to give land to highly influent persons in Damascus. But many admit that because of this reform agricultural productivity improved during 2002 and 2003 in the reformed land. Production doubled (although the production equipments were not all sold and that the cooperatives were not yet in function). Let us try to evaluate the enrichment of the recipients and I will then explore issues relating to general land sales and illegal hiring.

Disputes over decision 83 legal principles and implementation have taken place within a broad consensus on the fact that the economic improvement and increase of productivity are noteworthy. The decision aimed at reshaping the bond between land and farmers, even without property rights, on the base of use rights. The distribution comity director argued that each recipient was able to double his annual revenue. If we take 6,000 Syrian Pounds S. P. (100 US \$) as the average monthly salary for a farm employee (a temporary worker make 4,000 S.P. and an engineer 12,000 S. P.), which made annual wages of 72,000 S.P., the same person can easily obtain 130,000 to 170,000 S.P. annual incomes with 30 donoms irrigated.<sup>6</sup> According to Raqqa agricultural direction, Raqqa Mohafazat total agricultural production was multiplied by five in three years since the end of the State farms system. From 400,000 millions S.P. in 2000, the agricultural production jumped to 2 billion in 2003. The principal reason of such productivity increase is an illegal one and deal with the constitution of large fields by illegal plots resale.

### ***3.2. Lands Resale and Latifundia Recreation***

The State farms reform created many family conflicts between the recorded heirs who gained land and the non recorded. There was also conflicts however, between those who received bad plots and those who gained better land (improved location or better soil). Moreover, the reform led to an extreme land parcelling and a property scatter (most of the recipients obtained plots far from their former and actual properties). As a consequence, an internal 'rationalisation' process is taking place by plot sale or exchange.

Following the parcelling out of the lands and their distribution, many recipients now either rent or sell their plots. In case of land hiring, the current price is 1 500 to 2,000 Syrian Pounds per donom. For a 30 donoms plot, such a location produces an income of 45 to 60,000 pounds Syrian per annum, which corresponds to the average employees wages. In case of land sale, the current price is 15 to 30,000 Syrian Pounds per donom, which is three to ten times lower to the land market: along the river Balikh, a donom cost between 50 to 80,000 S.P., but along the Euphrates a donom cost between 100,000 S.P. to 400,000 S.P. for the best land, located near Raqqa. Thus a recipient who sells his/her

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6 Its calculation counts on the assumption that the recipient cultivates 15 donoms in corn and 15 donoms in cotton. 15 corn donoms can produce 8 tons (i.e. 75 bags, 'joul', from 110 to 120 kg); as a ton of corn is sold 12,000 S.P. (between 11,000 and 13,000 S.P.); that makes a total production of 100,000 £. Such a calculation supposes a high productivity of 5 corn bags by donom, that is to say 600 kg. As for cotton, a donum which can produce 300 to 400 kg, 15 irrigated donoms can produce from 4,5 to 6 tons of cotton; by counting on a selling price of 2,900 S.P. 100 kg, one reaches 130 500 to 174,000 S.P. Approximately 100,000 S.P. is necessary to purchase seeds, manures and the hiring of the farm equipment. Indeed, the seeds are sold 15 S.P. per kilo and 500 kg are necessary for 15 donoms. Manures cost 8 £ kg and one needs 50 kg by donum. The peasant is paid 250 S.P. by cultivated donum. On the whole, by deducing the production costs from the agricultural incomes (230,500 to 274,000 S.P.), one reaches 130,500 to 174,000 S.P. of additional benefit.



thirty irrigated donoms can hope to gain from 450,000 £ to 900,000 £ S.P. on the black market. That is six to twelve years of average wages. The buyer indeed makes a very good deal, but in an illegal way.

As the sale or hiring of the State farms plots are both illegal, the contracts are confidential and engage only private individuals. The denunciation risk weighs on the land recipient and not on the man who rents or buys it. I have tried to uncover the identities of new large landholders in this process, but it is a difficult subject to broach in interviews. I did, however, learn that approximately 80% of the recipients do not exploit their lands directly, but rented them or sold them; and that the largest 'purchasers' are currently members of the Châwaya tribes, in particular that of the Hleissat, who are specialized in sheep sale. Some Hleissat sheikhs confirmed this analysis in October 2004, by saying: *'Of course the Hleissat are the ones who buy this land: because it is their land! We, the former owner, received only 30 donoms out of thousand donoms we had. We do everything to get our land back. Why did not the government simply give us our land back?'* As a Ba'th militant reminded me, this former big owner should thank the government that gave him back some land, for, in most of the case, big ownership was built illegally in Jazîra. During the 1950s, many tribe chiefs registered in their name common tribal properties, and many Raqqawî urban landowner took land from indebted peasants. Furthermore, one must keep in mind that the agrarian reform was not fully implemented in the Jazîra: in 1970 it had concerned only a third of latifundia (Khader, 1984).

A double process results from the sale and hiring movements of the Pilot Project fields. On the one hand, there is a reinforcement of large contractor capacities who have the means to rent and exploit large surfaces, and that were able to keep their properties during the agrarian reform by giving it to their heirs. On the other hand, there is the renewal of large latifundia, which exceed all property ceilings fixed by the successive land reform laws. Thus the change in the property structures and nature of exploitation is radical. It passed from State farms to large private domains, that the Ba'th Party theorist wished to limit above all. It is indeed a form of counter-revolution (Bush, 2002).

### **3. 3. A New Law? Indemnities for the Agrarian Reform Expropriated Owners**

According to a rumour well spread in all Jazîra, the government has thought about compensating, or giving indemnities, to the owners whose lands were taken during the 1958, 1963 and 1966 agrarian reforms. Compensations would be given according to the land's agrarian potential and its location in the five different pluviometric zones. Billions S.P. should be versed, taken on the Syrian oil exportation incomes which knew a great growth since 1985, especially in the Hassaka and Deir ez Zor fields. All the owners devote themselves to chimerical calculations and wait impatiently for the promulgation of this new law. This rumour is linked to an official decree (n° 4602, July 2002) regarding Raqqa Mohafazat. In an article published the 16 August 2002, *Akhbar Al Charq* quoted this last decree and announced that the government is planning to pay compensations to owners wrongly expropriated during 1966 agrarian reform: *'The most important expropriation happened in the two Mohafazats of Raqqa and Hassaka and created injustice for the owner. This came from a wrong implementation of the agrarian reform law'*. And the newspaper quotes a memorandum written on the 20 July 2002 by Prime Minister Mustapha Miro to Raqqa governor, Fayçal al Qassem, asking for *'detailed information on properties and lands taken by the State, their exploitation, and all decrees related to them'*. The newspaper added that the Ba'th Party already made this demand in August 1972, but did not receive any answer in thirty years. According to Ministerial decree n° 4602, July 2002, either the lands will be given back to the former owners, or compensations will be paid to *'68 former owners expropriated before 1970'*. This decree concerning a small group of landowners in Raqqa Mohafazat is at the origin of the national rumour on compensations for expropriated lands.

According to Raqqawî intellectuals, even if the government paid back compensations, it will not be sufficient to launch an agro-industrial sector, for the recipients will first buy cars and built houses for their children. This counter-reform would not have real positive impact on Raqqa Mohafazat economy. Many people are sceptical about this rumour, for it will cost a lot to the government. As

concluded a Raqqawî Ba'th militant: *'After all, why should the government pay indemnities to former owners who got land illegally?'*

### **Conclusion: State Farm Privatisation as a Counter-Revolution**

The political decision 83 of December 16, 2000 completely upset the land structures which prevailed in the Euphrates Basin since the land reforms and the creation of the Pilot Project State Farms in 1972. This decision was not a law, but a political decision taken by the Ba'th Party, which already raised legal questions: can this decision legally cancel former property laws as those of 1959 and 1984?

The farms were divided in small plots of 3 ha, impossible to exploit without the merging of plots by purchase or lease. Moreover, 3 irrigated ha are not enough to cover the needs of a 6 persons family: one needs at least 6 irrigated ha. In December 2003, approximately 5,000 people received lands from the former Pilot Project fifteen farm. Half of them were former owners or land reform recipients; a third were sharecroppers with exploitation contracts and a fifth were workers and GADEB employees. An intense phenomenon of land hiring took place through which the former employees received the equivalent of the pay they have lost. In parallel, large land contractors grew rich at high speed. They even managed to acquire land at low prices (three times cheaper than the market), without respect of any property ceilings.

The state farms privatisation process was followed in Jazîra by an unexpected counter-revolution. Indeed, the primary beneficiaries of the 'reform' process are not the traditional rural constituents of the Ba'th party, but a re-emergent class of latifundists tied to central state and traditional power structures. Does it suggest that a shift is occurring in the social base of Syria's political elite?

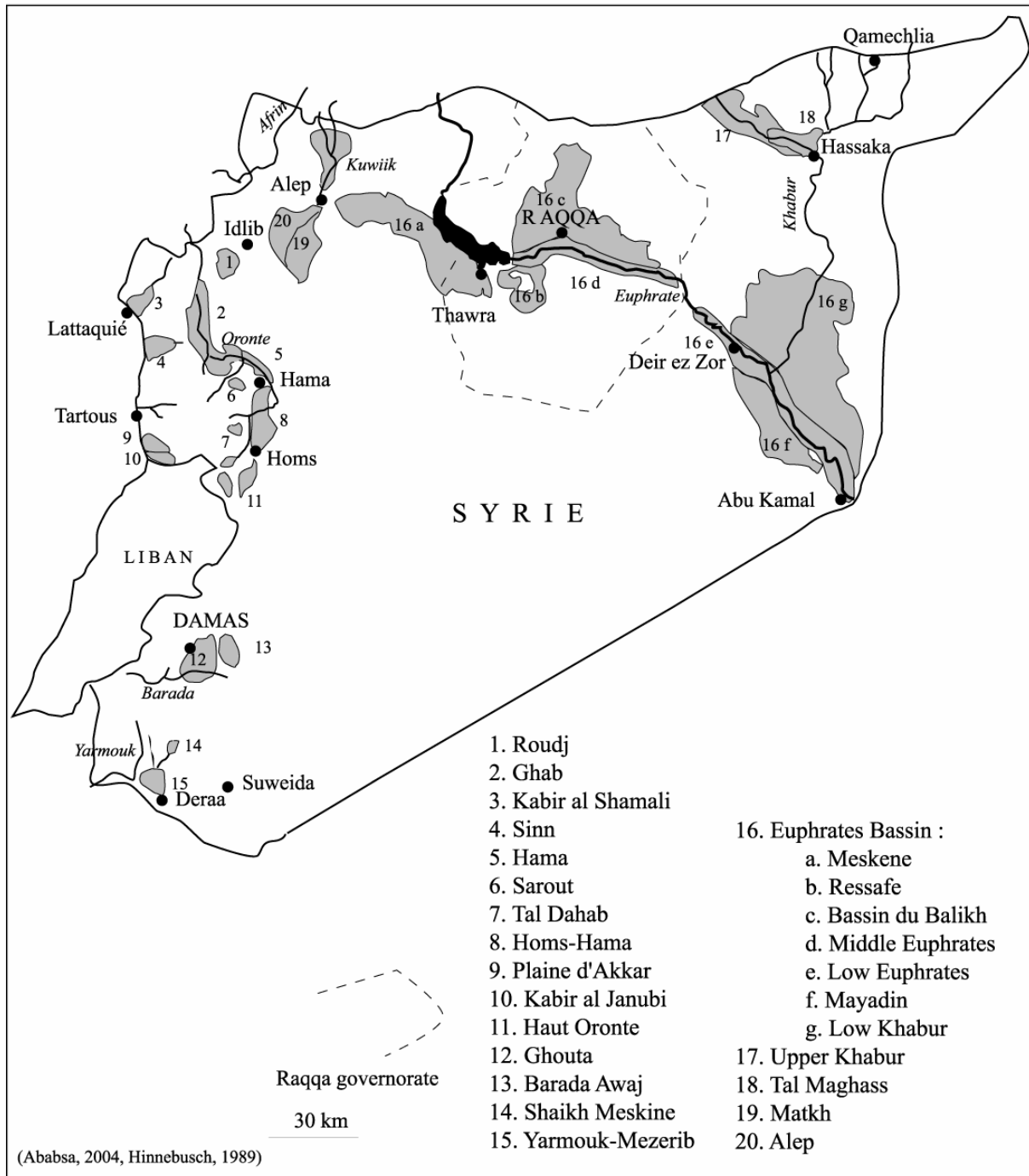
The government objective is above all to re-launch the national economy by reinvesting funds (with a real inflation risk) and to improve the Syrian standard of living. The point is to make of Syria a valid trade partner for the European Union by 2010, according to the economic Association agreement whose first step was signed this year (19-10-2004). It is within this framework that decision 83 was taken and that a new law is in project concerning the land property. Syria enjoys a very favourable location in Machreq for the Euphrates Basin and its intensive agriculture potentialities. That is the reason why the Euphrates Basin rational management is seen as vital and that the State farms privatisation occurred. Even if this contradicts forty years of ba'thists experiments made for internal aiming more than geostrategical ones.

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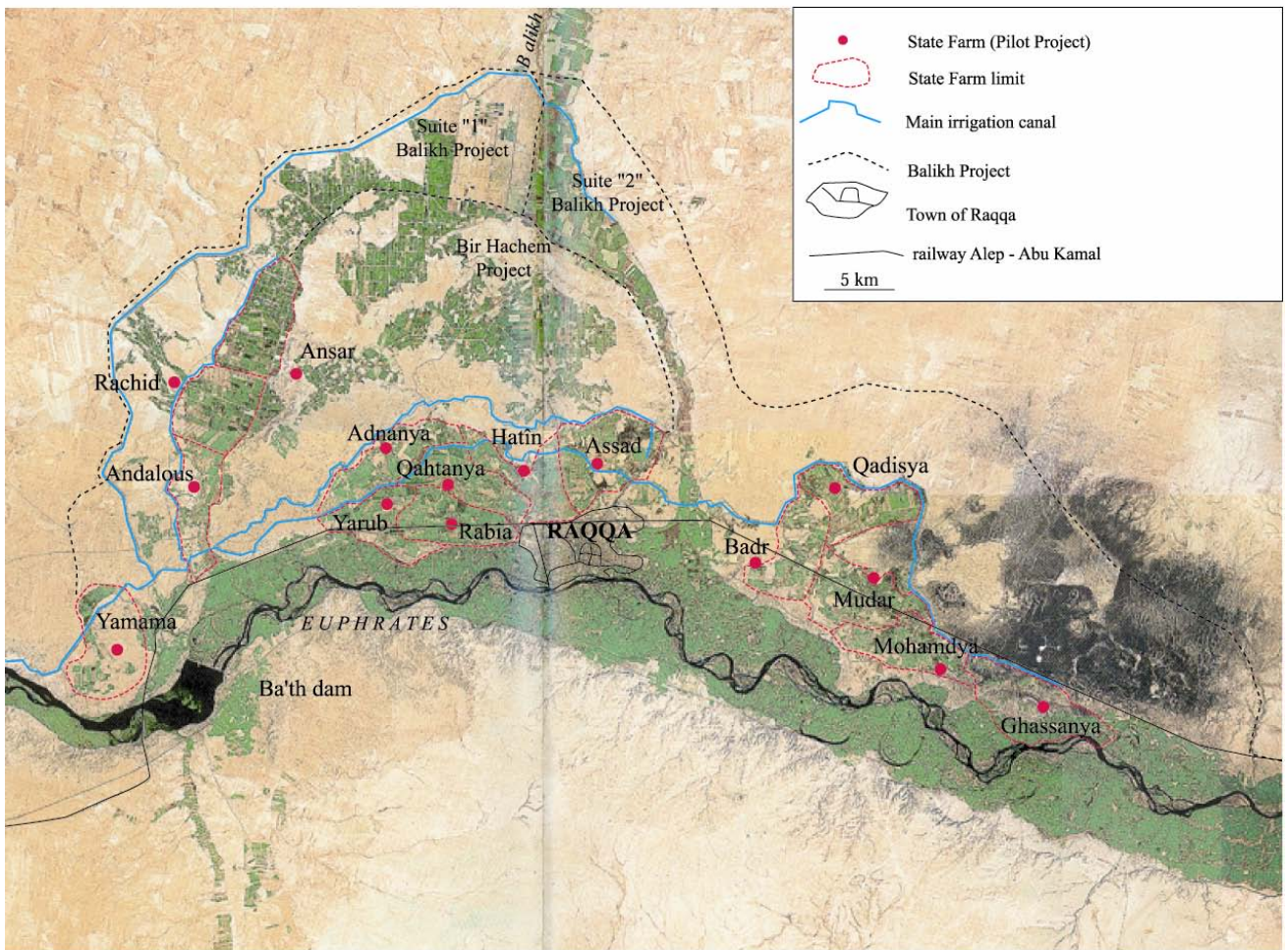
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Appendix

Map 1 : Irrigation projects in Syria

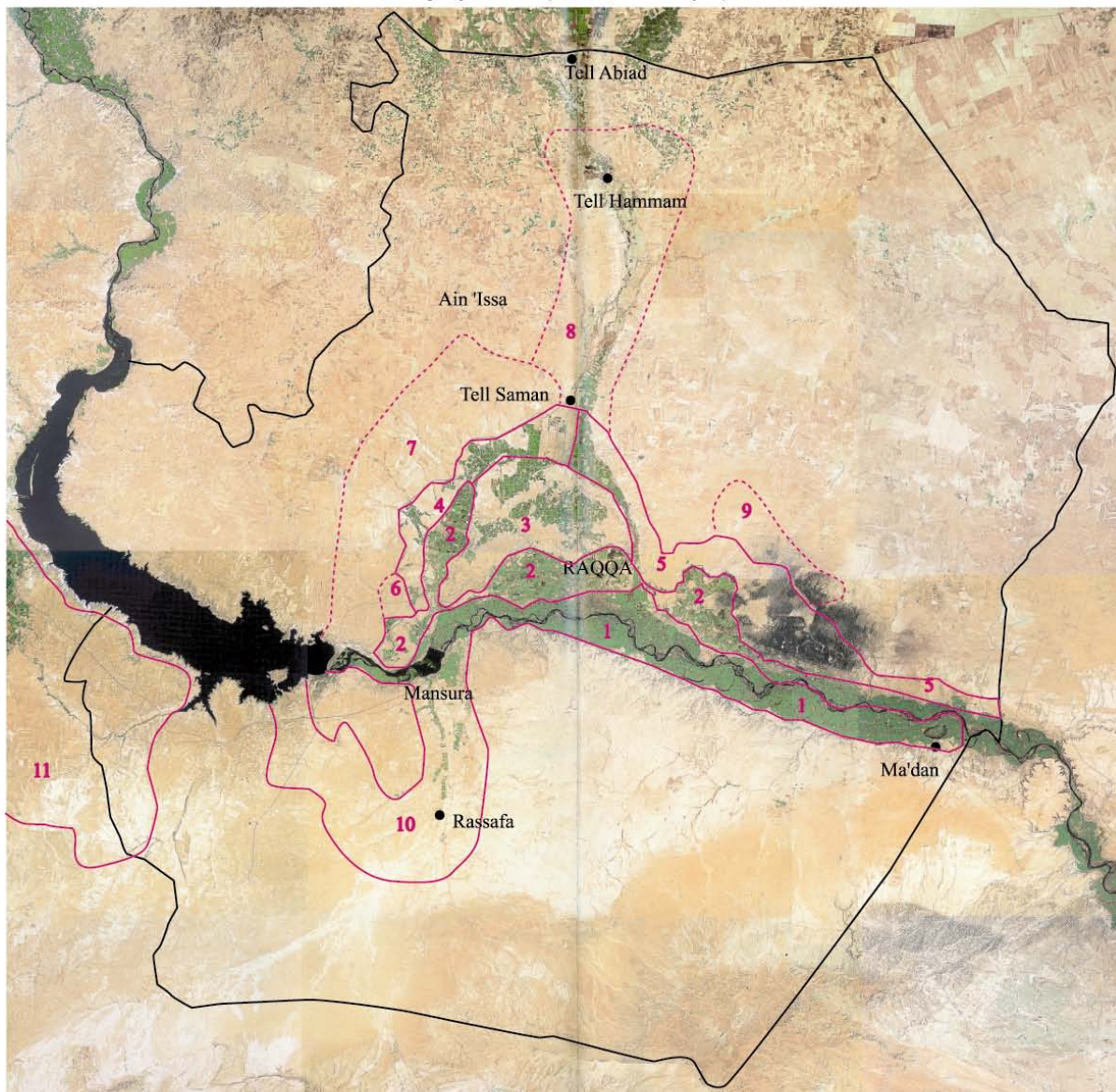


Map 2 : The Pilot Project fifteen State Farms and the Balikh Project (Euphrates Project) on a SPOT Image - june 1990 (GORS, Atlas of Syria)






(ABABSA, 2004)

Map 3 : The Euphrates Project zones in Raqqa governorate  
On a SPOT Image - june 1990 (GORS, Atlas of Syria)



(Ababsa, 2004)

-  limit of Raqqa Governorate
-  limit of the irrigation projects
-  limit of Balikh Bassin Extensions

- 1. Middle Euphrates (165 000 ha)
- 2. Pilote Project (24 000 ha)

- Balikh Bassin :
- 3. Bir Hachem (24 000 ha)
  - 4. Suite "1"
  - 5. Suite "2"
  - 6. 7. 8. 9. extensions

- 10. Ressafe (40 000 ha were scheduled in 1975)
- 11. Meskene (80 000 ha were scheduled in 1979)

10 km

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