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Volume 12, Number 5 March 28, 2018

Wither the Syrian Ba‘th? Down, but Not Out

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Throughout the brutal war in Syria, now entering its eighth year, the Syrian regime has been thought to be on the verge of defeat or victory, yet neither outcome ever seems to manifest itself and the brutal war continues. Today, as at certain points in the past, the Asad regime appears to have gained the upper hand, as demonstrated by its recent battlefield victories and advances, like in Eastern Ghouta, and territorial gains secured with the indispensable help of Russian and Iranian military assistance. This progress has emboldened the regime, which seems ever more confident that “final victory”¹ is within its grasp even though it still does not control important parts of Syrian territory. These developments, in turn, have also encouraged the one institution that has been synonymous with the regime for more than five decades but whose status in the country was diminished significantly in the early years of the conflict, the Arab Socialist Ba‘th Party. Nonetheless, and despite the erosion of its status as the “leading party in society and the state,” the Ba‘th has remained dominate; its organizations, institutions, and mechanisms for controlling and ruling the country continue to function. At present, a weakened and less influential Ba‘th is dedicated to regaining what it has lost and is currently ever more emboldened to reclaim its status.

To understand the Ba‘th’s current situation it is important to understand the erosion of the Party’s standing prior to 2011, as well as several developments that took place in the uprising’s early months. The Party’s privileged status had declined under the first decade leadership of Bashar al-Asad. The Party’s Arab nationalist ideology was reduced to empty platitudes and rhetoric, devoid of real substance and meaning, while Asad consolidated his power by instituting

¹ Neil MacFarquhar, “[Russia’s Greatest Problem in Syria: Its Ally President Assad](#),” *New York Times*, March 8, 2018.

reforms that curbed the Party's influence over national policy.² The regime's violent response to anti-regime protests in early 2011 further exacerbated and hastened the decline of the Party's authority and influence. The regime's response to the protests were largely driven by the decisions of the military and intelligence services, rather than by the Ba'ath Party's Regional Command (RC), the party's highest body (and, by extension, the nation's), once responsible for setting party and national policy and once considered "the most powerful institution in Syria."³ Through the RC's National Security Bureau (*Maktab al-Amn al-Watani*), the Party did work to quell public demonstrations and suppress dissent against the regime, as well as organize counter demonstrations, alongside pro-regime, predominately 'Alawi street gangs (known as the *Shabiha*) and the Syrian security forces.⁴ But the RC's efforts to mobilize party members and generate public support for the regime among Syrians, its two "core roles," proved only partially successful.⁵ Of far greater consequence, however, the regime's brutal crackdown on protestors alienated many rank and file Ba'athists, and resulted in massive defections from the Party, whose official membership was reduced from an estimated 2.5 million members to 1.7 million members.⁶ Their defections were further encouraged by the widespread belief in late 2011 and early 2012 that the regime, having lost control over a large part of the country, was on the brink of collapse.

Its membership depleted, the Party's authority was further eroded in February 2012 with the ratification of a new constitution, which replaced the constitution of 1973. In the name of reform, Article 8 of the 1973 constitution, which stated the Ba'ath Party was "the leading party in society and the state," was amended, eliminating in theory, though not in practice,⁷ the Ba'ath's privileged status, separating the institutions of the Party and the State, and paving the way for a multi-party system.⁸ The new constitution also removed any mention of socialism (one of the three pillars of Ba'athist ideology, along with unity and

² Carsten Wieland, *Syria-A Decade of Lost Chances* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2012), Kindle Edition, loc. 1669-1681.

³ Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 70.

⁴ Reinoud Leenders, "Repression is not 'A Stupid Thing': Regime Responses to the Syrian Uprising and Insurgency," in *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, ed. Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 264, and "[Bashar al-Assad's inner circle](#)," *BBC News*, July 30, 2012.

⁵ Souhaïl Belhadj, "[The Decline of Syria's Baath Party](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 5, 2012.

⁶ *Ibid.*, and Naser al-Sharara, "[al-Asad Yaquum bi-Inqilab Abyad](#)" [Asad Carries Out a Bloodless Coup], *Syria Steps*, July 19, 2013.

⁷ Sami Moubayed observed that Ba'athists were "so powerful that [they] continued to act as if business as usual. They continued to nominate their members for senior jobs, and were rewarded accordingly...." See Aron Lund, "[The Baath Party and the War in Syria: An Interview with Sami Moubayed](#)," *Diwan: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 17, 2013.

⁸ [Syria Constitution of 2012](#).

freedom), and its absence was particularly notable in the oath of office recited by the president and members of the legislature at their swearing in ceremony.⁹ It further underscored an ideological shift away from the foundational aspects of Baʿthist ideology. In addition, the Party’s standing was damaged by the proliferation of many pro-regime gangs and militias, from the *Shabiha* to the National Defense Forces, established outside of its control. Though Baʿth party members ostensibly belonged to and fought in various pro-regime militias, the party itself lacked an organized armed militia under its complete control until the summer of 2012. In addition, the regime’s official media rhetoric shifted to a nationalist discourse promoting the State and its institutions, while minimizing the Party and its role. Thus, the exploits of the Syrian security services were lauded and promoted, while the Baʿth receded into the background. Since this low point, the Baʿth has quietly worked to regain its status, expanding the role of the Party’s militia, recruiting new members, strengthening its institutions and bases of support, and attempting to assert its influence over government institutions.

In 2012, more than a year into the conflict and amid the outbreak of violence in Aleppo, Hilal al-Hilal, who was then the secretary of the Party’s branch in Aleppo, established the *Kata’ib al-Baʿth* (Baʿth Battalions) as the official party militia.¹⁰ Initially the lightly armed Baʿth Battalions were only active in Aleppo, where they supported the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) by maintaining order and security in regime held areas and for the most part were not involved in fighting rebels.¹¹ Indeed, the objective of forming the Party militia was not to create a frontline force, but rather an armed force capable of supporting the SAA by enabling it to focus on fighting rather than maintaining local law, order, and security. By 2014, the Party militia had expanded its organization and presence to other regime-held areas, notably Tartus, Latakia, and Damascus, where it manned checkpoints “in order to relieve the burden on security services and facilitate their operations on the front lines.”¹² In November 2016, the Party also established a unit in the newly formed “Fifth Legion” (*al-Faylaq al-Khamis*) under the command of the SAA, which sought to recruit volunteers to fight alongside Syrian security forces against “terrorism.”¹³ The Baʿth Party recruited male and female volunteers, young and old, to serve in the Party’s unit.¹⁴ Notably, the head of the Syrian

⁹ [Syria Constitution of 2012](#).

¹⁰ Aron Lund, “[The Baath Battalions Move into Damascus](#),” *Diwan: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 13, 2014.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “[Kata’ib al-Baʿth ila Shawari’a Dimshq](#) [Baʿth Battalions Come to Damascus’ Streets],” *al-Akhbar*, December 30, 2013.

¹³ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “[The Fifth Legion: A New Auxiliary Force](#),” *Syria Comment*, December 24, 2016.

¹⁴ “[Out of retirement and manning a checkpoint, SAA Fifth Corps volunteer: ‘It’s better than sitting at home](#),” *Syria Direct*, March 23, 2017.

National Student Union and member of the Ba‘th RC, Amar Sa‘ati, sought to use his position to mobilize university students in regime-held territory to join the battalion and turn universities into recruitment centers for the Ba‘th Brigade in the Fifth Legion.¹⁵ However, despite its efforts to enlist younger members, membership in the Battalions still appears to be dominated by older recruits. Today, the *Kata’ib al-Ba‘th* continues to train and equip Party members, and its leaders emphasize the Party’s important role in supporting Syrian security forces in defending Syria and maintaining the security and safety of citizens, from manning checkpoints in cities to guarding the gates of local universities.¹⁶ The Party and its militia, according to a recent report, are working to assert their authority over the numerous pro-regime militias, as well as recruit new members.¹⁷

The Party has also had recent success in adding new members to its ranks, particularly male and female young people. In February 2018, for example, a video published by the Ba‘th party depicted a large group becoming active party members by declaring their allegiance to uphold the principles of the Ba‘th in a large swearing-in ceremony held in the coastal city of Tartus.¹⁸ A similar video was also published by the Ba‘th Party branch in Latakia and appeared amid a general push promoting the annual gatherings of party branches in Syria’s various provinces. In tandem with expanding its membership, the Party, according to opposition sources, is also beginning to reassert its authority over local decision making in political and security affairs. In Hama, for example, the Party seeks to make party membership a prerequisite for employment in a state institution and has asserted its authority on security issues, making the Party the decision maker rather than the security branch.¹⁹ Even in regions the regime does not control, the Ba‘th has still been able to operate and assert itself. For example, in Afrin, an area controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) from 2012 until March 2018, the Afrin section of Party’s Aleppo Branch recently distributed flyers promoting its annual conference for workers and

¹⁵ “[Syrian regime forms militia mostly from the ruling party](#),” *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 16, 2017; “[Al Ba’ath brigades, new militia mostly from university students](#),” *Zaman al-Wasl*, February 20, 2017.

¹⁶ “[Amin al-far’ yutfaqid dawra Kata’ib al-Ba‘th](#) [Branch Secretary Inspects Ba‘th Brigade Training Course],” *al-Fida’*, January 31, 2018; and, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1VrMqUQDHY>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfsEHwoeCWw>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXodnDRb9Ek>.

¹⁷ “[Hizb al-Ba‘th Yuhawil Istia’ada Adawarahu fi Suriya](#) [Ba‘th Party Trying to Restore its Roles in Syria],” *Sada al-Sham*, February 13, 2018.

¹⁸ FB Page, [Hizb al-Ba‘th al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki – Far’ Tartus](#), February 3, 2018; and, FB Page, [Hizb al-Ba‘th al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki – Far’ Tartus-Shuba’ Safita](#); and, FB Page, [Hizb al-Ba‘th al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki – Far’ Latakia](#), February 5, 2018.

¹⁹ “[Hizb al-Ba‘th Yuhawil Istia’ada Adawarahu fi Suriya](#),” *Sada al-Sham*.

farmers without the PYD's permission or interference,²⁰ and the PYD appears to have allowed the local Ba'ath party branch to function and meet with little interference.

It remains to be seen if the Syrian Ba'ath's ambitions and efforts to regain its stature and monopoly on power in Syria, will be realized. While it is currently the largest and most organized political force in Syria, real opposition to its continued rule, the diffusion of and shifts in power within the regime and pro-regime elements, and the proliferation of armed groups and new political parties make success doubtful. Yet, the Ba'ath party has, in the words of Lebanese intellectual Elias Khoury, succeeded in creating a situation in which there was "no alternative to itself," having either destroyed any alternatives outright or creating conditions within society from which no real alternative could spring.²¹ To give but one example, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Ba'ath's historical ideological rivals, is perhaps the largest organized political force after the Ba'ath, but the SSNP is divided into three factions, each with its own leadership structure and policy towards the Syrian regime. Yet, even if a real political alternative existed it is unlikely the Ba'ath would tolerate any arrangement in which another party or group of parties threatened its influential and central position within Syria's society and state, such as through multi-party elections or through the establishment of a federal system that would eliminate its centralized power. Moreover, regardless of what happens, as Aron Lund observed in 2015, the regime's "constituent parts [e.g., the Ba'ath Party, the military, and the intelligence services] are not about to vanish from the face of the earth."²² Indeed, an emboldened Ba'ath party, celebrating the 55th year of its rule in Syria and in spite of its weakened stature and the destruction it has helped wreak on the country over the course of the last seven years, appears unlikely to disappear from Syria for the foreseeable future nor cease its efforts to dominate and rule the country.

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²⁰ "Shu'ba 'Afrin lil-hizb al-ba'th tada'wa firqaha al-hizbiyya lihudur al-mu'atamar al-sanawi bihalab," Rojava News; and, FB Page of Aleppo Branch-Afrin Section: <https://www.facebook.com/718949804931648/photos/a.718984991594796.1073741828.718949804931648/884194898407137/?type=3&theater>.

²¹ Robert Kaplan, "[Baathism Caused the Chaos in Iraq and Syria](#)," *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2018.

²² Aron Lund, "[Is Assad Losing the War in Syria?](#)," *Diwan: Middle East Insights from Carnegie*, May 13, 2015.

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