

Sociology of "Developing Societies"
General Editor: Teodor Shanin

THEMATIC VOLUMES

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF "DEVELOPING
SOCIETIES"

Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin

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Sociology of "Developing Societies"
The Middle East

edited by Talal Asad and Roger Owen

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Minorities and Political Elites in Iraq and Syria

Nikolaos van Dam

In publications dealing with the political situation in Iraq and Syria it is often suggested that the former country is ruled by an Alawi minority, whereas the regime in the latter is dominated by Sunnis and more specifically by tribally related people from the northern town of Takrit, who in their turn constitute a minority within the Sunni minority of Iraq.

Both situations would, at least statistically, be cases of so-called minority rule, because the Alawis are only about 11 per cent of the total *Syrian* population, a majority of roughly 70 per cent of which is Sunni, whereas in Iraq Shi'i Arabs are a majority of about 50 per cent; the Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds each making up for about 20 per cent of the population.

Some even speak about the Syrian "Alawi Ba'th" and the Iraqi "Takriti Ba'th", or about the "al-Asad family regime" and the "tribal Takriti clique". Many Western observers take over one or more of these labels of the Ba'thist regimes in Syria and Iraq, without critically testing their validity.

In this article I propose to investigate and analyse what the reasons are for the strong representation of Alawis in the Syrian Ba'thist regime, and of Sunnis, and Takritis in particular, in that of Iraq. In doing so I shall also try to answer the question of whether or not labels such as "Alawi, Takriti or Sunni rule" are justified.

1 Iraq

1.1 *Traditional Sunni Dominance*

It cannot be denied that Arab Sunnis have both before and after Iraqi Independence dominated the political scene, and that from a statistical point of view they have been strongly over-represented in Iraqi power institutions.

What accounts for this situation? When what is now Iraq was still part of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman government, itself composed of Sunnis, gave preference to co-religionists in appointments to the military, the bureaucracy and the upper echelons of the educational establishment which prepared young people for such posts. Arab Sunnis thus gradually came to dominate the army and the governmental bureaucracy, and had a disproportionate share of educational and professional advantages. The fact that the schools were at first mostly located in the cities and larger towns, only strengthened this trend: the Sunnis, forming the majority of the urban population, inevitably benefited to a greater extent than the Shi'is, who constitute the majority of the rural population; through education, many Sunni Arabs became teachers and army officers, key careers open to those without private means.

Since there is a natural tendency in any society for a dominant ethnic, religious or other social group to perpetuate its power, particularly if it has a disproportionate share of educational, professional and military advantages, it is only natural that Sunni Arabs remained over-represented in power institutions also after Independence, and notwithstanding the fact that no discrimination against the Shi'is and the Kurds has been practised, at least officially, since the Mandate.

1.2 Regional and Tribal Power Politics

As far as the post-monarchist period since 1958 is concerned, political factors go much further toward explaining the strong representation of Arab Sunnis in power institutions such as army and government. In the first place the Free Officers' movement which carried out the revolution of 1958 and dominated every regime up to 1968, when the Ba'th Party took over for the second time, contained no Kurds and very few Arab Shi'is, its members being mostly Sunni Arabs from the north. The intrusion of the army into politics put the Shi'is at a disadvantage, since relatively few Shi'is had reached as yet the top ranks of the military.

In fact the strong representation of Sunni Arabs in the army and governments since 1958 was not so much – as is often suggested – a result of sectarianism in the form of Sunni Arab discrimination and prejudice against Shi'is. It was much more a result of tribalism and regionalism playing an important role in Iraqi power politics. Military leaders tended to strengthen their grip on the army and to ensure their power positions in it by appointing tribal relatives

or trusted friends from their home regions to sensitive positions. Since the population of Iraq is, from a religious point of view, not very much mixed geographically, and the Sunnis and Shi'is are mainly confined to specific areas (i.e. the Sunnis being concentrated mainly in the area of Baghdad and northward, whereas the Shi'is are concentrated in the south, both areas themselves having rather homogenous populations as to religion) regionalism or tribalism usually implies relying on co-religionists, without sectarian ties as such being important.

Typical cases of tribally and regionally narrowly based regimes were those of the Arif brothers (1963-8). Both heavily relied on officers, non-commissioned officers and men from their own al-Jumaylah tribe from the predominantly Sunni western province of Al-Ramadi. In the time of the second Arif regime the Iraqi government became, as Professor Hanna Batatu has described: "to a greater degree than formerly, a plaything of officers' groups, and as these groups were only nominally differentiated by ideas, but in fact revolved around self-interested persons or drew their nourishment from narrow regional loyalties, politics in the upper levels increasingly degenerated into a struggle of factions without issues".

It is true that the elder President Arif sometimes in his speeches made Sunni-coloured nationalist remarks (for instance, he particularly praised the Sunni Arab Umayyad dynasty) which Arab Shi'is considered as discriminatory against them. Arif's reliance on predominantly Sunni officers had, however, little or nothing to do with sectarianism, but reflected regional and tribal power politics.

1.3 The Quasi-relationship between being Arab Sunni and Arab Nationalist

A second factor which indirectly enforced the trend of strong Sunni Arab representation in Iraqi power institutions was the Arab nationalist orientation of the governments since 1963. Phebe A. Marr argues that

the major support for and leadership of the pan-Arab movement, both pro-Egyptian and Baathist, in Iraq has come from the Arab Sunni population, particularly that portion of it which inhabits the towns and villages along the upper Tigris and Euphrates between Baghdad and Mosul. These Arab Sunnis feel most in common with their coreligionists across the border in Syria and even in Egypt. The domination of the government since 1963 by the Arab

nationalists and the Baathists, then, has meant Arab Sunni domination. Conversely, the pan-Arab orientation of these regimes, at least of their public professions, has drawn support from the Arab Sunni population and helped reinforce the presence of the Arab Sunnis in government.

So far so good, but has this strong representation of Arab Sunnis anything to do with their being Sunnis? And is there really a clear relationship between being Sunni and Arab nationalist? I would say not. The decisive factor here again turns out to be firstly regional. Many people in the northern (predominantly Sunni) Arab provinces traditionally leaned strongly towards pan-Arabism, inasmuch as they had in Ottoman times been economically (and in many cases socially) linked with Syria, and now suffered from the partition of the Arab areas of the Ottoman Empire and the obstacles of the new frontiers. "Indeed, it would not be going too far, to say that in the days of the monarchy the people of Mosul were closer in outlook and temperament to the Arabs of Syria or, more specifically, of Aleppo, than to the Arabs of central and southern Iraq."² This is partly a result of the fact that at the beginning of this century the major cities of Iraq differed in their economic orientation. The ties of Mosul were mainly with Syria and Turkey; those of Baghdad and the Shi'i holy cities with Persia and the western and south-western deserts; whereas Basrah looked mainly to the sea and to India. Until today many Iraqi Arabs living along the Euphrates west of Baghdad feel strongly related to the Arabs living across the border in Syria. This has little or nothing to do with the fact that both groups are mainly Sunni. Traditional economic and social orientations in the region are much more important. Nevertheless, the Shi'i Arab majority, in its bulk, particularly in the past when Arab nationalist ideology usually had a strong Sunni undercurrent, did not care to be integrated in what appeared in its eyes as an Arab unionist state of a predominantly Sunni colouring.

1.4 Secular Ba'thist Arabism

The secular Arab nationalist ideology of the Ba'th Party which assumed power in 1968, has generally made acceptance of Arabism easier for the Iraqi Shi'i Arab population. Secular Ba'thist Arabism considers Islam as an Arab cultural heritage, to which *all* Arabs, whether Sunni or Shi'i Muslim or Christian, are equal heirs apparent. Therefore, Arab heroes of Shi'i history are in Ba'thist ideology considered on the same footing as Sunni Arab

historical figures. This point of secular Arabism has repeatedly been stressed by Iraqi President Saddam Husayn and by other Iraqi Ba'thists.

Thus, President Saddam Husayn, for example, recently stated in a speech in the Shi'i holy city, al-Najaf, that

Iraq will fight and triumph against injustice everywhere with the swords of [Shi'i] Imam Ali, [his son] Husayn, Khalid al-Walid [chief general of the first Caliph Abu Bakr, and one of the key figures of the early Arab Islamic conquests], Salah al-Din [Saladin, the famous Kurdish Muslim commander from Takrit who recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders], all Arab strugglers and Islamic leaders of the land of Arabism and of the message of Islam.³

On another occasion, following the reported discovery in July 1979 of a plot against the Iraqi regime, President Saddam Husayn indirectly accused Syria of being involved in it by implicitly comparing the ensuing relationship between the Ba'thist regimes of Iraq and Syria with the historical seventh-century rivalry between Shi'i Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, who controlled most of Iraq at the time, and Mu'awiyah, the Umayyad Governor of Syria, who challenged the former's claim to the caliphate. Notwithstanding his being a Sunni, President Saddam Husayn described the Shi'i Imam Ali as "a man of honour representing all meanings and spirit of the Islamic mission" who "always lived for honour, principles and the values of Islam and chivalry", whereas he simultaneously labelled Mu'awiyah, the founder of the Arab Sunni Umayyad dynasty, as a man "who was fighting for the sake of earthly temptations". Former non-Ba'thist Sunni presidents would probably never have made such positive remarks about Shi'i Imams like Ali when comparing him with Mu'awiyah.

1.5 Sunni and Shi'i membership in the Iraqi Ba'th

Notwithstanding its secularist orientation the trend towards so-called Sunni over-representation increased even further during the period following 1968 when the Ba'th Party took over power. In the new regime Ba'thists from Takrit played a key role. In the mid-seventies Ba'thists from Takrit held not only almost all the foremost posts in the party, army and the government, including of course the portfolio of defence, but also, among other things, the governorship and Security Department of Baghdad, and the commands of the air force, the Baghdad garrison, the Habbaniyah air base and the tank regiment of the Republican Guard.

What accounted for this anomalous situation? Originally, i.e. before 1963, the Ba'th Party in Iraq was quite different in composition of its membership. Whereas the officer-Ba'thists were in this period almost without exception Arab Sunnis who by birth or origin were preponderantly from the country towns of the upper Tigris and the upper Euphrates, the majority of the highest civilian leaders were Shi'is by extraction. Nevertheless, Shi'is and Sunnis were to be found in the major existing factions, and it can be said that up to November 1963, when the Ba'th was temporarily ousted from power, it had to a large extent the characteristic of a genuine secular partnership between the Sunni and Shi'i Arab nationalist youth. When the Ba'th made a come-back in 1968, the role of Sunnis, and of Takritis in particular, had risen sharply, while that of Shi'is had strongly decline. The Shi'is lost their numerical strength partly because many of them backed the Shi'i Iraqi regional secretary-general of the Ba'th, Ali Salih al-Sa'di, who together with some other Shi'i Party leaders like Talib Shabib and Hazim Jawad had filled both the military and civilian sections of the party apparatus with numerous personal followers, many of whom happened to be Shi'is as well. In many cases these members were admitted through irregular procedures, on basis of ties of mere friendship and according to personal inclinations. Thus, personal factionalism was encouraged in this period, and a kind of "wild growth" of the party apparatus undermined the position of the Ba'th Party in Iraq as a whole. Many of the members thus admitted were purged after the ouster of al-Sa'di from the party following his conflict with the military Ba'thists in 1963.

Another, perhaps much more important reason for the decline of Shi'is in the Iraqi Ba'th lay in the discriminatory practices of the police. Professor Batatu has observed that

Ba'thists belonging to this sect were, after the 1963 coup by Abd-us-Salem Aref, on the whole more systematically hunted than their Sunni comrades and, when nabbed, treated with severity, whereas the latter frequently escaped with lighter[er] sentences. The explanation for this is to be sought not so much in sectarian prejudice as in the fact that Sunni Ba'thists were often from the same town or province or tribe as the members of the police, for the departments of Interior and Security teemed with functionaries from the province of ar-Ramadi and the northern districts of Baghdad province, from which many Ba'thists also hailed. The situation was a carry-over from the days of the monarchy, when such directors general of police as Abd-uj-Jabbar ar-Rawi and Bahjat ad-Dulaimi – both by origin from ar-Ramadi – facilitated, it

would seem, the entry of their kinsfolk and clansmen into the service under their control.⁴

1.6 *Takritism*

Though, as just mentioned, Sunni Ba'thists were on the whole less systematically hunted than their Shi'i comrades under the first Arif regime, the harshness of suppression of the Ba'th Party in general in Iraq should not be underestimated. Following the discovery of a Ba'thist plot to topple the Arif regime in September 1964, most party members were imprisoned, leaving those party members who had escaped arrest with the formidably difficult task of rebuilding and reorganizing the party apparatus, which as a result of internal splits and rivalries in 1963 had for some time been paralyzed in its activities. In 1964 leadership of the Ba'th in Iraq passed into the hands of General Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Husayn, who were both from Takrit, and were tribally related by common membership to the al-Begat section of the Al-bu Nasir tribe. Together they were responsible for reorganizing the military and civilian sections of the Ba'th Party apparatus which in 1968 assumed power. Due to political instability and the increasingly conspiratorial nature of politics, they, for security reasons, had to place a premium on mutual confidence. Those who could best be trusted, frequently turned out to be relatives, or friends from their hometown Takrit or its surrounding areas.

But this is not the whole story about the strong representation of Takritis in power institutions. Already before the rise of the Ba'th Party to power a great number of them was in the army. As Professor Batatu has pointed out:

this fact is not unrelated to the impoverishment of the inhabitants of Takrit caused by the decline in the production of *kalaks* – rafts of inflated skins – for which their town was renowned in the nineteenth century. To earn their living, many moved to Baghdad and settled in what is known today as the quarter of [the Takritis] at – Takartah. Some found employment as railway construction workers or laboured on the K2-Baiji-Hadithah oil pipeline. Others, however were able to gain admission into the cost-free Royal Military Academy.

For this they had to thank Mawlid Mukhlis, a protégé of [King] Faisal I and a vice-president of the Senate under the monarchy⁵.

Mukhlis, who was Takriti by extraction, and was married to a Takriti girl who was a kinswoman to Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, was a

man of the highest connections. Till his death in the fifties he used his influence in favour of Takritis in view of the many links that tied him to them, and he encouraged many young political aspirants of his poor and arid district to enrol in the army and police services. Similarly, politicians like al-Bakr and Saddam Husayn have used their influence to place Takritis during their rule in key posts, albeit on a Ba'thist basis.

To explain the rise of many Takritis to first rank in the Iraqi officers' corps, one has to refer also to the frequent comb-outs in the army. Since the Revolution of 1958 no fewer than three thousand officers have been pensioned off, among whom military royalists following the destruction of the monarchy; military supporters of the Qasim regime in 1963; the faction of Mosulite officers under leadership of General Abd al-Aziz al-Uqayli in 1966 and 1969; and finally the faction of Ramadi officers, who linked their fate with that of the Arif brothers or with the group of Abd al-Razzaq al-Nayif and Ibrahim al-Dawud, who only temporarily shared power with the Ba'th in July 1968 before being purged altogether. All these purges redounded to the advantage of Takritis.

Even during the reign of the Ba'th itself since 1968 the role of tribally related Takriti Ba'thists in military and civilian key positions was further accentuated and consolidated. This was partly a result of resentment which other prominent Ba'thists harboured against Takriti over-representation. For instance, Nazim Kazzar, the Shi'i Director-General of Internal Security, who felt excluded from real power, and reportedly resented Takriti dominance, only strengthened the trend he opposed, by trying to dislodge the most prominent leaders of Takriti origin from power in an abortive coup in June 1973. This may well have strengthened the conviction of the then President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and his then Vice-President Saddam Husayn that only by placing or maintaining some of the most reliable and tribally related Ba'thists from their home town, Takrit, in the most sensitive military and civilian key security positions they could ensure the survival of their regime in the longer run.

Nevertheless, the composition of the Iraqi Ba'thist élite is now gradually being broadened, away from regionalism and tribalism: more and more Ba'thists from other parts of the country, including the Shi'i south, have opportunities to reach high party and government posts, though perhaps only sporadically the most sensitive ones. And as long as the present high level of iron party discipline and absence of corruption in the Iraqi Ba'th upper élite is being maintained, this trend may well continue.

Taking all this into account it would be going too far to say, as Professor Batatu does, "that Takritis rule through the Ba'th party, rather than the Ba'th party through the Takritis"⁶. It is clear that Takritis are strongly over-represented in the most important power institutions. Nevertheless, I think it would be better to state that the present regime is in the first place Ba'thist, and that being a Ba'thist is decisive for being in power. The high-placed Takriti Ba'thists may consider themselves as a temporarily indispensable safety device, necessary to keep the present Ba'th leadership in power during a transitional period long enough to have Ba'thism penetrate deeply into Iraqi society and to broaden the Ba'thist élite's composition gradually, so as to finally win wider recognition in Iraq of its legitimacy as a ruling party.

2 Syria

2.1 Alawi Ba'thist Dominance

The present position of Alawis in the Syrian Ba'th differs considerably from that of Takritis in the Iraqi Ba'th. In Syria the strong over-representation of Alawis in power institutions was mainly the result of a long inter-Ba'thist struggle for power, in which sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties were exploited to the furthest limits, and played an important role ever since the Ba'thist monopolization of power in 1963.

Much of the present-day Alawi domination can be indirectly traced back to the more or less accidental fact that the leadership of the secret Ba'thist military organization – better known as the Military Committee – which seized power in 1963 happened to be in the hands of Alawi officers. In order to quickly consolidate their newly achieved power positions in the army, these officers called up numerous officers and non-commissioned officers with whom they were related through family, tribal or regional ties, so as to fill the gaps in the army resulting from purges of political opponents. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the majority of purged officers were replaced by Alawis. Similarly the other places were filled to a great extent by Druzes, Isma'ilis and Sunnis from Hawran, due to the – again more or less accidental – fact that officers from these committees and regions were members of the Military Committee as well.

In a subsequent stage it was difficult for the Military Committee to get rid of ideologically unmotivated or other directed elements who were not on one line with the Ba'thist leadership, and nonetheless demanded their share of power as a compensation for their indispensable help during the first stages of the Ba'thist revolution. All this gave way to various kinds of factionalism and instability.

The Alawi-dominated factions in the Syrian army [owed] their powerful position partly to purges of other sectarian and/or regionally based military factions which resented their disproportionately strong representation in power institutions, but by their opposition to it helped to even strengthen the trend they opposed. In February 1966 some of the most prominent Sunni officers' factions supporting Sunni President Amin al-Hafiz were purged from the army following a Sunni-minoritarian polarization in the officers' corps; in September 1966 the major Druze factions were purged, following an Alawi-Druze sectarian polarization; and in the course of 1967, 1968 and the beginning of 1969 the remaining most important non-Alawi blocks in the Syrian army were eliminated or neutralized. In this period particularly some prominent Isma'ili and Hawrani Ba'thist factions lost power. All this resulted in a situation in which some Alawi officers' factions which had survived the preceding purges ended up in a supreme position. This found expression in the fact that the subsequent power struggle was mainly confined to members of the Alawi community themselves. In November 1970 power was more or less completely monopolized by the (mainly Alawi) officers' faction of Hafiz al-Asad, who became Syria's first Alawi President a few months later.

2.2 *Minoritarians in the Syrian Army and Ba'th Party*

When in 1963 sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism started to play an important role in the inter-Ba'thist power struggle in Syria, the minoritarian and rural officers of the Military Committee could count on help and support of many military men and other officers with similar social backgrounds, who were already present in the army and Ba'th Party before the leaders of the Ba'thist Military Committee had seized power.

As I have already extensively explained in my book on Syria,⁷ the Ba'th Party in Syria counted many members from religious minorities and from the poor countryside as a result of the fact that the party at first recruited its initial members among rural

migrants who had come to Damascus for further education. From Damascus the party organization spread spontaneously, and without any clear plans of action, through the traditional social channels to the communities of the first party members, many of whom happened to be Alawis, Druzes and Isma'ilis.

Its socialist ideals made it easier for the party to obtain a firm footing in the rural towns and in the poverty-stricken rural areas than in the greater cities, where the political scene was dominated by the local bourgeoisie and traders. Since in Syria Arabic-speaking religious minorities are mainly concentrated in rural areas and bigger cities are principally Sunni, it is not surprising that minority members predominated among the Ba'thists.

But whereas the socialist component of Ba'th ideology contributed only indirectly, i.e. because of an overlap between ecological and sectarian factors, to a disproportionately strong representation of minority members in the Ba'th Party, there was also a direct cause: the secular character of Ba'thist Arab nationalism. Since the Arab nationalist movement had - as I already mentioned - traditionally been Sunni-dominated and Sunni-coloured, allotting only secondary status to minoritarians, secular Ba'thist Arabism could appeal much more strongly to Arabic speaking minority members who may have hoped that the Ba'th Party would help them to free themselves of their minority status and the narrow social frame of sectarian, regional and tribal ties.

Finally, the minority members must have been attracted by the idea that the traditional Sunni-urban domination of Syrian political life might be broken by the establishment of a secular socialist-political system as envisaged by the Ba'th, in which there would be no political and socioeconomic discrimination against non-Sunnis, or, more particularly, against members of heterodox Islamic communities.

The fact that relatively many of the original Ba'thists came from rural and minoritarian backgrounds later formed a social impediment to the membership of urbanites, i.e. due to the traditional contrasts between urban and rural communities and between Sunnis and religious minorities. Such traditional social barriers impeded a normal country-wide expansion of the Ba'th Party organization also after it came to power in 1963.

Not only the Ba'th Party counted already many minoritarians in their ranks before 1963, but also the Syrian army. This was a result of, among other things, the French Mandatory authorities, who within the frame of a divide-and-rule policy favoured

recruitment from the various religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Alawis, Druzes, Isma'ilis, Christians, Kurds and Circassians, in the *Troupes spéciales du Levant*, which later developed into the Syrian and Lebanese Armed Forces. A socioeconomic factor that even further accentuated the strong representation of minority members in the Syrian army was that to many people from the poor countryside (where most minoritarians live) a military career offered a welcome opportunity to climb the social ladder, and lead a life that would be slightly more comfortable than that within the agrarian sector. This incentive was of less significance for people from the larger cities which were mainly Sunni. Finally, people in urban areas frequently found it easier than their rural counterparts to avoid military service by paying a redemption fee.

After Syria became independent in 1946, entrants to the Military Academy at Homs increased strongly each year, mainly due to the vast expansion in the number of schools which opened up educational opportunities in hundreds of villages and small towns to the sons of the lower classes. Indirectly, this trend again helped to increase the number of (ex-peasant) minority officers.

Once having moved into command positions, these officers brought in relatives and others from their sectarian, regional and tribal communities, helping them to advance and tending to favour their applications to the army, navy and air academies.

2.3 Arab Nationalist Taboo on Sectarianism

Notwithstanding the fact that Syria is at present undergoing a serious internal crisis in which the country's national unit is severely threatened by sectarian tensions, particularly between Alawis and the Sunni majority of the population, the Syrian government and its mass media keep systematically denying that sectarianism could be of any determining influence on Syrian political and social life.

The following text of a press review on Radio Damascus may serve as a typical example of this complete denial:

In today's comment, *Tishrin* cites the feverish psychological campaign waged against Syria by the Arab nation's enemies and plotters against our cause, saying that these enemies are playing the sectarian tune, attempting to stir up sectarian strife and giving sectarian interpretations to every incident, whether petty or significant, that takes place in Syria. *Tishrin* adds that the success of the United States and its allies in manipulating the sectarian issue

to serve their purposes in Cyprus and Lebanon recently, and in other parts of the world previously, has spurred them on to foment sectarianism in Syria through hirelings and agents as well as through instigation and fabrication. However, the imperialists' success in Lebanon and Cyprus were not only the results of cunning psychological warfare, but were originally due to the existence of psychological, educational, economic and political foundations for sectarianism. However, such foundations do not exist in Syria and never did, even during the occupation period. This is why all efforts exerted by the occupying colonialists to spread sectarianism and divide the people's ranks were doomed to failure, even when the colonialists divided Syria by force into sectarian statelets, since these statelets eventually gave way to the masses' national spirit and deep pan-Arab [*qawmiyah*] feelings.

After reviewing Syria's national and pan-Arab history from the French mandate to the present, the paper affirms that every attempt to diagnose Syria's problems by recourse to sectarian premises are mere fabrications against our people and must be resisted with force and determination, because our people, who have never experienced sectarianism, will form strong barriers in the face of all attempts to fake [?] the struggle waged by our masses and divert attention from the real enemies both abroad and within the nation.⁸

This example clearly illustrates the *taboo* which in Syrian and other Arab nationalist circles obtains an overtly speaking or writing about sectarianism as an important issue in political and social life. This taboo in particular makes it difficult for the scientist to obtain reliable information on the subject concerned. Political sensitivities prevent politicians from expressing themselves freely on a subject such as sectarianism, and foreign researchers into contemporary political and social developments often meet with distrust as to their real purposes, particularly if subjects like sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism are investigated.

Books on "Who's Who in Syria" or the "Arab World" simply do not provide complete details about religion, etcetera, certainly not where the presently ruling Ba'athists are concerned. One therefore has to find out for oneself, making statistical research on sectarian and regional representation in Syrian power institution not an easy task of just making mathematical calculations.

2.4 Sectarian Consciousness

The secretiveness which surrounds the subject of sectarianism in Syria nevertheless does not imply that many Ba'athists and

others who publicly allege that sectarianism and regionalism are unimportant issues, would not know exactly what other people's religions or regional origins are.

This may be illustrated by a passage from an internal "secret" Ba'th Party document, issued in 1966, where it is stated that:

Major General Muhammad Umran has said in front of the National Command that Mahmud Hamra cannot command his battalion because 70 per cent of the non-commissioned officers in his battalion are led by Ali Mustafa. The same applies to Muhammad al-Hajj Rahmun and Kasir Mahmud respectively. [Military] branch 60 considers this presentation [of things] as equivalent to a pure sectarian presentation [of the situation]. We [therefore] demand the expulsion of Major General Muhammad Umran from the Government and the Party, and we insist on this demand. The Branch likewise sharply criticizes sectarianism and regionalism and decides [to propose] even the death [sentence] for anyone who is proven to be under its influence.⁹

This quotation [shows] us various things. In the first place that sectarianism at the time played such an important role in the Syrian army that some Ba'thist officers found it necessary to propose death sentences for those who would be influenced by it in their dealings within the Ba'th Party and the army.

Second, it [shows] us that it is apparently taken for granted that all Ba'thists who at the time had access to the internal party document I just quoted were completely informed as to the sectarian backgrounds of their officer-colleagues mentioned by name. For only if one knew that Muhammad Umran, Ali Mustafa and Kasir Mahmud were Alawi Ba'thist officers, and that Mahmud Hamra and Muhammad al-Hajj Rahmun were Sunni Ba'thist officers, and when one fills in their religions as well as their military functions in the quotation I just mentioned, its deeper contents can become clear. It then reads:

[The Alawi Minister of Defence] Major General Muhammad Umran has said in front of the National Command that Mahmud Hamra [who is a Sunni officer from Hama] cannot command his battalion [of the 70th Armoured Brigade], because 70 per cent of the non-commissioned officers in his battalion [are apparently Alawis and] are led by Ali Mustafa [an Alawi battalion commander in the same brigade, and supporter of Umran]. The same applies to respectively Muhammad al-Hajj Rahmun [who is a Sunni battalion commander] and Kasir Mahmud [an Alawi battalion commander].¹⁰

Third, this quotation shows us that the army command structure and discipline were at the time undermined by

manipulation of sectarian loyalties. Thus, sectarian ties not only played an important role in the appointment of officers in high military positions, but also at lower levels. Some armed units came to be composed mainly of members of a specific religious community. Thus, some tank battalions, for instance of the 70th Armoured Brigade stationed near al-Kiswah south of Damascus, were mainly Alawi. The same applies today to the so-called Defence Companies (*Saraya al-Difa*) commanded by Rif'at al-Asad, brother of the Syrian President.

Apparently the appointment of Sunni officers at high military posts was sometimes principally intended to satisfy their Sunni army comrades, as well as to diminish their distrust of military men from religious minorities, most particularly Alawis. For such appointments might help to negate the impression that key positions in the Armed Forces were mainly occupied by members of specific communities. But to hold a high military function did not imply having independent power.

2.5 Sectarianism combined with Corruption and Lack of Party Discipline

Similar to the Iraqi situation, the most sensitive military and civilian key security positions in Syria are controlled by persons who are in many cases tribally and regionally related to the Alawi Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, and thus belong mainly to the Alawi community. However, because of the fact that the Alawi-dominated party élite is deeply infected with corruption and lacks party discipline, a broadening of its composition seems to be hindered. Different from the Iraqi Ba'th the Syrian regime therefore seems to be caught in a vicious circle and its Alawi character becomes stronger and stronger partly also as a result of sectarian polarization in Syrian society, which endangers its very existence as well as that of many Alawis who have nothing to do with the Ba'thist regime. Officially the Ba'th Party pursues an ideology that wants to do away with sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties. But when it took power in Syria its leading officers found it necessary to revert to just those traditional loyalties in order to consolidate their positions and not to lose the strength that would be needed to realize that ideology. Thus, on the one hand, power was essential if the necessary drastic social changes entailing the suppression of sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties, were to be effected; on the other hand, maintenance of that power entailed dependence on those same loyalties, thus temporarily hindering

their suppression for a period long enough to broaden the Ba'th elite's composition, and create a Ba'thist inspired political community in Syria. But, as I already said, mainly as a result of a combination of corruption, sectarianism and lack of party discipline, the necessary broadening of the Ba'thist elite's composition could not be realized.

3 Sectarian, Regional and Tribal Overlap

Sectarian, regional and tribal categories can easily overlap, making it difficult to determine which play a role in a particular situation. In the event of such overlap, there is a danger of interpreting tribal and regional loyalties as sectarian loyalties, for instance, or vice versa. Overlap may be due to the regional concentration of particular religious communities and tribes in specific areas or provinces. Examples are the Sunni Arabs inhabiting northern Iraq and Shi'i Arabs in its southern part; the Alawis living mainly in Syria's north-western Latakia and Tartus regions; and the Syrian Druzes, concentrated in the southern "Jabal al-Duruz". Overlap may be further due to the fact that tribal groups as a whole usually belong to the same religious community (there are exceptions); and to that tribal and sectarian elements are sometimes inseparably linked to one another. In this respect the compact religious minorities in Syria, notably the Alawis, Druzes and Isma'ilis, and the tribes belonging to these minorities, serve as clear examples.

Sectarian, regional and tribal groups may in turn partially overlap with socio-economic and ecological categories. For example: the compact religious minorities in Syria live mainly in the poor countryside, whereas the cities are predominantly Sunni; in Iraq the majority of the rural population is Shi'i, whereas the urban population is predominantly Sunni. Thus, both in Iraq and in Syria urban-rural contrasts partly overlap with sectarian differences.

All this potentially implies that in cases of overlap of regional, tribal, sectarian and socioeconomic factors, social or political tensions may find an outlet through one or more of the existing social sectarian, regional, tribal or socio-economic channels. A class struggle can for instance be directed and stimulated through sectarian channels, in case socioeconomic and sectarian contrasts coincide.

4 Conclusion

In countries like Iraq and Syria reliance on regional and tribal ties at present appears to be preconditional for staying in power. Regionalism and tribalism do not, however, necessarily give rise to sectarianism, also not when there is theoretically a strong overlap between the three.

The Iraqi case may show that sectarianism can be curbed and may gradually fade away, notwithstanding outside (and particularly Iranian Shi'i) efforts to encourage Shi'i sectarianism in Iraq for [Iran's] own political purposes. Success depends, however, to an important extent on continued party discipline, absence of corruption and gradual widening of the party elite's composition; and subsequently democratic reforms and educational development.

This does not mean that sectarianism (i.e. the Sunni/Shi'i dichotomy) does not play any role in Iraqi internal politics. We have seen that the disproportionately strong representation of Takritis in Iraqi power institutions had little or nothing to do with Sunni sectarian solidarity, but was a result of tribalism, regionalism and socioeconomic factors. All this does not prevent the possibility however that Shi'is opposing the Ba'th regime can nevertheless perceive it as a Sunni regime, or that Shi'i (and even Sunni) opponents of the secular Ba'th regime can exploit the sectarianism issue for political purposes, so as to undermine its position. In the latter case one can say that political ideas create their own realities, and sectarianism may start to lead its own life, irrespective of whether or not the dominant political group derives its power from sectarian solidarity.

The Syrian case shows how regionalism and tribalism have given rise to and have stimulated a destructive kind of sectarianism, due to over-emancipation of formerly discriminated-against Alawis, combined with corruption and lack of party discipline. It remains questionable whether President al-Asad will be able to solve these problems which have pervaded greater part of the Syrian regime and have had an effect of sectarian polarization on Syrian society which seems extremely difficult to reverse in the short term.

Just like two years ago, the recently announced second anti-corruption campaign seems to be doomed to failure from the very beginning because some high-placed military officers in the direct entourage of President Hafiz al-Asad who constitute an indispensable part of the hard core of his mainly Alawi officers'

faction, in which his brother Rif'at plays a central role, seem to be deeply involved in corrupt practises. To purge these officers from the army, or to take severe disciplinary action against them would inevitably directly undermine the position of al-Asad's faction and consequently of the whole regime itself.

It seems therefore likely that present resentment against so-called "Alawi-rule" in Syria will continue to grow, together with the accompanying terrorist violence of Sunni opposition groups who through premeditated sectarian polarization hope to wrest power from the ruling Alawi minority.

In practice, this so-called "Alawi-rule" appears to be limited, however, to a rather restricted tribally and regionally related section of the Alawi community, from which many other Alawis, falling outside this section, have been able to profit on more or less sectarian grounds, therewith strengthening the Alawi sectarian character of the regime. David Hirst of *The Guardian* even goes so far – and as long as only part of the Alawi community is meant here I do not think that he is going too far – as to say that "the Alawites adopted Ba'athism as their instrument of supremacy", and further that

it is not, in any real sense, the Ba'athists who run this country. It is the Alawites . . . In theory they run it through the party, but in practice it is through their clandestine solidarity within the party and other important institutions . . . Behind the façade, the best qualification for holding power is proximity - through family, sectarian, or tribal origins - to the country's leading Alawite, President Assad.¹¹

As long as the just mentioned Sunni groups and their temporary Sunni allies have no dependent control over large quantities of arms and strategically important army units success for schemes to end Alawi domination seems unlikely.

Therefore, if President al-Asad fails to realize the necessary reforms, present-day so-called "Alawi rule" in Syria together with all its negative effects may in this stage only be ended with the help of Alawi officers themselves, however contradictory this may sound. For it is probably only Alawis "who, privy to the inner workings of the system, command the resources of organisation and information to launch a clean-cut coup",¹² be it with or without the help of officers from other communities.