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Before the 'Asads – The Rise of the Ba'at and the Syrian nationalism between 1946 and 1970

ABSTRACT

In the last couple of years, Syria has been at the center of international focus due to its bloody conflicts. However, less attention had been paid to the formative years of Syria that can be defined as the years between the independence and the emergence of a more or less stable, established regime under the Assads. This article examines the characteristics of that turbulent twenty-five years with particular attention to the political and social cleavages that dominated that time and still have an important impact on Syria's present-day developments. During the analysis, the primary purpose is to shed light on the complex political issues that determined the trajectory of the Syrian state between 1946 and 1970 and still affect society and political conditions nowadays. As particularist loyalties have undoubtedly contributed to the complexities of Syria's current situation, it is essential to analyze the context in which social, economic, and political cleavages emerged and operated in the first two decades of Syrian independence. By concentrating on these questions, this study utilizes the latest literature dealing with Syria's economic, social and political life between 1946 and 1970.

Keywords: Syria ■ Assad ■ Baath party ■ Arab nationalism

I. THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Although Syria can be regarded as one of the earliest civilizations, Syrian identity organized around Syria's territorial unity, and uniqueness is a relatively new phenomenon. This is partly because foreigners ruled Syria continuously, therefore being on the borderlands of large empires. The only more extensive state formation that had its center in Syria was the first Arab Caliphate era during the Umayyad Dynasty (al-'Umawiyūn), which controlled the empire from Damascus between 661 and 750. Four centuries of Ottoman rule (1516-1918) consolidated

the various identities of the communities living in Syria. At that time, the country was divided into four provinces, and the Ottoman *millet* system also contributed to the maintenance of communal divisions. The connections between local people and the state became scarce as communities governed themselves most of the time.^[1] This neither meant total separation nor helped to mitigate the differences between various ethnic and religious organizations.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire organized a larger province in Syria as a new administrative unit reflecting the local needs better. Thus, Syria in the 1860s was both an ideological construction and an organizational unit having a particular political consciousness of independence. The governorate of Midḥat Bāšā strengthened this sense of political commitment at the end of 1880s.^[2]

The First World War brought the end of the Ottoman Empire, and successful nationalist movements of local Arabs helped the British and the French reach their goals in the complicated situation of reordering the Middle East. The idea of nationalism bore fruit among certain Arab leaders, most important of them was the šarīf of Mecca and Medina, Ḥusayn and his son, Emīr Fay al, who were instigated by the British in their fight against the Ottoman Empire.^[3] By the effective leadership of Fayṣal and support of the British (partly channeled through the famous Lawrence of Arabia), by 1918, the pan-Arab uprising launched successful attacks against the Syrian territories of the fading Ottoman rule.

Emīr Fayṣal received legitimacy based on his military success (he occupied Damascus in October 1918) and Arab nationalism. After establishing his government in 1919, he tried to keep the Arab national movement united, although he faced several challenges. Imperial British and French policies made it impossible for him to claim the historical greater Syria (aš-šām). Fayṣal also tried to create a balance between the movement he led and the great powers; therefore, he acknowledged that the state of Syria in the transition to complete independence needs the counsel and support of the great powers (mainly concerning the United States).

In the end, the United States had little to say in the reorganization of the Middle East after the First World War. The Sykes-Picot Agreement signed by France and Great Britain in 1916 mattered more. Accordingly, French troops started to occupy the territories north of Palestine as the agreement granted influence for the French over those territories. The French intervention in Syria (and Lebanon) mostly met with the resistance of the Syrian General Congress, the representative body of the Arab movement in Syria. In July 1919, the Congress expressed its opinion and stated that local political actors support creating a constitutional monarchy with the leadership of King Fayṣal. Besides, Congress rejected France's claim as a protector over Syria.^[4]

[1] Barkey, 2008, 116.

[2] Rabinovich, 2008, 8.

[3] Kamrava, 2011, 41.

[4] Daher, 2019.

As the British and the French agreed in September 1919 and reaffirmed the French claims mentioned above, there was no way back for the Arab movement in Syria.^[5] Realizing the lost situation, at the end of 1919, Fayṣal tried to broker an agreement with the French about their protection over the territories and the secession of Lebanon as an independent mandate.^[6] Some of the supporters of Fay al were relentless as they proclaimed independence in Damascus (8 March 1920). The General Congress of Syria demanded the termination of both the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration (about an independent state of the Jews), confirmed Fayṣal as a king, and rejected the mandate system (protectorate of the colonial powers over Syria). This short-lived state of the Arabs was broken down by the French, who mobilized their troops from Beirut with the leadership of Henri Gouraud.^[7] By 24 July 1920, fights were terminated, and since Syrians were under economic stress, any further resistance against the French seemed futile.^[8]

The French colonizers' "divide and rule" strategy contributed to the weak national integration of the country that is still sensible today. The French separated the mountain area of Ġabal ad-Durūz, al-Lāḏiqiyya, the Sanjak of Alexandretta (occupied by Turkey in 1939) as distinctive administrative unites from "central" Syria (Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Damascus - the provinces of Aleppo and Damascus was initially separated and only united later by the French).^[9] The colonial government relied mainly on minority soldiers such as Druzes, Christian Arabs, Alawites, and Circassians in their *Troupes Spéciales* that played a significant role in maintaining public security. In return, these communities received protection from the French against the Sunni majority. This policy of creating unbalanced armed forces was rooted in the idea that Sunni Arab nationalism (*al-qawmiyya al-'arabiyya*) is the most significant threat to the French power in Syria; therefore, Sunni political power had to be reduced to the minimum in crucial political and military positions.^[10] Contrary to this belief, the Druzes in 1925 ignited the longest anti-colonial revolt of the Middle East's inter-war period.^[11]

The collapse of France under the attack of Nazi Germany in 1940 made it possible for the mandates to start their independence movements more actively. The local French administration recognized the Vichy state's authority - a potential threat to the British's positions in the Middle East. Consequently, British troops occupied Lebanon and Syria in June 1941 to hinder any movements of Nazi forces in those countries. To gain local people's support and mitigate their level of resistance, the Free French Forces led by General De Gaulle

[5] Ochsenswald-Fisher, 2004, 434.

[6] Naṣṣār, 2013.

[7] Naṣṣār, 2013.

[8] Rabil, 2011, 8.

[9] Sorenson, 2016, 13.

[10] Matar, 2016, 73.

[11] Sahnner, 2014, 100.

proclaimed the independence of Lebanon and Syria on 8 June 1941. However, the struggles of the local leaderships for complete independence lasted longer. Finally, following the end of the war, French troops reluctantly left the two countries at the end of 1946.^[12]

II. THE POLITICS OF THE FIRST DECADE OF INDEPENDENCE

The first decades of independence can be characterized by the general instability of the state and intergroup political fighting in Syria. Between 1946 and 1970, Syria was one of the most unstable countries in the world.^[13] The international position of Syria – just like other Arab states – was not favorable as the country became independent at the time of the emergence of the bipolar world. In this context, the country found itself between the Western capitalist traditions (underpinned by the French colonizers and the existing trade relations with Western powers) and the Communist ideology represented by the Soviet Union. However, it is not surprising that the Soviet Union's support for the creation of Israel undermined its position in Syria in 1948. Soviets could gain influence partly by the rise of Ba'at̄ in the '60s and amidst the increasing tensions of the Cold War position fights in the Middle East.^[14]

These statements are not surprising as the first Syrian governments inherited a weakly centralized state from the colonial era.^[15] Out of seventeen coup attempts between 1949 and 1982 and thirteen were successful. These sudden and frequent leadership changes made the military politicized and polarized, thus becoming vulnerable to political penetration from the outside.^[16] As a consequence of frequent government changes (although not system changes), it is interesting that for more than two decades after its independence, Syria lacked leading political and national figures such as Nāṣir in Egypt, Ben Gurion in Israel, or Atatürk in Turkey.^[17] Besides a charismatic leading figure, Syria also lacked “a founding document that everybody had to abide by and respect.” This was because the constitution had undergone amendments regularly; therefore, no relevance was attached to it by the national perception.^[18]

The so-called National Bloc (*al-Kutlat al-Waṭaniyya*) gave the first independent president of Syria, Šukrī al-Quwatlī. One of the very first challenges that Syria had to face was the war against Israel in 1948. As the Jews of Palestine declared their independence in May, the neighboring Arab countries launched an

[12] Sorenson, 2016, 15.

[13] Rubin, 2007, 27.

[14] Lawson, 1999, 72.

[15] Darling, 2013, 194.

[16] Gaub, 2017, 146.

[17] Sorenson, 2016, 15.

[18] Ziadeh, 2011, 2.

uncoordinated attack against them. The Syrian army performed very poorly in the war contributing to Israel's victory and the Quwatlī government's fall at the end of 1948. The first government was replaced by a coup led by the army's chief of staff, Ḥusnī az-Za'īm.^[19] This is the first sign of the beginning of a turbulent era of Syrian politics in the 1950s.

Allegedly, Za'īm's move was supported by the British, who intended to sponsor an oil pipeline leading from Mosul through Syria to the Mediterranean. However, Americans who agreed with the Saudis on oil had a different proposal.^[20] As Za'īm developed his policy aiming secularization, he antagonized a broad sector of Syrian political actors that led to the takeover of Sāmī al-Ḥinnāwī. Soon after, he was replaced by 'Adīb al-Šiṣaklī in December 1949. After five years of contentious politics, al-Šiṣaklī left the country, leaving the space for Šabrī al-'Asalī to form a government.^[21] Interestingly, both al-Za'īm and al-Šiṣaklī were of Kurdish origin, an ethnic minority living in the northern part of Syria.^[22] In the first two decades of independence, Kurds were represented well among the leading figures of the political and military spheres. For example, the leader of the Syrian Communist Party (*Ḥizb al-Šuyu'ī as-Sūrī*), Ḥālīd Biqdāš has initially been a Kurdish lawyer from Damascus.^[23]

In the elections of 1954, the People's Party could acquire only 21% of the votes (they received 71% in 1949) but was still the leading party in the Syrian parliament. The second-largest party turned out to be the Ba'at ("Resurrection"), a representative of nationalist and socialist ideas in parallel with the movement led by Nāšir in Egypt. This constant friction in the political life and especially in the parliament had a severe consequence on the political culture of independent Syria: politicians started to recognize the military's role as a means for policy-making and ignore the parliament's role. Contrary to Turkey, for example, where the military could gain control over politics as a united actor, in Syria, the military's political participation was utilized by the individual interests of politicians struggling for more power and influence. As a result of this practice, the Syrian army became fractured, allowing both politicians and self-appointed military leaders to aspire to leadership positions in the conflictual political arena.^[24]

[19] Sorenson, 2016, 16.

[20] Wakim, 2013, 90.

[21] Sorenson, 2016, 17.

[22] Tejel, 2009, 44.

[23] McHugo, 2015, 116.

[24] Gaub, 2017, 147-148.

III. MINORITIES

Syria as an independent state cannot be regarded as ethnically or religiously homogeneous. The ethnic composition of the country, however, is not so complicated as 90% of the population belongs to Arabs, leaving only 10% for other ethnic groups such as Kurds, Armenians, or Turkmens; Kurds being the most populous and having a more or less separate geographic area in the northern part of the country. According to contemporary accounts, “the major religious groups in Syria are the Sunni Muslims, forming a majority of 68.7% of the total population, the Alawis (11.5%), Druze (3.0%), Ismailis (1.5%), and Christians (14.1%), of whom the Greek Orthodox (4.7%) constitute the most important community.”^[25] From these groups, Alawis, Ismailis, and Druzes have geographical bases, while Christians have not. The largest religious group, the Sunni Muslims, can be found everywhere in the country. Except for the three Muslim groups mentioned above, they dominate the country’s religious layout. Alawis and Druzes can be characterized by their closed communities. The dominant Sunni narrative frequently regards them as non-Muslims even if they define themselves as Shia Muslims (of the Twelver branch). It must be noted that the dividing lines between these groups overlap with socio-economic categories and the rural-urban distinction. In this way, sectarianism is further exacerbated by the everyday realities of the economy and society. Compared to Lebanon, the Syrian political system could not transfer this pluralism into the political sphere meaning that minorities were not automatically eligible for parliamentary representation as they had to fight for political power and rights. This incalculability for the minorities made the whole system prone to relatively fast changes in ethnic and sectarian competition processes.

There is an ongoing debate about the importance of social cleavages (such as tribal and sectarian differences) in the organization of Syrian political, social and economic life. Western scholars usually attribute considerable explanatory power to these differences that originate from sub-state (tribal) and supranational (sectarian) identity – that make the Middle East unique in the eyes of Western scholars. As opposed to these claims, Arab nationalist and Socialist authors try to downplay the importance of these factors. In these circles, speaking on these intra-communal differences is often considered taboo. Their aim is twofold: on the one hand, they intend to support the unity of the existing political entity (the government and the country). On the other hand, Arab nationalists try to disclose these factors that hinder „the awakening of a national and socio-economic awareness”.^[26] The importance of sectarianism and tribalism is challenging to answer as these issues belong to the often overlapping identities of the local people that are usually not (and cannot be) measured by consistent polls and censuses. Moreover, the governmental and the non-governmental propaganda of the

[25] Baer, 1964, 109.

[26] van Dam, 2011, vii-ix.

last decades contributed to the distortion of the reality as the government has been trying to sweep the importance of these cleavages under the carpet. At the same time, its opposition might link too many political actions with sectarian reasons. Interestingly, under the consolidation of sectarian positions under the al-'Asads, Lebanon has been providing better publicity for the debates on the opposing views on sectarianism as a political mobilization force in modern Syria.

IV. THE WAY OF THE BA'ĀT TO POWER

The Ba'āṭ Party (*Ḥizb al-Ba'āṭ al-'Arabī al-Iṣtirākī*) was established by a Christian, Miṣīl 'Aflaq, together with Salāḥ ad-Dīn Biṭār and Zakī al-Arsūzī at the beginning of the '40s. The original organization (*al-Ba'āṭ al-'Arabī*) founded in 1940 can be connected to al-Arsūzī.^[27] The party's formative years saw a turbulent political environment dominated by the fight against the French colonizers, the main issue that thematized the Ba'āṭ' narrative. By May 1946, the party gained some popularity as many nationalist reformists joined, and their organization started to spread across the country by establishing local branches. Party leaders even launched their own newspaper to be circulated among the people with socialist and nationalist leanings.

One of the party's greatest appeals was its nonaligned foreign policy in the Cold War's most turbulent years when Syria had no foreign supporters. Still, both the United States and the Soviet Union tried to extend their influence over the newly independent states of the Middle East. The Ba'āṭ aimed to create Arab unity under the ideological guidance of socialism. As stated in the party's Constitution: "The Arab nation constitutes a cultural unity. All differences existing among its sons are accidental and spurious, and will disappear with the awakening of Arab consciousness."^[28]

This ideology advocating for the unity of the Arab nation was favorable from a minority perspective, especially for the Alawites. Socialism tried to overwrite the traditional lines of the Syrian society, thereby securing those who were socially or economically suppressed in the previous eras of Syrian history. The new loyalties were defined along socio-economic lines, and sectarian or ethnic differences were kept silent.

Despite its organizational successes, the Ba'āṭ gained no mandate in the parliament at the first elections of independent Syria. This was partly due to the Syrian government's anti-radical policies that hindered the party's operation due to its critical voices. This tension reached its highest point in the Fall of 1948 during the arrest of the party leader, Miṣīl 'Aflaq. However, the successful coup against the government in March 1949 made the Ba'āṭ possible to find its way

[27] Lawson, 1999, 67.

[28] van Dam, 1978, 201.

back to official politics. As the putschist az-Za'īm ruled only for half a year, the Ba'at leadership realized the importance of accommodation to the new rules of politics. After a long period of negotiations, the Ba'at and the Arab Socialist Party led by al-Hawrānī united as Arab Ba'at Socialist Party.^[29]

The Suez Crisis, in which Syria played only a minor role, was followed by a Ba'atist takeover in Damascus. This created an international crisis until November 1957. The root of the problem was that Western powers feared introducing socialism in Syria as the Ba'at party was ideologically incompatible with Western interests. NATO (mainly Turkish) forces threatened Syria with war from the other side of the border. Finally, fears proved to be baseless as the Ba'at had no significant relations with the Soviet Union at that time.

The new Ba'at party promised pan-Arab unity when party members proposed a union with Egypt in February 1958. Although Nāṣir was reluctant, he was convinced by a delegation sent to Cairo – in which the Ba'at played an important role.^[30] As a result, the first pan-Arab formation of the Arab independence period emerged (United Arab Republic).

However, as serious problems emerged in the cooperation with Nāṣir's Egypt, the Ba'at party concluded that the restoration of independent Syria would be more beneficial for them. There were at least three problems with the union. First, Nāṣir started a purge among the ranks of Communists and Ba'atists as they were considered as his political and ideological rivals in Syria. Second, the power of the military in shaping the political processes has decreased significantly. Third, the Syrian leadership realized that Cairo's decisions have a serious adverse effect on the legitimacy of the local politicians with local ambitions.^[31] As a result of this unsuccessful attempt at the unification of Syria and Egypt, the nationalist and socialist parties lost many supporters. After the elections at the end of 1961, the People's Party leader, Nāẓim al-Qudṣī, gained the presidency.^[32]

This government had to deal with a dysfunctional parliament as the leading party received only 19% of the votes.^[33] This ended in 1963 when the Ba'at party toppled al-Qudṣī's government and changed Syria's political system. The Ba'atist coup was partly inspired by the same event in Iraq that year when the putschists toppled the military regime of 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim in Baghdad.^[34] Interestingly, the Iraqi Ba'atists proposed the idea of union with Syria many times, which was not directly rejected by Damascus. Still, its implementation was delayed due to the negative experiences derived from the former union with Egypt.

They installed Salāḥ ad-Dīn Bīṭār as the new president followed by Salāḥ Ğadīd in 1966.^[35] Bitar became more like an organizer for the Ba'at, while Mišīl

[29] Lawson, 1999, 68.

[30] Gaub, 2017, 147.

[31] Gaub, 2017, 147.

[32] Sorenson, 2016, 17.

[33] Gaub, 2017, 147.

[34] Gaub, 2017, 148.

[35] Ḥaddād, 2001.

‘Aflaq contributed more to the movement by developing its ideology.^[36] Although initially a Christian, ‘Aflaq considered Islam the highest manifestation of Arab culture, a carrier of Arabness (*‘uruba*).^[37] This was a reasonable solution for the balance between socialism and the dominance of Islam in the Middle East. In this context, Islam cannot be abandoned entirely through the bureaucratic consolidation of this secular regime.^[38] ‘Aflaq drafted the party’s major theoretical statement in October 1963 with the slogan of “Unity, Freedom and Socialism” (*wahda, ḥurriyya wa ‘iştirākīyya*).^[39]

One can see a distortion in the original Marxist ideas when applied to a Middle Eastern context. As the size of the working class was insufficient, the local socialist ideology could not rely on the exclusivist class identity. Instead, Arab socialists employed the idea of national unity and tried to de-emphasize the dangerous notions of social division and class struggles.^[40]

V. ECONOMIC ISSUES

During the mandate period, French colonizers were not interested in the industrialization of the Syrian economy. The separation of cities such as Tripoli, Aleppo, and Mosul that cooperated in trade and industrial activity in the pre-colonial era had a severe consequence in forming new “national” economies.^[41] After the independence, Syria can be regarded as a free enterprise economy.^[42] In the first decades of liberation, a significant change took place in the Middle East that is relevant nowadays: the expansions of state institutions. The reasons for the creation and maintenance of large state bureaucracies lie in the following needs of the newly independent states:

1. in the post-independence era, the state had to maintain security;
2. the new national territory must be rendered under state control;
3. economic and social welfare programs (such as education, land reform) needed massive governmental coordination;
4. the state had to fulfill the positions that remained vacant after the departure of colonial officials.^[43]

The state’s active participation in public affairs is evident if the central government’s expenditure is considered. In 1960, 23.5% of the GDP belonged either to public spending or public enterprises. As of 1970, this figure reached 37.9%

[36] McHugo, 2015, 119.

[37] Sahnner, 2014, 103-104.

[38] Owen, 2004, 29.

[39] Lawson, 1999, 69.

[40] Owen, 2004, 27.

[41] Matar, 2016, 68.

[42] Matar, 2016, 68.

[43] Owen, 2004, 23.

in Syria.^[44] Another factor that had to be regulated by the government is the demographic challenge: during the period analyzed in this article, the population in Syria grew significantly: in 1945, the population was more than 3.5 million, which increased to 4.5 million by the next census in 1960.^[45]

State intervention can be verified by the “fragile postcolonial economic condition”^[46] as well. According to this argument, the country’s weak economic performance and unfavorable economic position required a central planning and organizing system to ensure the effective operation and regulation of the economic conditions. With the state’s increased presence, inequalities could be mitigated by the government’s intensive redistribution policy – an idea that played a central role for the Ba’at party. The political, economic, and social uncertainty also contributed to the “accelerated collapse of the traditional industries accompanied by retarded development of new ones.”^[47] In practice, it meant that the old Sunni bourgeoisie was not able to transfer its power as leading agents of investment after 1946; therefore the newly independent Syria lacked the local economic basis for national development. Without the proper capitalist class, state intervention in the economy and high spending on development programs seemed the only way to decrease the economic dependency and support imports substitution industrialization. This system can be regarded as a state-capitalist economy in the ‘60s, and it lasted at least until Ḥāfiẓ al-’Asad’s assumption to power in 1970. He sidelined the state-interventionism and promoted a more market-oriented approach in the economy.

Simultaneously, the weak governments of the ‘50s and ‘60s could not have a lasting impact on the Syrian economy. However, the radical reformist economic and social policy became the central issue on the Ba’at party’s agenda after the takeover of 1963. Their comprehensive economic policy, motivated by socialist ideals, started with nationalization and land reforms. In the meantime, party leaders and affiliated secured their hold on the state apparatus. They created a state-capitalist class dependent on the party, connected to the government and the newly emerging state bureaucracy.^[48] Under the first years of the Ba’at system, the leadership could not find the “proper” ideological base for its movement, as it could have been expected from a socialist movement. In this manner, the party tried to keep the emerging self-organized actions of workers and peasants at bay since they could have challenged their leading ideological position. Therefore, Ba’at represented only one part of the workers and other lesser social classes and could not unite these politically weak classes, often separated by ethnic and religious boundaries on the ground.

[44] Owen, 2004, 25.

[45] McHugo, 2015, 112.

[46] Matar, 2016, 65.

[47] Matar, 2016, 69.

[48] Matar, 2016, 65.

From 1963 onwards, the party started a more active policy in the countryside by launching aggressive nationalization. In this process, military officers that were sympathetic to the party played an important role. Massive agrarian reforms strengthened the state's redistribution policy and made the party the only channel of patronage, further strengthening its political position.^[49] In the countryside, the Ba'at party managed to decrease the power of the old landowner class, thereby acquiring a place for larger state estates and distributing lands for the poor (25% of farming families received land).^[50] Land reform served the purpose of Arabization: around 1965, the Ba'at party accelerated the reforms to create an Arab Belt on the border with Turkey. In practice, this policy meant the replacement of local Kurds with Arab families.^[51] By this, the central government could drive a nail into the continuous area of Kurdish territory in Northern Syria (on the borders of Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey) and reward its supporters with new lands.

VI. INTRA-PARTY FIGHT FOR POWER AND THE RISE OF AL-ASAD

The mid-'60s can be characterized by the fraction fight between different groups that dominated the Ba'at political scene: the Alawites, the Druzes, the Sunnis of Hawrān and the Sunnis from Dayr az-Zūr.^[52] Purges in the leadership and lower military ranks also dominated the first decade of Ba'at rule, mainly targeting Sunnis in leading positions. Under the continuous state of emergency from 1963, members of the Alawi minority started to acquire more critical roles. Moreover, the political turmoil also contributed to the "natural selection" of the army recruitments as communities began to resort to the safest policy to distribute political power by relying increasingly on shared identities.^[53] Early on, Alawis were represented in a significantly high number in the intelligence services: 55% of the non-commissioned officers belonged to the Alawi community in 1955.^[54] By the emergence of Alawis at the expense of other sectarian groups, the originally non-sectarian Ba'at succumb to the organizing principle of sectarianism and decrease the importance of populist and nationalist rhetoric.^[55]

Beyond the politics driven by sectarian reasoning, ideological debates also took place within the ranks of the Ba'at. By the dominance of the radical socialist branch in the Ba'at, Syria came closer to the Soviet Union. This development was also manifested in improving relations with the Soviet Union. Simultaneously,

[49] Darling, 2013, 195.

[50] Darling, 2013, 195.

[51] Yildiz, 2005, 36.

[52] Matar, 2016, 69-70.

[53] Gaub, 2017, 150.

[54] Wakim, 2013, 98.

[55] Darling, 2013, 193-194.

the 60s saw an intensive intra-party struggle between different factions that resulted in the victory of the fraction led by the pragmatist policy of Ḥāfiẓ al-'Asad. He served as Defense Minister since 1966, and even if he had a direct link to the military, he managed to maintain his influence after two military failures in the neighboring countries and pass the responsibility to Salāḥ Ḡadīd.

The first conflict emerged from the temporary ceasefire with the Israelis. In the atmosphere of continuous tension, it is difficult to assess the levels of responsibility the Arab countries and Israel share in the conflict's breakout. Already in April 1967, the Israeli Air Force shot down six Syrian airplanes over Syrian. Later, Egypt received information from the Soviets about a potential Israeli attack against Syria. As a response, in May, Egypt mobilized its forces in the Sinai Peninsula and closed the Tiran Straight (*Maḏīq Tīrān*), leaving the Israeli leadership no choice but a preemptive strike on 5 June 1967.^[56]

The Israeli Army was so successful that the troops could occupy the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, Cisjordania (including the whole city of Jerusalem), and the Golan Heights (*Murtafa'āt al-Ḡawlān*). The latter constitutes a territory with strategic relevance to Syria in the country's defense. With these conquests, Israel tripled its territory and redefined the status quo with its Arab neighbors. As the Arab states suffered an overwhelming defeat, from this point on, risking an open war with Israel was not an option for the Arab countries.^[57] It is not only Arab armies that were defeated, but the ideology of Arab nationalism and socialism (in Egypt and Syria), therefore 1967 could be regarded as a turning point in modern Arab and Syrian history. The population considered both the revolutionary regimes (Syria, Egypt) and the monarchies (Jordan) as the "regimes of defeat" (*anzīmat al-hazīma*). Internal critics accused the Egyptian and Syrian governments of not aligning with the original theses of socialism^[58] and urged the leaders to make "corrections" or "rectifications"^[59] in the existing systems. More radical voices, such as Islamists, demanded the end of the whole system. After 1967, these groups gained more popularity and legitimacy as socialism and nationalism failed to address the Syrians' most pressing questions.^[60] Islamists (those who intended to inject religious values into the political system) referred to their mission as one that comes from the Arab culture and provides an alternative to the Western ideas of socialism and nationalism. This idea of creating a common Islamic (Sunni) identity was threatening from the perspective of most of the religious minorities in Syria.

These regional events further dynamized the already tumultuous domestic politics of Syria. However, they did not lead to the fall of Salāḥ Ḡadīd in 1967. He needed another military crisis in 1970 to be toppled down by his general, Ḥāfiẓ al-'Asad.

[56] Kamrava, 2005, 117-118.

[57] 'Amr, 2007.

[58] Kamrava, 2005, 121.

[59] Owen, 2004, 24.

[60] Darling, 2013, 193.

The dilemma in which Salāḥ Ğadīd had no good move was related to the conflict in the neighboring Jordan in September 1970. The Syrian army intended to support the Palestine Liberation Organization (*Munazzamat at-Taḥrīr al-Filasṭīniyya*, or PLO) against its fight with the Jordanian Army. However, the USA and Israel coordinated their moves against Syria if Damascus continues the intervention.^[61] Under this pressure, Salāḥ Ğadīd had to retreat from Jordan and tried to place responsibility for the serious blow to his general, Ḥāfiẓ al-'Asad. However, Asad managed to protect himself by finding other scapegoats. Instead, he accused Salāḥ Ğadīd of communist directions that he took being far from the original Ba'at principles.^[62] On 13 November 1970, the military arrested Salāḥ Ğadīd, and many of his government made a relatively peaceful transition. The party accepted the new situation and strengthened the position of Ḥāfiẓ al-'Asad as the president. By this move, a new and stable era of modern Syrian history has started. The authoritarian rule of al-'Asad made it possible to consolidate the Ba'at regime in Syria.

The quarter-century period of Syrian history analyzed above was enough to see the rise and fall of Pan-Arab sentiments around the Middle East. While the first decade of independence saw the dominance of Pan-Arab ideology and different Arab countries seeking their way to create a union, by the end of the era, it had become evident that local, country-related interests are more important than any idea of integration based either on regional or ethnic commonality.

By introducing the presidentialism in Syria, the al-'Asad system became the last representative of the Arab socialist and Arab nationalist ideas manifested in the Ba'at party. From that perspective, the emergence and consolidation of the Ba'at in Syria is a success story. Although its ideological dominance in the Arab World ended at the end of the '60s, the political ideology of the current leadership still traces back to these beginnings. In light of the turbulent post-independence era, the stability that characterized the al-'Asad family's rule over Syria is even more surprising.

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