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Author(s): Malcolm H. Kerr

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MALCOLM H. KERR

## Hafiz Asad and the changing patterns of Syrian politics

The advent to power of General Hafiz Asad in November 1970 introduced the latest chapter in Syria's stormy political odyssey since independence was achieved at the close of the World War II. To attempt to put Asad's policies in perspective, I shall comment briefly on the background of Syria's political climate before the advent of the Baath party to power in 1963, and on the change of character that overtook the Baath in subsequent years.

### I BACKGROUND

For many years Syria has been generally viewed in the west as a barbarous, misgoverned land of zealotry tempered by incompetence. Novels like Morris West's *The Tower of Babel* and Eric Ambler's *The Levanter* have added to this image. One of the more charitable analyses of Syria's political character that this writer recalls reading in the American press appeared about 1957. The correspondent, fresh from a round of interviews in Damascus, reported that the typical Syrian is like the cactus pear: the exterior is prickly and forbidding, but once the skin is peeled back, 'what you find inside is mush.'

There are three apparent reasons for this poor image. First, Syria has obstructed the imperial and strategic plans of French, British, and American officialdom ever since World War I. It has been of scant comfort for them to find that Egyptians, Turks, Russians, and others have also found the Syrians difficult, and the point seems to have been little appreciated that all these states have sought, repeatedly, to manipulate Syria for their own purposes.

Dean of the Division of Social Sciences, University of California, Los Angeles;  
author of *The Arab Cold War* (3rd ed, London 1971).

Secondly, there is Syria's hostility to Israel, which has consistently seemed more implacable than that of other Arab states: Syria was the last to sign an armistice in 1949; it denounced the United Nations Security Council resolution of 1967 calling for a peace settlement; before 1967 it encouraged Palestinian guerrillas and habitually shelled Israeli fishermen and farmers on the Sea of Galilee and along the Jordan valley. Again, little attention has been paid to some of the crucial circumstances surrounding these actions, such as Israel's systematic encroachment on Arab rights in the demilitarized zones adjoining Syria.

Thirdly, Syria has had more than its share of military coups, all of which look much the same to the casual observer. Because Syria is remote and its affairs often obscure, the observer is bound to regard its internal struggles with some cynicism.

Throughout its modern history Syria has been subjected to difficult external challenges. Hopes for independence after World War I were dashed when the fledgling régime of Prince Feisal was expelled by a French military expedition; for twenty-five years the French then ruled Syria, separating it from neighbouring Arab territories, breaking it up internally into ethnically separate units, and forcing it to cede the territory of Alexandretta to Turkey. The whole period of French rule was marked by outspoken Syrian antipathy and, at times, armed rebellion.

Scarcely had Syria achieved independence after World War II than it became involved in the struggle for Palestine – a conflict from which no Syrian government could have been expected to remain aloof, in view of the high pitch of resentment at the separation of Palestine in 1920 from the natural geographic and social whole that had been Syria and its opening to massive alien immigration, culminating in the creation of a Jewish state in 1948. Arab Palestine had from the start been a keenly felt Syrian cause, as had Syrian independence itself; but now in 1948 the Syrians, though independent and possessing their own army, found themselves powerless to do anything about it, or, in the years that followed, anything about the unilateral steps of the new Jewish state to consolidate and even extend its grip on Arab lands and –

as any Syrian was bound to see it – on Arab rights.

Compounding these sensitivities were others deriving from the Cold War and from the rival ambitions of various Arab leaders. The decade following the creation of Israel was marked by multiple tugs of war that threatened to pull the Syrian body politic apart. Unwelcome British and American efforts to incorporate the Arab states into the grand alliance against the Soviet bloc coincided with the efforts of the Iraqi monarchy to draw Syria into partnership, and those of the Egyptian government (both before and after the 1952 revolution) to prevent it. Both sets of pressures were intertwined with political struggles inside Syria, with rival domestic factions seeking outside support and vice versa. Not only did this process have a pernicious effect on the health of Syria's domestic politics and contribute to a series of military coups beginning in 1949, but it heightened an already considerable psychosis directed against the western powers, culminating in the 1957 crisis in which the United States, Turkey, and Iraq threatened Syria while the Soviet Union and Egypt rushed to its side. Within Syria the decisive concern was to resist any undermining of the country's independence – a threat seen to come directly from the two leading western powers and their local allies. Prodded by a group of army officers, the Syrian government therefore threw itself into the arms of President Nasser early in 1958.

If the union of Syria and Egypt was a gesture of desperation on Syria's part, it nonetheless represented a deeply felt desire in Syria to reject the embrace of the great powers. It also represented an equally strong belief in Arab unity as Syria's natural destiny, a destiny preached most insistently at the time by the Baath party but also endorsed by many more traditional nationalists. Consequently, the failure of the United Arab Republic was to become something of a continuing trauma in Syria's political outlook, and remained so long after the military coup that brought about Syria's secession in 1961. In the years that followed secession, some Syrians condemned it, others endorsed it; there was, however, widespread agreement that the union had worked badly, that the Egyptians had shown themselves to be more domineering than

brotherly, that Syria would have to find its own way in defending its personality and modernizing its society – but also (here lay the dilemma) that the experiment in union, if hasty and ill-conceived, had nonetheless been a valid act of faith, a response to the moral imperative of Arabism, and that sometime in the future the project of Arab unity must be resumed on a sounder basis. In the meantime there would be ample room for recrimination and dispute, both over the question of guilt for the failure of 1958-61 and over who should manage Syria's affairs in the future.

By the time the Baath party arrived in power in 1963, Syria had a well-developed legacy of patriotic fervour combined with military and political impotence. Social and economic backwardness, a provincial view of the world, ethnic and religious divisions, and long-standing habits of factionalism, all combined with the natural vulnerability of the country to international and regional pressures to heighten its difficulties. The resulting frustrations presumably have something to do with explaining the tragic fact that today Syria's potential – economic, social, and cultural – remains largely unrealized; for among the immediate practical consequences of those frustrations have been political instability, crushing military expenditures, inconsistent economic policies, the flight of capital, and a serious brain drain.<sup>1</sup>

## II THE BAATH AND THE NEO-BAATH

By 1963 the Baath ('Resurrection') party was a familiar landmark in Syrian politics. Since its founding in 1947 by two Damascus schoolteachers, Michel Aflaq and Salaheddin Bitar, it had attracted a considerable following among younger and better educated Syrians (and other Arabs, for it was also organized outside Syria) with its advocacy of Arab unity, anticolonialism, and democratic socialism and with the highly intellectual flavour provided by Aflaq's ideological discussions. In the 1950s a different consti-

<sup>1</sup> Defence expenditures in recent years have been reported at around 70 per cent of the regular budget. As for the brain drain, a Syrian specialized commission reported in 1973 that between 1956 and 1969 some 57 per cent of Syrian professional men – mainly doctors and engineers – had emigrated. (*Agence France Presse*, cited in *Arab Report and Record*, xviii (1973), 166.)

tuency was added to the party, when the veteran radical politician, Akram Hourani, joined the Baath and brought with him a considerable following of army officers.

Hourani, Bitar, and other prominent Baathists served for a time in the UAR government under Nasser, but eventually became disenchanted with his monopolistic exercise of authority and moved more or less into opposition. Meanwhile at Nasser's insistence the Baath had been formally disbanded in Syria; much of its membership drifted away, and when the party was reconstituted following the military coup of 1963, an almost entirely new group of faces emerged. To be sure, Bitar served as prime minister off and on until 1966, with Aflaq standing conspicuously in the wings; but even during these three years the chief locus of real authority lay with a group of previously unknown men – both military officers and civilians – who had ideas and connections of their own and felt no particular loyalty to the Old Guard leadership. Particularly influential were the new chief of state and head of the Revolutionary Command Council, General Amin al-Hafiz; members of a secret Military Committee who had first organized themselves while on duty in Egypt during the days of the union, including Salah Jadid, Muhammad Umran, Hafiz Asad, Hamad Ubaid, Selim Hatoum, and Abd al-Karim Jundi; and three medical doctors who had served as volunteers in the Algerian war of independence: Nureddin al-Atasi, Youssef Z'ayyen, and Ibrahim Makhous.

The fact that Jadid, Umran, Asad, and Makhous were all members of the Alawite sect, while Ubaid and Hatoum were Druzes and Jundi was an Ismaili, gave the régime a distinctive minority flavour, significant in several ways. The three minorities are small heterodox Islamic communities – Alawites forming perhaps 11 per cent of the population, Druzes 3 per cent, Ismailis less than 1 per cent – all of which are predominantly rural, isolated, economically and socially underprivileged, clannish in social structure, and occult in religious tradition. Their representatives in the new military-political régime, all men from modest family background, could be expected, other things being equal, to display a populist

agrarian-oriented radicalism, a resentment of the Sunni urban-based establishment, a penchant to rely on personal networks of relatives and friends, and something of a conspiratorial outlook. In addition, one might not expect as much pan-Arabist zeal from them as from the Sunnis.

As a result of various factional manoeuvres, Amin al-Hafiz and Muhammad Umran both eventually gravitated into an alliance with the Bitar-Aflaq Old Guard wing of the Baath party, and were expelled from power along with the latter in a coup that purged the régime in February 1966. The Neo-Baath régime that emerged was nominally under the civilian leadership of the three doctors – Atasi as chief of state, Z'ayyen as prime minister, Mak-hous as deputy prime minister and foreign minister – but was decisively influenced from behind the scenes by prominent army officers: chiefly Salah Jadid, who by now had left his military position and operated under the relatively obscure title of assistant secretary-general of the Regional (ie Syrian) Command, but also Hafiz Asad, commander of the air force and minister of defence, as well as Abd al-Karim Jundi, the minister of agrarian reform. While it is customary to date the Neo-Baath period of rule from the 1966 coup, in actuality these men had become influential before then, and in fact it had been the desperate effort of Amin al-Hafiz to stem their growing influence that led them to decide to stage the coup and eliminate him from power altogether. Indeed, it might be said that the driving force behind the Syrian régime from the coup of March 1963 onward had been the Military Committee, of which Jadid, Asad, and Umran had been founding members and which al-Hafiz was subsequently invited to join. In a way, then, it might be said that the Neo-Baath largely dominated the régime from 1963 on.

These new men felt no reverence for the founders of the party, despised the efforts of Bitar and Hafiz to ingratiate themselves with Nasser, and thought much more strongly in terms of radical social priorities than of Arab unity. These new ideas came to the fore as early as the fall of 1963, when a set of resolutions along quasi-marxist lines, castigating the bourgeoisie and advocating

class struggle, was adopted at the Regional (Syrian) and then the National (pan-Arab) Congresses of the party. In January 1965 Jundi became minister of agrarian reform and for the first time the reforms decreed in 1958 were implemented with determination. At the same time, a large-scale nationalization programme was launched, resulting in the takeover of 108 companies.<sup>2</sup> Other measures included the prohibition of oil concessions to foreign companies, the reform of tax laws, and restrictions on currency exchange (designed to stem the flight of capital which, by early 1965, had reached truly alarming proportions).<sup>3</sup> Radical economic measures were not to the taste of the Bitar-Aflaq wing of the party – indeed, ironically, early in 1965 while the nationalizations were proceeding, Bitar was sent off on a tour of Africa to persuade Syrian emigrant communities to invest their money in private enterprise in Syria. But the new men such as Jadid, Jundi, and Asad, representing a ‘country bumpkin’ social background, cared little for the sensitivities of the urban business and land-owning class, and still less for the cultivation of trading relations with large western corporations such as the Iraq Petroleum Company (whose trans-Syrian pipeline the Syrian government shut down in December 1966 in support of its demand for larger royalties) or the Concordia Company, the West German concern that had sought an oil-drilling concession.

While the Neo-Baathists certainly were not hostile to the ideal of Arab unity as such, and perpetuated such traditional party slogans as ‘Unity, Freedom, Socialism’ and ‘One Arab Nation

2 The measure was apparently decided upon in great haste at a rump session of the National Revolutionary Command Council in the absence of the Old Guard members, as a calculated move to embarrass them; and subsequently some of the nationalizations were revoked. See Munif al-Razzaz, *Al-tajriba al-murra* [The Bitter Experience] (Beirut 1967), p 117; Shibli al-Aysami, *Al-wahda al-'Arabiya min khilal al-tajriba* [Arab Unity in the Light of Experience] (Beirut 1971), pp 86-7; both cited by Nikolaus Van Dam, ‘The Struggle for Power in Syria and the Ba’th Party (1958-1966),’ *Orient* (Hamburg) (March 1973), p 14.

3 Estimated, according to reports, at one billion Syrian pounds (us \$250 million), ie, about twice the entire sum of capital investment in industry in Syria in 1965. See Tabitha Petran, *Syria* (London 1972), p 178.



with an Immortal Mission,' they resolutely rejected the idea of co-operation with conservative régimes for the sake of Arab solidarity, and they also tended to be highly distrustful of Nasser, whom they saw as a manipulator and an opportunist. Arab unity, as a long-term goal, would only be achieved through pursuit of the class struggle on a pan-Arab basis. In 1966 the Neo-Baath régime nonetheless reached a rapprochement with Egypt, including the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations (broken since the dissolution of the UAR in 1961) and even the conclusion of a military defence treaty. However, this was a strictly limited gesture, implying nothing in the way of further steps toward reunion; and in fact the Syrians immediately took advantage of the treaty to engage in provocative actions against Israel which ended by drawing their Egyptian partners into what became the Six-Day War.

It apparently meant little to the Neo-Baathists that Syria was becoming increasingly isolated within the Arab world, separated from one Arab government after another by ideological quarrels and mutual accusations. By June 1967 Syria was on hostile terms with Morocco (over the Ben Barka affair, for which the Syrians condemned the Moroccan authorities), Iraq (where President Aref had overthrown a Baath régime), Saudi Arabia and Jordan (ruled by pro-American monarchies), and Tunisia (whose President Bourguiba had advocated compromise with Israel). Tension with Lebanon was endemic; relations with other Arab states were cool at best, and those with the United States and Britain were frigid, while diplomatic ties with West Germany had been broken. Following the 1967 war, Syria's isolation among the Arab states was to grow still worse. Tunisia broke relations when Syrian representatives were implicated in an attempt to assassinate Bourguiba; relations with the new People's Republic of South Yemen were hampered by the affiliation of its leaders with the Arab Nationalist Movement, a rival of the Baath within Syria; the replacement of Aref in Iraq by his old Baath enemies did nothing to help, since these were affiliated to the Aflaq-Bitar Old Guard that the Neo-Baath had chased from Syria. Egypt became suspect for pursuing a 'political solution' to the Middle East question and for

accepting the Security Council resolution advocating peace with Israel; Jordan and Lebanon became guilty of obstructing the operations of the Palestinian fedayeen.

It had been Syrian support for the fedayeen that had provided the immediate sparks igniting the Six-Day War in the first place – support which appears to have been given for ideological reasons that moved the Neo-Baathist leadership to conclude that a war with Israel was an acceptable and perhaps even desirable risk to run. A good deal of propaganda in 1966-7 was devoted to the theme of a 'popular war of liberation,' on the supposed models of Algeria and Vietnam – a theme that naturally had more appeal for Drs Z'ayyen, Atasi, and Makhous, the veterans of service in Algeria, than for General Hafiz Asad, minister of defence and commander of the air force, whose job it would be to direct the operations of tanks, artillery, and aircraft rather than Viet Cong-style guerrillas if war broke out. In any event, the war came; the Syrian air force, like its Egyptian counterpart, was decimated on the ground; the Israelis marched into Kuneitra and the Golan Heights while some of the best Syrian armoured units were held back to guard the government in Damascus from its domestic enemies. One hundred thousand Syrians fled the occupied territory; the Israeli army stood only forty miles from Damascus.

Incredibly, this stunning defeat did nothing to shake the security of the Syrian régime, already isolated as it was from much of the population and resented by half a dozen other left-wing parties and groupings whom it had insisted on excluding from participation in politics. (Even as late as 1968 Salah Jadid, the all-powerful assistant secretary-general, continued to refuse to countenance the formation of a proposed 'progressive front' with a variety of Nasserist, Houranist, and renegade Baath elements.) But perhaps it was the very isolation of the régime that made it impervious to the consequences of its own defeat on the battlefield: as long as the Neo-Baath maintained its internal cohesion, its monopoly of the positions of power in the country would suffice to fend off dissent. The territory lost to Israel in the fighting was of no great importance other than strategically; the army

was able to lie low and avoid further provocation of the enemy. This kept the régime off the hook: it could stay out of trouble, without having to eschew its established doctrines of people's war and Palestinian resistance. In fact, it set about creating a fedayeen organization of its own called Al-Sa'iqa (The Thunderbolt), placed under the control of the Baath party – ie, of Salah Jadid – but operating mainly from Jordanian and Lebanese, rather than Syrian, territory.

In fact, however, recriminations arose behind the scenes between Hafiz Asad (representing the armed forces) and Jadid and the doctors (representing the party), over the question of responsibility for the 1967 defeat and what to do about it. Asad insisted that the army should control the fedayeen, that the party should be kept out of military affairs, that the armed forces should receive a larger budget at the expense of economic development projects, and that the government should move to improve relations with Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt in order to facilitate co-ordinated military planning with them. Jadid and his colleagues resisted these demands, and the Regional Party Congress held in September 1968 rejected them. Asad, however, was quite prepared to press his points arbitrarily. In February 1969 he staged a limited coup d'état in Damascus, seizing control of newspaper offices and the radio station and releasing political prisoners. For the next twenty months Asad was to share power on a compromise basis with Jadid and the doctors. At his behest the cabinet was broadened to take in representatives of the non-Baathist left, and it was agreed that a more conciliatory policy toward other Arab governments should be pursued. Limited military co-operation was established with Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt. Relations were improved with the conservative oil states. A Syrian delegation was sent to Rabat in December 1969 to attend the Arab summit conference.

However, judging from events during the Jordanian civil war of September 1970, the argument between the Asad and Jadid factions remained unresolved. Tank units entered northern Jordan from Syria to join the fedayeen in fighting the Jordanian

army. The tanks bore Palestine Liberation Organization markings and were, ostensibly at least, manned by PLO members, but the crucial decision to authorize them to move into Jordan lay of course with the Syrians – more specifically, with the Syrian Regional Command of the Baath party, on which Generals Asad and Jadid both sat in uneasy partnership.<sup>4</sup> Just how well the intervention fared against the Jordanian forces is a matter of some controversy – at the very least it could be said that they gave a critical measure of relief to hard-pressed fedayeen in the north of the country – but in any event it was prematurely terminated a few days later under the threat of American and Israeli military action, with the Soviet Union and Egypt both advising the Syrians to order a retreat from Jordan rather than risk such escalation.

Within days of the intervention, reports were circulating that General Asad had opposed it, that it had been a Jadid-Z'ayyen operation and that Asad had deliberately withheld air support.<sup>5</sup> Failure to use the air force had cost the PLO armoured units heavy losses during the retreat and provoked great bitterness among Asad's critics in Syria, who angrily dismissed his argument that air operations would have constituted open interference in Jordanian affairs and would have provoked grave consequences. On 21 October, as the dispute mounted, an extraordinary session of the National (pan-Arab) Congress of the Baath party was summoned to render judgment. At that congress, Asad argued that with the death of Egypt's Nasser on 28 September, Syria could no longer afford the luxury of threatening Israel and playing at extremism; 'it would be better,' he said, 'to refrain in future from all gratuitous acts of provocation which the enemy could use as a pretext to challenge the Syrian Army and force upon it a battle which it is in no position to undertake, and even less to win today.'<sup>6</sup> These remarks brought a storm of protest from the Jadid faction

<sup>4</sup> Petran reports (*ibid*, p 247) that the decision was made by the Regional Command on 17 September, the day the Jordanian army assault against the fedayeen in Jordan began, and was planned jointly by the Regional Command and the PLO, and directed by General Asad in his headquarters in Deraa.

<sup>5</sup> *Al-Nahar* (Beirut), 22 September 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Reported in English edition of *Le Monde*, 18 November 1970.

against Asad's 'defeatism' and readiness to yield to imperialist pressure to accept peace on Israel's terms. Asad and his supporters held that the activities of Sa'iqa (controlled by Z'ayyen and Jadid) and other fedayeen in Jordan and Lebanon would invite massive Israeli retaliation, and accused Sa'iqa of interference in the affairs of the Syrian government and army.

These arguments, however, were rejected by a majority at the congress, and on 12 November a series of resolutions was passed upholding the Jadid faction. These resolutions denounced the accumulation of power in the hands of the Minister of Defence, called for the transfer of both Asad and his close associate, General Tlas, to 'other posts,' rejected the principle of a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and declared the obligation of all party members to adhere to these resolutions – a warning clearly pointed at Asad.

Asad's response was to carry out a coup d'état the following day and assume full power. Jadid and Z'ayyen were arrested; Atasi, the chief of state, had already resigned and was now put under surveillance. Three days later Asad announced that the Regional Command of the Baath party had been replaced with a new slate loyal to himself. Ahmad Khatib, an obscure young Baathist, became provisional chief of state; Asad himself became prime minister, and retained the post of minister of defence as well, alongside a coalition cabinet of fifteen Baathists and eleven assorted Nasserists, communists, and independents. In a press interview Asad denied that there had been a coup d'état, describing the events by which he had arrived in power as 'a natural development in our party'<sup>7</sup> – a characterization that seemed ominously close to the truth.

### III THE ASAD RÉGIME

Was Asad's coup just another in the dismal series of Syrian power struggles, or did it have significance for the Syrian people and the outside world? It would probably be most accurate to say that

<sup>7</sup> *Jaysh al-Shaab* ('People's Army,' Damascus), 25 November 1970, cited in *Arab Report and Record*, xv (1970), 644.

Asad's advent to power represented a change of style, rather than of substance, which has not made a great deal of difference, yet still has been a healthy change on the whole. Asad has represented liberalization, moderation, normalization, a search for consensus, without changing Syria's basic institutions and policies. In so doing, it is just possible that he has given Syria the basis for political stability that has eluded it for the past quarter of a century. On the other hand, the fundamental law of Syrian political behaviour established by the experience of these twenty-five years appears to be that no one can exercise power for long without making enemies from among his supporters; and there is no certainty that General Asad can make himself an exception.

As a military commander, Asad's primary concern in the fall of 1970 was to prevent political ideologues and adventurers from dragging Syria into renewed war with Israel through their fascination with the so-called people's war of liberation – a process for which he obviously harboured the greatest skepticism. This required greater authority for the army over the party and Sa'iqa at home, and greater co-operation between Syria and its fellow Arab states abroad. Not only would such co-operation strengthen the common defence against Israel, but, perhaps much more important, inter-Arab co-operation generally meant a quiet consensus not to provoke Israel in the first place or to alienate the great powers to whose views Israel was sensitive. And co-operation with other Arab states also meant reconciliation at home with the various elements tied by one bond or another to those states.

The success of such a policy would not be dramatic or obvious, but would simply provide a freer atmosphere in which to breathe. Up to the time of writing, in mid-1973, this appears to have occurred. Just as Bourguiba's Tunisia, once a symbol of pro-westernism and hostility to the positions of the left-leaning Arab military republics, has found greater security and equanimity in pursuing reconciliations with the latter and shunning all controversy, so conversely Asad's Syria had mended one fence after another with erstwhile opponents who are mainly to the right of it.

Scarcely had Asad staged his coup when Libya's Colonel Qad-

dafi arrived in Damascus with a gift of \$10 million and a promise of \$38 million more. This enabled Asad to consolidate his position at home quickly by reducing the prices of essential foodstuffs, loosening foreign-exchange restrictions, and permitting freer imports, travel abroad, and trade with Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. In return, Asad announced on 27 November that Syria would adhere to the projected federation joining Libya, Egypt, and the Sudan – a project of great importance to him, insofar as it signified the closer relations with Egypt that he had advocated all along. In turn, this implied a more flexible Syrian attitude toward United Nations resolution 242 and the prospects of seeking a 'political solution' to the conflict with Israel.

In December Asad paid visits to Sudan, Egypt, and Libya. Normal telephone service with Amman was restored. A previous ban on flights of Saudi Airlines was lifted. Asad received a prominent Lebanese Christian politician and assured him of his respect for Lebanese independence. In January 1971 a group of Syrians arrested many months previously on charges of working for the Iraqi régime were released. Steps were taken toward resumption of diplomatic relations with Tunisia and Morocco. The American-owned Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company was finally permitted to repair a portion of its line in Syria that had been damaged the previous May (in exchange, to be sure, for a promise from the company of increased payments). Asad visited Moscow in February, and hinted in the communiqué that was issued that Syria would not obstruct resolution 242.

While Asad made these moves to alleviate Syria's international isolation, other steps were designed to ease the isolation of the régime at home. In keeping with the Provisional Constitution of 1969, in February 1971 Asad appointed a people's council, or legislature, charged with drawing up a permanent constitution. Although the appointive status of the Council suggested that its powers would be minimal, its composition was a departure from policies of previous years: it was comprised of 87 Baathists and 86 others, including communists, Nasserists, and members of other groups who had been at odds with the Baath over the past decade,

as well as a bloc of 36 representatives of the General Union of Farmers. The Council named Asad president of the republic, and thus he became the first non-Sunni ever to occupy this position; the electorate ratified the nomination by a telltale majority of 99 per cent in March of 1971.

Over the next two years the Asad régime consolidated these policies of foreign and domestic accommodation. An excellent harvest in 1972, following several lean years, helped considerably. The country got off to a good start in its 1971-5 five-year plan; the small but fully Syrian-operated oil industry was progressing well; work on the massive Euphrates dam at Tabka (being built with Soviet assistance) was on schedule toward completion in 1974; efforts to persuade well-to-do Syrian expatriates to return their money to Syria, and reinvest it in a guaranteed private sector, brought modestly successful results. Per-capita income in Syria reportedly rose 11 per cent from 1971 to 1972 to over \$300, a figure which placed Syria in the most prosperous category of developing countries according to a classification system used by the United Nations.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these achievements, Asad's domestic prospects were far from assured. For one thing, Salah Jadid continued to have a significant following in the army; an attempted coup d'état led by his cousin Izzat Jadid in December 1972 was put down, and 200 arrests were made. The publication in January 1973 of the draft of a new permanent constitution led to large-scale rioting in several Syrian cities, with dozens of rioters killed when the police opened fire. The issue, as on several previous occasions during the 1960s, was the 'godlessness' of the Baath, this time signified in the failure of the constitution to mention Islam as the established religion of the state; but behind this controversy lay the general distrust felt by much of the urban population, especially the commercial middle and lower middle classes, for a régime which, despite Asad's reforms, still bore the appearance of being rural-oriented and minority-dominated. Asad sought to calm the public by amending the draft constitution to specify that the president

<sup>8</sup> *Le Commerce du Levant* (Beirut), 28 April 1973.



of the republic should be a Muslim; but coming from an Alawite, it was a little as if a Protestant chief of state in Italy were to advertise himself as a 'Christian.' The constitution was endorsed by the public in March by a 97.6 per cent majority, but more riots followed on the occasion of the Prophet's Birthday on 15 April, and when parliamentary elections were held on 25 and 26 May – Syria's first such elections since 1961 – the atmosphere was one of crashing apathy. (The elections had to be extended into the second day because less than 50 per cent of the electorate turned out on the first day, but even by the end of the second day the total turnout was estimated at only 40 per cent.<sup>9</sup>) In these elections the Baath formed a National Progressive Front with the communists and other socialists, winning 140 out of 186 seats. (There were 42 'independents' and four 'opposition' also elected.) The Front, however, was largely a symbolic device, for it was overwhelmingly dominated by the rump of the Baath loyal to Asad, and omitted a host of unfriendly elements that the régime would continue to have to worry about – as the December 1972 coup attempt and the religious riots had suggested.

Likewise in the international arena, efforts at normalization could only accomplish so much. Asad led Syria into membership in the Federation of Arab Republics with Egypt and Libya in September 1971 – a very loose arrangement in which none of the three gave up any of its sovereignty – and continued to ease relations with conservative régimes. (Morocco even sent a contingent of troops to man Syria's ceasefire line with Israel; the United Arab Emirates, whose creation had once been scorned by Asad's predecessors as a reactionary and imperialist device, contributed \$25 million to Syria's defence budget.) By maintaining good relations with other Arab states ranging from the most conservative to the most radical, Asad preserved some of his freedom of action, which he demonstrated, for instance, during 1971-2 by steadfastly refusing to sign a defence treaty with the Soviet Union as both Egypt and Iraq had done, although he maintained cordial relations with the USSR and received considerable military aid from it.

<sup>9</sup> Reported in *Arab Report and Record*, xviii (1973), 237.

The weak point of Asad's Arab policy was that it could not rescue him from the dilemmas continuously posed by the confrontation with Israel. In the face of domestic Syrian opinion he could not turn his back altogether on the Palestinian guerrilla movement. In July 1971, as King Hussein's forces in Jordan continued the bloody crackdown on the fedayeen that had begun the previous September, Syria closed its border to Jordanian traffic and barred air transport to and from Jordan across its territory. This boycott was maintained for some seventeen months, until December 1972, when Asad cryptically announced that just as he had closed the border for 'Arab reasons,' so now he was re-opening it for 'Arab reasons.' Likewise in the spring of 1973, when hostilities erupted between the Lebanese army and the fedayeen, the Syrian régime found it opportune to declare its solidarity with the latter and to send units of the Sa'iqa across the border in a situation that was potentially extremely dangerous, posing (like the Jordanian crisis of 1970) the threat of a major Israeli intervention in which the Syrians as well as their neighbours could lose further territory. Fortunately for Syria, the Lebanese crisis was quickly patched up and the Sa'iqa withdrew.

Nor was the ceasefire line with Israel quieter under Asad than it had been under his predecessors, despite his measures to place both the Sa'iqa and other fedayeen under tighter control.<sup>10</sup> As long as fedayeen encampments existed in Syria at all, regardless of their activities there, the country was always subject to Israeli punitive air raids as Israel saw fit – as, for instance, in September 1972 following the Munich affair, when Israeli air strikes caused heavy casualties in Syria. Despite Asad's relative moderation regarding United Nations diplomatic initiatives and the like, his declared commitment remained the continuation of the armed

10 After taking power one of Asad's first steps had been to transfer supervision of Sa'iqa from the Baath party to the army. In March 1973 fifteen Fatah leaders were expelled from Syria for participating in anti-government religious demonstrations, and in April a demonstration organized by the Palestinian Student Federation against unnamed Arab countries that restricted guerrilla activities led to the arrest of twelve Palestinians, including the Damascus correspondent of Wafa, the Palestinian news agency.

struggle against Israel and support for the Palestinian resistance in its quest for the eventual liberation of Palestine. As long as overwhelming military superiority remained in Israel's hands, even nominal commitments of this sort were bound to pose continuing risks and dilemmas; but conversely, as long as international diplomacy had no significant results to offer, for Syrian leaders to turn their backs on the Palestinian cause would pose other dangers.

In conclusion, Asad has laid a foundation of policy which offers hopes of long-term success in Syria if given the benefit of a fair amount of good luck. Good luck would include, *inter alia*, the following: (1) good weather and good harvests, (2) the avoidance of personal slights and grievances which could stimulate factional animosities in the party or the army, (3) a minimum level of harmony in the inter-Arab arena so that Syria would not be forced to take sides in others' disputes, and (4), last but not least, avoidance of a renewed major outbreak of fighting between Israel and any Arab country or group. Given the general Arab resentment of the status quo, this last condition may be too much to hope for, but the prospects of positive steps toward a settlement seem dimmer still.