

The Renewal of the “Struggle for Syria”: The Rise and Fall of the Ba’th Party

Eyal Zisser¹

Several days before the fall of Egyptian President Husni Mubarak’s regime, when it appeared that its days were numbered, Syrian President Bashar Assad (Arabic, al-Asad) granted an interview to *The Wall Street Journal* in which he talked for the first time about the momentous events taking place in the region. With a self-confidence bordering on arrogance that soon proved to be thoroughly unjustified, Assad assured his concerned interviewers that “...we [Syrians] are not Tunisians and we are not Egyptians,” and explained why the earthquake rocking the Arab world would bypass Syria:

We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people’s beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance....

...Why is Syria stable, although we have more difficult conditions [than Egypt]? Egypt has been supported financially by the United States, while we are under embargo by most countries of the world. We have growth although we do not have many of the basic needs for the people. Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. So it is not only about the needs and not only about the reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have.²

Assad’s words depict a regime in perfect harmony with Syrian society; a regime that championed a widely popular ideology, provided for the needs of its people despite the many obstacles, and generally reflected the beliefs and sentiments of Syria’s diverse inhabitants. The Ba’th regime, according to Assad, represented the end of the struggle over Syria’s political and social identity that dominated the country’s history. Though the young Ba’th regime of the 1960s and 1970s was indeed representative of Syrian society and brought respite from decades of struggle, it did not mark the termination of that struggle. Despite the views expressed by Assad in his interview, the

¹ Professor Eyal Zisser is the Dean of Humanities and holds the Yona and Dina Ettinger Chair of Contemporary Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University.

² *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011,
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>

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failure of the Ba'th regime to conform to the changes within Syrian society produced a breach between the regime and the people in which the struggle was lying in wait.

For many years the Assad regime had focused on another struggle, the conflict with Israel. Following his interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, the Syrian media echoed their president's views. Several sources attributed the fall of the Mubarak regime to its peace treaty with Israel, suggesting that it was Egypt's relations with Israel that brought the masses onto the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian towns. The implication of this assertion was that Syria's commitment to the resistance (*muqawama*) camp was a major factor in ensuring that the Assad family and the Ba'th party would maintain their strength and popularity.³

A few weeks after Assad's interview his case for Syria's exceptional stability appeared baseless. On 15 March 2011 demonstrations broke out in several Syrian towns. At first it appeared as if the demonstrations would be far less extensive than those in Egypt. While hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people were taking to the streets in Egyptian cities, only hundreds or at most several thousand demonstrators took part in the Syrian protests. Further, the demonstrations in Syria were confined to peripheral areas such as the town of Dar'a in the south and the small towns and villages nearby.

However, within several weeks the disturbances spread from Dar'a to the rural areas around Damascus and then to the capital itself. Riots also broke out in the towns along the Syrian coast. In this case, commentators attributed the disturbances to the persistent friction between the Sunni Muslim majority living in the cities of Jabla, Banyas, Tartus, and Ladhqiyya and the 'Alawite villagers who had immigrated to the formerly Sunni-dominated coastal towns.⁴

Something here should sound quite incongruous to anyone familiar with Syria's recent history. It was precisely the peripheral areas of Syria that had constituted the stronghold of the Ba'th Party and then the Ba'th regime after it was established in the revolution of 8 March 1963. Dar'a, the dreary town in southern Syria where the uprisings began, is the birthplace of both Faruq al-Shar', Syrian vice president and former minister of foreign affairs, and Faysal al-Miqdad, Syria's deputy foreign minister. Similarly, the town of al-Tall, located in a rural area near Damascus, witnessed demonstrations despite its

³ See, for example, *Al-Watan* (Damascus), 30 January 2011; *Tishrin* (Damascus), 12 February 2011.

⁴ *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), 27 March 2011; Syria Comment 26 March 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8789>.

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ties to the Ba'th regime. 'Abdallah al-Ahmar, who serves as assistant to the general secretary of the Ba'th Party National Command (al-Qiyada al-Qutriyya) and who is regarded as second only to Assad in the party and state hierarchy, was born in al-Tall. In the town of al-Rustan, not far from Hims, demonstrators destroyed a statue of Hafiz Assad, the regime's founder and long-time ruler, in April. Al-Rustan is also the birthplace of the Talas family, whose members fill key positions in the Ba'th regime. Mustafa Talas served as minister of defense for over three decades and was known for his close personal relationship with Hafiz Assad. His son, Manaf Talas, is known as one of Bashar Assad's close associates and serves as one of the commanders of the Republican Guard, an elite force tasked with protecting the regime.⁵

The demonstrations in Dar'a, al-Tall and al-Rustan reveal how politics in the Syrian periphery have changed. The areas that supported the Ba'th Party for years, the areas from which the Ba'th regime drew its strength and its leaders, have turned against the regime. This change is the culmination of a long process, extending over several decades, during which the regime allowed the support it enjoyed among the popular bases to decline and dissipate.

The Syrian Ba'th regime that was established following the 8 March 1963 Revolution and consolidated following the November 1970 seizure of power by Hafiz Assad (in what was known as the Corrective Movement, al-Haraka al-Tashihiyya), reflected the changing social realities of the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically, the new regime reflected the emergence of the minority religious communities and the Sunni Muslim residents of the Syrian periphery. While Syria has continued to change since the 1960s and 1970s, the regime and the Ba'th Party have not adapted accordingly. It is in this gap between the Ba'th Party and the regime that rules in its name, on the one hand, and a Syrian society that has undergone social and economic transformations in recent decades, on the other, that we must seek the sources of tumult the country has experienced since March 2011.

Respite: The Ba'th Regime of Hafiz Assad

For several decades, the Syrian Ba'th regime was a personal affair whose various and at times conflicting components were held together by its founder and long-time ruler, Hafiz Assad. The regime drew its support from the Assad family, whose members played a central role in the state, and from other members of the Kalbiyya tribe from which it hailed. The regime also

⁵ For more see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 178-180. See also Eyal Zisser, *Decision Making in Assad's Syria* (Washington: the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998), pp. 17-27.

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had a sectarian character, as it relied on the support of the powerful 'Alawite community to hold together its various elements. In this respect, the Syrian regime reflected the rise to prominence of the 'Alawite community during the second half of the twentieth century.

Despite Assad's centrality, the regime he established in Syria was multifaceted. At times it showed a personal face, and at others a family, tribal, or communal face, each in accord with the circumstances and challenges it confronted. The regime also showed the face of the Ba'th Party, a central component of its identity, and that of the military, since its survival was based upon the support of the military and security forces. When judging this protean regime, we must conclude that it was first and foremost the product of the social and political transformations that took place in the country following the Ba'th revolution of 8 March. As such, the regime reflected the social, economic, and political order that was established in the wake of that revolution.

Further, it should be emphasized that the Ba'th revolution was an important step toward ensuring the survival and durability of the Syrian state. The revolution inverted the governmental pyramid and, in practice, the former social and economic orders. For hundreds of years, an urban elite hailing from the Sunni Muslim community had dominated the political, social, and economic life of Syria. As a result of the Revolution, its place was taken by a new coalition of rising political and social forces that had emerged from the dispossessed sectors of Syrian society, members of the minority communities living mostly in rural and peripheral areas.

At the heart of the new order stood a coalition of four main forces. First, at the center were the members of the 'Alawite community, particularly those close to the Assad family. The 'Alawites were the dominant factor in the coalition: their power over the other elements ensured its cohesion and continued existence. Second were members of the Sunni Muslim community from the rural and peripheral areas of the country. They became, as a group, a senior partner in the post-8 March coalition. Most of the public figures in the top echelons of Syrian politics come from this sector. Third were members of other minority communities, including Christians, Druze, and Isma'ilis. These groups viewed 'Alawite dominance in the country as a factor guaranteeing their own status and personal and economic security. Fourth was the Sunni Muslim economic elite living in Damascus. This last group was gradually absorbed into the ruling coalition over a number of years beginning in November 1970, when its members began to take advantage of the policies of

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economic and political openness adopted by the Assad regime at that time and even more so from the beginning of the 1990s.⁶

These four groups supported the Ba'th regime in the struggle against its opponents, in part because they saw it as Syria's best option. For example, the Islamic insurgency against the regime from 1976-1982 was confined to several of the large towns in the north of the country, at first to Aleppo and its surroundings and afterwards to the town of Hama, scene of the well-known 1982 massacre. The rural regions and the capital Damascus were generally marked by quiet.

Respite to Renewal: Bashar Assad and the Antecedents of Struggle

Syrian President Hafiz Assad died on 10 June 2000. He was succeeded by his son and heir, Bashar Assad. Upon his rise to power, Assad the son made promises to institute far-reaching political reforms. However, it quickly became clear that the new president remained committed to his father's legacy and the political system his father left behind.⁷ That system, however, had become increasingly estranged from the country's society. In contrast to the period following the 8 March revolution, Syrian society no longer found its interests expressed in the structure, institutions, and worldview of the Ba'th regime.

Indeed, in the decades following the revolution Syrian society experienced extraordinary transformations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Syria witnessed dramatic population growth, the result of one of the highest birth rates in the world (3.5-3.8%). When Hafiz Assad took power in 1970, Syria's population numbered about 6 million people. In 2011, its population had grown to nearly 23 million.⁸ The dramatic increase in population led to a process of accelerated urbanization that turned Damascus, Aleppo, and other towns into large cities with millions of residents, many coming from rural and peripheral areas and seeking a better life. However, these immigrants encountered numerous difficulties in their efforts to integrate or even to find a place for themselves at the margins of urban life. The percentage of urban residents in Syria rose from 37% in 1960 to 43% in 1970 and to 55% in 2000. A study published in May 2002 revealed that the population of Damascus had grown

⁶ For more see Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 29-35.

⁷ See Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 19-76. See also David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁸ *Tishrin* (Damascus), 19 October 2000; *Al-Thawra* (Damascus), 10 August 2002.

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from about half a million residents in 1960 to 5.5 million in 2002. Of those 5.5 million, about 3.9 million had emigrated in recent decades from rural areas.⁹

With this increase in residents, cities expanded geographically by absorbing rural areas. However, these areas are not classified as urban in official statistics. The urban population in Syria is therefore even greater than those statistics reveal. The Syrian regime has found it very difficult to deal with this accelerated growth in the urban population, as demonstrated by the proliferation of squalid slums around the urban centers. Urbanization presented a serious challenge to the Ba'th regime in another way. In the early years of its rule the regime cultivated support among minority communities and the Sunni Muslims living in rural areas and the periphery. The regime guaranteed this support through an extensive network of institutions and organizations. It integrated minorities and residents of rural areas into the mechanisms of the regime, including the ranks of the army and the security services, the institutions of the state, and even the highest echelons of the regime. However, little by little the regime abandoned the rural areas and the periphery. At the same time, it did not win the trust and loyalty of the recent immigrants from the villages to the big cities.

For a time, the Ba'th Party succeeded in maintaining its ruling position, a status that was also anchored in Article 8 of the Syrian Constitution, which grants to the Ba'th Party leadership of state and society. The party even registered a dramatic growth in its membership. A report published on the occasion of the Sixth Congress of the Ba'th Party, held immediately after the death of President Hafiz Assad in June 2000, stated that the party had 1,409,580 members, of whom 406,047 were "active members" (sing. *'udw 'amil*), the highest ranking membership, followed by "candidate members" (*murashshah*) and "supporting members" (*nasir*). In 1971, the party had 65,398 members, in 1981, 374,332 members, and by 1992, 1,008,243 members.¹⁰ However, the growth in the size of the party did not accurately reflect the degree of support or popularity it enjoyed among the population at large or the degree to which its ideology was attractive or relevant. Rather, the increase in membership seemed to reflect the desire of the new members to take advantage of the opportunities for social, economic, and political advancement that the party provided.

Indeed, while the party grew in numbers, the ideology upon which it had been built was collapsing. The fall of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s through the 1990s and the subsequent crash of the Syrian

⁹ *Al-Thawra*, (Damascus), 22 May 2002 and 21 January 2011.

¹⁰ *Al-Nahar* (Beirut), 16 June 2000.

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economy proved Ba'th socialism to be a failure. Syria's willingness to advance the peace process with Israel and engage in dialogue with the West weakened its commitment to Arab nationalism and unity. Further, the regime's leadership began to focus on Syria's own separate interests and political identity. Bashar Assad alluded to this new outlook during discussions at the June 2000 Ba'th Party Congress when he said: "The party's survival is dependent upon the extent of its ability to adapt itself to the situation prevailing today in Syria and to the developments in the various areas of life in the state."¹¹ However, it has now become clear that despite Assad's apparent recognition that the Ba'th regime must actively adapt to changing circumstances, a sensibility he expressed to his *Wall Street Journal* interviewers, his regime's failure to do so meant that the struggle for Syria would emerge sooner or later.

It seems that instead of adapting, the Syrian regime, like other dictatorial regimes in the Arab world, survived by erecting around itself walls of fear. One wall was solid and tangible, personified by the security forces, whose task it was to protect the regime and to suppress any effort to weaken or overthrow it, whether in word or deed. The other wall was just as high and solid, but much less tangible. It consisted of the intimidating belief planted in the hearts of Syrians that there was no alternative to the Ba'th regime, and that its fall would be followed by anarchy and bloodshed. Standing in the shadow of this wall and lending it support were the public sector employees, whose numbers swelled in an unprecedented manner. These government officials constitute a significant proportion of the work force in Syria and many other Arab states and are inclined to remain loyal to the existing regimes that provide their livelihood.

The fear of what might ensue if the present regime were to fall is particularly perceptible in Syria, especially considering the country's history of conflict, its disjointed social structure, and the experiences of its neighbors, Lebanon and Iraq. Those two countries offer frightening scenarios to the people of Syria. Iraq descended into an abyss of anarchy and civil war after the overthrow of Saddam Husayn's regime. Lebanon, which does not enjoy the stability of a dictatorial regime, is constantly on the verge of civil war. Syria's geopolitical proximity to Iraq and Lebanon make those neighbors more relevant models than Tunisia or Egypt. Still, following the revolutions in Tunis and Cairo and the unrest that spread to Libya, Yemen, and even Jordan and Bahrain, Syria's turn also came. The wall of fear erected by the regime and its agents has apparently collapsed. It now remains to be seen whether the other wall of

¹¹ Radio Damascus, 18 June 2000. For more on the Ba'th Party see Kamal Abu-Jaber, *The Arab Ba'th Socialist Party: History, Ideology and Organization* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966).

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fear, the fear of the unknown, will also fall, allowing the various socio-political communities in Syria to make the final move towards regime change.

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The current conflict taking place in Syria is best understood as part of an ongoing struggle within Syrian society and its political community that has characterized much of the country's history in the twentieth century. This struggle has been fought over the state's identity, political orientation, and independence, but perhaps mainly over the issue of political authority and hegemony.

This is the picture painted by Patrick Seale, correspondent in Damascus for the British newspaper *The Observer*, who in 1965 published *The Struggle for Syria*, a book that continues to be one of the most important sources for studying the history of Syria.¹² Seale constructs an image of Syria as a weak and unstable state embroiled in a constant struggle among contending forces for power and the ability to determine the path the state should follow and the identity it should assume. Seale sees Syria as a passive player who can help its allies attain leadership and hegemony in the Arab world but who can never itself attain that status. It is no accident that Seale ended his book in 1958, the year Syria "commit[ed] suicide" by combining with Egypt in the United Arab Republic (UAR). By this union, the Syrian state temporarily lost its independence and merged with its "elder Arab sister," as Egypt was called.

In Seale's second book on Syria, published in 1988 and entitled *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, the author describes the leadership of Hafiz Assad and Syria's emergence as a pivotal player in regional and intra-Arab affairs. To Seale at the time, it seemed that the "struggle for Syria" had been brought to an end. As a result, the Ba'th regime was turning its attention to the struggle for the Middle East. Indeed, when Seale asked Assad how he wanted his period of rule to be remembered, the Syrian dictator replied that he hoped it would be remembered as one in which "the struggle continued."¹³

¹² Patrick Seale, *Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). For more on the power struggles in Syria in 1946-1963, see Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994); Michael H. Van Dusen, "Intra- and Inter-generational Conflict in the Syrian Army" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, John Hopkins University, 1971); Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949-1961* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994).

¹³ Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), p. 495.

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Though Assad was referring to the struggle against Israel and the West, it is now clear that the struggle over the character and image of the Syrian state and society, which appeared to have been resolved during Assad's reign, has come to life once again. Given strong impetus by the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the Syrian people have instigated a new struggle to reshape the character of the Syrian state.

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