

# Union in the Fertile Crescent

by Nikolaos van Dam

Although so many attempts to achieve Arab unity have failed, Dr van Dam believes the unification of Syria and Iraq has a better chance of success than most. He examines the obstacles and explains what each country has to gain from union.

The Baathist rulers of Iraq and Syria had been extremely hostile to one another for over 12 years until they were reconciled following the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli agreement at Camp David in September 1978. In January 1979, they agreed to hold a meeting in Baghdad "to approve a constitutional formula for the two countries' unity and to accomplish a party unity". When they met in Baghdad, however, Presidents Bakr of Iraq (who resigned this week) and Assad of Syria failed to achieve either objective. Instead, a joint political command was formed, headed by the two presidents, with the task of co-ordinating foreign, Arab, defence and economic policies. Already it seemed that the pace of unity had slackened.

In planning for some form of unity between Syria and Iraq there are several favourable circumstances which have not applied in the case of previous attempts to achieve Arab unity, such as the short-lived union between Syria and Egypt in the United Arab Republic of 1958-61:

(1) Syria and Iraq, both former provinces of the Ottoman Empire, constitute a geographical whole, being part of the "fertile crescent". Local habits and traditions are very similar in both countries.

(2) The Baath parties ruling both countries have essentially the same ideology and organisational structure. The two states have similar political systems and both parties were one until 1966.

(3) Both the Iraqi and Syrian rulers have plenty of experience of previous attempts and are therefore well aware of the

mistakes to be avoided. They would be wary of plunging into a union before studying all its consequences.

(4) In both countries the present Baathist regimes have been in power for more than ten years and have well organised party structures. In deciding to cooperate they are acting from positions of relative strength.

(5) Partly as a result of Baathist indoctrination, and also because of the historical background of the area, political awareness of Arab national identity and Arab nationalism (*qawmiyah*) related to the Arabs as a people is strong, by comparison with the narrower and more restricted form of patriotism (*wataniyah*) confined to the political boundaries of states such as Syria or Iraq, which constitute artificial political units created by France and Great Britain from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War.

Ever since its foundation, the Baath party has stressed its ideal of uniting the Arabs in a single socialist state. It will not be easy for the Baathist rulers of Syria and Iraq now to go back on their officially declared intention to bring their two countries together without seriously undermining their credibility as Baathist unionists. Nevertheless, there are some serious obstacles to be overcome before a full merger can be realised.

The first obstacle to uniting the two Baath parties is the question of who will be in power. Neither the Syrian nor the Iraqi ruling faction, the one led by President Assad and his brother Rifat in Syria, the other by Iraq's new President Saddam Hussein, will readily surrender power to former Baathist rivals with whom they have been at loggerheads for more than 12 years. In the past, collective leadership has always proved a source of conflict and dissension, which led

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to a struggle for power among party leaders and eventually to the emergence of a "strong man" in both Iraq (Saddam Hussein) and Syria (Hafiz Assad).

If Iraq and Syria do unite, a similar leadership crisis will almost certainly arise. Maintaining the present power structure in a fully integrated Iraq and Syria, with a unified army and security apparatus, would imply the continued existence of two separate power centres within institutions which should have a single unified command as a precondition for effective operation. Such power centres would give rise to factionalism and instability, with all the dangers this would imply for the continued existence of the union itself. The ruling Baathists therefore realistically tend to accept these facts, leaving the existing military and civilian party structures in both countries intact for a transitional period which should finally lead to full integration. In the long run, the aim is for the unified state to have only one regional command.

At present, however, mutual distrust between the different Baath factions is still in evidence. The presence of Syrian Baathist exiles in Baghdad (who since 1966 have been active against the Syrian regime) still seems to be a sensitive issue to the Syrian rulers. The exiles are not yet free to travel without restriction to their home country. The Syrian regime's distrust is understandable, since the Iraqi-based Baath has for more than 12 years been active against the Syrian regime through its own secret military and civilian party organisations in Syria, ready to assume power there if it had the chance. The Iraqi-based Baathists will almost certainly keep these organisations intact as long as complete party unity has not been achieved; and they might well reactivate them in case unification efforts fail.

Another practical obstacle hindering the full integration (but not federation) of Iraq and Syria in the near future seems to be the composition of the hard core of both countries' political élites. In Syria, Alawis from President Assad's home district in Latakia are heavily represented in the most sensitive power institutions; whereas in Iraq, the leaders are Baathists from former President Bakr's and his successor Saddam Hussein's home district of Tikrit and adjacent areas. Before their reconciliation in October 1978 both regimes used to exploit this theme in their mutual propaganda warfare: Radio Damascus at the time labelled the Baathists ruling in Iraq as the "tribal Tikriti clique", while the Iraqi mass media spoke about the "al-Assad family regime". Propaganda warfare has now of course subsided, but the power cores of both regimes have remained much the same.

The historical background which gave rise to the particular composition of the Baathist élites in the two countries is different in each of them. In Syria the present pattern developed mainly as a result of a long inter-Baathist struggle for power, in which sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties were exploited and played an important role, and which

started after the Baathist monopolisation of power in 1963. In Iraq, on the other hand, it was mainly a result of the harsh conditions under which the Baath secretly rebuilt its organisation when in opposition to the Aref regime between 1963 and 1968. President Bakr and Saddam Hussein were responsible at the time for reorganising the party apparatus which in 1968 assumed power. Owing to political instability and the increasingly conspiratorial nature of politics in Iraq — at the time most party members were imprisoned — they had to place a premium on mutual confidence. Those who could best be trusted frequently turned out to be relatives or friends from their home town or its surrounding areas.

Finally, the extent of corruption apparently still existing in the upper echelons of the ruling Syrian Baathist élite seems to be an obstacle to full integration. In 1977 President Assad started an anti-corruption campaign and announced the formation of a Committee for Investigation of Illegal Profits. The campaign was doomed to failure from the beginning, since some highly placed military officers in the entourage of the president (among whom his brother Rifat was said to be) were found to have been involved in corrupt practices. Many of these officers were tribally and regionally interrelated Alawis from the president's home district of Latakia. Purging them from the army or taking severe measures against them would have directly undermined President Assad's own position and consequently that of the whole regime. The problem thus became a vicious circle which Syria's leaders will have to break out of if a full merger is to be achieved with Iraq, whose iron-disciplined Baathists have not allowed corruption to affect their party élite in the same way.

It may be concluded that at present the most that can be achieved is a federation — already quite an achievement in itself — keeping separate military and internal security organisations, but becoming fully integrated in the political, economic, cultural, educational, information and other fields. Nevertheless it would not be illogical if Iraq, being the richer partner, demanded a full military merger and a tougher Syrian stand vis-à-vis Israel as a precondition for full economic integration. A union of both parties would therefore imply some restrictions on Syria's freedom of manoeuvre in its dealings with Israel, with all the dangers of a new military confrontation in circumstances which the Syrian authorities might not be able completely to control.

In short, the Iraqi Baathists seem to be more dedicated than the Syrians to a full merger. Perhaps they feel confident that they will be able to dominate the union in the long run, since Iraq is richer and more powerful than Syria. Syria, on the other hand, has more to gain, both economically and militarily, but its leaders seem reluctant to plunge themselves into a full merger. Perhaps for fear of Iraqi domination, and also out of reluctance to sacrifice the power and the perquisites of office, the Syrians may be trying to slow the pace of the advance towards a real union.

## On the Record

"We have an agenda now."

"It's a step forward."

"This is a breakthrough. Both of these groups go home winners. Actually all three of us."

Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Khalil

Israeli Interior Minister Josef Burg

US envoy Robert Strauss

reported by UPI, 6 July

"Begin's 'autonomy' plan — 'autonomy' for 'people' but not 'territory' — is a jerry-built, trouble-sowing administrative and political nightmare."

columnist George F. Will  
in *The Washington Post*, 14 July