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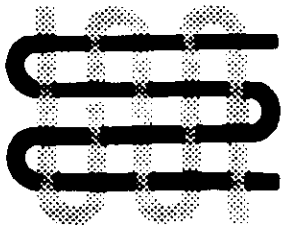

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Asad's Syria and The New World Order: The Struggle for Regime Survival

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ASAD'S SYRIA AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER: The Struggle for Regime Survival

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Can a regime so apparently at odds with the "new world order" as Hafiz al-Asad's Syria adapt and survive in it? Can a regime still on the State Department's terrorist list, denounced for its human-rights abuses and still Israel's main opponent, avoid the fate of Saddam's Iraq? Can an authoritarian regime in part modeled on the Soviet Union resist the tides of liberalization which swept away its supposedly stronger totalitarian prototypes? Can it move toward a more liberal institutionalized state and market economy and make peace with Israel without undermining the nationalist legitimacy and patrimonial political cement of which it is constructed? Most analyses of the Syrian regime stress single factors, such as repression, sectarianism, or class; however, as will be seen, the complex character of the regime gives it greater staying power than single-factor explanations can credit.

FORCES OF CHANGE

The Asad regime has long been under mounting pressures for change. By the mid-eighties Baathist étatism was in crisis. The public sector never became an effective capital accumulation mechanism. Arab aid had fueled the rapid expansion of the state in the 1970s. When aid declined in the eighties, the oversized state brought on economic stagnation. As declining resources dictated retrenchment, the state began to shed some of its economic responsibilities. Private business had to be given concessions to fill the gap. The private sector's share of foreign trade widened rapidly, and new private industries have sprung up, generating a more mixed market-oriented economy.

The nationalist struggle with Israel, the centerpiece of Asad's policy, has become less viable. Dwindling economic resources and the disappearance of Syria's Soviet patron exhausted the strategy of seeking military parity with Israel. Without Soviet protection, nationalist policies risked making Syria a victim of a seemingly unipolar world order.

The regime's social base, embracing segments of the government-employed middle class, workers and land-reform peasants, has been enervated as state industry stagnated, forcing austerity and concessions to the private sector. Class gaps widened as a state bourgeoisie emerged within the regime while the salaried middle class and wage workers were squeezed by inflation and educational expansion generated legions of educated unemployed. The gov-

ernment can absorb no more than the 40 percent of the work force it already employs. A new phenomenon, children battling over control of the trash bins in affluent urban neighborhoods, indicates impoverishment among the lower classes.

This transformation in the state's "environment" has internal consequences. Baathism as a legitimating ideology is at risk: socialism requires a viable public sector while Baathist nationalism is the product of an obsolete bipolar world. How can a state built on an ideological party, the public sector and a nationalist army survive when the credibility of these pillars is so gravely compromised? The regime is altering its master strategies: away from statism and toward economic liberalization, away from the struggle with Israel and toward diplomacy and compromise. The state's structure and social base are being adapted to this new orientation through limited liberalization and the search for a new alliance with the bourgeoisie.

PRESIDENT IN COMMAND

The president is the linchpin of the regime. The personal character of the regime is both a strength and a weakness. Asad is smart, adaptable and a workaholic who keeps his finger on the pulse of the country and remains the center of high policy. He is perceived to know what every member of the elite is doing. He personally negotiated seven straight hours with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker over the conditions of the Arab-Israeli peace conference. Asad has always been a behind-the-scenes-leader, uncomfortable with a populist style. He has tried to build up a cult of personality, comparing himself to Nasser, but he lacks charisma and therefore enjoys respect, not adulation. Even those who dislike the regime, however, see no alternative to him.

Asad has the power to adapt the regime. Those seeking change without compromising stability, particularly the bourgeoisie, look to him to initiate it. His power is well-consolidated since the period in the early eighties when regime barons, notably his brother Rifat, and Islamic revolutionaries, threatened it; both were defeated. Other regime barons are balanced against each other. The power of the top elite flows chiefly from nearness to the president rather than from independent bases of support. The Baath party leadership cannot constrain Asad if he wishes to dismantle Baathist socialism or make peace with Israel.

The president himself is, however, the main obstacle to system transformation. He is a pragmatist, but he is stubborn in defense of principle and, unlike the impulsive Sadat, who led the de-Nasserization of Egypt, his style is to make incremental rather than radical changes. Criticism of the established order cannot be much encouraged, because it would be criticism of Asad's work. As in Egypt, major change probably will require the accession of a leader who seeks to make his own power base among those desiring change.

THE POLITICAL ELITE: LIABILITY OR ASSET?

The top political elite is not a cohesive or effective team in part because Asad exploits rivalries rather than fostering collegial leadership. Whatever collegial institutional underpinning that Baath party organs may have once provided has been enervated by the personalization and concentration of power in the presidency. The elite have become Asad's mere lieutenants. Vice-president Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the most viable candidate to succeed Asad, has substantial party stature, broad government and foreign-policy experience, and connections to the Alawi community and

the army, but, only one of three vice presidents, his preeminence is unconsolidated. Top Sunni generals Hikmat al-Shihabi and Mustafa Tlas exercise power more as trusted lieutenants of the president than as representatives of a military or Sunni constituency. The Alawi security barons, such as military intelligence chief Ali Duba or Third Division Commander Shafiq al-Fayad, control force and patronage but lack public legitimacy. Perhaps the most divisive issue still hanging fire in the elite is the role of Rifat al-Asad, who is feared by all and has reportedly returned to Syria. As long as the president does not remove him from his post as vice-president, the Rifat threat can be held over the elite. Rumor has it that Asad has brought him back to counter any opposition from the elite to a peace agreement with Israel and a further turn "right" in policy.

The elite presents, for the most part, a liability in terms of legitimacy for the regime. Aside from a few veteran Baathists like Khaddam, Asad has surrounded himself with pliant or corrupt figures. Since the regime could not pay top officers and politicians what they expected, it turned a blind eye to their enrichment through corrupt activities like smuggling. Occasionally Asad removes the most corrupt, but those who take their place enjoy similar enrichment opportunities. This gives the elite a strong stake in defending the regime, for its fall would bring a day of reckoning. Lacking legitimacy, the elite feel insecure. Their homes are guarded by armed men and they travel protected from potential assassins. For example, as Khaddam approaches his office building all traffic is stopped, the cars of his guards race up, gun-toting security men alight and fan out, and generally manage to make a conspicuous fuss—a sign of both power and insecurity.

While old revolutionaries like Khaddam retain some stature, their children are widely disliked. Khaddam is tainted by the involvement of his children in a notorious toxic-waste scandal. Shihabi's reputation as an upright Sunni seems similarly tainted by the activities of his children. The lack of interest on the part of the younger generation of the political elite in the ideology of their fathers has long been striking. They have gone into business, using their privileged connections to the state, often in partnership with the Sunni bourgeoisie and/or as agents for foreign firms. They drive Mercedes, live in villas and feel it is their due to get rich. A main source of public resentment is their ostentatious consumption and an arrogant deportment which proclaims their immunity from the law. Increasingly, they support economic liberalization.

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Preserving the regime after Asad's death will require both cohesion and vision which the elite may lack. Khaddam is forceful, not imaginative. Tlas enjoys little respect. Shihabi's personal stature would be feared by the Alawis. Rifat is also feared among them and is widely disliked in the party and the army. The Alawi security barons lack legitimacy and the desire for change. The big new factor is the growing belief that Basil al-Asad, the president's son, is being groomed to carry on a dynasty, although it is unclear whether by his father or by Alawi barons looking for a front man and alternative to Rifat. Though a mere army captain, he was sent on a mission to Saudi Arabia and is depicted with his father in portraits

affixed to the vehicles of the security forces. The press has played up his equestrian feats, bestowing on him the name "the golden captain." It was long thought that Asad wanted him to stay in the military and live a blameless life; but rumors that he was behind the forming of two new parties paint him as politically ambitious.

THE ALAWIS: SHIELD OF AUTOCRACY OR FORCE FOR CHANGE?

The Alawi clans, with their half-private militias, are a regime shield. Their *asabiyya*—solidarity and trust from primordial ties—substitutes for strong legitimate institutions. Their solidarity, their fear of the revenge they would face if the regime fell and the fire power at their disposal minimize any prospect of changing the regime against their will. They are, of course, deeply resented by Sunnis, although those with a historical sense acknowledge that before the Alawis it was the Kurds, the Druzes, the Hamawis, etc., that buttressed various regimes.

But are Alawis really such a clannish group, religious-minded *batanis* taking orders from their sheikhs and uniformly ranged against outsiders, as many Sunnis believe? In fact, Alawis are not a monolith. The security barons who parasitically live off the state or as brokers between it and the private sector are obstacles to liberalization. The many propertyless "marginal men" who left their villages en masse to join the security militias are probably obstacles to the rule of law. Some Alawis are public-sector entrepreneurs: e.g., Dr. Hassan Ibrahim was director at the ministry of petroleum and later created Syria's marble quarry industry and initiated the steel industry. Once impoverished, the Alawis have used the army, police and public sector to advance their fortunes and have a stake in preserving the dominant roles of these institutions.

There are, however, Alawis susceptible to forging common interests with Sunnis on behalf of liberalization. Many educated Alawis appear too secular, liberal and materialistic to cling to the primitive doctrines of their sect. Asad, himself a liberal on religious issues, has tried to move the community into the Islamic mainstream, having them certified as a Shiite branch. The Alawis have also produced a stratum of professionals, economists and intellectuals who are liberal-minded and often critical of authoritarian rule. Upwardly mobile Alawis have married into the Sunni merchant bourgeoisie and a few into the old aristocracy. One obstacle to broad intermarriage is that many of the first-generation Alawi elite have village wives; though there are reputedly many secret second marriages in which a Sunni merchant marries his daughter to an Alawi officer to gain political connections, only among the Alawi second generation is open intermarriage likely. These children of the Alawi elite, now going into business with Sunni partners, lack their parents' fear of the bourgeoisie, and, having been raised privileged, feel a part of the upper class. They may be on their way to amalgamating with the Sunnis into a new cross-sectarian upper class with an interest in greater liberalization.

MANAGING THE ECONOMY: PRIME MINISTERS AND TECHNOCRATS

Prime ministers and their cabinets count because their preferences influence policy, and management of the economy depends on their power and skills. Prime ministers have enormous responsibility to contain politics and patronage in the interest of economic rationality, but many have failed to amass the power to do their job. Abd al-Rauf Kasm, prime minister in the late

seventies, was one of the stronger premiers. Kasm had his own strong statist development project and, feeling he had Asad's support, plunged ahead, antagonizing various interests. Personally wealthy, he was seen as going against his class in rejecting "the Syrian way,"—using office for self-enrichment and providing friends and relatives with jobs and favors. His attacks on corruption gave him a reputation for undiplomatic harshness toward officials. Kasm even stood up to the military, reining in the powerful Colonel Bahloul, who ran the massive military construction company Milihouse as a personal fiefdom, and clashing with Defense Minister Tlas in an effort to curb smuggling. This finally brought him down.

The quite different style of his successor, Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Zoubi, is perceived as weak. As a Dera Sunni and longtime Baathist, he has support from the Baath party regional command and its secretary. But this is not enough, and his strategy is to seek the backing of security barons like Ali Duba, Adnan Makhlouf and Muhammed Nassif. Al-Zoubi is more friendly to business than al-Kasm, but he has no liberalizing project, and his weakness is said to open the government to influence-peddling.

There is a certain divorce between power and economic competence at the ministerial level that obstructs rational economic management. Some ministers are political appointees lacking competence. Technocrat-ministers wield too little power, and middle-rank experts are ignored by political ministers. Technocrats have long fought a losing struggle against politicos who interfere in the workings of the state at the cost of managerial effectiveness. Yet technocrats do hold some key positions in ministries where competence is crucial to the regime, such as the ministry of electricity, whose good management is essential to minimizing the electricity cutoffs that antagonize the public, or the ministry of petroleum, a main source of government revenue. The non-Baathist minister of economy, Muhammed Imadi, is the main architect of economic liberalization. Although he has been viewed by much of the bourgeoisie as lacking the power to really implement it, the growing dependence of the regime on private investment is increasing his leverage. Imadi's persistent advocacy of economic liberalization is behind the incremental policy initiatives—joint ventures, a new investment law welcoming outside capital, a project to revive the stock market—that by the nineties had snowballed into a major change in regime strategy: the private sector is now seen as an engine of development needed to fill the vacuum left by the decline of étatism.

MASSAGING THE BOURGEOISIE

While in the sixties the Baath and the bourgeoisie were at odds, since 1970 they have moved toward coexistence. The regime's current strategy depends on eliciting support and investment from the bourgeoisie without giving it enough power to threaten the elite. The transformation and differentiation of the bourgeoisie under Baath rule make it easier for the Baath to divide and coopt it.

The influence of the aristocratic, landed bourgeoisie has radically declined, many having left the country, suffered expropriation of their estates or consumed their capital. Many surviving great families remain aloof from the regime and from business, contemptuous of corruption and arbitrarily applied economic regulation. But younger generations of old families are going back into business and making profits, and this has muted their resentment of the government. The fear of Islamic radicalism among

this Westernized stratum drives some into the regime's embrace.

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The bourgeoisie is differentiated by region. The regime has its closest relations with the merchant bourgeoisie of the capital and principal trading center, Damascus. A key Damascene section of the merchant class survived Baath socialism—its assets not being so vulnerable to nationalization—and accommodated itself to the regime. Close to the center of power, corrupt connections and regime expenditure, it has prospered under Asad. It is in the vanguard of partnerships linking officer, technocrat and businessman which pool money, brains and political pull. A part of this bourgeoisie, notably the al-Shallah family, led by patriarch Badr ad-Din Shallah, head of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, has became a crucial regime link to the Sunni community. Al-Shallah is perceived by Sunni society as "clean" yet exercises great influence on behalf of business since the Islamic disturbances in the early eighties when he won Asad's trust by keeping the Damascus *suq* [bazaar] quiet. The Shallahs believe the current pro-private-sector line is permanent and seek accommodation rather than confrontation with the public sector.

The bourgeoisie of Aleppo, more industrial and agrarian, suffered more from nationalization and land reform. They were also hurt by the centralization of power in Damascus, which peripheralized a city the equal of the capital under the pre-Baath regime. The Aleppine bourgeoisie is more anti-regime, supported Islamic rebellion in the eighties and has diverted investment to Turkey. But it has recently been appeased by big profits earned on export sales to pay off the Soviet debt.

The old bourgeoisie has been joined under the Baath by a thin stratum of politically connected operators who thrive on state contracts and commissions. Tycoon Mustafa al-Aidi parlayed personal connections with Baathis into a fortune on commissions from an aircraft deal with Syrian Arab Airlines and invested it in the chain of al-Sham hotels. He also gets oil-servicing contracts that bring in the hard currency necessary for diversified business operations. Saeb al-Nahas could become Syria's Osman Ahmad Osman—the Egyptian tycoon who bridged the public and private sectors and pushed for *infitah*. Beginning as the prime local agent for auto companies, Nahas invested in tourism and transport and is a partner with Gulf capital in international banks and investment companies. A Shiite, he deals with Iran and is reputedly involved in the arms trade. He has pushed semi-privatization schemes in which the state turns over firms of which it retains part ownership to private management. He has moved from services into joint industrial ventures in Syria with Arab capital. The sons of the political elite are also going into business, importing computers to sell to state agencies and setting up food factories. Political connections are crucial for access to lucrative fields like oil industry servicing contracts and the sons of officers are active in this field.

Two segments of the bourgeoisie have particular potential to widen the space for the market and civil society. In the vanguard of entrepreneurs who have risen from the local petite bourgeoisie are the Seif brothers, the largest private employers in Syria. They and other smaller firms pro-

duce clothing competitive on the international market, proving that productive enterprise can operate within Syria's regulated economy. Their provision of employees with social benefits constitutes an extra-governmental welfare network.[1] Syrian expatriates have vast fortunes abroad. The regime's desire to attract this capital gives them leverage to press their demands. Omran Adham, a Paris-based expatriate, published a letter to Asad insisting that political pluralism was essential to investment: "Economic and political freedom go together."[2]

An independent bourgeoisie poised to launch capitalist development has not yet been consolidated. Intermarriage between its Alawi and Sunni branches remains too limited. The bourgeoisie is not strong enough to force greater liberalization than the state wants. It presents no common front in favor of the market since much of it is dependent on monopolies in an overregulated economy and on state contracts and protection. The public sector is a source of materials at low fixed costs and of cadres who leave and go to work for the private sector once they are trained. Many local private industries would be destroyed by global competition from full trade liberalization.

A welter of contradictory economic legislation still deters business. The new investment law is counterbalanced by an older decree carrying harsh penalties for trade in the foreign exchange necessary to do business. Even though it is not enforced, it is a threat corrupt regime barons can use to extort from businessmen. Business confidence and investment will remain limited unless the state accords the private sector greater autonomy. The project under consideration to create a stock market and private or joint venture banks are steps in this direction. The bourgeoisie takes some confidence from the belief that in the new, capitalist world order, Syria cannot reverse its pro-business line.

Can the regime contain the political consequences of economic liberalization? Since the Baath is ill-suited to incorporate businessmen, how can they be satisfied without their own party? Vice-president Musharka asserts that business and politics can be separated: traders are kept happy if they prosper. In fact, the bourgeoisie seems prepared to defer demands for political power. It accepts Asad's rule for fear of disorder and fundamentalism and is satisfied by increased personal and economic freedom—to buy, sell, travel and talk; voting matters little to it. Rather than leading a democracy movement, the bourgeoisie looks to Asad to distance himself from the Baath, coopt more of its own into government and accord it greater political access. In fact, the prime minister's Committee for the Rationalization of Imports, Exports and Consumption, in which the heads of the Chamber of Commerce and Chamber of Industry are included, gives crucial bourgeois access to economic decision-making.[3] An outspoken block of independent merchants and industrialists in parliament sometimes coordinates for common interests. But the regime will tolerate no bourgeois pretensions to political independence. Large merchants who tried to win public stature through press advertisements were broken by the enforcement of currency laws. In the long run, business confidence will not mature without curbs on arbitrary state power, more judicial independence

[1]Volker Perthes, "The Bourgeoisie and the Ba'th," *Middle East Report*,, v. 21, n. 3, May-June 1991, p. 33.
[2]*The Middle East*, September 1991, p. 21.
[3]Steven Heydemann, "Liberalization from Above and the Limits of Private Sector Autonomy in Syria: The Role of Business Associations," paper given at the Middle East Studies Association Conference, San Antonio, November 10–13, 1990.

and an Egyptian-like upgrading of parliament for power-sharing with the bourgeoisie. But since the inherent inequalities of capitalism are likely to heighten popular discontent, neither bourgeoisie nor regime wants full democratization. Thus, a limited modus vivendi is developing between a state which needs a wealth-generating, conservative social force, and a bourgeoisie which needs the economic opportunities and protection the state provides.

CUTTING IDEOLOGY AND PARTY DOWN TO SIZE

The high profile of the Baath party in the regime is receding. It was taken as symbolic that in his 1991 election acceptance speech, Asad thanked businessmen, students, peasants and parliament but ignored the party. His attempt to broaden his base beyond the party is happening unevenly and incrementally, however.

The party faces an ideological crisis. Baathist socialism retains little credibility since the collapse of communism, although ideology is less central to the regime than to its communist counterparts, and its decline is unlikely to be fatal. Egalitarian Baathism cannot serve as ideological cement for the coalition with the bourgeoisie the regime now seeks. But it is not easily jettisoned by a state which began as an ideological movement, and the regime is hard put to find a credible alternative that does not delegitimize its rule. The regime is therefore trying to adapt Baathism by stressing its long-neglected liberal components, notably tolerance of a private sector coexisting with the public sector. While formal doctrine remains static, ideological change is manifest in the diminishment of populist rhetoric—'We're for the poor against rich exploiters'—which was political good sense only as long as the regime's base was in the party and the bourgeoisie was a rival. Now there is a subtle alteration in the message: being rich and entrepreneurial is good since this provides jobs and production.

As Baathist ideology declines, so does party power. The Regional Command, which used to be the politburo of the regime, has been downgraded. Its members complain that Asad no longer regularly meets with them to make high-level decisions, especially on foreign policy. The command can, however, still obstruct change in economic policy as long as Asad remains aloof from a particular issue and economists urging liberalization still see the Regional Command as a power center that must be convinced.

Party apparatchiks perceive their personal power declining, although not uniformly. Party status and office, per se, confer less power. Non-Alawi party politicians need good Alawi military connections and strong personalities to play a credible political hand. But Asad coopted few strong personalities who had their own power bases into the party leadership. Sulayman Qaddah, the regional secretary (once a major power position), lacks such a base and, being a Dera Sunni, also lacks strong connections to Alawi officers. The few strong party politicians are those able to combine other assets with party office. Izz ad-Din Nasser is on the Regional Command, has a forceful personality, is an Alawi and heads (and strengthens) the trade union federation through which he has influence in the public sector. He is ambitious, uses his power to defend the public sector and is seen by business as a major opponent. Ahmad Dergham, the Baath's "Suslov"— ideological chief on the Regional Command—is an Alawi ex-intelligence officer with relations to the Alawi military. He studied at Moscow University and became a defender of socialist ideology but is said to be on the defensive since the collapse of Soviet socialism.

TABLE 1. Occupational Composition of Baath Party Membership, 1980 and 1984

Occupation	1980 Number	1980 %	1984 Number	1984 %
Doctors, Pharmacists	298	0.08	1,255	0.23
Engineers	1,104	0.30	3,739	0.69
Lawyers & Judges	401	0.11	688	0.13
Nurses	752	0.20	1,853	0.35
Teachers	19,668	5.27	40,598	7.55
Public Officials	31,390	8.41	48,103	8.94
Workers	51,224	13.70	73,965	13.75
Artisans	3,547	0.95	4,220	0.78
Peasants	65,859	17.63	74,665	13.88
Students	183,355	49.10	267,255	49.70
Other	15,879	4.25	21,523	4.00
Totals	373,477	100.00	537,864	100.00

Source: Hizb al-baath al-arabi al-ishtiraki, Taqarir al-mu'tamar al-qutri al-thamin wa muqarraratihi [Reports and Resolutions of the Eighth Regional Congress], Damascus, 1985, pp. 35–58.

A symptom of the reduced centrality of the party is the fact that no party congress has been held since 1985 and is three years overdue. Some think Asad was angered by criticism in the party of his big foreign-policy gambles—the Gulf war, the peace process—and wants to have something to show for them before a congress is held. Party leaders themselves are in no hurry as the elections held at congresses always sweep out many incumbents. Those below looking for the chance to move up are the ones being frustrated. The party organization as a whole is weakening. The regular meetings of party cells in government institutions are ritualized; ever since the Islamic rebellion they have ceased to be forums where the debate of policy was tolerated. Ideologically minded activists are demoralized by the downgrading of Baathism.

Asad cannot, however, wholly abandon the party even if he wanted to. It gives the regime a non-Alawi base, which is indispensable because, in the end, he cannot rely on the business class. The party is also a useful political machine. Some party operatives perform patronage and redress functions in key urban neighborhoods. Ala ad-Din Abdin, Damascus party boss, is such a politician. He has good relations with Damascene bourgeois families who dislike the regime and takes care to service their grievances. From a religious family, he nurtures connections to Islamic opinion, too.

The party remains the regime's main connection to the provinces and villages, its original power base. At the local rural level it is still active. Provincial party schools continue to graduate activists. As Tables 1 and 2 show, the party, incorporating some 500,000 members—overwhelmingly teachers, students, state employees, peasants and workers—gives the regime roots in the middle and lower strata.[4] It is striking that

[4]The source of the data is Hizb al-baath al-arabi al-ishtiraki, *Taqarir al mu'tamar al-qutri al-thamin wa muqarraratihi* [Reports and Resolutions of the Eighth Regional Congress], Damascus, 1985, pp. 35–58. To arrive at the class estimates in Table 2, students, whose class status is undetermined, were excluded. Doctors, pharmacists, engineers, judges and lawyers were counted as upper to upper-middle class; nurses, teachers and public employees as middle class; and

TABLE 2. Estimated Class Composition of Baath Party Membership (in percent)

Class	1980	1984
Upper/Upper-Middle	01.04	02.28
Middle/Lower-Middle	29.73	36.35
Lower	69.23	61.36
	100.00	99.99

Source: Table 1 data on occupation. To arrive at the class estimates, students, whose class status is undetermined, were excluded. Doctors, pharmacists, engineers, judges and lawyers were counted as upper to upper-middle.

while the lower classes make up more than 60 percent of the membership, only about 1–2 percent are of the upper stratum; although some changes in composition between 1980 and 1984 indicates an attempt to broaden recruitment among the latter, the party's popular composition will not be quickly transformed. The character of the party base constrains any radical departure from the statist and populist policies which favor it. But the party survives chiefly as a patronage machine, not an ideological vanguard or active mass party.

CONTROLLING THE SECULAR OPPOSITION: REPRESSION, COOPTATION AND FRAGMENTATION

There had been some recent hope that the constitution and party law designating the Baath as the "leading party" would be amended after Asad's last re-election to allow more party competition. But, so far, parties require regime approval and approved non-Baathist parties remain fragmented and submissive. They do, however, represent fragments of the non-Baathist middle class.

workers, artisans and peasants as lower class. The data excludes the military party organization.

The National Progressive Front (*jabha*) of pro-regime parties is divided into numerous factions. There are two official communist factions. The official Arab Socialists—the former party of Akram al-Hawrani—are now led by Hawrani's old officer protégé, Abd al-Ghani Qannut, but others still loyal to Hawrani reject the regime. The Socialist Unionists, who split from the Baath over the failure of the 1963 union project with Egypt but made up with Asad, are led by Fayez Ismail; leadership quarrels led to the split-off of the Democratic Socialist Unionists under Ahmad Aqil al-Asad. The Nasserite Arab Socialist Union (ASU) is led by Safwat Qudsi and a splinter from it, the Democratic Socialist Union, by Yusuf Jaidianne. The leadership of these parties is socially indistinguishable from the Baath. The ASU leadership, for example, includes a middle-class intellectual from Damascus, a Tartous Alawi lawyer of peasant origins, an Aleppo trade unionist, a Hama lawyer of peasant origins, a government employee from Qamishyle, a student-union apparatchik from rural Aleppo and a teacher from an Idlib village. The ASU lauds Asad as the current Nasser, though it mildly criticizes Western penetration of Syria's oil industry and the Gulf war. These Nasserites, like Nasser, reject rigid ideology and accept Asad's pragmatic adaptation to new conditions. They advocate a greater private sector role but would reform, not abolish, the public sector, which despite its problems represents the base of the economy. Rushing into a market economy would risk Soviet-like economic collapse.

Small parties outside the front have reappeared as part of a regime cooptation strategy. The Syrian Social National party (*Suri Qaumi*) is represented in parliament by an independent, Basil Dahdoa. It is the most active party outside the front and has some social roots and ideology. The presidential election campaign brought the appearance

of new "loyal opposition" parties, but all were laudatory of Asad and evidently encouraged by the intelligence barons. One, the National Democratic party, led by Karim ash-Shabani, has already suffered a splinter, the "National Solidarity" party. Unlikely to win much support, they may coopt segments of the middle class seeking strategic connections and suggest that regime barons are experimenting with building their own political bases outside the Baath party.

Jamal Atasi, head of an ASU faction not in the *jabha*, is the leader of the real secular opposition. But it is very weak: Atasi is allowed to give critical interviews to Western journalists because he poses no threat. The government has saved its repression for the leftist intellectuals of the *maktab al-siyasi* faction of the communists. Although of limited numbers (perhaps 1,000), in a small country like Syria their activism posed a threat to the regime's own base. They exposed its deviation from its own ideology and, as national communists, were an alternative to the Baath for young activists. The regime has released many of them from prison under external human-rights pressures and because they are less dangerous now that communism is apparently irrelevant.

Even some diehard Marxists see democratic capitalism as a necessary and progressive stage prior to socialism. Many who became communists, especially Christians, for lack of an alternative secular opposition, were never ideologues.

Liberalism has revived among the intelligentsia. Ironically, secular leftists appear to be the potential liberals. Some leftists let out of jail under American human-rights pressures have become converts to the virtues of democracy. Intellectuals who used to write about settler colonialism have graduated to promoting human rights and "civil society." Even some diehard Marxists see democratic capitalism as a necessary and progressive stage prior to socialism. Many who became communists, especially Christians, for lack of an alternative secular opposition, were never ideologues. But if democracy is being embraced among the left, many remain hostile to capitalism. At a forum at the Soviet cultural center, Syrian Marxists expressed great hostility to Gorbachev. The Communist party continues to defend the public sector.

A divided and coopted non-Baathist middle class with negligible organized support poses little threat to the regime, but it would back whatever limited political liberalization the regime seeks and is its natural ally against the Islamic threat.

THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

The Islamic movement has been divided and quiescent since the repression of its rebellion in the early eighties. Violent revolution has been discredited in most Islamic circles. The departure from Syria of Rifat al-Asad, the chief hardliner leading the anti-Islamic crackdown, cleared the way for a sort of modus vivendi with the regime (which could be threatened by his reputed return). Some Ikhwan exiles in Europe reached a deal with Ali Duba allowing them to return to Syria and work in the mosques if they eschewed politics.

The government tries to combine control and cooptation in managing political Islam. Islamists publish a magazine and have vocal spokesmen in parliament. Ghassan Abazad, a doctor and Ikhwan leader from Dera who brokered the return of Ikhwan exiles from Jordan, won a seat in parliament as an

independent. A big 1992 release of Islamists from prison to appease Western human-rights critics also aimed to mollify Islamic opinion. People are no longer afraid to go to mosques, as they were at the height of the anti-Islamic repression. Imams are supposed to deliver sermons approved by the ministry of religious affairs (*awaqf*), but controls have been relaxed over mosques. Fundamentalists still organize around them but are deterred, by fear of infiltration by the *mukhabarat* [secret police], from recruiting beyond tight-knit groups. A peaceful Islamic movement focused on pious personal behavior is starting to spread again, and so long as it does not challenge the regime, this safety valve will be tolerated. One sees more of the *hijab* [head scarf] now that Rifat al-Asad's revolutionary girls no longer threaten to forcefully remove them. The regime has allowed the formation of new Quranic schools that could become the base of a future Islamic movement. The regime knows that under political liberalization the Islamists, the main beneficiaries of the ideological vacuum, would widen their base. It is unlikely to allow them to operate politically unless they support the regime.

Society itself actually limits the movement. Islamists are not strong on campus, where there are many influential minority groups. The government can play on fear of the Algerian scenario, especially among rich, Westernized Sunni families and educated working women. Both government and bourgeoisie would like to see a liberal Islamic current gain strength. Dr. Muhammed Sharour, a professor of engineering from an old Islamic family, wrote a best seller on Islam which aimed to "rescue" it from the clerics, fanaticism and the veil. Its popularity may be an indicator that, in Syria, liberal Islam—letting people personally interpret and decide how they will practice religion—is stronger than elsewhere. Moderate conservative Islamic leaders who have cooperated with the government, such as Muhammed Said Rahman al-Buti, professor of *sharia*, and the mufti, Ahmad al-Kaftaro, have some followings in Sufi brotherhoods and old quarters like al-Midan. At the time of Ceausescu's fall, a nervous regime wanted al-Buti to form a tame Islamic party, but he was afraid he would lose his credibility and, when the crisis passed, the regime lost interest.

POLITICAL CONTROL AND LIMITED LIBERALIZATION

In the aftermath of the Islamic rebellion, the regime repressed the remaining remnants of pluralism: mosques and professional associations were purged, the press and the *jabha* muzzled, and criticism inside the Baath party no longer tolerated. It resorted to repression, fear and informants to control opposition. The sack of Hama is a reminder to all of how far it will go to preserve itself. The regime long deployed "totalitarian"-like Leninist organization, too. However, the regime never "atomized" civil society; family, religious and neighborhood solidarities remain strong. Syria is a close-knit society where networks of talk and rumor, informal groups and personal connections penetrate the state, cut across political cleavages and mitigate the harshness of the regime. It has eschewed the systematic terror used in Iraq to neutralize such networks.

Corruption and privilege supplement coercion as control mechanisms. The illicit riches the new bourgeoisie was encouraged to acquire will long need the protection of an authoritarian state. Corruption is generalized at all levels of government because of the permissive signals from the top and since inflation makes it impossible for officials to get by on their salaries. Thus, traffic policemen routinely take bribes, and rumor has it that they compete for assignment to

certain highways where the pickings are best: near the airport where unlicensed taxi drivers have to pay bribes or where vehicles are bringing goods from Turkey.

Automobiles are used to dispense privilege. They are scarce, private imports are banned, and the state, which periodically imports large numbers, allocates access. A major middle class grievance is that cars paid for ten years ago have not been delivered because of foreign-exchange scarcities. But elites get their Mercedes and officials an assigned car.

For those excluded from privilege, leaving is an option. The chance to work in the Gulf long provided a safety valve. Such opportunities have declined, but in the current economic stagnation, many Syrian youth are migrating wherever they can. But this too requires that one keep on good terms with the intelligence agencies.

Limited political liberalization is a viable supplemental strategy of control.

Limited political liberalization is a viable supplemental strategy of control. There is no great social pressure for democracy. Its natural constituents, the bourgeoisie and intellectuals, are wary of the disorder and Islamic fundamentalism it has unleashed from East Europe to Algeria. The regime believes greater personal freedom and security can be a safety valve for discontent, increasing the ranks of those with a stake in the regime. Police control and censorship have been relaxed; the press criticizes officials, even ministers. Parliamentary elections provide some outlet to the politically ambitious. In the last election, in a typical electoral district of five seats, two seats were left for independents, who, seeking the prestige and connections of an MP, campaigned vigorously. The Baath-dominated National Progressive Front (*jabha*) nominated candidates to the three other seats and easily won because, while most citizens are apathetic, the party and popular organizations can deliver large, decisive blocs of votes. In the resulting parliament, 66 percent were *jabha* and 33 percent independents.

Parliament has the power to amend government proposals and is an arena for limited articulation of interests: professional groups fight over supplemental allowances (to make up for low salaries) against the finance minister's effort to hold the line on the deficit. In theory, the parliament withdrew confidence from several ministers in Kasm's government, but this was done at the prompting of rivals in the higher elite.

Asad's 1991 presidential re-election campaign suggests the regime seeks to substitute a cult of personality for the decline of ideology. The regime launched an unprecedented two-month, semi-totalitarian mobilization. Schools and ministries turned out their students and employees for marches. Merchants were forced to close up shop to join them. Peasants were trucked into Damascus. Jews organized a pro-Asad march to win release of Jewish prisoners. For many, the campaign, with banners, carnival lights and ubiquitous portraits of Asad, became a holiday in a country where there is little to do for entertainment. It took on its own momentum, creating a certain euphoria among youth who grew up under Asad and intimidating skeptical elders from criticizing it. It was unprecedented in the downplaying of the Baath party. The regime even sanctioned the appearance of semi-fictitious parties supposedly supporting the president, as if to show his base was broader than the Baath and hinting at the possibility of party pluralization.

Substantial liberalization still carries too many risks for the regime. The Baath would have a hard time surviving free elections.

Until the social cleavage between state and bourgeoisie is fully bridged, the Alawis would be threatened by any return of power to the Sunni-dominated business establishment. Fuller political liberalization entails the risk that Islam would become a vehicle of anti-regime mobilization, as the ideological gap separating it from the secular minoritarian regime is so wide. Any sign of weakness would be the signal for those Islamists waiting for revenge for the sack of Hama. Limited liberalization will be pursued at regime discretion and can be reversed if it unleashes dangerous opposition. In the last analysis, the security forces have the firepower and personal stake in regime survival to defend it.

AVOIDING VICTIMIZATION BY THE NEW WORLD ORDER

In the "new world order" there is, as the Iraq case shows, little obstacle to the deployment of force and economic isolation against those deemed by Washington as terrorist or pariah states. Asad has shrewdly maneuvered to prevent Syria from becoming the next victim of this "order" through joining the anti-Iraq coalition and the U.S.-sponsored peace process. However, since foreign policy is the key to nationalist legitimacy, the regime must walk a narrow line between accommodating U.S. demands and internal opinion. Joining the anti-Iraq coalition against pro-Saddam public opinion had legitimacy costs, but with Saddam's defeat many Syrians grudgingly accept that the wily Asad allowed Syria to escape a similar fate. A diplomatic settlement that brings full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories would be a major legitimacy gain for the regime, but a separate or partial peace would be seen as dishonorable. Asad must therefore keep the peace process going, seize any chance for real gains and avoid being blamed for any breakdown in it, while evading a deal that appears to settle for much less than U.N. Resolution 242. A regime which so dissipated its legitimacy would be poorly situated to pursue even a modest political liberalization without the risk that its enemies would use the issue to totally discredit it.

CONCLUSION

The Baath regime has greater survival assets than its East European counterparts: its semi-Leninist party-state is buttressed by the Alawis' stake in regime survival and by indigenous nationalism. It has diversified its control mechanisms, deploying clientalism, divide and rule, and corruption while maintaining its institutional (party) base. Not least important is the class underpinning the state has acquired as the political elite and its network of Sunni bourgeois partners coalesces into a property-owning bourgeoisie. This class has a personal stake in regime survival which East Europe's apparatchiks lacked (and hoped to get through abandoning communism). Apparently, an authoritarian regime with a mixed economy can more readily generate class and primordial support bases than a totalitarian one. Limited liberalization may be enough to coopt broader segments of the private bourgeoisie and middle class.

Hafiz al-Asad's astute steering of Syria through the dangerous shoals of external threat and internal instability has provided leadership pivotal to regime survival, but the personalization of power also throws doubt on the regime's ability to survive succession. Civil war among rival security militias could open the door to insurrection, sectarian conflict (as in Lebanon) and outside intervention. The best insurance against this is to broaden the stake in the regime of the dominant socioeconomic strata through continuing economic and political liberalization.