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CHAPTER 1

The Ba'th in Power, 1963–2011

Roots and Weakness of the Syrian State

The seeds of modern Syria were sown in negotiations between Great Britain, France, and their other allies during the First World War. When planning the future of the region in the war's aftermath, Britain was especially interested in securing a land bridge from Iraq to the Mediterranean in order to transport Iraqi oil through territory it controlled. France, by contrast, had vaguer goals in mind—primarily the desire to emerge from the war with its colonial empire enhanced.¹ France's claims to the region included an interest, manifest since the 1860s, in protecting the Christians of the Levant, the Lebanese Maronites. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 reflected France's desire to control the Levant, namely the area covered currently by Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian authority.

Shortly after the war the League of Nations accorded France a mandate for Syria and Lebanon.

At that stage, the French government opposed the very notion of Syrian statehood, viewing the principal political force in the Syrian heartland—Sunni Arab nationalists—with suspicion and hostility.² In French eyes, modern Arab nationalism

was actually a British creation, a force and a movement hostile to France's interests and aspirations. So upon taking control of Syria and Lebanon in 1920, the architects of French policy in Syria refrained from creating a unitary Syrian state, forming instead a Syrian federation composed of several statelets characterized by sectarian division and regional rivalries. They also added parts of Syria in southeastern and northern Lebanon to the Lebanese state, seeking to enlarge the entity they viewed as the mainstay of their position in the area. It was only five years later, in 1925, that a Syrian state was established. Two statelets populated by the Alawi and Druze minorities were integrated into that entity in 1945, when in the aftermath of World War II and under American and British pressure Syria was accorded independence. The newly independent Syria was governed by the traditional Arab nationalist elite, composed mostly of urban notables and landlords. This leadership had struggled against French control during the previous decades but failed to mobilize and lead a successful national war of liberation. Thus, France left Syria not as a result of expulsion by a nationalist opposition but rather as a result of pressure from the United States and Britain. These victorious wartime powers concluded that the French claim to Syria and Lebanon had expired, and they sought to absorb the new Syrian and Lebanese states into their spheres of influence.³

The Syrian Republic emerged as a weak and fragile state. Through the late 1940s and the 1950s Syria would become synonymous with instability. The traditional Arab nationalist politicians who came to power upon independence failed to form a stable, effective regime; the country was buffeted by internal divisions and conflicts, the intervention of regional and foreign powers, and successive coups d'état. Three military coups were staged in Syria in 1949 alone, and even the return to parliamentary life in 1954 failed to stabilize the chaotic state.

The rulers of a newly independent Syria had to cope with a vast array of challenges, first and foremost the need to engage in nation and state building. The population was diverse, with an Arab Sunni majority of 60 percent, and the rest composed of several religious and ethnic minorities: 10 percent Alawis, 10 percent Christians, 10 percent Kurds, and such smaller groups as the Druze, Ismailis, and Armenians. The Kurds were Sunni but not Arab, and most of them lived in the country's northeastern part close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders. The Alawis and the Druze were so-called "compact minorities," concentrated in mountainous areas, and their separatist tendencies had been encouraged by the French authorities earlier in the century to weaken the Sunni Arab nationalist elite of Syria's major cities.

The fledgling new Syrian state was pulled in opposite directions, between supranational ideologies and identities (Arab and Greater Syrian) and the reality of regionalism and localism. Syria was ruled by staunch Arab nationalists, and Damascus was commonly known as "Arabism's pulsating heart." The Kurdish minority naturally felt alienated in a country defined as Arab, and many Kurds did not actually possess Syrian citizenship. They crossed the border from Turkey and were not accorded citizenship by Syrian Arab nationalist governments, which were uninterested in expanding the ranks of this non-Arab minority. Other minorities, such as Christian and sectarian Muslims (Alawis, Druze, and Ismailis), regarded the dominant ideology of Pan-Arab nationalism to be an essentially Sunni Arab phenomenon in which they were relegated to an inferior position as members of minority sectarian groups. (Christians had played an important role in formulating the ideology of Pan-Arabism, but their hope of becoming equal members in a new political community were frustrated by

Arabism's Sunni tincture.) A new postindependence generation of younger Syrians, defined neither by sect nor by ethnic affiliation but as "a new middle class," felt excluded and exploited by the traditional governing elite. There was also tension between the civilian government and the leadership of the Syrian army, since that army had been built originally on the colonial auxiliary military force formed by the French authorities. As part of their policy of "divide and rule," the French had sought out military recruits from members of minority communities, and army commanders from these groups were treated with disdain by civilian politicians. Syrian politicians, in turn, were divided among themselves by personal and regional rivalries, with individual political actors forming alliances with rival regional and external powers seeking to manipulate Syria's politics. Internal tensions were exacerbated by the unsuccessful war with Israel in 1948–49.⁴

The rise of messianic Pan-Arab nationalism in the region, under Gamal Abd al-Nasser—second president of Egypt—and the impact of the Cold War and Soviet influence in the region in the 1950s further radicalized Syrian politics. In February 1958, Syria's leaders, led by the Ba'th, finally sought refuge by merging themselves with Egypt into what became known as the United Arab Republic (UAR). But the UAR proved to be a failure; the much larger and more assertive Egypt ended up dominating Syria. Paradoxically, the union reinforced a sense of Syrian distinctiveness owing to the bitter experience of Syria's being overwhelmed and overshadowed by Egypt. In September 1961 Syria seceded from the UAR and reestablished itself as an independent state. Egypt's Nasser refused to accept the secession and attempted to undermine the newly formed Syrian state by speaking over the heads of the Syrian government to the Syrian public directly via radio broadcasts. Nasser had retained some

lingering support among Syrian politicians and army officers. It was against this backdrop that a group of officers identified with the Ba'th Party staged their coup on March 8, 1963, thus laying the foundation for decades of Ba'thi rule. Ironically, it was a party advocating Arab unity and union that consolidated Syria's existence as a self-standing sovereign state.

The Ba'th in Power

The Ba'th has been nominally in power in Syria ever since the military coup of March 8, 1963—but it has undergone several transformations.⁵ Known in Arabic as the “Socialist Party of Arab Renaissance,” the Ba'th Party was first founded in the 1940s by two Damascene intellectuals: Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Bitar. The party offered a secular version of Arab nationalism combined with a social democratic ideology. Its secularism attracted members of minority communities, and its social democratic ideology attracted younger men who were critical of the traditional ruling elite and who sought social and political change. In 1953, the original Ba'th founding party merged with another party formed by a politician from the central Syrian city of Hama: Akram Hourani. Hourani had recruited to his party young army officers and mobilized peasants in the countryside against the traditional political elite under the banner of Arab socialism. Hourani brought to the augmented Ba'th Party both voting power and influence in the military. The combined party—which spread beyond purely Syria, to Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan—did well in parliamentary elections, particularly in the elections of 1954, and played an important role in the ongoing radicalization of Syrian politics, and in championing the ill-fated union with Egypt, aiming for a leading role in Pan-Arab politics. But the party's hopes of genuine partnership with

Abd al-Nasser were to be frustrated; Nasser wanted full mastery of the political sphere. The Ba'th became a hostile critic of the Nasserist regime, and some of its leaders turned to facilitating instead the breakup from the UAR and rebuilding Syrian independence.

The party's rise to power in Syria came about in an unusual way. A group of army officers—members of the party, most of them from minority communities—formed a secret cabal known as “the Military Committee” during the union with Egypt. This was the group that planned and executed the coup on March 8, 1963, quickly forming a partnership with the traditional leadership of the Ba'th to establish the Ba'th regime.

The first phase of the Ba'th regime lasted from March 1963 to February 1966. During this period the new regime consolidated its hold over the country, confronting both Nasser's pressure from outside and the enmity of the Sunni urban elite and middle class at home. It carried out several socialist reforms, including nationalizing large enterprises and an agrarian reform distributing land owned by major landowners to peasants. Consequently, the state and the public sector came to dominate the economy, and the regime enjoyed support in the countryside among the beneficiaries of the agrarian reform. Yet the new regime was also torn by internecine conflicts: between the army officers who had staged the coup and who consequently felt they owned the regime, and the historical leadership of the Ba'th; and between the party's more moderate wing and a new radical, Marxist wing that had emerged during the union with Egypt. The regime as a whole found itself in conflict with the Sunni urban elite, the religious establishment, and the merchant classes. These groups felt dispossessed and alienated: by the large number of minority members (Alawis, Druze, and

Ismailis) in the ranks of the regime's military wing; and by the radicalism and secularism of part of its leadership.

The overrepresentation of minoritarian officers in the ranks of the new regime—particularly its military wing—turned sectarian and communal issues into a major element in Syrian politics. This overrepresentation had its origins, first, in French colonial “divide and rule” practices of recruiting officers and noncommissioned officers from minority communities, and second, in the attraction that young men of these same minority communities, wary of the Sunni orientation of Arab nationalism, had to secular political parties. In the 1940s and 1950s two secular parties, the Ba'th and the SSNP (Syrian Social Nationalist Party), competed for the hearts and minds young Alawis, Druze, Ismailis, and Christians across all Syria, adding them in large numbers to their ranks.

In Ba'thi Syria, sectarian solidarity became a major political force for the first time, particularly as individuals and factions within the regime began to fight over position and influence. In Arabic, the term *ta'ifiyyah* refers to social and political allegiance and conduct determined by sectarian and ethnic affiliation. The term *Ta'ifah* referred to a religious community. In the Ottoman system, the Islamic empire—headed by a sultan, also regarded as a caliph—had no problem giving religious groups known as *millets* a large degree of autonomy in the so-called millet system. But once Arab nationalist sentiment replaced allegiance to the Ottoman caliph, all ultimate loyalty to such primordial groups as sects and tribes came to be seen as retrograde. The prominent role played by members of minority communities in the new regime was therefore unacceptable to many Sunnis, who—in addition to feeling dispossessed—refused to accept Alawis and (to a lesser extent) Druze as proper

Muslims. In 1964, the Syrian branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Islamist movement organized an early protest in Hama against the regime's secularist nature; a second outburst against the regime's secularism and socialism broke out in Homs in 1965. A third protest occurred in 1967 following the publication of an atheistic essay in the Syrian army's magazine authored by a radical Alawi Ba'thi intellectual.

The principal challenge to the Ba'th regime, however, remained Abd al-Nasser's refusal to accept Syria's secession from the UAR and the new regime's legitimacy. In 1963, Syria signed a tripartite union with Egypt and the new Ba'th Party regime in Iraq in an attempt to consolidate its hold over the country. This short-lived abortive agreement was never to be implemented because of the underlying hostility between Nasser and the two Ba'th regimes.

In late 1963, in an effort to neutralize Nasser's animosity, the Ba'th regime adopted a radical new strategy vis-à-vis Egypt—a strategy that would play a major role in escalating Arab-Israeli tensions in the years 1964–67, and which would ultimately lead to the crisis of May 1967 and to the Six-Day War. Simply put, Syria threatened to go to war against Israel and to drag Egypt into that war against the latter's will. The Syrian threat was triggered by Israel's completion of an overland water carrier (consisting of both a canal and a pipeline) from Lake Tiberias to the south of the country. In Arab eyes, the completion of the project was seen as a crucial step in consolidating Israel's existence by enabling it to settle the country's arid southern region. When Israel announced the project, the Ba'th regime threatened to go to war in order to abort it. The threat was in fact directed at Egypt rather than at Israel.⁶ Implicit behind this was the knowledge that a Syrian-Israeli war would end in Syria's military defeat—which would force Egypt to intervene on Syria's

behalf. Nasser had already learned from the Second Arab-Israeli War of 1956 that it was imperative for Egypt not to be drawn prematurely to another war with Israel. So, in order to check Syria, in January 1964 Nasser summoned the first Arab summit conference in Cairo, to develop a comprehensive strategy for dealing with Israel's water project and other core issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It would not be the last time Syria's Ba'thi rulers would use the threat of escalation with Israel as a means of pressuring Egypt to recognize Syria's legitimacy as an independent state. Much as Nasser resented the new regime in Syria, he realized that he could not afford to see it militarily destroyed by Israel. The resolutions adopted in Cairo—to divert the tributaries of the Jordan River, to build unified Arab command in support of that move, and to support the establishment of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization, an organization created by the Arab League, dominated by Egypt)—would inaugurate a new phase in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Their strategy proved effective, but it also would bring the region to the brink of war in May 1967.

Meanwhile, internecine conflicts within the Ba'th regime in Syria were coalescing by 1965 into a struggle between two coalitions. One was led by the country's president, the Sunni general Amin al-Hafez, along with the Ba'th Party's historic civilian leadership and a supportive military faction; the other consisted of a group of mostly Alawi and Druze army officers, along with the civilian party's radical wing. In February 1966, the latter group—known as the Neo-Ba'th—staged a coup and took control of the regime. The coup of February 23, 1966, would have far-reaching consequences. The new regime in power had a more distinctive sectarian character and a much narrower base of support. The new regime had a difficult dilemma to resolve right off the bat: How could it legitimize its conduct as a

Ba'th regime when it had expelled the party's founding fathers? In an effort to overcome this problem, the regime now argued that the Ba'th Party's *true* founder was Zaki al-Arsuzi, an Alawi intellectual from Alexandretta (the Syrian province ceded to Turkey by France on the eve of World War II). The fact that Arsuzi was Alawi suited the country's new rulers. The Ba'th regime had previously dispossessed and antagonized Syria's urban Sunni elite during its first three years of power, but some of its leaders, including Amin al-Hafez and Salah al-Bitar, still managed to communicate with members of the country's ousted elite, in order to minimize its opposition to the regime and to guarantee broader base of support. After February 1966 these lines of communication were completely severed, and the regime relied on an extremely slender base consisting of radical intellectuals as well as provincial and rural groups. The new regime was supported by Egypt and the Soviet Union; both were worried that it would be toppled and replaced by a regime friendly to the West and to the conservative Arab states, thus changing the regional balance of power in the context of an escalating Cold War.

Between February 1966 and June 1967, the Neo-Ba'th, as the regime came to be commonly called, continued to deal with broad opposition inside Syria to its radicalism. It was also torn by continued internecine conflicts governed by personal rivalries and sectarian loyalties. Alawi army officers who had initially collaborated in ousting Druze and Ismaili ones began to fight each other. Two coalitions were formed around two generals: General Salah Jadid, and General Hafez al-Asad, commander of the air force and acting minister of defense. Beyond the personal rivalry, the conflict between Jadid and Asad and their factions was also about orientation and policy. Salah Jadid was considered to be politically savvier, but at the end of the day

Asad would prove to be more cunning. Jadid allied with the party's radical wing while Asad supported a more pragmatic and moderate line on socioeconomic issues. When Asad seized power, he did manage to build bridges to the urban bourgeoisie and mitigate its hostility to the regime.

The Neo-Ba'th's domestic radicalism was matched by an adventurous foreign policy: a reliance on the Soviet Union and escalation of its antagonistic policy toward Israel. Syria's role in trying to divert the tributaries of the Jordan, its support of the new Palestinian nationalist organizations headed by Fatah (the Palestinian nationalist organization founded and led by Yasser Arafat), and its confrontation with Israel over border and water issues (access to Lake Tiberias) brought the two countries to the brink of war in 1967. The Syrian-Israeli border dispute went back to the armistice agreement signed between the two countries in 1949 at the end of the 1948 war. These agreements were made on the assumption that they would apply to the brief transitional period prior to the signing of a peace agreement. In the event, peace was not made, and the two countries found themselves in almost permanent conflict over border issues. The radicalization of Syrian politics under the Neo-Ba'th and Syria's decision to use these issues as means of pressuring Egypt brought Syria and Israel to the verge of war. Despite Nasser's reservations, Egypt was drawn increasingly into this conflict and finally decided to deter Israel by remilitarizing the Sinai in May 1967. A series of miscalculations by regional and international actors resulted in the outbreak of the Six-Day War. And yet in sharp contrast to its bellicosity prior to the war, the Ba'th regime did not prosecute this war energetically, knowing full well that it was no match for the Israeli army. In the last phase of this war, Israel launched an attack directly against Syria and captured the Golan Heights.

Recriminations about the Syrian army's performance during the Six-Day War exacerbated the conflicts within the Ba'th regime. The factions headed by Hafez al-Asad and Salah Jadid argued over the responsibility for the military defeat. Jadid and his people argued that, as minister of defense, Asad was responsible for the failure. Finally, in November 1970, Hafez al-Asad seized full power in another coup, which he called "the Corrective Movement." This term was meant to signal that Syria's new ruler intended to "correct" the deviations of the Neo-Ba'th and restore the party and its regime to their correct course.

The Hafez al-Asad Regime

"The Corrective Coup" of November 1970 would be a major turning point in the history of the Syrian state, after which Hafez al-Asad would hold onto power for thirty years, introducing profound changes in Syrian politics and society and turning the previously weak state into an important regional and occasionally international actor. He came to power fully ready: Asad had been a senior partner in the Ba'th regime since March 1963, demonstrating his leading position within the regime in 1969 by staging a preliminary coup and biding his time until he was ready to seize complete power. By the time he took command of Syria he had a full plan for building a stable and durable regime.

Asad's strategy was to construct his regime in a series of concentric circles. At its inner core was a neopatrimonial regime built around Asad's immediate family, his Alawi clan, and, in a looser way, the whole Alawi community along with a group of close confidants (who were not all Alawi). This inner core was surrounded by larger circles: the institution of the presidency; the Ba'th Party; the Syrian armed forces; the cabinet and the

government; a coalition of “progressive parties” (established in 1972); and a number of popular organizations. Asad’s policy of relying on the Alawi community as the true core of his regime was far reaching. Traditionally, the Alawis were a downtrodden community exploited by tribal chiefs and urban Sunni landlords. The community’s partnership with the French authorities had enabled some members of the community to do well, particularly in the ranks of the military. Asad recruited large numbers of Alawis, some of them to senior positions, many of them to junior and middling ones. Soon most key positions in the Syrian armed forces and security services were filled with Asad loyalists from the Alawi community. Asad’s immediate circle, known as al-Jama’ah (“the group”), included Ali Haydar (commander of the special forces); Muhammad al-Khuly (head of air force intelligence); Ali Duba (head of military intelligence); and Shafiq Fayad, Ibrahim al-Safi, and Adnan Bader al-Din (all three commanders of key divisions). A large number of Alawis was also recruited to lower-level positions in the military, the security services, government bureaucracy, and the public sector. Significant investments were made in the Alawi region, including the establishment of a university in Latakia. Large numbers of Alawis migrated from the mountains and the coast into inner Syria, to Damascus, Homs, and Hama. While most officers and enlisted men in the army were not Alawi, the chain of command was restructured such that every Sunni officer had an Alawi subordinate or superior. The city of Damascus underwent important changes. Its meager Alawi population increased exponentially, and the city was surrounded by military bases and units that were largely Alawi.

This structure enabled Asad to build a stable regime based on primordial loyalty and overlaid with supportive groups and institutions not explicitly Alawi, thus creating the semblance of

a party regime resting on a broad base of the rural population and minority communities other than the Alawis who were distrustful of Sunni domination, and elements of the Sunni Arab majority.

Over time Asad's success in providing Syria with a stable government built genuine support among broad groups in the Syrian population. While his strategy was adopted in order to guarantee absolute loyalty to Asad and the regime, its negative effects were mitigated in a number of ways. Asad made sure to place Sunnis in several senior military and civilian positions: for example, Hikmat al-Shihabi as chief of staff of the Syrian army; Naji Jamil as commander of the air force; Mustafa Tlas as minister of defense; and Abdallah al-Ahmar as his chief lieutenant in the Ba'th Party. Asad also cultivated the Sunni religious establishment and appointed the cooperative Sheikh Ahmad al-Kaftaru as the country's mufti instead of the hostile Hasan Habanake.⁷ He took care to participate in Friday prayers and other occasions of a religious nature. And Asad also sought rapprochement with the Sunni bourgeoisie in Syria's major cities; he did not share power with them but gave them space and enabled them to do well economically. In time, a new economic elite composed of Sunni-Alawi partnerships emerged. Such partnerships rested on collaboration between senior members of the regime and businessmen, directly or through their offspring. Asad also recruited to his regime a large number of Sunnis from the Houran area. He enabled the bourgeoisie in Damascus and Aleppo, and the country's small but impressive intelligentsia, to operate within a well-defined space.

While the public sector remained dominant in the Syrian economy, Asad's economic reforms enabled members of the private sector to do well and develop a stake in the regime's durability. Prominent academics and intellectuals such as Sadiq

al-Azm and members of the country's impressive theater community were allowed to pursue their professional life as long as they did not cross well-defined red lines to engage in what the regime regarded as "politics." Political opposition, needless to say, was not tolerated. Asad's Syria was a brutal dictatorship, but it was not Saddam Hussein's "Republic of Fear."

Asad's strategy was successful in that during his thirty years in power, his country's Sunni Arab majority came to accept, however reluctantly, the rule of a handpicked Alawi elite. There was a militant minority to whom this state of affairs remained unacceptable, but the majority was willing to accept the status quo because of the stability and foreign policy achievements provided by the regime. And yet on several occasions the majority's unhappiness with Alawi control bubbled up to the surface. For example, when a new constitution was drafted in January 1973, Asad decided it was time to formalize his position as Syria's president. Syria's original constitution stipulated that Islamic law would be the chief source of legislation and that the country's president must be a Muslim. Since Alawis were not considered proper Muslims by conservative Sunnis, Asad tried to skirt the issue by omitting this stipulation. This triggered massive demonstrations that forced Asad to step back. He tried to resolve the issue by having Lebanon's chief Shi'i imam recognize the Alawis as part of the Shi'i community. His close alliance with Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution was also motivated in part by the fact that Islamic legitimacy could be provided by the endorsement of the ayatollahs. Both moves met with limited success and the discontent of Syria's Sunnis.

Sunni discontent with the regime's Alawi nature reignited once again in 1976 when Asad intervened in the Lebanese civil war on the side of the Christian camp against a Muslim-Palestinian coalition. Asad's intervention was chiefly motivated

by his fear that a Muslim-Palestinian victory could lead to another war with Israel, but his Syrian critics interpreted his stance through a sectarian lens: an Alawi ruler helping members of another minority, Lebanon's Maronites, against the country's Sunnis. This criticism was shared, notably, by members of the Syrian branch of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, which led a revolt against Asad's regime in the late 1970s.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the most militant and effective Sunni organization in Syria, had organized earlier demonstrations against the Ba'th regime in 1964, 1965, and 1967 that threatened but failed to topple it. But in the mid-1970s the organization underwent a transformation when members of a radical wing called the Fighting Vanguard (*al-Tali'ah al-Muqatilah*) took over the movement. The members of this team were an early version of movements such as the Egyptian *Jama'at al-Hijra wal-Takfir* and *Al Qaeda*. They criticized the movement's traditional leadership for being much too passive, even compliant, and argued that violence alone would accomplish their mission. The Fighting Vanguard launched a terrorist campaign against senior Alawis and other members of the regime. In one of the worst incidents, one of their members perpetrated a massacre in the Syrian army's Aleppo Artillery School in 1979, killing some sixty Alawi cadets (this grim massacre was a rare opportunity to realize the disproportionate number of Alawis prepared for high military office).

It took three years for the regime to defeat this Jihadi insurgency, culminating in February 1982, when the Ba'th artillery destroyed a whole quarter in the city of Hama, putting an end to the Islamic rebellion but killing more than twenty thousand civilians. This bloody episode was never forgotten, even if the memory of it slipped into dormancy in the decades that followed.

The other severe crisis faced by Asad occurred in 1983–84, when he suffered a major health crisis due to a cardiac illness.

Asad was bedridden for several months, and his brother, Rif'at, took advantage of the situation by attempting to seize power. Rif'at was the commander of the Defense Detachments (Saraya al-Difa'), one of the special units created by his brother to protect the regime (another such unit was the Presidential Guard, headed by his brother-in-law Adnan Makhluf). Rif'at was an undisciplined, corrupt man who represented the most egregious aspects of a family- and clan-based regime. The crisis ended when Hafez Asad recovered, asserted himself, and sent his brother into exile.

Asad's success in reconciling diverse and contradictory elements in his domestic policies was also replicated in the conduct of his foreign policy. In one respect, he was the ultimate Arab nationalist, representing Arab resistance (*muqawamah*) to the United States and Israel. An ally of the Soviet Union, he remained Moscow's major asset in the region. Asad also became a close ally of the new Iranian regime after the Islamic revolution in 1979, sharing its radical anti-American and anti-Israeli (as well as anti-Iraqi) positions. He led the Arab opposition to Sadat's peacemaking with Israel and sought to keep his patronage of Palestinian nationalism and resistance despite his dislike of Yasser Arafat.

Asad pursued a policy of building not just a Syrian state but an enhanced Syrian nation, seeking to extend his country's geographic reach. In 1976, with the encouragement of the Ford administration and the tacit agreement of Israel, Asad sent his army into Lebanon. His initial purpose was to prevent a radical victory in the Lebanese civil war, but the initially modest foray led to the establishment of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. His cultivation of the Palestinians and efforts to extend his influence over Jordan were parts of the same policy. These expansionist policies attracted significant internal support for the regime from those who shared Asad's quest for enhanced regional power.

Asad's adroitness in the conduct of his foreign policy was demonstrated by his ability to balance conflicting interests. For example, while it may have been risky to support a non-Arab country, Iran, in its war with its Arab neighbor, Iraq, in the early 1980s, this effort to outflank a regional power rival (Saddam Hussein) by building a partnership with Iran was largely successful. And Asad's close relationship with the Soviet Union did not prevent him from cultivating diplomatic ties with the United States. In the aftermath of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, he conducted long negotiations with Henry Kissinger, who was hoping to repeat his success with Egypt. Asad's ambition was to become the regional power that both Moscow and Washington would have to work with in order to accomplish their Middle Eastern aims.

But Asad's foreign policy universe was complicated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1989–90. The adroit leader lost the support of his biggest external patron and had to adapt to the international reality of the US-led coalition against Saddam Hussein. Asad was invited to join the coalition. For the United States, having Syria and its leader representing "resistance" in the ranks of the coalition would be a great asset. For Asad, joining a Western-led coalition against another Arab country presented yet another risk, but he accepted the invitation in order to cultivate a relationship with the last remaining superpower while enabling the defeat of his arch enemy, Saddam.

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the Bush-Baker administration in the United States decided to launch a massive effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and persuaded Asad and Israel's right-wing leader, Yitzhak Shamir, to take part in a peace conference in Madrid in October 1991. Entering into direct negotiations with Israel was a far-reaching decision for the leader who

fourteen years earlier had denounced Sadat's trip to Jerusalem and the subsequent Egyptian peace negotiations with Israel as an act of treason. Yet Asad ended up joining the US initiative. The Madrid conference inaugurated a two-decade-long period during which Syria and Israel negotiated peace. The negotiations were intermittent and difficult. The difficulty was due in no small part to the continued hostilities between the two countries—Syria, notably, continued to collaborate with Iran in supporting Hezbollah, the main violent opposition to Israel's lingering presence in south Lebanon in the aftermath of the 1982 war. Five Israeli prime ministers (Rabin, Peres, Netanyahu, Barak, and Olmert) conveyed a conditional hypothetical willingness to withdraw from the Golan in return for peace, with conditions attached. On several occasions, Asad—and his son after him—indicated a willingness to sign a full peace agreement with Israel on that basis. In the end, it all came to naught. Both sides were ambivalent in their approach to peacemaking, and there were several decisive moments when either an Israeli leader or the Syrian president refrained from making a bold, unequivocal decision.

As Asad's health began to deteriorate during his final years in power, his energies were poured into an effort to ensure his succession by his son, Bashar. Asad's original heir apparent, his other son Basel, was killed in a car accident in 1994. After Basel's death Bashar was brought back from London, where he had been training as an ophthalmologist, and spent the next six years being groomed by his father, who died in June 2000.

Hafez al-Asad's legacy was complex. After thirty years in power he left behind a relatively strong and stable Syrian state and had turned his country into an important regional player. But the regime's stability rested on shaky foundations. Asad was successful in building a complex dual system based on a

family-sectarian core surrounded by a complex structure of a military security establishment, state and party institutions, and the support of broad strata of the Syrian population. But the delicate balance that held this system together depended on the extraordinary skills of the man who built it—and exacted a heavy price. Asad's large governmental bureaucracy and the public sector were corrupt and inefficient. Syria was in urgent need of administrative and economic modernization and reform. Asad recognized the need, but he also realized that there would be massive opposition by vested interests to any change and reform.

At different phases of Asad's tenure Syria's economy was boosted by minor economic changes and reforms: revenues from higher oil prices, cheap oil from Iran for local consumption, remittances from Syrian workers abroad, and financial aid from Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries after the First Gulf War. Such income helped Asad and his regime get by but were insufficient to address the country's underlying problems. A broad-reaching political reform—demanded by the opposition and indeed vital for modernization of the country—was never contemplated.

Bashar al-Asad: A Crisis Foretold

In the summer of 2000, when Bashar succeeded his father as president,⁸ he was an unknown quantity; his ability to master the system built by his father had yet to be demonstrated. The transition from a revolutionary Arab republic to a hereditary one could be problematic, but rival factions and individuals within the Ba'th regime calculated that it was safest for them to respect the father's wish, and transfer power to his son rather than run the risk of internecine strife. Initially, Bashar seemed

to represent progress and change. He was young, with a deceptively mild and self-deprecating manner, a trained ophthalmologist who had spent three years studying in London and was the president of Syria's computer society. His first speech promised change, reform, and modernization. He allowed an unprecedented degree of political freedom, a so-called Damascus Spring, in which intellectuals, artists, and political activists were suddenly allowed to demand reform and offer criticism. The winds of change were blowing. Bashar was well aware of the effervescence in Syria and was seeking to offer the regime's critics a measure of political freedom.

In September 2000, a group of civil society and political activists released the "manifesto of the 99," a call demanding the lifting of the state of emergency and martial law imposed in 1963; an amnesty for all political prisoners; the return of political exiles; and freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the freedom of public life in general. Among the signatories were Syria's greatest poet, Adonis, and its most prominent public intellectual, Sadiq al-Azm. In short order, a more radical petition signed by one thousand intellectuals was published, demanding free elections and the end of the Ba'th Party's monopoly of political power. The two manifestos were followed by the resurgence of political activity, first and foremost through informal forums. Non-Ba'thi members of the parliament and other political activists joined the fray by demanding greater freedom.

The initial response of Bashar's regime to these manifestos was surprisingly mild and sanguine. Hundreds of political prisoners were pardoned, political parties were granted permission to publish their own newspapers, and the activity of hundreds of discussion forums was tolerated, at least initially. Then the regime suddenly changed its mind and decided to crack down

on opposition activity and arrest activists. By September 2001 the Damascus Spring was brought to an end.

Why the about-face and seemingly contradictory approaches to political change? One explanation was that the suppression of the Damascus Spring was forced on Bashar by the old guard of the regime. Undoubtedly, key figures in the regime were worried by the extent of criticism and opposition exercised by Syria's civil society and political opposition, and in all likelihood they impressed their concern on the young president. He himself was initially uncertain of his position and policies. It took him time to acquire firsthand experience and self-confidence, to remove several of his father's confidants, and to plant in key positions younger men with whom he felt more comfortable. By 2007–8, Bashar would emerge from a period of formidable challenges, domestic and external, with a bolstered sense of confidence. And he revealed to the world that he was less a forward-looking liberal modernizer than a quintessential product of the system he inherited.

External and Domestic Challenges

The presidency of George W. Bush, the crisis of 9/11, and eventually the 2003 US invasion of Iraq posed a daunting set of challenges for Bashar. Shortly after his assumption of power, Syria's foreign policy environment underwent significant changes. In the United States, the Clinton administration was replaced by the harder-line George W. Bush's administration. Any hope that the moribund Syrian-Israeli peace process would revive was shattered when Ariel Sharon—an opponent of any withdrawal from the Golan—became Israel's prime minister. Moreover, the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in the fall of 2000 led to increased pressure on the Syrian regime to show

enhanced support for the Palestinian cause. Bashar responded to such pressure by enhancing his sponsorship of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization. This strategy was met with retaliation on both sides. Israel penalized Syria for its support of Palestinian Islamic Jihad's activity by bombing an Islamic Jihad base in Syria. And in Lebanon, the Sunni leader Rafiq al-Hariri created significant opposition to Syrian hegemony with Saudi backing. Meanwhile, in Iraq, Saddam Hussein's maneuvers vis-à-vis the United States created both opportunities and risks for Bashar. As the specter of an American military attack on Iraq grew closer, Bashar tried to maintain his opposition to US military presence east of his border without unduly antagonizing the Bush administration.

The impact of the American invasion on Syria was immediately evident. Opposition groups in Syria were encouraged by the fact that one Ba'th regime had just been toppled by the United States. Like Qaddafi, Bashar suspected that his country might be the next target of a US president determined to change the face of the Middle East. In May 2003, US secretary of state Colin Powell visited Damascus and exerted pressure on Asad not to interfere with US policy in Iraq, to stop his support to such terrorist groups as Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad, and to cease the development of weapons of mass destruction (chemical weapons in particular). Powell did not have to use explicit threats against the background of the administration's recent invasion of Iraq and the calls for further action against other hostile regimes in the region. Asad promised to respond but in fact did not deliver; when asked why he did not close the offices of Islamic Jihad in Damascus as promised, the answer was vague: "operational offices were closed and only media spokesmen were allowed to continue."⁹

This line of conduct was met with disapproval in official Washington, particularly inside a Bush administration divided between those who thought one had to cooperate with Bashar and others who argued that only a hard line and an iron fist could effect any change in Syria's conduct. Republicans in Congress pushed through the legislation of the Syria Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Act in April 2003; President Bush signed the act into law in December 2003. The text denounced Syria for supporting terrorist groups, allowing armed volunteers to slip into Iraq, developing weapons of mass destruction, and occupying Lebanon. The act also banned all export to Syria of military and dual-use items, and it offered the president a menu of sanctions to choose from, including a complete ban of exports to Syria, a prohibition of US businesses operating in Syria, restrictions on Syrian diplomats in the United States, limits on Syrian airline flights, a downgrading of US diplomatic representation, and a potential freeze on Syrian economic assets.

Syria's role in facilitating the transit of Islamist volunteers to the Sunni insurrection against the US military occupation of Iraq came to dominate the American-Syrian relationship during this period. Bashar not only facilitated the transit of Islamists into Iraq but created a whole infrastructure with his intelligence service in northeastern Syria that was responsible for the safe crossing of thousands of anti-American warriors. For Asad, the US presence in Iraq and on his eastern border was a threat that he was determined to reduce, if not eradicate. When the United States exerted pressure or disapproval, the regime tried to placate Washington with occasional cooperation. So, for example, Syria extradited Saddam's half brother Sabawi Ibrahim al-Tikriti to the Iraqi authorities—who in turn handed him over to the United States. But such occasional

cooperation failed to placate Washington, where anger against Bashar and his regime mounted.

Syria's regional and international standing was also buffeted during this period because of its deep and controversial involvement in Lebanese politics. Tensions flared over the issue of whether to extend the Lebanese presidency of the Christian Maronite Emile Lahud. Lahud was close to the Syrian intelligence services, and Syria considered the extension of his term essential to their control over Lebanon. Such an extension required an amendment of the Lebanese constitution. The anti-Syrian political opposition in Lebanon was led by the Sunni prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, a wealthy businessman who made his fortune in Saudi Arabia and who was close to the Saudis as well as to French president Jacques Chirac. With the active support of Hariri, who despite pressure from Bashar opposed extending the Syrian-backed presidency of Lahud, the French and the Americans collaborated at the UN Security Council to pass Council Resolution 1559 on September 2, 2004, calling for the departure from Lebanon of all foreign (namely, Syrian) forces.

When Hariri was assassinated in Beirut in February 2005, the murder created domestic and international outrage. Suspicion fell on Syria and Hezbollah. The UN launched an investigation headed by the German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis. Mehlis submitted two reports in October and December 2005—carefully drafted and pointing a clear finger at Syria and Hezbollah. The aftermath of the report was messy but inconclusive. An Alawi officer and head of Syria's security apparatus in Lebanon, Ghazi Kan'an, who had been in charge of the Lebanese portfolio, died mysteriously in October 2005. Kan'an's death was described as a suicide, but it is quite possible that he was killed or forced to kill himself, thus becoming a sacrificial lamb.¹⁰ The

international investigation was never consummated. The whole affair contributed to darkening the image of Bashar's regime, and to the undermining of Syria's position in Lebanon.

Syria's position in Lebanon was directly assailed on February 21, 2005, by an unusual rallying of internal Lebanese opposition to Syria and Hezbollah when masses of opponents demonstrated in Beirut demanding an end to Syrian occupation. The combined Lebanese and international pressure persuaded Bashar that Syria's military presence in Lebanon had become untenable. On April 27 of that same year, Bashar withdrew his forces from Lebanon.

It was a major blow for the young president. Syria's hegemony in and control of Lebanon was one of his father's major achievements, in line with his view of Lebanon as part of Greater Syria. It also led Bashar to rely more heavily on his relationship with Iran and Hezbollah. Hafez al-Asad had built a close partnership with Iran that essentially was a partnership of equals. Yes, he had cultivated Syria's relationship with Hezbollah; but for him Hassan Nasrallah, the organization's leader, was a client and not a partner. Hafez al-Asad never gave Nasrallah an audience and dealt with him through his underlings. Under Bashar, the nature of the relationship with Hezbollah changed to more of a partner relationship. Bashar not only met with Nasrallah; he even made public his admiration for the Hezbollah leader.

These foreign policy setbacks were reflected in Bashar's domestic position as well. Bashar now had to contend with opposition from inside the regime *and* a new wave from Syria's civil society. Inside the regime, criticism by major figures from within and of his father's reign became more evident. The chief critic was Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Syria's Sunni vice president. The clash between Bashar and his intra-Ba'thi critics came to a head during the party's regional conference in June 2005,

when Bashar asserted himself over Khaddam—who was then ousted from his position. Asad also removed his former minister of defense, Mustafa Tlas, and Abdallah al-Ahmar, both close collaborators of his father from their party positions. Syria's civil opponents of the regime were given a boost by the external pressures, and in October 2005 they published the "Damascus Declaration," signed by 250 opposition figures. The declaration—organized by two prominent civil society activists, Michel Kilo and Riad Seif—criticized the Syrian government as "authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish," and called for "peaceful, gradual," reform "founded on accord, and based on dialogue and recognition of the other."¹¹ Signatories included both secular and Islamist critics of the regime and Kurdish as well as Arab names. The publication of the declaration in turn boosted opposition activities. Abd al-Halim Khaddam left Syria; in March 2006, he announced in Brussels—along with the Muslim Brotherhood—the formation of the National Salvation Front, composed of seventeen groups of political exiles.

These were significant challenges, but Bashar managed to overcome them. The year 2005 was an important one in the evolution of Bashar al-Asad's regime as he was able to overcome the criticism and opposition of members of the old guard and to impose his control over the Ba'th Party. A new, the tenth, five-year plan was approved. The slogan "social market reform" was adopted by the regime in an effort to strike a compromise between the original ethos of the Ba'th revolution and the need for economic reform and modernization. Khaddam's removal and departure from Syria enabled Bashar to tighten his grip over the regime. Opposition activists were jailed. In 2007 Bashar was elected for a second term as president. It was hardly surprising, in a country that had not had a free election in a long time, that he won the election by massive majority,

but the reelection still gave Bashar a much needed dose of self-confidence.

A series of external developments also helped to facilitate Bashar's way out of the crisis. The war between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006—and the inconclusive fashion in which it ended—was seen overall as an achievement for the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis. There were also indications of a shift in US policy. The Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan group headed by former secretary of state James Baker and former chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Relations Lee Hamilton, was formed against the background of dissatisfaction with US policy in Iraq and examined ways for dealing with the issue. In March 2006 the committee published its report; one of its key recommendations was for the United States “to engage with Iran and Syria.”¹² These recommendations were in stark contrast to the position of the Bush administration, which felt there was no point in talking to Syria. Next came Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Damascus in April 2007; this was another indication of growing opposition in the United States to the Bush administration's Middle Eastern policy, in this case specifically its Syrian component. Bashar was invited to Paris by France's new president, Nicolas Sarkozy, in July 2008; July 2008 saw also the launch of a Turkish mediation between Syria and Israel. In short, by 2008, Bashar seemed to have overcome his immediate domestic and external problems and to have consolidated his rule.

A Futile Quest for “Social Market Reform”

Bashar al-Asad inherited both the system and the need to reform it.¹³ A study published in 2004 by the International Crisis Group (ICG) was prescient in this regard:

Syria urgently needs domestic change. Its economy is plagued by corruption, ageing state industries, a volatile and under-performing agricultural sector, rapidly depleting oil resources, an anachronistic educational system, capital flight and lack of foreign investment.

The study recognized the regime's resistance to any fundamental reform:

The elites that have navigated repeated domestic and foreign crises for three decades, providing the country unprecedented stability are wary of change and attached to a formula that so far has served them well. They will be hard to persuade of the merits of a course change. Nor should their fears of an Islamist take-over, sectarian or ethnic conflict, and renewed and prolonged instability be taken lightly. Even assuming Bashar wishes to take bold steps, it would be unrealistic to expect a rapid transformation.¹⁴

As the ICG's report makes clear, Bashar was incapable (or unwilling, or both) to introduce substantive changes in Syria's political and economic systems and address all the concerns expressed.

Some of the difficulties facing the new president were directly inherited from his father's era: like his father before him, Bashar found it impossible to reconcile his regime's minoritarian coalition with economic liberalization. There was an inherent antagonism between the ethos of the Ba'ath regime and Syria's private sector, and one simply could not reform the government bureaucracy in a serious way, as the public sector served as the chief depository for the network of cronies that formed the bedrock of regime support. Nevertheless several economic reforms were introduced such as the establishment

of private banks (2004) and the introduction of holding companies (2007) into the Syrian economy.

The pace of reform was dramatically expedited in 2005 in the aftermath of the tenth regional conference of the Ba'ath Party, when Bashar managed to get rid of several senior members of the old guard and reinforced his hold over the party and the regime. He put Abdallah al-Dardari, as deputy prime minister, in charge of economic reform and development, and he launched a five-year plan. As we saw, the slogan "social market reform" was broadly used in order to signal a middle way chosen by the regime: modernization and liberalization, while keeping the policy of social welfare in support of the poorer strata of society.

Six years later, although the record was far from impressive in terms of economic growth and development and modernization of the system, Bashar's efforts did have some impact. By 2010, Syria's GNP had grown, the private sector's share in the economy and in external investment had grown, and the business sector had become a bit more autonomous. But on the other side of the equation was a dramatic expansion of inequality. In 2008, almost 70 percent of Syrian employees earned less than one hundred dollars a month, almost 40 percent of public sector employees took a second job, and the average salary was between US\$225 and US\$270 a month. These figures starkly contrasted with the ostentatious lifestyle of the small elite that was the principal beneficiary of the president's policies.

The reality of Syrian politics was such that the opening of the Syrian economy was used and abused by a new elite composed of the president's own family and clan, heads of the military and security services, and their partners in the private sector. These groups managed to either block reforms that threatened their

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