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Syria: A Center of Instability

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SYRIA: A CENTER OF INSTABILITY

The Arab Socialist Resurrection Party, better known as the Baath, celebrated the fourth anniversary of its take-over in Syria on 8 March 1967. These four years, however, have witnessed a constant shifting of influence among an assortment of military power factions and have left Syria almost bereft of any stable government structure or responsible political leadership. In the international sphere, Syria's efforts to establish itself in the vanguard of anti-imperialist Arab nationalism have had little success, and the Baathist goal of Arab unity is as far away as ever.

Recent History

Since the end of the French mandate in 1949, Damascus has seen a succession of short-lived regimes, most of them dominated by the army. Lacking either a strong national leader such as Egypt's Nasir or the stabilizing influence of a hereditary monarchy, the Syrians have endured almost 20 years of political turmoil.

The Baathist regime which took power in February 1966 is probably even more narrowly based than its predecessors. It is dominated by members of minority religious groups who are feared and disliked by most of the population. This regime, whose leaders are largely of peasant stock, has effectively quelled opposition from the middle and upper social classes. Its irresponsible socialist policies have led many professional people and merchants to remove themselves or their as-

sets to more stable environments outside the country. Within the army, too, the Sunni Muslim majority resents the present preponderant influence of officers from the minority communities, but no power grouping with the strength to displace the present leadership has emerged.

Although in their first three years in power the Baath leaders frequently announced their devotion to Marxist principles and nationalized most of Syrian business, last year's coup led by Major General Salah Jadid, pushed Syria significantly further left. The new leaders, proclaiming their intentions to restore the "ideals of the 8 March 1963 revolution," quickly sought to establish themselves as true socialist revolutionaries and win badly needed support by developing ties with other "progressive forces." They included in their first cabinet a well-known

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member of the Communist Party of Syria (CPS), permitted the CPS's long-exiled secretary general to return to Damascus, and eagerly sought closer ties with Moscow. The Soviets responded by pledging aid to develop the expensive Euphrates Dam project in north-eastern Syria and admitted the new Damascus regime to the club of true "progressive" states.

In April 1966 the Syrians sent a military delegation to

Moscow, presumably to discuss still another arms agreement as well as delivery schedules for equipment remaining under earlier contracts. Although Moscow's propaganda for the new regime was enthusiastic, the Soviets insisted on carrying out a series of study projects before beginning actual work on the Euphrates project, and appeared reluctant to commit all-out support for the new Baathist leaders until they had established

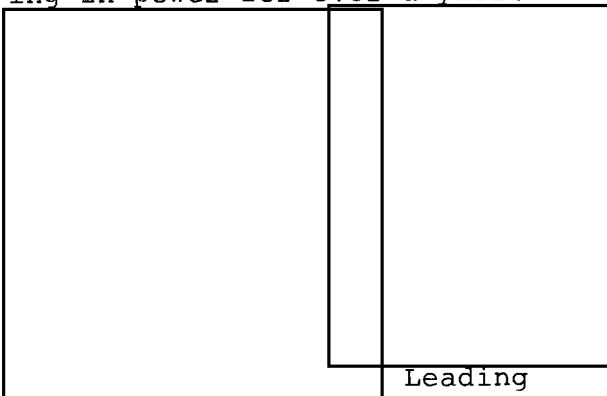


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their control more firmly over the Syrian Army.

Present Leadership and Its Goals

The Jadid clique has surprised most observers by remaining in power for over a year.



Leading

"pre-February" Baathists are still in exile or jail, while conservative elements possess no effective military or paramilitary assets. Despite their seemingly precarious position and the intensity of their own factional differences, key leaders evidently realize that they sink or swim together and so far have avoided an open break.

Baath party doctrine states goals of "liberty, unity and socialism." Of liberty--in a Western sense--little has been seen in Syria. Arab unity is to be accomplished under the Baathist banner, but the Syrian Baathists have usually only thrown a monkey wrench into the works of inter-Arab affairs.

Anti-Western, anti-imperialist and anti-Israel propaganda was vitriolic under the 1963-66

Baathist regimes. Since the February take-over this output has intensified, and Syrian provocations have heightened tensions both between the Arabs and Israel and among the Arab states themselves. Syrian support of the Fatah terrorist organization in its commando raids into Israeli territory has complicated Jordan's and Lebanon's efforts to maintain relative calm along their frontiers with Israel and avoid large-scale confrontations. The Israelis' reprisal attack for the Fatah raids on the Jordanian village of Sammu in November 1966 sparked demonstrations among Palestinian groups within Jordan which threatened for a time to topple King Husayn; the Syrians actively called for the King's overthrow and sent saboteurs into Jordan.

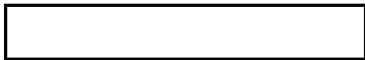
At the same time, Damascus has looked for ways to associate itself with other "progressive Arab forces." Syria's violent anti-Western stance at the first Arab summit meeting in Cairo in January 1964, when other Arab leaders--including arch-"progressive" Nasir--were anxious to maintain some semblance of neutrality between Moscow and Washington, had alienated the Syrians from their fellow Arabs and left Damascus almost completely isolated. The February regime now has taken steps to effect a partial rapprochement with Nasir, and has proclaimed its friendship for both domestic and international "progressives."

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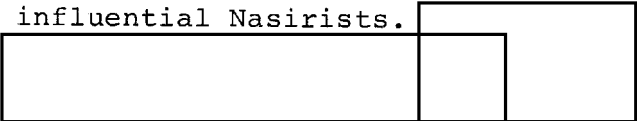
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Relations With Egypt

In June 1966 a trade and payments agreement was signed between Cairo and Damascus, the first bilateral agreement since Syria's 1961 secession from the United Arab Republic had begun a period of intense rivalry between the two countries. Nasir's willingness to deal with the Baathists, whom he basically despises, apparently resulted from his own fears that the West was encouraging conservative Arab states--especially Jordan and Saudi Arabia--to form a moderate bloc which would be receptive to Western influence. The two "progressives" moved a step further in their cooperative effort in November, when Syrian Premier Zuayyin led a delegation to Cairo and concluded a mutual defense pact committing each signatory "to come to the aid of the other if it is a victim of aggression." Cairo and Damascus are now making preparations to exchange ambassadors.

But the Syrians seem reluctant to commit themselves fully to any real accommodation with Egypt, just as Nasir is reluctant to strengthen these rivals for Arab leadership. The Nasirist movement within Syria is still viewed as a major threat to any Baathist regime, and the Syrian inclusion of "progressives" in the cabinet has not extended to influential Nasirists.



and there is no evidence of any

meaningful results from the widely publicized defense pact. The Egyptians in fact probably view the agreement primarily as weak insurance that the Syrians will not go off on their own into an all-out conflict with the Israelis--a development which the Egyptians hope to avoid.

Relations With Algeria
And Others

Damascus has also exchanged high-level delegations with the "progressive" Algerians, whom the Baathists regard as fellow ideologues. An Algerian group visited Damascus last August; the Syrians returned the call with a Baathist delegation to Algiers in December. In the communique issued after the December exchange, the two groups declared the need "to multiply the number of meetings among the progressive forces" and reiterated their aim of developing Arab unity in a socialist framework. Propaganda support from Algeria, however, is unlikely to be followed by any tangible benefits to Damascus.

In its efforts to establish Syria in the vanguard of radical socialism the regime has become a compulsive meddler in the affairs of nonsocialist states. While the Baath has not yet rivaled Nasir as a supporter of extremist minority groups, they have welcomed delegations from groups such as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which seeks independence from Ethiopia, and the Front for the Liberation of

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South Yemen (FLOSY), an Egyptian-supported anti-British terrorist organization active in Aden. Syrian support for such organizations has usually been confined to propaganda, but ELF guerrillas have been trained in Syrian camps and Damascus has shipped arms into Eritrea.

Syria, Iraq, and Oil

The most spectacular success achieved by the Damascus regime in its "anti-imperialist" war was its victory over the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) in early 1967. In late 1966 the Syrians seized IPC assets in Syria and forced the company to close down the IPC pipeline extending from the oil fields of northern Iraq to the Syrian Mediterranean coast. The Syrians, who had earned approximately \$27 million in transit royalties a year from the Western-owned company, took the step after IPC had rejected their demands to double transit fees and pay \$280 million allegedly owed for oil shipped through the pipeline since 1955.

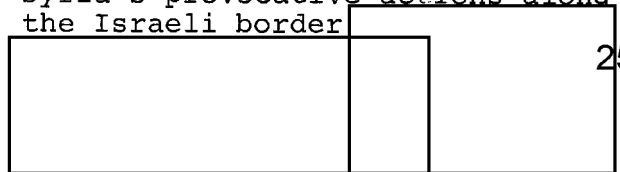
The Syrians, sorely in need of foreign exchange but grandly ignorant of economics, undertook the campaign as much out of political as financial considerations. The Egyptians, however, while ideologically constrained to give outward support to the move, were aware of the serious financial implications for Baghdad and quietly urged Damascus to settle with the company. The Iraqis are dependent for 40 percent of their national income on their oil profits from the

IPC. Damascus, nevertheless, remained intransigent in its bargaining position and the company finally knuckled under in March 1967 with an agreement to increase the Syrian revenues, although no time limit was specified for further negotiations on the question of back payments.

The Soviet Involvement

Moscow had welcomed the newest Baathist regime and encouraged its development of ties with Egypt, but has since shied away from supporting the Baathists' more extreme moves to demonstrate their enthusiasm for radicalism. During the IPC crisis the Syrian foreign minister claimed that if the company closed down its fields in northern Iraq the Soviet Union would be happy to buy the Arab oil. The Soviets were almost certainly delighted when the dispute was settled before they were forced to respond to Arab requests to supplant the West as a market for the Iraqi product. The Soviets have also been wary of Syria's provocative actions along the Israeli border

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When the regime came to power in February 1966 and began to search for supporters, the coup leaders were fortunate that their action had coincided with a Soviet initiative to increase Soviet influence in the Middle East. While some observers

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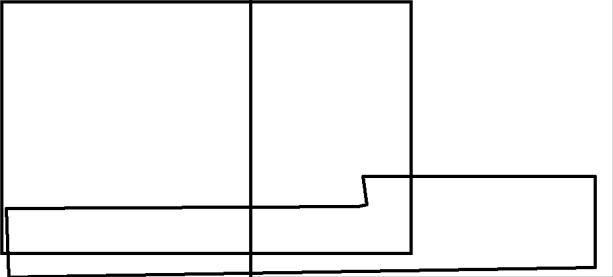
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believed at the time that the Soviets were taking advantage of the Syrian situation to develop another Cuba, neither party has indicated that it wants to make irrevocable commitments. There have been reports that the Syrians had accepted Soviet conditions such as permitting freedom of action for Syrian Communists in exchange for new economic aid and propaganda support but these have not been borne out. Damascus has consistently refused to allow publication of a Communist paper, and the most recent high-level Syrian delegation to Moscow, led by strong-man Jadid himself, met a comparatively chilly reception. Damascus remains almost totally dependent on the Soviet Union for both military and economic aid, as it has been since 1961, but the latest idyll is apparently over.

Syria's Isolation

Except for the defense agreement with Egypt, which thus far exists only on paper, Syria's year of rule by the new Baathists has left the regime as isolated as ever. Internally, the Communists and Nasirists remain wary of the Baath and the general public almost entirely disaffected. On the international scene, Syria's relations with its Arab neighbors have deteriorated. The Iraqis not only continue to distrust the leaders in Damascus for their irresponsible actions during the IPC dispute but are

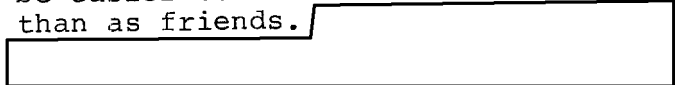
fearful that Syria will support an attempt to reinstall a sister regime in Baghdad--which the Iraqi Baathists controlled for most of 1963.



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Even the regime itself suffers from the same disunity and mutual distrust which have characterized four years of Baathist rule. While there is little chance that any outside group will be able to develop the military support required to displace the present Baathists, the endemic frictions within the hierarchy will certainly cause a series of restructurings of the Syrian power picture, possibly accompanied by violence. Syria's attempts to "out-Nasir Nasir" in the Arab world will continue, and any leadership which might evolve in the foreseeable future would probably maintain a violently anti-Western position. In any event, while the Syrians will continue a thorn in the side of the US and other Western powers, Moscow's recent experiences in dealing with the Baath came close to suggesting that the Syrians may be easier to deal with as enemies than as friends.



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