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14 April 2016

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/80122/>  
MPRA Paper No. 80122, posted 11 Jul 2017 13:38 UTC

**AL-ASADĪ AND HIS WORK *AL-TAYSĪR*:  
A study of his socio-economic ideas**

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**This project was funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research (DSR), at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, under grant no. G-1436-120-476. The author, therefore, acknowledges with thanks DSR technical and financial support.**

## **Acknowledgement**

My first and foremost thanks are due to Almighty Allah Who enabled me to complete one more project in the series of Islamic economic thought. Then my deep gratitude is to the Deanship of Scientific Research, King Abdulaziz University, for a generous funding of this project. The help and support extended by the Deanship of Scientific Research is being gratefully acknowledged. I am also thankful to our Dean Dr. Abdullah Qurban Turkistani and to all our colleagues at the Islamic Economics Institute for being a constant source of inspiration and encouragement in this endeavor. Finally, I would like to thank to all the supporting staff at the Institute who helped in several ways during the completion of this project. *Wa ākhiru da‘wānā ‘ani’l-ḥamdu li’-Allāh Rabbi’l-‘ālamīn*

Abdul Azim Islahi

7-7-1437H. / 14-4-2016

**AL-ASADĪ AND HIS WORK *AL-TAYSĪR*:**  
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**ABSTRACT**

Muḥammad bin Muḥammad bin Khalīl al-Asadī lived in A.H. 9<sup>th</sup>/ C.E. 15<sup>th</sup> century. The details of his birth, life and death remain obscure. He authored many works on the socio-economic problems of his time. All these works have disappeared without trace except one: *al-Taysīr* (the Facilitation). This surviving work is the only source of information about his life and his ideas. He suggested efficient market administration, public distribution of food, elimination of monopolies, monetary reform, management of public income and expenditure, embryonic quantitative use in production and distribution, and measurement of inflation. The depth and significance of his ideas remains largely unexplored. The present paper attempts to address this need.

## Introduction

Al-Asadī was a fifteenth-century scholar of the post Khaldunian era who kept alive the Arab-Islamic traditions in economic thought. As this paper is to show, writing about forty-five years ago Boulakia (1971, 1118) was not correct when she remarked in her article “Ibn Khaldun: A Fourteenth Century Economist”, that Ibn Khaldun was “an accident of history without predecessors and without successors”. In fact, beginning from Islamic history up to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century it is possible to identify about a hundred Arab-Islamic scholars who thought and wrote on a variety of specific economic issues.<sup>1</sup> Immediately after Ibn Khaldun we find al-Maqrīzī and al-Asadī— two brilliant scholars of Mamlūk era who followed the pattern of Ibn Khaldun in writing on socio-economic issues. While al-Maqrīzī is well-known in the circle of scholars, al-Asadī remained obscure although his contribution to economic thought is no less than the former. He dealt with the efficient market management, public distribution of food, elimination of monopolies, monetary reform, public income and expenditure, incidence of taxation, embryonic quantitative use in production and distribution, and measurement of inflation. But his ideas still remained unexplored.

To the best of our knowledge, al-Asadī's work has not been translated into any other language including English. To date, there is no review or critical analysis of al-Asadī's economic thought except an article in Arabic language.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of a detailed scrutiny of his original work, the present study attempts to fill this void.

### 1. Life and his time

It is one of the ironies of biographies that while the life account of some famous scholars receive scant mention, lesser known persons enjoy much wider publicity. Writers who contributed to humanity's stock of knowledge with their deep insights

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<sup>1</sup> For details see Islahi, Abdul Azim, 2014, *History of Islamic Economic Thought*, Cheltenham and Brookfield, Edward Elgar.

<sup>2</sup> In 1991, Ahmad Shawqi Dunya wrote an article entitled "*Qira'ah Iqtisadiyah fi Kitāb al-Taysir wa'l-I'tibār wa'l-Tahrir wa'l-Ikhtibār bi mā yajib min ḥusn al-tadbir wa'l-taşarruf wa'l-ikhtiyār li Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Khalīl al-Asadī* " (An economic study of Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Khalīl al-Asadī 's Work *Al-Taysir* ...), *Majllah Jamī'ah al-Imam Muhammad b. Su'ud al-Islamiyah*, No. 5, 1412/1991, pp. 197-226. Perhaps the same article became the part of his work *Silsilah A'lam al-Iqtisad al-Islami*, (1418/1998), vol. 3, pp. 177-214).

are sometimes altogether ignored. Al-Asadī belongs to this last category. His work itself is the only source of information about him.<sup>3</sup>

Muḥammad bin Muḥammad bin Khalīl al-Asadī,<sup>4</sup> as his full name, was born in the declining phase of the Mamlūk dynasty.<sup>5</sup> He lived in the time of the second Mamlūk dynasty called *Burjī* Mamlūk's regime (784-923/1382-1517).<sup>6</sup> He authored a valuable work on the socio-economic problems of his time entitled *al-Taysīr*<sup>7</sup> (Facilitation). The manuscript of the book was first introduced to the public by Muhammad Kurd Ali in 1342/1923.<sup>8</sup> He presented a selection of it and at the end wrote that the only copy of the manuscript was available in al-Khazānah al-Taymurīyah Library owned by Ahmad Taymur Pasha. He said that its author came after Ibn Khaldun, the famous writer on philosophy of civilization and history. Ali expressed the need for publication of the book.<sup>9</sup> From the date of completion of this book, 855/1451, it can be established that the author was alive during the mid 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>We have searched almost all the available works on history and biography of the fifteenth century but found no information on al-Asadī.

<sup>4</sup> The origin of his attribute "al-Asadī" is not known. Perhaps he was called 'al-Asadī' because he belonged to the 'al-Asadī' family which earlier migrated from Safad in Palestine to Syria, or he belonged to the Arabian tribe called Banū Asad.

<sup>5</sup> Mamlūk dynasty ruled Egypt and Syria. They are divided into an earlier group called the *Baḥrī* Mamlūks (1250-1382), and a later group, the *Burjī* Mamlūks (1382-1517). The Mamlūk dynasty was established in Egypt in the mid-thirteenth century after abolishing the Ayyubid dynasty in 648/1250. Cairo was their capital. The dynasty of *Burjī* Mamlūks, as opposed to the *Baḥrī* Mamlūk dynasty (684-784/1250-1382), was established by al-Zāhir Barqūq (d. 801/1399), a *burjī* slave, in 784/1382, by overthrowing *Baḥrī* Mamlūk sultan al-Ṣaliḥ b. Sha`ban (773-4/1381-2, 791-2/1389-90) to whom the former was a bodyguard.

<sup>6</sup>The Mamlūk dynasty was established in Egypt in the mid-thirteenth century after abolishing the Ayyubid dynasty in 648/1250. Cairo was their capital. After they took control of Egypt, they achieved the re-conquest of the last of the Crusader kingdoms in the Levant, and defeated the Mongols at the critical battle of Ayn Jalut in 658/1260. The dynasty of *Burjī* Mamlūks, as opposed to the *Baḥrī* Mamlūk dynasty (684-784 /1250-1382), was established by Al-Zāhir Barqūq (d. 801/1399), a *burjī* slave, in 784/1382, by overthrowing Baḥrī Mamlūk sultan al-Ṣaliḥ b. Sha`ban (773-4/1381-2, 791-2/1389-90) to whom the former was a bodyguard. Their rule came to an end in early 16<sup>th</sup> century when Ottoman Sultan Salim First (d. 926/1520) defeated Mamlūk Sultan Qansawh Ghawri in 1517 C.E.

<sup>7</sup>The full title of his work is *al-Taysīr wa'l-I'tibār wa'l-Taḥrīr wa'l-Ikhtibār bi mā yajib min ḥusn al-tadbīr wa'l-taṣarruf wa'l-ikhtiyār* (Facilitation and Consideration, Registration and Scrutiny in matters that need good governance, management and choice).

<sup>8</sup>Ali, Muhammad Kurd. *al-Taysīr wa'l-I'tibār wa'l-Taḥrīr wa'l-Ikhtibār bi mā yajib min ḥusn al-tadbīr wa'l-taṣarruf wa'l-ikhtiyār*, in *Majallat al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī*, Damascus, 1923, vol.3, pp. 221-27.

<sup>9</sup>The book was edited and published later by Abd al-Qadir Ahmad al-Tulaymat in 1387/1967 n.p., Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi. We have referred to pages of this book in this paper.

century.<sup>10</sup> From his various statements it is also clear that he lived in Damascus. At that time Egypt and Syria were ruled by the Circassian Mamlūk. The Caliph was Al-Qā'im bi-Amri'llāh Ḥamzah b. Muḥammad (d. 855/1451).<sup>11</sup> He was 12<sup>th</sup> Abbasid caliph in Egypt.

A study of al-Asadī's work would reveal that he occupied the position of a *muḥtasib* (market inspector). This is so because he called for the standardization of products, correct weight and measures, supply of necessities, control of prices in case of imperfection in the market, currency reform, check on social evils, etc. which are functions of a *muḥtasib*. His awareness of these problems shows that he was practically involved in public dealing.

All contemporary sources show that the Mamlūk administration in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century presented an abhorrent picture in terms of natural calamity, political upheaval, morality, and economic conditions.<sup>12</sup> Al-Asadī sheds light on all these aspects of Mamlūk rule.

Egypt and Syria had the advantage of both trade and agriculture. But due to misguided policies of Mamlūk rulers the commercial sector was adversely affected (some of the Mamlūk rulers monopolized trade, resorted to hoarding and heavy custom duties). Agriculture was badly affected. Fiscal and monetary mismanagement worsened the economic situation tenfold. The period saw frequent economic crises caused at times by rulers' ill-governance and corrupt practices, and at other times by natural catastrophes such as over flooding of the Nile or its drying up, epidemics, crop diseases, etc. In many cases both man-made and natural factors co-existed. From such situations both the ruling class and the common man suffered but the suffering of the latter was far greater as the rulers tried to recoup resources by imposition of regressive taxes, monopolization of businesses, and hoarding of food supplies. The most affected class was that of small farmers, laborers, and artisans. It was in this context that al-Asadī advised the ruler through his writings to reform the situation. He drew the ruler's attention to the existing problems and their causes, and suggested remedies.

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<sup>10</sup> He completed this work on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan, 854. The final copy was prepared on Tuesday, 30<sup>th</sup> Ramadan, 855 AH. P. 175, 178.

<sup>11</sup>For more details refer to Ibn Iyas, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'i' al-Duhūr*, (Cairo: Lajnat al-Talif wa'l-Tarjamah 1960) vol. 2: 288. Events of year 855 hijrah.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Lane-Poole, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen 1925); S. William Muir, *The Mameluke or Slave Dynasty of Egypt* (London: Smith, Elder 1896).

## 2. Motive behind writing His Work *al-Taysīr* and its Content

Al-Asadī was motivated to write his book *al-Taysīr wa'l-I'tibār* by a sense of obligation towards the ruler and his people and presented it to an influential government official as a manual for good governance<sup>13</sup> (al-Asadi 1967, 34, 48). It was presented to an influential government official but the author does not mention his name. He simply addresses him saying that he is a '*kātib al-sirr al-sharīf*' (top government secretary)<sup>14</sup> and supervisor of the Departments in the entire Islamic domains (p. 48).<sup>15</sup> He gives a good account of the person to whom the book was addressed in four pages from 48-51. It would appear that al-Asadī was his subordinate, (p. 51).

He divides it in four chapters of which the first and the third are especially concerned with economic matters. In the first chapter he deals with the unhealthy changes that took place in the Islamic governments causing distress in public and private lives. He highlights lessons that one can learn from these changes, and measures that can be taken to correct the situation. There were four main causes of the unrest: negligence towards agriculture, the main source of sustenance; rioting of Bedouins; oppression of farmers; and assignment of government posts on payment of money (bribery). He points out in detail the methods of good governance and their benefits for the ruler. At the same time he warns of the bad consequences of negligence and laxity. He supports his statements by quoting from the Qur'an, *ḥadīth* (tradition of the Prophet) and evidences from Islamic history. He also got inspirations from ancient history of Egypt and Iran.

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<sup>13</sup> It may be noted that al-Asadi was not unique in writing such a manual. In Islamic history in every period we find manuals written by wise men of the period for the guidance of the ruler. Such works are generally known as 'mirror for princes. Al-Asadi's contemporary historian al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1441) wrote two manuals – *Ighāthat al-Ummah bi-Kashf al-Ghummah* (Relief for the nation by removing distress) and *Shudhūr al-'uqūd fī dhikr al-nuqūd* (Pearls of garlands in dealing with money) – the former to guide the ruler in general economic matters and the latter especially for monetary management.

<sup>14</sup> *Kātib al-sirr* was a very prestigious position in the Mamlūk Sultanate (al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz wa'l-'itibār bi dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa'l-'athār* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, undated), 2: 367.

<sup>15</sup> The qualities and positions noted by al-Asadī apply to Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Abd al-Rahim Ibn al-Kamal al-Barizi (796-856/1393-1452) who was, according to al-Sakhawi (*al-Dawu' al-Lāmi'*, Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hayah, undated), 9: 236-39) '*kātib al-sirr*' in the capital Cairo and died on the same position in 856/1452.

In the next chapter al-Asadī exhorts rulers, court officials and religious scholars to recognize their responsibilities, and through using the best and wisest policies, correct the prevailing miserable situation and save the socio-economic structure from total collapse. It may be noted that agriculture received first priority in the Mamluk economy (Islahi 1988, 33-44) and industry came the next but it mainly remained on traditional pattern (Gibb and Bowen 1965, 1: 281). As far commerce was concerned, they could not fully utilize their strategic location on Mediterranean Sea and being on the world caravan route.

In the third chapter al-Asadī deals with issues like inflation, migration, in-fighting and ordeals. He also suggests measures for overcoming the latter. In his opinion, corruption in weights, measures and money exacerbated conditions. The incumbent authority was not interested in reforming and standardizing these weights and measures. He calls for standardization and reform of these important tools of economy in such a way that manipulation and deception are eliminated.

In addition to weight, measure and currency factors, there were other reasons for shortage of supply and increase in prices, such as charging protection money or extortion,<sup>16</sup> monopolization of commodities, corrupt intermediaries, and shortage caused by paucity of rain, insufficient irrigation facilities and inadequate land preparation. He urges authorities to fulfill their responsibilities towards removing all these hurdles in the way of proper and sufficient supplies of required goods. In this connection he also emphasizes the role of the *al-hisbah* (market supervision) institution and its proper functioning which can alleviate many market evils.

Al-Asadī appeals to authorities to take stock of the situation, put a check on monopoly, and an end to profiteers, hoarders and middlemen, as the present state of affairs is good neither for the Sultan, nor for his subjects. He warns of the grave consequences if the miserable condition is left unchanged. He presents examples of earlier rulers and their just and sound policies that led to the creation of enormous wealth and prosperity, like Alexander the Great, *Kisrā* (Sassanid) of Iran, ancient Egyptian kings, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, great rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, Fatimid, Tulunid, Ayyubid and finally he mentions the early

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<sup>16</sup> For protection money or extortion in Mamlūk economy of 15<sup>th</sup> century refer to John L. Meloy, 2004, "The privatization of protection: Extortion and the state in the Circassian Mamlūk Period", *Journal of Economic and social History of the Orient*, 47, 2, 195-212.

Mamlūk rulers (al-Asadī 1967, 53-78). The descending successors in this dynasty took a different course of action resulting in a worsening condition of the people and the economy.

### **3. *Al-Taysīr*– an example of the mirror for princes**

Al-Asadī's work *al-Taysīr* is a good example of the mirror for princes written in the middle age of the Arab-Islamic history (Islahi 2014, 44-45).. Thus discovery of this work is an addition to the known list of books written on the pattern of mirror for princes.<sup>17</sup> Al-Asadī first gives an account of the troublesome condition of the two major parts of the Mamlūk Sultanate – Syria and Egypt and then draws the attention of the ruler towards their reform.

In his opinion, in the Syrian part of the Sultanate rulers do not follow the right course of action for dealing with the affairs of people. Farmers are subjected to injustice and tyranny; ethical values are ignored; villages are deserted, and anarchy is wide spread (ibid. 91-2).

In Syria, trouble started due to the spread of tribal in-fighting and internal strife, oppressive treatment meted out to the farmers, occupation of Bedouins in their lands, farmers' desertion of their farms and their involvement in illicit activities in the cities. Authorities were kept unaware of the grim situation of the territory (ibid.).

As far as the Egyptian part of the Sultanate was concerned, al-Asadi identifies four causes of unhappy events – negligence of land development, emergence of an errant group of villagers, arbitrary and tyrannical behavior of the tax collectors, and appointment to various posts on payment of money – details of which are given below.

The first reason was the negligence of land development which entailed preparation of land, excavation of irrigation sources, and a revamp of canals and water courses. It also required removal of obstructions and interruptions in the way of cultivation. In addition to this neglect of the land, maltreatment and abuse was meted out to the tillers of the land and cultivators (ibid. 92-3).

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<sup>17</sup> In the Persian tradition we find examples of such works known by Western writers as “Mirrors for Princes” and some of them were translated into Arabic during the ‘translation phase’ in development of Islamic culture. Muslim scholars of the later period must have benefited from them as it is clear from quotations, by some of them, of their wisdom and citation of their examples and episodes, in varying degrees (Hosseini 2003, 110, 122, 127).

The second reason for trouble was the emergence of an errant group of villagers as a result of negligence of land and maltreatment of cultivators. Sometimes the deserting farmers took refuge with the people of the town where they were exploited, leading to anxiety, disturbances and other social problems. This caused a decline in agricultural production and increased the cost of law and order maintenance (ibid.).

The third factor was the arbitrary and tyrannical behavior of the tax collectors and governors. They imposed heavy taxes on farmers and collected them with utmost cruelty, resulting in riots and uprising. If farmers were unable to pay taxes, they were sometimes imprisoned and their property confiscated (ibid. 94-5).

The fourth factor was related to the appointment to various posts on payment of money. In other words, some people paid bribes to obtain top positions. Al-Asadī stresses that this is common to Egypt, Syria and neighboring Muslim states. Naturally, such incompetent office bearers who obtained the offices through bidding high prices first tried to collect their money with profit and exploited the common man. Every tyrant enjoyed the support of some authority, so the oppressed person could not complain against him. The whole system was based on corruption (ibid. 95-6).

Dealing with the economic consequences of worsening condition of the country al-Asadī observes:

Number of dead has increased, prices are rising, hunger is prevailing, bad conditions are exposed, migration is occurring. It is expected that the situation may lead to waging wars, devastation and riots. The rebellious may spread and the enemy may occupy. Epidemics and diseases may catch. Fear, pains, and defects may dominate. The blessings may turn into curse. (ibid. 146)

He stresses that the officials will fulfill their duties only if they take serious measures to tackle the situation and correct the deteriorating condition of the people and the economy.

Aiming at comprehensive treatment of the economy, al-Asadī points out responsibilities of the government. According to him the ruler should observe the conditions of his retainers, and exhort them to observe the *'ahd* (covenant) with Allah and fulfill His trust. He should not take help of persons except those whose integrity, religiosity and aptitude is satisfactory. If possible, he should personally take care of all affairs of the subject. Otherwise he may appoint someone to do them, and then he

should check him. If the governor is found best for the work assigned to him, then he should be appreciated and encouraged. If not, he should be removed (ibid. 153). Al-Asadī notes that the Persian ruler Anusherwan always kept before him the following words of wisdom written in golden ink on green diamond: "The king is with his supporters, supporters are with wealth, wealth is from taxation, taxes are from the subject, subject is by development and development is by justice" (ibid. 158-9). Referring to this statement he advocates multidisciplinary and dynamic action by the government to arrest the waning socioeconomic condition of the country. All this is written in the style of "mirror for princes".

#### 4. His other works

From al-Asadī's own statement it is known that he authored four other books in addition to only surviving work *al-Taysīr wa'l-I'tibār wa'l-Taḥrīr wa'l-Ikhtibār bi mā yajib min ḥusn al-tadbīr wa'l-taṣarruf wa'l-ikhtiyār* (al-Asadī, pp.35-37). Most probably his contemporaries ignored his works because he frequently advocates for exercise of *ijtihād* (independent and fresh thinking) by the in-charge of public affairs,<sup>18</sup> something against the 'scholarly taste' of his time. It may be noted that the door of *ijtihād* was closed long ago and talking about it was considered not less than a heresy.<sup>19</sup> He says, "Imam has to exercise *ijtihād* in proper way" (p. 43). He considers the existing dull minds as one of the factors behind the deteriorated condition of people in his time (p. 46). At another place he observes: "One who intends to govern with justice, ..... he should make use of *ijtihād*, knowledge and awareness of the method of ruling among the people" (p. 149).

However, he takes precautions and does not advocate for unrestricted and absolute *ijtihād*. He emphasizes on practice of *ijtihād* by the ruler that should be in agreement with the consensus of the people following the practice of the Prophet and main stream of Muslims (*al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*) (p. 86). From the titles<sup>20</sup> of his extinct works it appears that they also dealt with the politico-economic problems and social reforms.

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<sup>18</sup> For example see al-Asadī 1967, pp. 43, 87-88, 149.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Nujaym (d. 970/1563), a great scholar of Hanafite school of *fiqh*, who came a century later stated that the door to analogical reasoning, the very basis of *ijtihād*, was closed during his age. The *ulama*'s role was only to report the opinions of past scholars of their school of thought (Ibn Nujaym, 1980, p. 87). Another Shafī'ī scholar of the same period Ibn Hajar al-Haytamī (d. 973/1566) says: 'It is not permissible for anyone to pronounce a judgement against his school of jurisprudence. If they do, it is void because the capacity for *ijtihād* was missing from the people of this age' (al-Haytamī, n.d., 2: 213).

<sup>20</sup> The titles of these works are as follows:

## 6. Two Engines of growth – Agriculture and foreign trade

The Mediterranean basin of Egypt and Syria has traditionally been a rich source of agriculture on which the economy was based. Land during the Mamluk regime was divided into twenty-four parts of which four part belonged to the Sultan, ten were in the hands of *amirs* and ten were assigned to the *ajnad* (military personnel) (Ibn Taghribirdi, 1930, 8: 92). Majority of population was land tillers. During the fifteenth century it suffered from negligence and poor maintenance. Lack of land development, absence of its reform and imposition of oppressive taxes were some of the important factors behind worsening condition of the economy and people (p. 85). In this context al-Asadī says that no reform or development is possible with the existence of coercion, tyranny and oppression (p. 93). The country suffered a great deal and actually regressed because of widespread tyranny and oppression. The policy of soft treatment is especially recommended with the cultivators: "They should be provided with seeds, bullocks, instruments of cultivation, etc. They should be protected from any assault. Their grievances should be eliminated and they should be treated graciously" (p. 90).

He points out that a source of corruption is the grant of land to undeserving persons on false pretexts. Generally the deserving persons remain deprived. He questions rights of the caretaker of Public Treasury to dispose, grant or make endowment of public property (Ibid. pp. 79-80). He shows how charitable *awqāf* (endowment) and lands granted for performance of various official services become personal property with the passage of time and succeeding generations. Similarly, he shows with examples how public property, granted as usufruct only, can become lost to private hands forever (pp. 81-83). He

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- *Kitāb Lawami`al-Anwar wa Matali` al-Asrar fi`l-Nasīhat al-Tammah li-masaliḥ al-khāssah wa`l-`amah* (mentioned it on pp. 35-36 and gave a brief account of it). The following three titles he mentioned on p. 37 of his work *al-Taysīr*:
  - *Kitāb al-Nasīhat al-Kullīyah fi` kull ma yata`allaq bi` masaliḥ al-ra`īy wa`l-ra`iyah*
  - *Kitāb al-Isharat al-`Aliyah fi` ma yujib al-khalal wa`l-fasad wa`l-salah wa` aḥwal al-ra`iyah*
  - *Kitāb al-Mustadrak al-Latīf fi` kull ma yajib an yubriz bihi al-amr al-sharīf*

brings all these facts to the notice of authorities so that the situation could be improved.

Next in importance to agriculture was foreign trade as both Egypt and Syria are located on the Mediterranean coastline which facilitated their contact with Europe, while the caravan route connected them with the eastern part of the world. But in the period under study, foreign trade lost its significance. Al-Asadī understood that trade may promote growth, not just increase the nation's "treasure". He states that foreign trade was adversely affected because of various custom duties charged from the merchants. After pointing out the significance and benefits of foreign trade, he laments its deteriorating condition in his age and declining income from such an important source. In addition to excessive duties, the disturbed condition of the country discouraged foreign traders from trading in Mamlūk territory. They preferred to deal with other countries (pp. 83-84). Thus, al-Asadī believes that for the development of foreign trade attention should be paid to security and safety of the trading routes, law and order inside the country, and reasonable custom duties. This is true in the modern period as well and countries formulate their policies and programs accordingly.

He reminds the Mamlūk ruler of the flourishing trade in the past between Yemen, Egypt, and Syria, especially the role of Kārimī merchants<sup>21</sup> who had numerous vehicles on land and lofty ships at sea. Similar to kings they had their personal army, caravans with guards, commissioners, partners, slaves and servants. He mentions a few great names who earned fame, pomp, and influence in international trading. He regrettably adds: "But all that became the things of the past" (pp. 84-85).

## **7. Causes of price rise and measurement of inflation**

Fifteenth-century Egypt and Syria experienced very high inflation. The reason was not so much a shortage of goods as corruption and mismanagement. Al-Asadī notes that there are many reasons for rising prices in spite of granaries being full, such as blocking the arrival of grain in the open market, hoarding and hiding grain by millers

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<sup>21</sup> For etymology refer to *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4: 640. Kārimī is pronounced like Dārimī or *Khārijī*. For Kārimī merchants refer to Islahi (1430/2009[b], pp. 91-92); Labib, (1990, 4: 640-643).

and storekeepers, and monopolies enjoyed by certain sections (pp. 143-44). He cites the case of food items, being a necessary commodity, as an example. The same situation prevailed in all other kinds of commodities (pp. 145).

An important contribution of al-Asadī is his attempt to calculate the inflation rate by taking the example of bread. He states that if the wheat rate is one *dīnār* per *irdabb* (=70 kg) in Egypt, one *raṭl* (450g) Egyptian bread would be available at one copper dirham. This he considers a 'normal rate'. If wheat is sold at 2 *dīnārs* per *irdabb*, the price of one *raṭl* bread will be 2 *dirhams*. This he considers as '*ghalā*' (inflation or a highly abnormal price).<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, if the price goes below one *dīnār* per *irdabb*, the *rakhā* or cheapness will be at the same rate. However, he says that he never saw the price of bread go below one *raṭl* per *dirham*, even if the wheat price went below one *dīnār*.<sup>23</sup> He notes that this happened during the Ashrafīyah and Zāhirīyah regimes<sup>24</sup> when one *irdabb* wheat was sold at 100 copper *dirhams* (*dirham min al-fulūs*).<sup>25</sup> Its price sometimes even decreased to 3 *irdabbs* per *dīnār* [that is, 83 copper *dirhams* per *irdabb*] (p. 143).<sup>26</sup> In the year 854/1450, when he authored his treatise, the price of bread reached 6 *dirhams* per *raṭl*. Then it rose to 8 *dirhams* per *raṭl*. This meant a 600 to 800 percent price rise (*ghalā*), if we accept that the normal price of bread was one *raṭl* per *dirham*.

It may be noted that al-Asadī measured price rise by taking an important and essential commodity, that is, bread. This perhaps represented the other necessities as well. Had he included a basket of commodities, he would have been considered the

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<sup>22</sup>It may be noted that in modern Arabic the term used for 'inflation' is '*taḍakkhum*'. In old days the *ghalā*' was used for general rise of prices.

<sup>23</sup>The reason may be the fact that in production of bread the value added at flour and at baking stages may have been the major constituent of the bread price.

<sup>24</sup>Ashrafīyah and Zāhirīyah regimes refer to the reigns of Mamlūk Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay (825-42/1422-38) and Sultan al-Zāhir Jaqmaq (842-57/1438-53) respectively.

<sup>25</sup>During the Mamlūk period, a new monetary element "copper *dirham* of account" (*dirham min al-fulūs*) was introduced. (For example, see al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, ed. Sa'id 'Ashur, (Egypt: Dar al-Kutub Press, 1972), 3: 1059, and 4: 944). Some rendered it as 'trade *dirham*' (Willim Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans 1382-1468 AD., Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghri Birdi's Chronicles of Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955-57) vol. 2, p. 61). It originally represented one real copper coin of a dirham weight (about 3 grams), but with the continuous debasement and decline of the weight of copper coinage the 'copper dirham of account' no longer stood for one single *fals*; instead it equaled a gradually increasing number of copper coins (See Boaz Shoshan. 1982, "From silver to copper: Monetary changes in fifteenth-century Egypt", *Studia Islamica*, 56: 97-116).

<sup>26</sup>During that period an average exchange rate of *dīnār* to *copper dirham* was 1: 250 (ibid.).

first economist who guided the measurement of inflation. However, he did not attempt to present a theory of inflation. Nevertheless, such a measurement of price movement has not been advocated by any other author before al-Asadī.

## **8. Monetary Reform**

Al-Asadi perceived the corrupt monetary system as the major source of inflation. He saw that the weight and quality of metallic content of the coins were not standardized. Cutting and shedding caused frequent change in the use of money from weight to counting or vice versa. This created a chaotic situation in economic dealings. Al-Asadī expresses his anguish at the poor condition of currency that had been prevailing for a long time. Every day disputes arose regarding weight, quantity, and the value of gold and silver, and the matter was repeatedly taken up to the authorities. He presents many such instances (p. 124).

Before giving his suggestion for monetary reform al-Asadī highlighted the importance of money in man's life (pp. 43, 115, 116). According to him there are five basic needs of man: food, drink, clothing, shelter, and family life. Man has to make efforts to fulfill these needs. Since people cannot always meet all their requirements on their own, the co-operation and support of members of society are needed, and this in turn calls for division of labor. Money, as a medium of exchange, facilitates the procurement of necessities from each other (p. 42). In other words, money is created to facilitate buying and selling, and exchange of goods and services. Thus, to al-Asadī, the basic function of money is to work properly as a medium of exchange. On another occasion he observes: "It is well known that the money should be kept just and fair because it is money which is used in buying and selling. All Shar'īah remunerations and government taxes are paid in terms of money. It is used for buying and selling, and it is with this that the salaries and ranks are determined in most of the regions" (p. 115). It may be noted that the modern economists consider the medium of exchange as the most basic function of money (Crowther 1967, 83). This has also been stressed by many predecessors of al-Asadī such as al-Ghazali (n.d. 4: 114-15), Ibn Taymiyah (1963, 29: 472), Ibn al-Qayyim (1955 2: 137), etc., but he does not refer to anyone of them.

However, the main thrust of al-Asadī is to maintain a standard and sound monetary unit. He reminds the authorities of their responsibility towards having such type of money:<sup>27</sup>

It is the duty of the authority to issue right type of money and keep it just and fine in proportion, number, and maintain it well coordinated and soundly issued. It should have exact round shape and structure, and stable value and weight, in such a way that its weight and number (intrinsic value and face value) would correspond to each other whether people use it by weight or by number, and there shall be no difference or discrepancy between the two. Its way is that the royal decree be issued that money should be minted in four nomenclature keeping in view various public needs in their exchange of different goods, each kind should be well-defined so its payment, acceptance and purchasing through it becomes very convenient. (al-Asadī 1967, 119)

Al-Asadī recommends the following four silver coins<sup>28</sup> (pp. 119-20):

1. A coin of exactly a *dirham* weight,
2. Another coin of half *dirham* weight,
3. A third coin of quarter *dirham* weight, and
4. A fourth coin of one-eighth *dirham* weight.

Since al-Asadī was against any discrepancy in face value and the intrinsic value of the coin, he argues for the issue of coins of pure metal. The intrinsic value or its equivalent should be clearly indicated on the coin. As a defence against counterfeiting practices, he suggests: "All these four kinds should be fully rounded and clearly and correctly stamped on the two sides. Now if we take hundred such *dirhams*, and then weigh them, we would find that they are of the same weight written on their face. Conversely, if we take *dirhams* of the weight of hundred, and then count them, we would find that they are exact in number. The same may be said about halves, quarters and eighths dirham" (p. 120).

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<sup>27</sup> It may be noted that money and monetary management was a typical subject even for Western medieval authors. For example see Schumpeter (1997 [1954], 277-99).

<sup>28</sup> The weight of a silver *dirham* was one silver *mithqāl* (2.975 grams).

As far as gold coins are concerned, he proposes that the royal decree should be issued to mint pure gold coins of a *mithqāl* (4.25 grams). Its half, quarter, and one-eighth parts can be accurately worked out. It should be clearly announced that a *mithqāl* (gold) is equal to the value of 400 *dirhams*; half a *mithqāl* equals 200 *dirhams* and a quarter *mithqāl* is equal to 100 *dirhams* (p.129).

In the opinion of al-Asadi, in the case of copper coins too, a royal decree should be issued that the coins must be minted from pure fine red copper, fully round with just value, on which the respected name of the Sultan and the place of the mint are stamped. They should be of three kinds, so that their use and exchange for all kinds of purchases become convenient:

1. Copper *dirham* of 3 (silver) *dirhams* weight,<sup>29</sup>
2. Half a *dirham*, and
3. Sixth a *dirham*. This was the prevailing practice in Egyptian territories at that time (p. 131).

It may be noted that for convenience of calculation and to avoid very small fractions, he suggests one-sixth and not one fourth after the half. Thus, the weight of one copper coin will be equal to 3 (silver) *dirhams*, half copper coin will be equal to one and half a *dirham*, and one-sixth copper coin will be equal to exactly half *dirham*. Again, in the case of copper coins he suggests only three denominations as copper being a cheap metal, a very small piece may not have any significant value to buy things. Even about one-sixth copper coin he says: "This will be mainly used in charity giving, water drinking in streets and purchase of petty things like groceries and vegetables. .... The decree should be issued for cancellation of the old coins and that they should be sent to the mint. Their equivalent value is to be paid without any diminution. And that would be blessing to the people in each region and the territory. Surely, there will be lot of benefits for the Sultan as well" (p. 132).

In this way, al-Asadī strongly advocates equality of face value and intrinsic value of the coin. In his opinion, this will prevent counterfeiting and debasement of the money. It will also benefit the importers and taxpayers as well as the collectors of

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<sup>29</sup>It may be noted that dirham is traditionally a silver coin but at that time in Egypt both dirham of silver and dirham of copper were used. Copper dirham was called '*dirham min al-fulūs*' and weighed one real copper coin of a dirham weight (about 3 grams). See also note no. 25 above.

duties and stipends. This will also facilitate their use inter-changeably by weight or by count. Payment for petty purchases and small spending will be easier (p. 120).

He stresses that the standardized coins will bring a lot of benefits to the people. They will be grateful to the king and generally a good atmosphere will prevail. Money exchangers will not be able to exploit the layman on the pretext of discrepancy in number and weight, because now the number and weight would be known and equivalent to each other. (p. 122).

To safeguard his proposed reform from failure, Al-Asadī suggests that it should be clearly announced by the order of the Sultan that the defective dirham should not be put into circulation. Rather, it must be sent back to the royal mint and its equivalent value to be introduced (p. 124).

Al-Asadī's recommendations to mint coins out of pure metals, bright and shining, with perfect round shape and exact weight as well as royal stamps on both sides of the coins and equality of face value and intrinsic value are, as he himself clearly pointed out (ibid. 121, 125), the measure to prevent coins from debasement, counterfeiting, and minting coins with deficient weight. This is no doubt an important contribution of al-Asadi regarding monetary reform of his time. It may be noted that all these proposals are similar to the anti-counterfeiting measures adopted today in the case of paper currency. At present most countries are using various methods to stifle counterfeiters such as complicated printing techniques, printing on high-quality paper made of cotton and linen, the intricate crisscrossing lines in the artwork along the side of the currency, tiny fiber embedded inside the paper, etc.

Al-Asadī supports his suggestions for monetary reform (*iṣlāḥ al-nuqūd*) by historical facts – money issued by ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (d. 705) the Umayyad caliph, and the regimes of Abbasid (750-1258), Fatimid (909-1171), and Ayyūbid (1171-1260). According to him, some instances of corruption were found during the Fatimid regime which were corrected by their successor, the Ayyūbids. But in the later period of the Ayyūbids, debasement and counterfeiting also crept into their system. A similar corrupt situation persisted during his own time the Turkish Mamlūk sultanate of Egypt and Syria (ibid. 126-28).

Thus al-Asadī provides very useful information on the monetary system during these periods till his own time, and concludes his four tier monetary system having the same face- and intrinsic value. He can be rightly considered a 'monetarist' a practical metallist, to use Schumpeter's (1997 [1954], 288) terminology, because of

his emphasis on monetary control and reform to arrest the economic and financial crisis of his time.

### **9. *Ḥimāyāt* (protection levies) – another cause of economic evils**

After completion of his discourse on monetary reform and related matters, al-Asadī discusses some other corrupt economic practices, such as charging protection money (*ḥimāyat*)<sup>30</sup> and deliberate prevention of merchandise and foodstuff from reaching the market. He opposes such practices. It seems that the worst form of corruption in his time was extortion or charging protection money. He considers it as a source of oppression and crime (p. 135). He states: "The devised protection money extorted from countrymen, villagers, millers etc. simply mean misappropriation of a part of people's money wrongfully. ... These *ḥimāyāt* (protection levies) have been designed on behalf of mayors and governors. Because of their tyrannical behaviors the followers also behave in tyrannical way. And every time new kinds of duties are imposed on farmers. ... Sometimes *ḥimāyah* is levied on them on the pretext of money due upon them for contribution to digging lands and preparation of means of irrigation that they were obliged to support with men and money" (ibid.). He further writes: "The essence in occurrence of these oppressions is that they are by them and collected from their own people. This is because the mayors and governors are helpers of the king, and the protectors are also among the princes, ministers and the helpers. Now if the protection money, which is charged on certain pretexts, is cancelled by them in some areas by taking money [bribe], then it is a must for them to obtain such unjust levy from the areas which are still not subject to protection levy. Thus, they put people of those areas under great trouble and torment. Generally, the protection money extorter enjoys the support of the mayor and the governor, so he never pays heed to the people and dictates whatever he likes. When people come to the protector (*ḥāmi*) (with their complaints) he never listens to them. Nor does he help them. Their charges and the misery multiply, and they never get rid of the protection money

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<sup>30</sup>*Ḥimāyah* means protection money or extortion money. Al-Asadī explains that many types of unjust levies have been designed to collect from various sources. They have been given different names and all are known as '*ḥimāyāt*' (al-Asadī, 1967, p. 135).

(*ḥimāyah*), as it becomes their destiny. All these are the corrupt practices and the scornful habits" (p. 136).

Al-Asadī reminds the officers of their traditional role in running the government. He also points out a possible reason behind this corruption, that is, those government officials are not paid sufficiently and there is no proper arrangement for their living: "The basic thing to realize is that the mayors and governors are the representatives of the government in every country. It has always been obligatory upon them in all ages to do justice with the subjects and protect them from injustice and wrongdoing. If anyone of them does injustice, he should be fired and humiliated. The victim should be compensated by the sultan by imposing a penalty on the wrongdoer. Had every one of them been granted a fief and salary that would have been sufficient for him, and he would not have been left to one who oppressed the village and town people [through extortion], then he would have never dared to cross the limits and he would have avoided the oppressive behavior fearing the consequences. When these patterns are abandoned through going against the way of justice, demolishing the ethical foundations and by development of new means of corruption, people fall into fresh difficulties and problems" (p. 136).

In the opinion of al-Asadī, in many cases those illegal duties are imposed by doing illegal things. This works as a license for doing those unlawful activities. They have negative effects on people and society. In other words, al-Asadī thinks that extortion is bad if it is imposed on something legal while it is worst if it is imposed on illegal things because in this case its harm multiplies. In this way al-Asadī seems to be distinguishing between extortion on legal activities which is basically a problem of surplus appropriation, although by reducing the surplus appropriable by the investor, investment itself is inefficiently discouraged and extortion on illegal activities which, if practiced by public officers, is something that encourages undertaking activities that are, by definition, surplus-decreasing from the viewpoint of collective welfare. He says: "As far the new-fashioned duties imposed on houses, lands, bakeries, crushers, shops, and grinders are concerned, there is detail that should be taken into account. Its reality is known to people having insights. For example, there are certain objects on which duty is imposed because of doing prohibited things. Thus, nobody can talk against it because of its relation to the duty-imposer and due to the illegal (*ḥarām*) money collected from it and the resulting huge rent and collection" (p. 137).

It may be noted that such a practice was found in Mamlūk regime in its early period also. Ibn Taymiyah (d. 728/1328) who lived more than a century before in Damascus also criticized practice of imposing fine on commitment of a crime. He allows financial penalties to abolish evils, not to raise funds. If they are used to raise funds, this may help to diffuse the evils and to contradict the motive and justification of the penalties (Ibn Taymiyah, 1971, 87-9). Al-Asadī might have been inspired by Ibn Taymiyah.

### **11. Low salary – a possible source of corruption**

Al-Asadī reminds the officers of their traditional role in running the government. He also points out a possible reason behind this corruption, that is, those government officials are not paid sufficiently and there is no proper arrangement for their living:

The basic thing to realize is that the mayors and governors are the representatives of the government in every country. It has always been obligatory upon them in all ages to do justice with the subjects and protect them from injustice and wrongdoing. If anyone of them does injustice, he should be fired and humiliated. The victim should be compensated by the sultan by imposing a penalty on the wrongdoer. Had every one of them been granted a fief and salary that would have been sufficient for him, and he would not have been left to one who oppressed the village and town people [through extortion], then he would have never dared to cross the limits. (p. 136)

In the preceding passage al-Asadi reminds authorities their just and protective role towards citizens. His recognition of low salaries as likely reason behind corruption and bribery is something which many modern economists also emphasize. For example, Marie Chêne remarks: "There is a broad consensus that low government wages in developing countries result in a decline of public sector efficiency and productivity and create both incentives and opportunities for corruption and misuse of public resources."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Chêne, Marie (2009), U4 Helpdesk, Transparency International, accessed on 3.8.2015 file:///C:/Users/admin/Downloads/expert-helpdesk-220.pdf

## 12. Taxes, public income and expenditure

The part of Mamluk government in which al-Asadī lived was passing through its decaying stage. At this stage, according to Ibn Khaldun, "the taxes are too heavy, and the profits anticipated fail to materialise. Thus, the total revenue continues to decrease, while the amounts of individual imposts and assessments continue to increase" (Ibn Khaldun 1967, 2: 90-91). Thus, the Mamluk government was caught in a vicious circle of increasing various taxes and falling revenue. They imposed taxes on so many free gifts of nature and thus depriving people to benefit from them. Al-Asadī also realizes this as he says: "the income derived in this way is apparently considered as supporting and strengthening the ruler but in fact it is weakening the very foundation of the sultanate" (al-Asadī 1967, 78-79). He is in favor of Shariah sources of public revenue, like *zakāh* (poor due), *kharāj* (land tax), *jizyah* (poll tax), *'ushr* (tithe), *khumus* (one-fifth of booty), etc. (ibid). He advises cancellation of those unjust and illegal taxes that had ill effects on people and the economy. He remarks:

Abolition of such levies, duties, and protection charges is the biggest act of piety, especially what is charged on salt, natron, pastures, fisheries, etc. and all that Almighty Allah has made as free goods. This is so because all such charges are unjust, and some of them are added to the original prices. All are corruption, destruction and devastation. It is obligatory on the ruler to abolish it and remove these evils from the whole country. (ibid. 138)

Al-Asadī seems to be aware of the idea of the incidence of taxation as he says: "All duties imposed on shops, grinders, bakeries, juicers, etc. ....the entire amount is added to the original prices, in the same way as the custom duties and other charges are added to the prices of imported commodities from some countries to other countries. The worst kind of tyranny is that those levies and duties are collected in the name of the sultan, and the above-mentioned protection monies are attributed to the government officials such as princes, ministers, and dignitaries" (p.137).

It is well known in economic theory that the incidence of taxation is possible in goods which have inelastic demand. However, in his statement above al-Asadī is not explicit about the nature of goods in terms of elastic and inelastic demand. Nor does

he distinguish such levies in terms of direct and indirect taxes. However, his statement that "the entire amount of tax is added to the original prices" indicates that he is talking about necessities of life which have near perfectly inelastic demand.

Al-Asadī visualizes adverse effects of such taxes on production and distribution as they discourage production activities, and the unjust taxes cause disincentive. As a result the farmers and workers abandon their work places. This ultimately affects the relationship between the public and government. This is what happened during his time. He reiterates that the development, prosperity and enormous revenue which existed in the past was due to the rulers acting justly at that time. They governed the people with kindness and benevolence, and took care of the poor and needy (ibid. 85). He also realizes the adverse effects of oppressive taxes on the public. What exacerbates these effects is that public income is not spent on productive necessities like building infrastructure for the development of the economy. Nepotism is emphasized at the cost of public welfare. He cites an example: "A village belonging to *bayt al-māl* (public treasury) that could support ten military persons and their families was granted by the authority to the relative with no return to the public treasury. Had it been retained by the government and that person was provided with his sustenance from the *bayt al-māl* according to Sharī'ah rules, it would have proved to be a better arrangement" (ibid. 81-82).

Al-Asadī draws the attention of officials towards the undertaking of development activities like improvement of lands, excavation of canals and provision of water resources, removal of obstacles in the cultivation of fields, building of irrigation systems and bridges, and management of flood and inundation in every region. This was the practice from the early Islamic period throughout his age till gradually corruption prevailed (ibid. 93).

He further criticizes the existing pattern of public expenditure:

The public expenditures which are made, if investigated, it will be found that they are generally unnamed, a kind of embezzlement. They spend in the interests of their selected individuals. Most of its benefits never return to the sultan. Nor does it reach even to the court men who are close to the king. These are the events that continue for many years. However, its harm has multiplied these days. (ibid. 145)

In this way al-Asadī warns those who are at the helm of affairs, and appeals for reform in the collection and expenditure of public income. However, he does not discuss in details the sources of public income and expenditure as his intention was not to write a complete treatise on the subject.

### **13. On the role of *al-ḥisbah* (market supervision)**

Throughout past Muslim rule, market supervision (*al-ḥisbah*) played an important role in economic affairs. It was through this department that the state exercised a comprehensive socio-economic control on trade and economic practices. The *muḥtasib*'s (official in charge of *al-ḥisbah*) functions included prevention and punishment on all sort of fraudulent and dishonest dealings and control over the guilds and lodges of the artisans and other classes of town men (Gibb and Bowen, 1965, vol. 1, 2:80). The *muḥtasib* (*al-ḥisbah* officer)<sup>32</sup> used to possess moral character and checked market evils. In Mamluk period its scope was widened and collection of certain duties was included in its functions. With the corruptions seeping in the government and in its institutions, the *ḥisbah* also became a profit earning office for the *muḥtasib*. During the period under study the position of *muḥtasib* was obtained through bribe. The result was incompetent and dishonest appointment of *al-ḥisbah* officers. Al-Asadī was worried about this situation. He stressed that the authority should not appoint to the prestigious *al-ḥisbah* office and all the other departments except one who is competent, and he should be provided with all necessary means so that he could serve the public interest in all those matters which are under his jurisdiction. A *muḥtasib* should not cross his limits. Nor should he do injustice. Whenever he violates rules, he should be caught and punished (al-Asadī 1967, 138).

As an inspector of people's overall moral and social behavior and supervisor of market functioning, the *muḥtasib* should be vigilant and prevent people from misusing money, measure, and weight. But the failure or delinquency of the *al-ḥisbah* administrator has been noticed on both fronts. The *muḥtasib* should enforce a single accepted matrix in the market. He should carefully monitor the manufacturers of the weights and scales, to ensure that they manufacture correct standard weight and

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<sup>32</sup> It may be noted that in Greek and Roman traditions also, activities of market place were administered by the market inspector or *agoranomos* (Lowry 1987, 238-240).

measure. He must not allow the sellers and traders to use ordinary stones or any such material for the purpose of weight (p. 116).

According to al-Asadī, prevention of debased and counterfeited money from being circulated in the market is also the duty of the *muhtasib*. He should keep an eye on the shape, brightness, purity and weight of the coins and must not allow counterfeited money. Al-Asadī explains: ‘This is because when laxity is shown in this matter and money is issued in improper form and shape having different character and weight, it becomes the major source of fraud, deception and dishonesty’ (p. 117).

It is an irony that the corrupt Mamlūk government made the *al-ḥisbah* office, whose function it was to check corruption, a source of deceit and corrupt practices. Firstly, the appointment to *al-ḥisbah* office was made on payment of a bribe. Then protection money was imposed on the *muhtasib*. In this way al-Asadi complained both about corruption to get the job and also about corruption in performing the job something modernly known as regulatory capture. No inspection was carried out and no criterion was observed in the selection of the *al-ḥisbah* officer; neither in brief nor in detail. Commenting on this situation, al-Asadī remarks: "It may be said that there are two possibilities: the in-charge of *al-ḥisbah* may be just or a wrong doer. If he is just, there is no justification for imposing a duty upon him. In fact it would be a tyranny especially if the *ḥimāyah* collector is himself a fraudulent and ill-character; he himself is involved in practices that need check and inspection. On the other hand, if the in-charge of *al-ḥisbah* is a wrongdoer, in this case it is obligatory to protect the good reasonable sober public from him. It is necessary to report his matter to the sultan so that he is removed and relief is obtained, as it is not allowed to appoint a wrong-doer and oppressor, especially to religious offices whose affairs are considered as models to be followed" (p. 137).

#### **14. Management of public distribution**

As noted earlier, the 15<sup>th</sup> century saw frequent rise of prices because of negligence, or hoarding and hiding the food grains by the resourceful traders. Al-Asadī suggests a method to manage public distribution and solve the problem of shortage:

"It is must for wise men and policy makers and those who have knowledge, and administrative power to note down the daily required rations in every city, town and village in a particular period. After having information of the daily need, it may be

calculated what is needed in a month and the whole year. Then it is to be considered what quantity of foodstuffs is available in that particular year in every region as a whole. From that quantity the needed seeds should be separated. Next, the required rations should also be separated in some excess so that it may be distributed among the receivers throughout that year at a divinely fixed price (*bi-si 'r-Allāh*).<sup>33</sup> The surplus quantity should be offered for sale at the existing price. In this way it will appear to the people that enough foodstuffs are available and they are not in shortage or deficiency" (p.141).

Naturally, if that is done, permanent supply of food is ensured in every condition and speculative buying and hoarding will stop. According to al-Asadī, when availability of food grains is ensured, people would buy what is needed and take what is sufficient for them. In this case an average price will prevail. People will enjoy prosperity and contentment. They abandon hostility. When there is a surplus of produce and demand is low, the excess produce should be stored and preserved for a later period when demand is high. This policy should be followed everywhere (pp. 141-42). He was guided to this technique by the story of Prophet Joseph<sup>34</sup> (ibid. 140).

## 15. Suggestion for removal of monopoly

A big obstacle in the way of reducing prices is the existence of monopoly. Al-Asadī was aware of this fact. He knew that if the monopolist is left free, he would fix a price which is in his own interest. Thus, he exhorted the ruler to act for the removal of monopoly and check the ways of creating artificial deficiencies. Addressing the authorities he says: "It is in noble knowledge that according to holy Sharī'ah rules it is not permissible to hold back, hoard up, and impose restriction over the grains. It is also prohibited to store the quantity which is over and above one's need for a year's consumption, for the purpose of profiting from it. This is so because this would be a

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<sup>33</sup>By *si 'r-Allāh* or "Divinely fixed price" he means the price established in the market without interference. The term seems to be indicative of the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet refused to fix the price administratively and said it is Allah who fixes the price (al-Tirmidhī, Abu 'Isa Muhammad. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1998), 2: 596.

<sup>34</sup> Prophet Joseph son of Jacob who worked as food minister of an Egyptian king managed the granaries. He experienced seven good years of plenty, followed by seven years of drought and famine spread throughout the region. Joseph worked hard. He planned for this. He stored the surplus product of seven good years and made sure the store houses were filled with wheat and grain which were rationed during seven years of difficulties. He opened his stores and let everyone have some of the wheat. See the Quran 12: 45-49 ; Genesis 41: 47-57.

kind of stockpiling the eatables which have been created by Allah (God) as sustenance for people and cattle. He makes it grow out of the soil in a year to be consumed in the coming days. That it is taken over by dominating powerful men is one of the biggest factors causing price rise, and hurting the poor and the weak" (p. 138).

Al-Asadī's opposition to monopolization of foodstuff cannot be criticized by alluding to the action of Prophet Joseph who set aside grains for seven years. He reiterates "It may be noted that the Prophet Joseph did not store except what was surplus food in those prosperous seven years. He rationed the stored food grain for seven dry years to peoples. This protected their lives and souls. Had it not been adopted, all would have perished. That act proved to be the source of people's rescue, their living, existence and lives" (p. 140). Thus the example of Prophet Joseph cannot be presented as evidence to support validity of hoarding of necessities.

"As far as the monopolist" he continues, "who exact foodstuffs available for people over which he has control, and stores and hoards it to enhance his own wealth through creating shortage which causes rise in prices, this is never permissible because of its resulting corruption and destruction of people and the country, especially when stern warning has been reported in the noble Tradition to one who hoards any such thing over forty days, as this leads to very bad consequences. The hoarder has been cursed in some other noble *ahādith (narrations of Prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him)*" (p. 141). "Thus, there is no doubt that hoarding and monopolization is highly injurious and harmful. ... At a very high price only that person who has wealth is able to buy... As far as drought is concerned, it can never be borne in any condition, especially when grains are there but monopolized and hoarded to have the worldly gain taking the advantage of uncertain circumstances" (p.142). Al-Asadī warns: "If the problems faced by people are not tackled intelligently and wisely, and justice is not done, and royal orders are not issued to correct the worsening situation and check what is happening, tremendous punishment is feared from the Creator of heaven and earth. Much time has already passed, multiplying the misery....." (p. 145).

## **16. Quantitative analysis**

As we have seen above, al-Asadī presents a unique suggestion for management of supply: the officials concerned must calculate the daily quantity of foodstuffs each city and village needs. They must then calculate the requirement for a month and the year. When the crop is ready, the quantity calculated should be gathered together with provision for the seeds, and leave the rest to be sold in the free market. The stored grains must be brought to the market whenever required. This would ensure flow of supply that would keep the prices stable at the normal level. To prove this point he presents a statistical model of Egypt and Cairo. He says that in certain circles it has been estimated that the daily need of Cairo, the old city of Egypt, was 1000 *irdabb* (1 *irdabb* = 70 kg) wheat, out of which 500 *irdabbs* were needed for officials and government supported institutions like schools and inns, etc. and the remaining 500 *irdabbs* were for store keepers, millers, bakers, and stalls where bread was sold in every street. Al-Asadī does not agree fully with this estimation. However, in his opinion, "if this is accepted, it can be calculated that Egypt and Cairo need 360,000 *irdabb* wheat each year (1000 multiplied by 360 days of the lunar year). He emphasizes that this quantity can be obtained from one *kurah* (district) only whereas in the Egyptian territory there used to be originally 103 such *kurahs*, now only 84 remaining" (ibid. 142-43); still the available quantity would be much greater than the daily needs of people. "Thus, if the state of affairs is carefully reviewed, the reality would become clear and conditions of the poor, weak and destitute could be improved" (ibid. 143).

In the preceding pages it has been noted that in the case of issuance of money, al-Asadī insists on equality of face value of coins and their intrinsic value, so that they can be used freely by weight or by counting. In this connection he shows equivalence of various coins and their weights. Here again he displays his skill of the quantitative method (see ibid. 130-32). Al-Asadī calculates the number of laborers required for agriculture and land development (ibid. 92). He has also worked out the income of Egypt in different periods under different governments (ibid. 74-75). It is worth noting that the use of quantitative data was very rare in past Muslim writings. If statistics merely means the employment of quantitative data – as it did during its early period (Spiegel 1971, 122) – then al-Asadī is among the pioneers who led the way to the use of statistics. In this way al-Asadī may be considered the originator of quantitative analysis in the history of Islamic economic thought. But this was like the last bright light of a candle before it is extinguished. To the best of our knowledge, al-

Asadī's quantitative model could not be further improved by succeeding scholars. No other writer has tried to plan for the development of the economy using the pattern advocated by al-Asadī.

## 17. Epilogue: a comparison with his contemporary scholar al-Maqrīzī

At the end, it would be interesting to compare al-Asadī's discussion of the economic difficulties of his time, their causes and remedy with those suggested by al-Maqrīzī<sup>35</sup> who also wrote on such issues. Al-Asadī authored his work *al-Taysīr* in 854/1451 ten years after al-Maqrīzī's death (d. 844/1441) and about fifty years after the latter's work of *Ighāthat al-ummah bi kashf al-ghummah* (written in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century). In those fifty years the socio-economic condition had hardly changed. Al-Maqrīzī also tried to expose corruption in the ruling class. He dealt with the economic difficulties, inflation and exploitation, and devoted a major portion of his work *al-Ighāthah* (1940) to monetary problems. He also authored a full treatise on money called *Shudhūr al-ʿuqūd fī dhikr al-nuqūd* (pearls of garlands in dealing with money) (1967).

In the opinions of the two scholars, Egypt's economic difficulties were due to incompetent and corrupt administration, oppressive taxation, increasing bedouin's encroachment on agricultural areas, the flight of the rural population, the loss of cultivated lands to the desert, disruption of lucrative long distance trade, and a debased monetary system in which copper coins predominated and coins of precious metals were exceedingly rare.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Taqī al-Din Ahmad b. ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī (766-845/1364-1441), a prolific writer, historiographer and economic historian, was born in Egypt in the last days of the *Bahri* Mamlūk dynasty in the reign of al-Ashraf Shaʿban (d. 778/1377). Al-Maqrīzī saw the fall of *Bahri* sultans. The last sultan of this dynasty was al-Šāliḥ b. Shaʿban who was overthrown by his body guard Barquq (d. 801/1399), a *Burjī* slave, in 791/1382. At that time al-Maqrīzī was 18 years old. Al-Maqrīzī is famous for his historical works. It is not definitely known whether al-Asadī was aware of and influenced by al-Maqrīzī's work as none of them mentioned it anywhere in their works. However, being contemporary and having the same profession, there is a likelihood that they knew each other, especially when we know that al-Barizi, to whom al-Asadī presented his work, was a student of al-Maqrīzī (al-Sakhawī, *al-Dawuʿ al-Lāmiʿ*, 9: 236). There is also an indication in al-Asadī's statement that he does not claim originality of his ideas regarding good governance. He admits that he benefited and noted these ideas from wise men of the past (al-Asadī, 1967, p. 109).

<sup>36</sup>For details see Islahi (2009[a], 441-50).

In the opinion of al-Maqrīzī, the deterioration of its monetary system was the single most important cause of Egypt's economic difficulties. Therefore he dealt extensively with this aspect of the economy and as a cure he advocated a return to gold and silver standard, and the restriction of copper coinage to petty transactions only.<sup>37</sup> Measures to solve other socio-economic problems and increase production could not get his due attention.

In fact, al-Maqrīzī did not realize that the issue of copper coins was not due to corruption but because of compulsion, as Egypt lost its stock of precious metals and was passing through a period of "silver famine".<sup>38</sup> Thus, his diagnosis of the problem and remedy suggested were not based on realistic analysis.

As we have seen in preceding pages, in the opinion of al-Asadī, the corrupt monetary system was not the sole cause of inflation and economic difficulties of the time. He does not confine his analysis to monetary problems only. He advocated for overall reform and strict management of the whole economy, the monetary aspect being one of them. He also pays attention to other factors responsible for economic crisis and recommends measures that include not only monetary reform but also elimination of corruption, removal of discrepancy in weight and measures leading to fraud and deception, correct management of public distribution, enlargement of production through strengthening agricultural relations, and promotion of trade and commerce. He stressed upon the maintenance of peace and security, and a healthy environment conducive to efficient economic activities. He does not restrict money to gold and silver. Nor does he engage in the discussion of gold and silver as natural money. To him precious metals and copper all have their utility as money and can be used at the same time. However, the issue of money and minting of coins should be

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<sup>37</sup>Many experts of the economic history of 15<sup>th</sup> century Egypt do not agree with the analysis of al-Maqrīzī. For example, Udovitch observes, 'What Maqrīzī did not, and possibly could not understand was that Egypt's monetary problems were not the result of its unfortunate financial policy, but a manifestation of its unfavorable position in the international trade' (Lopez, Robert, Miskimin, Harry and Udovitch, Abraham, "England to Egypt, 1350-1500: Long-term Trends and Long-distance Trade", in M. A. Cook (editor), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 123-24.

<sup>38</sup>Egypt did not have its own mines of silver. It depended for supply of precious metal on external sources: West Africa for gold and Europe and Central Asia for silver. Favorable trade balance and arrival of pilgrims constituted two major streams of supply of these metals, which were disturbed in early 15<sup>th</sup> century (Ashtor, E. *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages*, (London: Collins, 1976), 291-92.

structured in such a way that they cannot be copied and counterfeiting is checked. In this regard he suggests certain measures which are similar to what governments today adopt to prevent the issue of fake currency. In this way al-Asadī's analysis of the situation is more pragmatic. This kind of comprehensive internal economic reform is fully relevant to present day complex economic situations.

Al-Asadī's work is a rich source of economic thinking and economic history of the Mamlūk regime of Egypt. The author himself was conscious of his extraordinary contribution presented in this book, as he says that the book is of vital importance. In addition, the book contains other useful information: it deals with burning issues of the time such as how to reform the monetary situation, various economic practices, abolition of oppressive taxes, cheating and fraud in weight and measures, and corruption resulting in shrinkage of public money. It also advances policy suggestions to rectify the situation and protect lives, property and dignities (p. 180). It is sometimes the case that the author's own evaluation of his work is more useful than one done by others. No doubt, it is a significant source material for the economic history of Egypt and Syria in the 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century and Muslim economic thinking of the period. It is a pity that al-Asadī and his work were ignored in his own time, and still misses the attention of researchers today.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

### **A. Findings:**

1. In spite of its importance, al-Asadī's work has not been translated into any other language including English.
2. To date, there is no review or critical analysis of al-Asadī's economic thought except an article in Arabic language.
3. His interpretation of the fifteenth century economic and financial crises is different from that of al-Maqrizi.
4. He was first to use, though embryonic, statistical analysis.
5. The book is important source of monetary history of Muslim states prior to the fifteenth century. Al-Asadi's suggestions for monetary reform and measures to protect money from counterfeiting are marvelous.
6. The book belongs to the genre of works written as "mirror for princes".

## B. Recommendations:

1. The book was edited by a single person long time ago in 1967. Since then much information is available about the time and environment in which the author lived. Moreover a single person has limitations. The present writer feels that there is need to re-edit the book, preferably by a team of scholars conversant with the history and literature of the period.
2. In view of the importance of the book in socio-economic and historical information it is recommended to translate and edit the book into English similar to al-Maqrizi's *Ighathat al-Ummah bi Kashf al-ghummah* translated and edited by Adel Allouche.

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