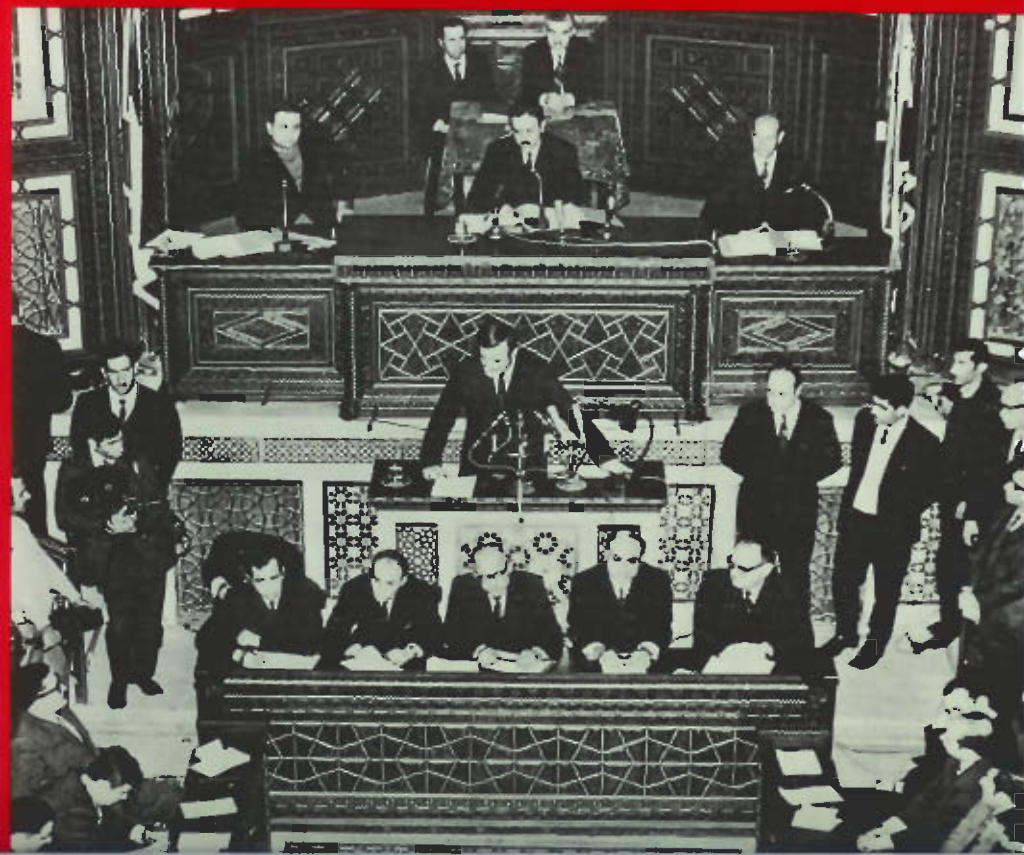


The Struggle for Power in Syria

Nikolaos van Dam



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Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism
in Politics, 1961-1980

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PREFACE

Sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties¹ have undeniably played a role in the political and socio-economic history of Syria in the twentieth century, but opinions vary strongly as to how significant that role has been. Many Western and non-Syrian authors are inclined to attach great consequence to it, being of the opinion that these factors continue to be important even since the country became independent.

Many socialist-oriented Arab nationalist writers and Syrian politicians, on the other hand, completely reject this view and publicly take a contrary stand, particularly if it concerns a regime which has their support. Nevertheless, these same writers and politicians sometimes attach great importance to sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism when the issue at stake is the activities of opposing or deposed regimes or of political opponents within their own regimes.

All these factors can naturally be over or underestimated according to the stand that is taken. The truth lies somewhere in between and can only be revealed by critically testing the factual material on as broad a basis as possible.

Our aim is to investigate the extent to which and the manner in which particularist loyalties and commitments such as sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism have played a role in the struggle for political power in Syria. Attention will be focused mainly on developments within the military and civilian bureaucratic power elite in the period since the break-up of the United Arab Republic in September 1961. In so doing, we shall attempt to answer the question of how important were sectarian, regional and tribal criteria in the formation of power factions within the Syrian Armed Forces and the party organisation of the Ba'th, which took over power in 1963. Above all, we shall investigate which factors and developments have encouraged the strong rise of religious minorities, in particular of Alawis, Druzes, Isma'ilis and Greek Orthodox Christians, in Syrian political life since 1963.

None of the works on Syria published so far has dealt so extensively with these matters. The studies by Be'eri, Biegel, Ma'oz, Van Dusen and others, all of which are listed in the bibliography, tend to stress one or other of the factors, neglecting the rest or leaving them out of consideration. Devlin, Petran, Rabinovich, Seale, Torrey and others treat certain

phases of Syria's politico-historical developments in detail, but give only brief or oblique attention to sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism, if only because the role of these factors was not chosen as the central thesis of their studies.

Sources Used

For many reasons it is difficult to obtain reliable material dealing with the subject of this study. In the first place, most available sources appear to be extremely partial and biased and are often of a propagandist nature. More important, perhaps, is the fact that in Syria and other parts of the Arab world a kind of taboo obtains on overtly speaking and writing about sectarian, regional and tribal contradistinctions.² Such a taboo is practised particularly in Arab nationalist circles and is even stronger in the case of sectarianism than of either regionalism or tribalism. Political sensitivity prevents politicians from expressing themselves easily on a subject such as sectarianism, either orally or in writing, particularly if they have political aspirations for the future, in which case they have to allow for eventual repercussions should they express themselves openly about Syrian internal affairs that are usually considered to be 'confidential'.

Moreover, the Ba'athist organisation which has held power in Syria since 1963 is of a secretive character, while Syria has been in a situation of (semi) war at varying intervals since 1948. It is only natural, therefore, that foreign researchers into contemporary political and social developments often meet with distrust as to their real purpose.

Documentation dealing with sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism in Syria has been drawn mainly from three categories of primary sources: internal Ba'ath Party documents; biographies, memoirs and polemical writings; the Arabic press and radio broadcasts. The information obtained from these sources has been supplemented by interviews.

Ba'ath Party Documents

Many of the Ba'ath Party documents used in this study have not yet been published. They have been issued by both the civilian and the military sectors of the party apparatus and consist mainly of internal party bulletins, circulars, brochures, minutes of party meetings, and other documents issued by the party's Syrian Regional Command, the National (i.e. pan-Arab) Command and their subordinate bureaus and sub-sections.

Many internal party documents which were previously classified as 'secret' have been published by Dar al-Tali'ah in Bayrut in a series

called *Nidal (Hizb) al-Ba'th* (The Struggle of the Ba'th Party). This consists of eleven volumes in which the period up to 23 February 1966 is dealt with quite extensively. The Ba'th officially propagates an ideology that aims at realising the ideal of a united Arab society with a socialist system. Obviously, therefore, it is reluctant to admit that factors such as sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism, all considered as a negative residue of traditional society which hinders the awakening of a national and socio-economic awareness, have played any role in the struggle for power within the party's ranks. Most of the material about these factors has therefore been drawn from hitherto unpublished party documents which, in many cases, were classified as secret at the time or were intended for restricted use within the party apparatus.

Biographies, Memoirs and Polemical Writings

Biographies and memoirs of Syrian and other Arab politicians offer details and indications that are indispensable if we are to obtain a reasonably complete impression of the role of sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism in the struggle for political power in Syria. Almost all (auto)biographies or memoirs used in this study, including those of Munif al-Razzaz, Sami al-Jundi, Muhammad 'Umrān, Zahr al-Din, Shibli al-'Aysami and others, all mentioned in the bibliography, offer a partial vision or interpretation of events and circumstances which were experienced and lived through by the respective authors. This aspect sometimes gives their writings a polemical character. Even more polemical are the works of Muta' Safadi, Khalil Mustafa, Fu'ad al-Atrash and others which are listed in the bibliography and are indicated in the footnotes to the text. Such authors constitute, as it were, exponents of opinions and ideas prevailing among particular Syrian population groups and are for that reason incorporated in this study.

The Arabic Press and Radio Broadcasts

The Syrian government-controlled press and radio rarely offer any insight into the role which sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties and commitments play in Syrian political life, be it behind the scenes or in public. In the exceptional cases in which Syrian mass media have offered any information at all, it was usually in reaction to, or in denial of, reports which had appeared in the foreign press or foreign broadcasts.

Non-Syrian, and more particularly the Lebanese, mass media have much more to offer in this respect. The Lebanese press has served more than once as a kind of safety valve for various political factions or

regimes in ventilating criticism and propaganda against political opponents and rivals. In the years following the takeover of power by the Ba‘th in Syria in 1963, various Ba‘thist party factions lost for different reasons, the chance of unimpeded expression of their political views via local mass media. They therefore sometimes resorted to establishing dailies and periodicals of their own in Bayrut, such as *al-Ahrar* and *al-Rayah*, or, if they thought such action would be advantageous to their own position, deliberately leaked confidential or secret information concerning the party or the regime to existing Lebanese dailies such as *al-Hayah*, *al-Nahar*, *al-Jaridah*, *al-Muharrir* and *al-Anwar*.³

The tracing of material in the Arabic press and radio broadcasts which would be relevant to this study was facilitated through publications such as *The Arab World*, *al-Watha’iq al-‘Arabiyah*, *Arab Report and Record*, *Middle East Record*, and the *Daily Report*, *Middle East & North Africa* of the *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (Springfield, Virginia).

During the 1960s and seventies, Arab and Israeli mass media repeatedly waged sectarian propaganda campaigns with the aim of stimulating sectarian divisiveness in order to undermine the power position of the Syrian Ba‘th regime.⁴ This study does not go into this sectarian propaganda, since that is a chapter apart and falls outside our present scope. For similar reasons we do not deal with the sectarian-tinted demonstrations that repeatedly took place in Syria after 1963 and which were particularly directed against those Ba‘thists in power who were from religious minorities. Material on those demonstrations is abundant in the Lebanese press, but its reliability leaves much to be desired.⁵

Interviews

Through interviews with a number of Syrian, Jordanian, Palestinian, Iraqi and Lebanese Arab politicians, who were directly or indirectly involved in the political developments and events described in this study, it was possible to add new data and insights to the material distilled from the above-mentioned primary sources. It goes without saying that these people do not all wish to be mentioned here, but they included the following (ex-) politicians: Shibli al-‘Aysami, Salah al-Din Bitar, Lieutenant-General Amin al-Hafiz, George Saddiqni (Syria); Dr Munif al-Razzaz, Dr Fawaz Suyyagh (Jordan); Tariq ‘Aziz, Zuhayr Bayraqdar (Iraq); Malik al-Amin, Dr Bashir al-Da‘uq, Eng. Nicola Firzili, Basharah Marhij, Munah al-Sulh

(Lebanon), none of whom bears any responsibility whatsoever for the interpretations laid down here.⁶

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Chapter 6 and Tables 1-7 were earlier published in a different form as part of my article 'Sectarian and Regional Factionalism in the Syrian Political Elite' which appeared in *The Middle East Journal* (Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring 1978, pp. 201-210). I am obliged to The Middle East Institute, Washington DC, which kindly allowed republication.

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Notes

1. In this study sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism are defined as follows: *Sectarianism (Ta'ifiyah)*: acting or causing action on the basis of membership of a specific religious community; *Regionalism (Iqlimiyah)*: acting or causing action on the basis of a specific regional origin; *Tribalism ('Ash'a'iriyah)*: acting or causing action on the basis of membership of a specific tribe or family. The latter might also be called *familism ('A'iliyah)*.

2. Cf. President Hafiz al-Asad in a speech broadcast by Radio Damascus on 12 April 1976; Morroe Berger, *The Arab World Today* (New York, 1962), p. 265; Moshe Ma'oz, 'Alawi Military Officers in Syrian Politics, 1966-1974', *Military and State in Modern Asia* (Jerusalem, 1976), p. 279.

3. 'Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din, *Mudhakkirati 'an Fatrat al-Infisal fi Suriyah ma bayn 28 Aylul wa 8 Adhar 1963* (Bayrut, 1968), p. 345; Hizb al-Ba'th al-'Arabi

al-Ishtiraki, al-Qutr al-Suri, al-Qiyadah al-Qutriyah, *Muqarrarat al-Mu'tamar al-Qutri al-'Adi al-Thani lil-Qutr al-Suri wa al-Mun'aqid bayn 18/3-4/4/65: al-Taqrir al-Tanzimi, al-Taqrir al-Siyasi, al-Taqrir al-Iqtisadi al-Ijtima'i* (Damascus, 1966) (hereafter quoted as *al-Taqrir al-Tanzimi 1965*), p. 18.

4. Cf. Nikolaos van Dam, 'Israeli Sectarian Propaganda during the October, 1973, War', *Muslim World*, Vol. LXVII, No. 4, October 1977, pp. 295-305.

5. See John J. Donohue, 'La Nouvelle Constitution Syrienne et ses Détracteurs', *Travaux et Jours* (Bayrut), April-June 1973, pp. 93-111.

6. In the system used in this study for transcribing Arabic words, diacritical marks are omitted for the sake of convenience: the transcription system used will be lucid to those who know Arabic and irrelevant to those who have no mastery of that language. Cf. R.P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London, 1969), p. xv, 'Note on Abbreviations and Transliteration'.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition of this book, published in Spring 1979, covered developments relating to the role of sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism in the struggle for power in Syria until the end of 1978. This second edition includes a Postscript entitled 'Sectarian Provocation and Confrontation' which covers the most important events from then until mid-1980. The sub-title of the book has been altered accordingly. With the exception of a few minor changes that deal with form rather than content, the text remains unaltered. The new chapter was necessary not only to up-date the book, but also because the power struggle in Syria has taken on an important additional dimension. As far as the effective struggle for political power was concerned, sectarianism had previously been confined largely to the Ba'athist political elite and its party apparatus; in the second half of the 1970s, however, the phenomenon assumed wider proportions. As a result of sectarian assassinations and other factors, and influenced by the sectarian-tinted civil war which had plagued Lebanon since 1975, sectarianism now affected not only the Ba'ath Party apparatus, the armed forces and other security institutions, but the larger part of Syrian society. The armed forces were consequently threatened with disintegration along sectarian lines to a greater degree than ever before, and the country was in danger of being drawn into the throes of civil war.

28 June 1980

