

## SYRIAN STABILITY AND THE BAATH

## A New Look at the Structure of Power in Syria

by Alan W. Horton

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An important change has occurred in Syria. Where once regime followed regime in tiresomely fickle fashion, a stable polity now exists. Syria—no longer the political joke of the Arab world—has become a country with a reasonably predictable future, and the political party popularly known as the Baath, which has provided the cadres for the new stability, seems likely to continue in power for some time.

When the French departed after World War II, they left in power the nationalists who had led the anti-French agitations of the inter-war period. These were men of a landowning class that believed in independence but not social change; but largely because the French had set it in motion, social change was under way, and new groups began to seek political influence—merchants, shopkeepers, bureaucrats, professional people, army officers, and others, whose common interest was a desire for "progress," a wish to be somehow modern. Some of these modern men were of upper-class origins, but more were the sons of lesser folk whose first social and educational opportunities had arisen during the mandate. Significantly, the officer corps was one of the best ways to advance socially, and of the possible careers open to ambitious men from Syria's depressed areas (such as the rural areas of Jebel Durze and south of Latakia), an officer's career was preferred.

Over the years since World War II, there have been two power struggles. The first, which was largely decided by the time of union with Egypt in 1958, was a struggle between a landowning class, whose principal weapons were elections and parliaments, and a group of modern men, whose weapon was sometimes the army officer corps. Indeed, the initial expression of open dissatisfaction with the parliamentary regime, in which landowners obtained huge majorities by virtue of control of Syria's traditionalist electorate among the peasantry and

urban poor, came in 1949 in the form of a military coup d'état. Other coups and various parliaments followed and failed with embarrassing regularity. While the traditionalist parliamentary parties remained firmly right, the locus of power inside the army moved slowly left, and traditionalist control of the parliamentary system became less significant because parliament had a diminishing control of the machinery of government. Ministers, though their appointments were approved by parliament, were—as a matter of necessity—increasingly selected for their ability to please the officer corps and prevent military intervention. In the meantime, it was becoming clear to all that the officer corps, which reflected Syria's changing urban structure with considerable accuracy, was—despite some traditionalist factions—gradually falling into the hands of officers who favored radical change. By 1957 public authority was in a state of near-chaos; interfering army factions were disputing among themselves; parliament was virtually powerless; and the Communist party was quickly strengthening its position both inside and outside the armed forces. Searching desperately for ways to preserve what remained to them, the traditionalist parties allied themselves with the Baath, one of the groupings of the modern sector, to seek union with Egypt—and thus, ironically, their remaining power was taken from them. Despite a last parliamentary gasp immediately after the separation of 1961, the traditionalists never recovered effective political influence.

The other struggle of those years was, of course, the struggle within the modern sector over the Syrian future, and a major reason for the delay in ousting the landowning parties and their parliamentary system of control was the inability of the modern sector to agree. During the early 1950's, the most powerful modernist grouping was the Syrian Social National party (S.S.N.P.), a cell-organized structure that believed in Syrian (as opposed to Arab) nationalism and concentrated its almost fascist efforts on Lebanon as well. In 1954 a merger of two lesser parties produced a stronger rival: the Resurrection (Baath) party of Michel Aflaq and Salah-el-din Bitar joined the Arab Socialist party of Akram Hourani to form the Arab Socialist Resurrection party, which was popularly called the Baath and advocated not only socialism but also Arab unity and neutralism. In 1955 the political assassination of a prominent Baath-sympathizing officer by a member of the S.S.N.P. provided an excuse for action, and with the co-operation of traditionalists and Communists, the Baath organized the S.S.N.P.'s systematic destruction by adopting various tactics of terror and purge. As traditionalist power waned, the principal modernist groups remaining, the Baath and the Communists, fought for supremacy and, because it was clear that control of the army would be ultimately decisive, the

officer corps was the chief battleground. The Communist party improved its position more speedily than the Baath, and in 1957 a Communist was appointed chief of staff; the Baath responded by leading the move toward union with Egypt—playing on the fears of traditionalists and on the general delight at the thought of Arab unity. With Egyptian help, the Communist party, like the S.S.N.P. before it, was reduced to negligible influence. This left the Baath in sole possession.<sup>1</sup>

The union with Egypt lasted for something more than three years, and after it was over, in September 1961, Syrian parties raised their heads to assess the suddenly fluid situation. During the union, all parties had been banned—eventually even the Baath, which had expected to be Nasser's political representative in the Syrian Region; socialist laws, including a land reform law, had been promulgated; and three years of normal social evolution had considerably strengthened the modern sector. Immediately after separation, in reaction to Nasser's one-party system, a parliament was elected along the liberal democratic lines that meant dominance by landowners, and, in almost Pavlovian fashion, the votes of Syrians went to the political names that represented an imagined pre-Egyptian happiness—as well as a landowning and merchant desire to repeal Nasser's socialist laws. Such a parliament was out of tune with its times, however, and the traditionalists who controlled it soon antagonized the army by their bungling attempts to reproduce the status quo ante and by gestures in the direction of closer relations with Iraq. The army, of which large segments remained pro-Egyptian, sensed the general revulsion and felt a revulsion of its own, and on March 28, 1962, some of the officers who had conspired against the union brought off another coup, designed—according to many observers—to forestall an imminent coup by a group of Nasserite officers.

Clearly, army factions had been busy maneuvering for power, and the Syrian polity seemed right on course for a return to pre-union instability. But this time was different. With the purge of the Communist party in 1958, there had emerged within the modern sector a Baath-type consensus on Arabism, socialism, and neutralism, and the factional fissures that now appeared could be ascribed to disagreements over leadership rather than ideology. Indeed, the principal issue was Egyptian leadership. Despite many subtle gradations, three broad posi-

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<sup>1</sup> For pre-union Syria, see Gordon H. Torrey, Syrian Politics and the Military 1945-1958 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964). See also the forthcoming book by Patrick Seale, The Struggle for Syria (London: Chatham House, 1965).

tions came to be generally recognized—unionism, federalism, separatism—and all three revolved around the problem of relations with Nasser's continuing United Arab Republic. Unionists were those who wished to return to full union within the U.A.R., and—among the officers particularly—unionist strength was not inconsiderable. The federalist factions, on the other hand, wanted to reach some kind of new semiautonomous arrangement with Nasser: in this position stood the main body of the Baath, whose ideology coincided with that of the Egyptian revolution but who wished a chance to run things themselves. The separatist position was basically one of Syrian nationalism reinforced by the unhappy experiences of union, and some separatists claimed an interest in Arab unity of a non-Egyptian kind. A separatist section of the Baath led by Akram Hourani announced its anti-Egyptianness and broke away from the party.

Of the three, the federalist position ultimately won out. The word "separatist" soon became a term of opprobrium; many who were separatists at heart did not dare to make such a non-Arab admission publicly, and Hourani's group increasingly became a political backwater. The unionists, or Nasserites, though initially well entrenched, did not play their cards with much skill—and the federalists had the advantage of having the Baath organization, an experienced political party, at the heart of their efforts, whereas the unionists were all but cut off from the Egyptian leadership they apparently needed. Within the officer corps, unionists kept identifying themselves by staging unsuccessful attempts to take control or achieve greater influence, and when it came time for purge, an accurate list of Nasserite names was available to federalists. Thus, Nasserite disorders broke out immediately after the coup of March 28, 1962, in army barracks of the Aleppo area; and after an officers' conference in Homs had failed to produce a sufficiently pro-Egyptian agreement, some die-hard unionists contrived a minor rebellion that had to be put down with the use of heavy armor. A few lesser disorders followed at irregular intervals, and each disorder permitted—if only in the name of army discipline—greater federalist control. By March 8, 1963, the federalists were in a strong enough position to bring off a quiet army coup that put the Baath, the only political organization ideologically available, in cabinet control of the machinery of government.

Is the Baath simply a convenient political front for a group of professional soldiers bent on keeping order? The Baath does not think so: the coup of March 8, 1963, has already come to designate, in Baath mythology, the start of Syria's social revolution. Where does the ultimate power reside—with the Baath or with the Army? The answer lies deep in the nature of each and in the complex involvements that each has with the other.

The Baath is an ideological party under "collective leadership," facts that distinguish it from Syria's traditionalist parties, whose appeal was based almost entirely on the leadership of political personalities. The Baath's basic directions of belief are expressed in the principal slogan, "[Arab] Unity, Freedom, Socialism," and though it is verbose, the ideological literature is almost as imprecise as the slogan, hence lending itself to the exegetic change necessary to national development. Despite such imprecisions, or perhaps because of them, Baath members are often believers, men who are willing to be doctrinaire and dedicated; and the party is an ideological bond between believers from all levels of society, many of whom—significantly—appear to be in social transition. The attraction for believers may explain a regional feature of the membership: the Baath has always been Damascus-centered, drawing a disproportionate number of members and leaders from southern and central Syria and making relatively little headway in the commercially successful, enterprising atmosphere of the Aleppo region in the north. At the party's top levels, generational differences are apparent; the generation of Salah Bitar and Michel Aflaq, whose political formation owes much to the Sorbonne of the 1930's, is giving way to the less patient, more activist generation whose formation can in considerable measure be traced to the campus of the American University of Beirut during the 1940's. The party's claim to collective leadership, a claim often heard in the context of relations with Nasser's United Arab Republic, has some validity; and though the prevention of a personality cult may well be a problem in the future, the all-too-human desires of the present leadership for national prominence have been contained remarkably well.

A principal asset of the Baath has been its organizational ability, which perhaps arises from its long experience of seeking to survive in hostile surroundings. Theoretically, the party's top command is the international committee—in Baath parlance it is called the National Command because it represents the entire Arab nation—whose membership is made up from the local committees of each Arab state. The local committees—the Baath calls them Regional Commands—are presumably the seats of effective power, but the international committee is sometimes more than a co-ordinating body. In the Iraqi crisis of November 1963, when a split in the local committee threatened civil strife and political chaos, Baath elements from the officer corps—including the prime minister—insisted on bringing in the international committee to settle the dispute. Ironically, the presence of Syrians from the international committee—Syrians making decisions about the future of Iraq—contributed substantially to the fall of the Iraqi Baath regime a few days later. The Iraqi army's belief in Arab unity did not extend as

far as local control by non-Iraqi Arabs. The high proportion of Syrians on the international committee reflects the central position of the Syrian Regional Command, which is now the only local committee in power and increasingly adopts the pose of a "mother" committee representing Baathism's Syrian home. Indeed, despite its continuing verbal deference to Arab unity, some observers suspect the Baath of an increasing Syrian nationalism, partially forced on the party by its isolation and lack of success elsewhere and partially the result of the same regional urges that fostered the Syrian Socialist National party of a decade ago. The party's international elements are understandably anxious to reverse this trend by engineering new political successes elsewhere in the Arab world.

The power base of the Syrian Baath is the army officer corps, but this does not mean that the army can now, as it did for more than a decade, easily bring about changes of government. The structures of army and government have changed: a single party now lies near the heart of both. Where there was once a disputing multitude of military factions, each irresponsibly seeking to influence the machinery of government, there is now only one large faction, well organized and dominant; and because it is the military branch of the Syrian Regional Command of the Baath, it provides a stable relationship between officer corps and civil bureaucracy. The branch is little known: one estimate of its size is that it comprises some 30% of the total membership of the Syrian Baath, but since no reliable figures for total membership exist, the estimate is not particularly helpful. The significant, stabilizing fact is that it is a genuine party branch, an organization of and for the military, which apparently maintains its own discipline and independently regulates its relations with the Baath's civilian structure. This separate military branch allows politically minded officers to make their influence felt through the party's ideological and organizational channels—with less risk of being accused of the blatantly direct control that was made unforgettably unpopular by the army rule of Adib Shishakly in the early 1950's. Without this evolution of orderly means of influencing government, the army would find only haphazard and disorderly ways of expressing its power and impatience.

Some observers have said of Syria that it is now a country run by a Mameluke clique, a band of professional soldiers interested in power for its own sake; the Baath, they say, has become little more than an ideological and civilian cloak to hide a tight military control. Though beguiling because of its simplicity, this view of things is misleading. To begin with, officers are people, and few people are concerned exclusively with power. The urge to dominate is, after all, ordinarily accompanied by some justification, such as order or reform or preservation of tradition, and the recent history of Syria is crammed

with officers who have been sufficiently attached to their various justifications to risk their lives. There seems little doubt that the military factions of the last decade have been built on beliefs as well as on personalities. After the Baath faction took power on March 8, 1963, it eliminated its principal Nasserite rival from serious contention by purging officers whose own beliefs had made them risk death and disgrace in attempted coups—especially those of April and July 1963—designed to restore the full union with Egypt; and no matter what the mixed motives of its officers, the Baath faction derives its principal strength from its beliefs—that is, from the historically fortunate fact that its beliefs, both ideological and on the issue of Egyptian leadership, are running with the tide of consensus. The officers at the head of the Baathist army faction are the prisoners of these beliefs as well as the manipulators; should they in all unlikelihood desire to do so, they could not buck the tide of socialism, neutralism, and anti-Nasserism. To be sure, beliefs that come to form a consensus can be reinforced by demonstrations of the practicality of agreeing with the majority. Thus, as it entrenched itself in power during 1963 and early 1964, the Baath military faction increasingly became the only practical channel for the ambition of Syrian officers interested in politics, and it soon became clear that the reward for proper orientation was a measure of political influence. In effect, the Baath faction came to play a key role in two organizations: just as it had earlier become the Baath's military wing, so now it became the effective political wing of the officer corps.

The Baath's military branch has, in all probability, a relatively small membership—and this is as precise as one can be on the matter. Now that the major purges are over and political opposition has been effectively eliminated, there is perhaps no need for a large political organization. Provided it fulfills its functions of protecting the general interests of the corps and of providing a channel for political influence, the military branch has apparently little to fear from the commissioned majority who remain outside the party. What opposition remains is the unorganized opposition of nonpolitical discontent, and there is less of this than formerly because the officer corps is carefully coddled. One observer—admitting his informed guesswork—puts the proportion of officers remaining outside the party's military membership as high as 80%, and if this is too high an estimate, it indicates nevertheless the importance of knowing their social and political identity. Many, I have said, are in social transition—and often unwilling to risk their new officer status for the pleasure of dabbling in politics. In their purest form these are the professionals, the "Mamelukes" interested in a military way of life, perhaps originating

in the villages or small towns of Syria's less favored regions, men whose psychological investment in the officer corps is so great that it commands undivided loyalty. But not many are as "pure" as this: one can, in fact, postulate a social and political continuum that ranges from Baath activist to chaste professional—including, in the words of a Damascus diplomat, "Mameluke Baathists and Baath-type Mamelukes"—and it is certain that many officers, though not members of the Baath, now sympathize with its aims and favor its new central position in Syrian life.

The reasons for sympathy are basic to an understanding of Baathist strength. Aside from the key fact that Baathist ideology expresses a consensus about the Syrian future, non-Baathist officers are drawn to the Baath by the natural complementarity evolving between army and party. The emergence of the Baath military faction as the institutional bridge between the two organizations results from the increasing usefulness of each to the other. Since the time of Shishakly, it has been assumed that the army cannot govern Syria directly, and whether or not this assumption is true, it is sufficiently believed to have become an important fact of Syrian politics. Not only is the Baath the only effective political organization to emerge from the political wars of the last decade, and hence the only one available for the army's use, but the Baath has made the further gesture of welcoming army influence and participation. Were the officer corps to become impatient with the Baath, as in the past it has become impatient with other civilian governments, there would not be—except for the unacceptable land-owning and (perhaps) Communist alternatives—any other organized leadership available. Moreover, the corps would risk the loss of a pleasant association difficult to replace: the Baath generally protects the army's "dignity," and it has made it plain, for both ideological and practical purposes, that it greatly values the support of minority groups, of villagers and ex-villagers, of those less blessed by unearned fortune—precisely, in fact, that large non-party group whose pro-Baath sympathies inside the officer corps are a vital source of party strength.

On its side, the Baath must have as its ally a stable and satisfied army, for in a modernizing and revolutionary era it could not hope to stand on its own against the forces of tradition. It would be impossible to achieve army stability and satisfaction by a general purge of non-Baathists—this would mean ousting a majority of officers, for whom competent Baathist replacements could not be found—and hence the solution was to oust only those who had been led positively into contrary political belief. For the remaining officers, Baathist and otherwise, the price of stability appears to have been to allow the emergence



of the party's semiautonomous military branch, a branch that would reflect (more than any civilian organization could) the legitimate aspirations of officers, and to formalize this military branch's position by giving it representation on the party's governing bodies. Thus, the inter-Arab National Command has strong representation from the party's Syrian military branch, and, more significantly, the party's Syrian Regional Command has Syria's key military figures as members. More than this, the military branch is represented in Syrian political institutions that theoretically are not part of the party organization. The National Council of the Revolutionary Command (N.C.R.C.), an institution whose origins are related to the military intrigues following the separation from Egypt, is supposedly Syria's ultimate political authority; its reported 21 members, as though their identities are not known, are, in the words of a Baathist civilian, "mostly military." The presidium, the (usually) five-man supreme executive body responsible to the N.C.R.C., has at least two members from the party's military branch, and the presidium's chairman is currently Amin el-Hafez, the general who is also prime minister. (The unconstitutional occupancy of these two posts by the same person will, say some Baathists somewhat uncertainly, soon to be discontinued.) Of some 15 cabinet ministers, four or five are military, and among these are at least two of the six non-Baathists in the cabinet. Significantly, and especially considering the Baathist control of political life without the alienation of sympathizers inside the corps, the ministry of the interior is held by a Baathist officer and the ministry of defense by a non-Baathist one.

A careful reading of these representational arrangements will remove any doubt that at times of party decision the military branch carries more weight than the numerically larger civilian apparatus of the towns and villages. One reason, as has been said, is the pivotal nature of the military branch itself: because it doubles in brass as the officer corps' instrument for political action, it is at the balance point of Syria's polity, a focus for the political attention of both the Baath and the army. Another reason is historical: the Baath's army branch—with the co-operation of Baathist sympathizers—brought the party to power on March 8, 1963, and though civilian Baathists were immediately given some authority, it was the military that gave it to them. The direction of the relationship, as the Baath becomes more an accepted part of life in Syria and as its military branch becomes less beholden to sympathizing officers, is toward greater influence for the party's civilian cadres; but for several years to come Baathist officers will be more influential than Baathist civilians. The essence of the relationship, however, remains the importance of each to the other:

in the words of one observer, "both army and party cannot now get along without each other and both know it."<sup>2</sup>

The Baath has been in practical control of Syria for more than two years, and the statement of a diplomat that the party is now less attractive than it was is probably fair. In order to stay in power, Baathists have been "temporarily" forced to abandon some of the ideological positions taken during the years in the political wilderness. One party member said, with a not unhappy smile: "We've been forced to adjust our theology to the demands of this world, and our provisional slogan should read 'Federal Arabism, Economic Freedom, and Occasional Socialism.'"

Despite published beliefs in representational government, the Baath now runs a one-party system in Syria. Though anti-Baath opinions are easy to find in private conversations, which the authorities could easily overhear if they chose, public discussion that discredits the party and its aims is not permitted, and all but two major newspapers—both of them Baathist—have been closed down. A labor journal (called Al-Ishtiraki, or The Socialist) financed by the unions, which are theoretically independent of the party apparatus, occasionally includes interpretations with which the government is unhappy; but these interpretations are never, as the journal's name should indicate, capitalist in intent. What, in fact, gives the journal its freedom is the naïve Baathist conviction—or perhaps the pious hope—that workers (like peasants) could never be genuinely antisocialist.

Like their ideological and political rival in Egypt, Baathists now speak of the impossibility of political freedom prior to the establishment of economic justice. And to this end, the Baath is forging vigorously ahead with land reform, rural "co-operatives," and some new industry. Nationalization of the "commanding and less commanding heights of the economy" (as one Britisher put it) is proceeding piecemeal; and despite the protest that their socialism is pragmatic and partial, Baathists will be sufficiently doctrinaire, I believe, to push decentralized nationalization of nonagricultural enterprise to a point just short of taking over small shops and other small family undertakings. They are proceeding very slowly, however, making

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<sup>2</sup> Though the party's National Congress in May 1965 has apparently suggested the dissolution of a separate branch for the Syrian military, the suggestion will presumably be rejected by the Syrian Regional Command as provisionally impractical.

clumsy attempts to lull middle-class suspicions that further rounds of nationalization are on the way, and the effect of this piecemeal approach has been disastrous. Enterprising Syrians by the tens of thousands have taken themselves and their money to the capitalist haven of Beirut, where the latest sneer about the plummeting Syrian pound is that there are now more of them in Beirut than in all of Syria. Aleppo, once the expanding capital of Syria's private enterprise, is now a discouraged and politically powerless city, and investment in Jezireh Province, which was the prime mover of the economic surge of the 1950's, has dwindled to almost nothing. In the words of a former Syrian landowner, now in Beirut: "They are wrecking the economy, and they should close the border to Lebanon and take everything—before everything goes." Baathists, on the other hand, claim doctrinally that a period of economic depression is inevitable during the stage of rapid social transition leading to economic freedom.

However, any group in power in Syria has a natural advantage in that the Syrian economy is hard to destroy. Despite the disturbances of land reform and socialism, agricultural surpluses are often likely—and when this is so, the living is easy. The economic system that the Baath is imposing may ultimately be considered unwise, although the evidence for this will not be clear for a number of years, but in the meantime a significant number of Syrians will forgive the Baath its foolishness in grateful acknowledgement of the priceless gift of stability.

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