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SPECIAL REPORT

SYRIA UNDER THE BAATH

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SYRIA UNDER THE BAATH

Syria has been led for more than three years by the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party, more commonly known as the Baath. The country's several Baathist governments, however, have been able only partially to implement the party ideals of "liberty, unity, and socialism." Like the predecessor Baathist regimes, the radical military clique which seized power in a violent coup d'etat in February 1966 proclaims its loyalty to the Baathist ideology, but the party veneer is worn thin. The endemic power politics and military factionalism which have determined the course of Syrian political life since the late 1940s are essentially unchanged, despite the current shift toward the left and Syria's full-blown embarkation on the path to socialism.

The Rise to Power

The Baath was founded in 1940 by Michel Aflaq, a young Syrian intellectual who had been attracted to Marxism while studying in Paris during the 1930s. Aflaq, who has been the party's chief theoretician, found Marxist doctrine inapplicable to the modern Arab state and, with the help of fellow Syrian student Salah al-Din Bitar, evolved the Baath's complicated, semimystical doctrine.

The central thesis of the Baathist program is Arab nationalism. The doctrine proclaims that the party's mission shall be "one Arab nation with an immortal mission, the Arab Resurrection Socialist Party, a popular national revolutionary movement striving for Arab unity, freedom, and socialism." The so-called national leadership of the party is in theory pan-Arab, directing the movement within present individual Arab countries through a series of "regional commands." The party is small in most of the Arab countries, however, and has achieved power only in Syria and, briefly in 1963, Iraq.

The Baath is a secular movement, professing the substitution of Arab nationalism for Islam as a unifying force throughout the Arab world. Aflaq took pains to differentiate the Baathist movement from Communism, stressing the personal freedom of the individual and his freedom of action. The basic organization of the party and much of its socialist doctrine, however, stem directly from Marxist theory.

During the 1940s the Syrian-based Baath played an insignificant role in active political life. In 1953 the Baath amalgamated with another Syrian group, the Arab Socialist Party led by Akram Hawrani, and began to gain supporters within the army.

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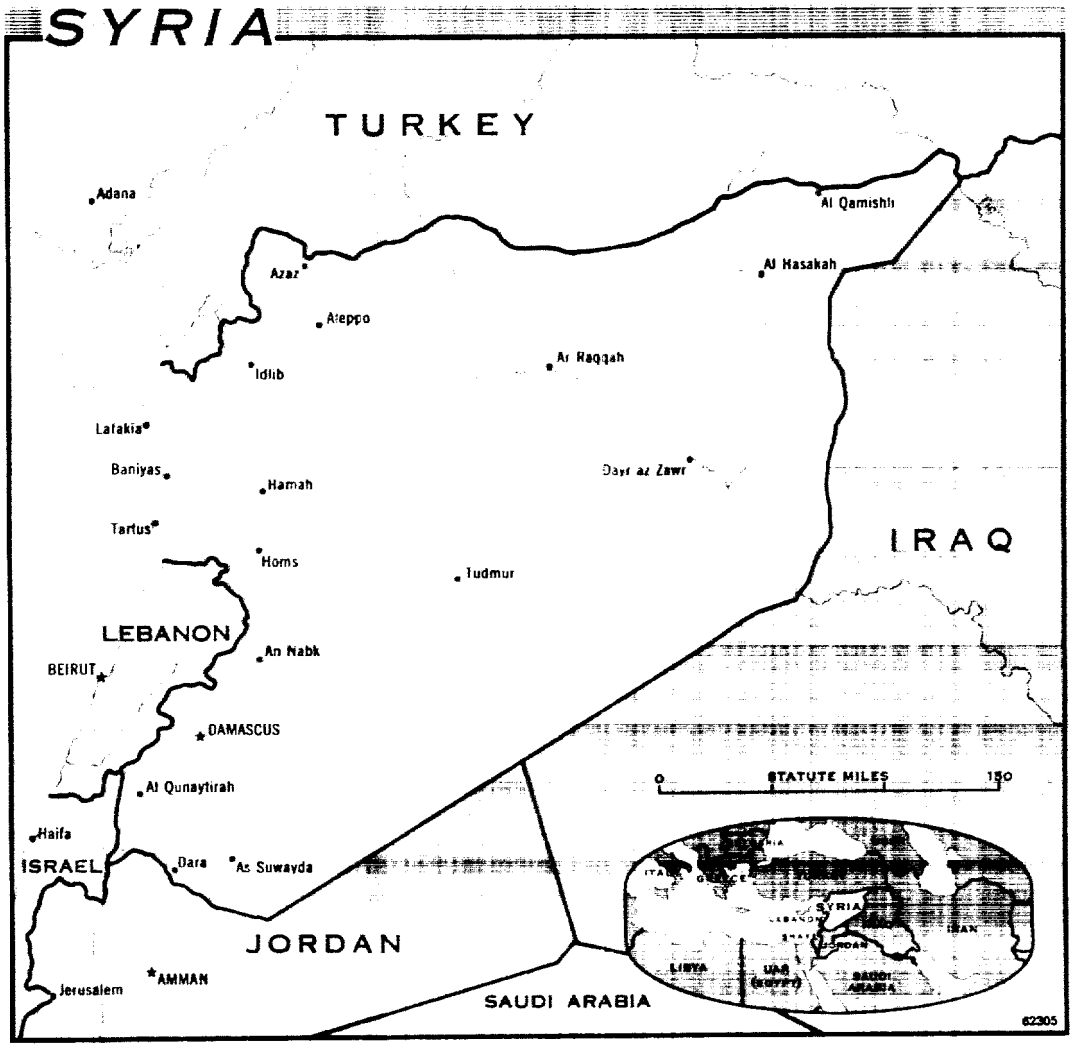

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During this period the Baathists worked closely with the Communist Party of Syria (CPS) in opposing the traditional conservative elements who at the time dominated the political scene. In the fall of 1957, however, when CPS strength reached an all-time high, the Baath broke from its alliance with the Communists to urge immediate union with Egypt in order to prevent what threatened to be a CPS takeover of the government. After the Egyptians had accepted the Syrian overtures, the Baathist leaders were chagrined to discover that Narir's view of the new United Arab Republic was that of a unitary state, with Egypt directly controlling Syrian affairs. The Baath, which had hoped to rule Syrian politics, was soon effectively dissipated as a direct political force.

Aflaq and other party leaders exiled themselves to Beirut in 1960, where they attacked Nasir's monolithic leadership of the UAR. After the Syrian breakaway from the union in September 1961, however, the dominant Bitar-Aflaq wing of the party reconsidered its attitude toward Egypt and urged a reunification of the two countries on a loose federal basis. This alienated the violently anti-Nasir branch of the Baath led by Hawrani, and in 1962 the Hawranists were expelled from the party over this issue. A series of generally weak civilian regimes governed Syria during the postunion era until March 1963, when the Baathists and their supporters within the army took power and began the Syrian Baathist experiment.

Domestic Opponents

The Baath's experience in three years of rule has been characterized by a series of realignments within both the party and the associated military power structures. Cloaked in secrecy, narrowly based, and lacking any charismatic public figure such as Egypt's Nasir to rally popular support, the Baath has clung to power by gradually eliminating a series of opposition forces and, until last February, effectively conciliating factionalism within its own ranks.

The chief rival to the Baath and its military supporters after the March 1963 Syrian coup was the pro-Nasirist movement. The Syrian Arab Nationalist Movement, a tool of the Egyptian Government, sparked a series of pro-Nasirist demonstrations in various parts of the country during the months following the Baath take-over. At the same time, the regime was maintaining a facade of friendship with Cairo and conducting a series of unity talks with both the Egyptians and the new Baathist government in Baghdad.

An abortive pro-Nasirist coup in July 1963, however, spelled the end of any plans for a tripartite unity. The Baathists' harsh suppression of the uprising--most Syrians were shocked when the regime executed

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28 of the rebels--and purges in the army largely eradicated militant Nasirist sentiment. Nasirism as a potential force to overthrow the Baath has been generally ineffective since that time.

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Conservative elements opposed to Baathist efforts to implement socialist doctrine have rebelled against the regime and staged several protest demonstrations. After a large-scale series of nationalizations in late 1964 and early 1965, merchants in Damascus closed down their shops and refused government orders to resume business. The Baath again reacted violently, and the party's paramilitary arm, the national guard, was sent to the markets with crow bars to open the striking shops. Many demonstrators were arrested and their properties confiscated. In a similar incident several months earlier, government troops shelled a mosque in which demonstrators had taken refuge, probably killing at least 40 people.

Since early 1965 the conservative elements have been quiescent. Victims of the nationalizations, particularly in such politically turbulent cities as Aleppo continue to grumble at the government's inept handling of Syrian industry. They lack any militant support with which to push their grievances, however.

Akram Hawrani and his Arab Socialist Party supporters who had once been aligned with the Baathists were eliminated as a political opposition force in 1963. The movement still controls some localized support, but Hawrani himself was expelled from the country in late 1965 on charges of collaboration with an unspecified foreign state.

Rivalries Within the Baath

The only real threat to the Baath's position since the destruction of the Nasirist movement in 1963 has been dissension among regime leaders themselves along ideological, religious, and personal lines. The chief factor which held the regime together for almost three years was the conciliatory talent of the military strong man, Lt. Gen. Amin al-Hafiz. Hafiz held a succession of leading positions in the government from March 1963 until February 1966, throughout a series of cabinet permutations and combinations.

Rivalries usually were eliminated by purging dissident elements. Members of a radical clique were removed from their posts in 1964 after one prolonged intraregime conflict, and later that year, another dispute was solved by appointing the former deputy prime minister as ambassador to Madrid. Friction between civilians and military officers provided a constant source of tension but, with all real power concentrated in the hands of the army, the civilian party leaders could do little to increase their direct influence.

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Sectarian rivalries between the majority Sunni Muslims and members of minority Muslim sects caused further divisions. Under the French mandate, members of the minority groups, slightly removed from the mainstream of Arab nationalism and generally considered more loyal to the colonial power, were encouraged to enter military service, and the result was a preponderance of minority elements in the Syrian Army. Among them, support for ideological theories within the Baath has usually been subordinated to individual loyalty to fellow religious or tribal connections.

Foreign Relations

On the international scene, the proclaimed Baath goal of Arab unity has only become more remote. Since the breakdown of the unity talks among Syria, Egypt, and Iraq in 1963 and the overthrow of the Baath regime in Iraq in November of that year Syria has become almost totally isolated from the rest of the Arab world.

At the first Arab summit meeting in Cairo in January 1964 the Syrian delegation promoted a violent anti-Western line, at a time when Nasir and other Arab leaders were anxious to maintain some semblance of neutrality between Moscow and Washington. The Syrians' efforts to "out-Nasir Nasir" on the anti-US and anti-Israel propaganda front and their efforts to compete with Nasir's Arab socialism for leadership of the pan-Arab movement have left Syria with no supporters among Arab rulers. The Iraqis have continued to follow the Egyptian line, with both countries voicing their desires for eventual Egyptian-Iraqi unity, and anti-Baath sentiment on the part of such conservative regimes as Jordan and Saudi Arabia has continued unabated. The Jordanians are genuinely frightened of the strongly leftward bent of the new Damascus regime on their northern border. In April they took the precaution of arresting a large number of Jordanian Baath members in a general security sweep.

Although before last February's coup the Baath regime publicly maintained a vitriolic anti-Western posture and the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia provided most of its arms and economic aid, it tried to keep some ties with the West. The regime carefully watched the Syrian Communists, who probably number about 3,000. Last year it rebuffed CPS efforts to encourage the formation of a popular-front government.

The only real political concession made to the domestic left was the expansion of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command (NCRC) in August 1965 to include several Communists or Communist sympathizers. The NCRC, however, had evolved by that time from a small and powerful military/civilian clique which had largely directed the country's affairs after the 1963 coup into a rubber-stamp legislative body with no significant influence. "Progressive forces" other than the Baath

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were allowed no real role in determining Syrian policy.

The February Coup

On 23 February a radical army clique proclaiming itself the true revolutionary arm of the Baath took power, dissolved the more moderate international command, and either arrested or forced underground such party leaders as Aflaq, Bitar, and Hafiz. The leaders of this military group, predominately members of the sectarian minorities, had opposed the apparent willingness of Hafiz and his military supporters to allow the civilians a meaningful voice in the government and to downgrade military influence. When the Hafiz clique took steps to curb the power of the radical group within the party hierarchy, the radicals seized power.

The new regime is a poorly cemented amalgam of military officers representing a variety of ideological and confessional interests. The coup leaders began arguing among themselves as soon as they took control of the country, and the variety of rival minority religious sects represented among them has been a continuing source of tension. Several key participants are reportedly wildly erratic, including the [redacted] commando chief who triggered the 23 February violence. In addition, army units which had initially resisted the coup in key positions such as the Southwest Frontier Command on the Israeli border are still apparently withholding full support, preferring to wait until the situation in Damascus is clarified.

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Moscow and the Communists

The new leftist government was fortunate, however, in that its takeover and subsequent search for support seem to have coincided with a Soviet decision to increase its interest in the Middle East. Moscow expressed surprisingly quick support for the shaky new junta and enthusiastically welcomed a Syrian economic delegation in early April. Both Moscow and Damascus widely publicized a Soviet agreement to supply $150-175 million in economic credits to finance Syria's long-pending Euphrates Dam project, and the Soviet press began to express propaganda support for the regime in the face of an alleged series of plots by the imperialists. An exchange of military delegations between Moscow and Damascus in April presumably worked out delivery schedules for equipment remaining under existing agreements. Preliminary discussions for a new arms agreement are believed to have also been held.

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Nevertheless, the new regime is less cautious than some of its predecessors in dealing with the

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far left. Casting around for supporters who might broaden its narrow base of support and consolidate its shaky position, it has made some gestures toward conciliating the Syrian Communists. A CPS member was included in the cabinet formed in early March. Several Communists reportedly have been given second-echelon government positions. In early April CPS Secretary General Khalid returned to Damascus after eight years in Eastern Europe.

The new regime has not abandoned all caution in this regard, however. It apparently did not give advance approval for Bakdash's return. [redacted] It still seems to be unwilling to recognize the party as a legal organization or to accord its members a real voice in the government. The Communists' hopes that they would be permitted to publish a newspaper in Damascus have not been realized as yet.

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Both Moscow and the CPS have apparently urged the new regime to seek some rapprochement with Egypt. Whether or not either Nasir or the Baathists will be willing to settle their long-standing differences is still uncertain.

The Baath in Power

The regime, already under the threat of a countercoup by more moderate military elements who fear that Syria will be drawn too far into the Communist camp, is also concerned over the less immediate problem of maintaining a semblance of legitimacy as a genuine Baathist government. A new party regional command was elected during a series of meetings in March to replace that dissolved last December. The government announced in April that a meeting would be convened within a few weeks to elect a new international command, but any such group appointed by the present junta would probably not be recognized by Baathist wings in other Arab countries. The Lebanese Baath, for example, has expressed support for the ousted leaders.

The coup leaders claimed to have captured such key figures of the old regime as Aflaq, Bitar, and NCRC Chairman Mansur Attrash immediately following the 23 February action, but they are apparently still in hiding, probably within Syria, and could be in touch with army groups planning a new coup to reinstate the moderate elements of the party.

The primary concern of successive Baathist governments with maintaining their own power position and eradicating continuing opposition has largely precluded any full implementation of Baathist doctrines. The "Baath" has ruled in effect as a

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military power group similar to previous Syrian juntas, and such basic plans as setting up a constitution have never been realized.

The Baath has, however, carried out extensive socialization measures since 1963. Although a large part of Syrian industry had already been nationalized during union with Egypt from 1958 to 1961, the Baathists have gone on to take over most of the rest, including the crucial cotton ginning and marketing industry.

Land reform projects have been somewhat less successful. The redistribution of privately owned land and state domains has been slow, despite the enthusiasm for land reform implementation on the part of such regime leaders as Minister of Agrarian Reform Abd al-Karim Jundi.

Baathism as proclaimed has proved to be inapplicable to the present-day Arab state. Probably most troublesome has been the emphasis on anonymity within the party hierarchy--membership in the Baathist command structures has until recently been a closely guarded secret. This has encouraged the development of personal rivalries and factionalism and left the party with no central rallying figure who might muster public enthusiasm for the party program. Amin al-Hafiz, an effective public speaker whose frequent television appearances have been likened to President Roosevelt's "fireside chats," has come the closest. He lacked the inspirational talent of Nasir, however.

Public sentiment is still almost unanimously hostile to the regime. The merchant and landowner classes are strongly anti-Baath. The regime has been unable to develop any real enthusiasm for its idealistic policies among the peasants. The basis of regime strength still lies with the army, and even there the power balance has become increasingly uncertain since the February coup.

Outlook

Any successor regime to the present junta would almost certainly be still another Baathist military group, probably one which supported the Aflaq/Bitar wing of the party. Such a government might present a more legitimate image as a Baathist regime, but it would continue to rely on the military to maintain its position. The Baath itself seems unlikely ever to become a truly popular movement, and the present pattern of military power politics in Syria will probably continue indefinitely. In addition, Syria will almost certainly maintain its vitriolic anti-Western posture and close ties with the Communist bloc.

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