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LIMITS OF “AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING” IN
SYRIA: PRIVATE WELFARE, ISLAMIC CHARITIES,
AND THE RISE OF THE ZAYD MOVEMENT

The growth of private welfare in Syria since the 1990s and a parallel détente between the Ba‘th regime and the Islamic trend have allowed an Islamic movement called Jama‘at Zayd to gain an impressive hold on Damascus’s charitable sector. Through a detailed, fieldwork-based analysis of this process, this article argues that the movement’s success as a private welfare provider is the product rather than the cause of its large religious following. We also propose an empirically nuanced contribution to the debate on the current transformations of Arab authoritarian systems, questioning the regime’s ability to effectively co-opt the Zayd movement. Whereas the development of private welfare is politically risk free when authoritarian leaders control the financial and symbolic resources needed to maintain it, it can also strengthen independent-minded groups when, as in Zayd’s case, its funding stems from a large popular base that limits the possibilities of instrumentalization by the regime.