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The Arab Socialist Baath Party: Preparing for the Post-War Era

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A Syrian reading the Ba'ath newspaper, March 2005 © Youssef Badawi / EPA



Arab Reform Initiative

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party has made several organizational changes and repositioned itself within the state. In February 2012, a constitutional amendment abolished Article 8, which had enshrined the party's rule and role in leading society (though the Syrian opposition regarded this as a formality rather than a substantive change). In June 2013, the party initiated a remarkable change in the Ba'ath Regional Command, with a number of historic long-standing members, such as former vice-president Farouk al-Sharaa and the Assistant Regional Command Secretary Mohamad Said Bkheitan losing their seats. And in late 2016 the Regional Command made drastic changes in 11 Syrian provinces, including two provinces outside of regime control, and three major universities.

However, the most significant development came on 22 April 2017, when Bashar al-Assad chaired a meeting of the Ba'ath Central Committee, during which more than half of the Regional Command members were removed¹ and a new Central Committee and Monitoring Committee² were formed.³ These internal changes to the party are not insignificant, particularly amid current turmoil and local, regional, and international developments that may bring the Syrian conflict closer to resolution. The organizational changes represent an effort to shore up loyalty to Assad and the party more generally both at the level of the leadership structure but also in society at large through the reactivation of the party's socio-economic divisions. Yet at the same time, through the re-assertion of the party's pan-Arab nationalist mission and the corresponding vision of a unified Arab identity for Syria, the Ba'ath party is consolidating support from the regime's external backers and enlarging its possible base of support within Syria itself. The organizational shifts of the Syrian Ba'ath party are ultimately aimed at the party's survival and continued dominance in any post-conflict scenario.

Reinforcing Loyalty to Assad and the Arab Identity

At the level of the party itself, the organizational shake-up of the Regional Command seems to represent both a test of loyalty as well as the admission of new blood in service of the president. While the selection of individuals reflects

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those whose absolute loyalty has been tested during the current Syrian crisis, the remnants of the old generation have been removed, enhancing the role of Bashar al-Assad's team, which has accompanied him since he assumed power in 2000. These shifts also reflect the party's continued focus on the army and the encouragement of party activity within its ranks, in particular with the nomination of four military elites to the "ideological branch" of the party.⁴ Moreover, the activation of the party's functional organizations, including Information, Economics, Education, Higher Education, Farmers, and Mobilization, demonstrates a focus on the basic needs of society and the effort to energize party activity in the streets and mobilize members in preparation of any potential political change. In a speech given at the April 2017 meeting, Assad focused on the importance of the party's role in the future and the development of the party's strategies to keep pace with transformations in Syrian society. He stressed, "this war, which has persisted for six years, must motivate the party to bolster its presence among the citizenry by creating new mechanisms that adapt to new circumstances and make a serious attempt to keep up with societal developments."⁵ Assad also underscored the importance of party change and renewed discourse to appeal to the country's youth, stating "it is essential that party leaders look for new ideas and new frameworks to improve the party's performance. This will help initiate constructive dialogues with party cadres in order to equip and empower them for internal party activities and social work, devise programmes that address the minds of new generations, and develop Ba'athist thought." Such statements and shifts in operational focus attest to the identified need to reinforce popular support in the post-war era.

Yet the extent to which changes in the party's senior members and renewed focus on society at large represents true inclusiveness or merely the illusion of inclusion remains to be seen. Since its ascent to power in Syria in 1963, the Ba'ath Party has engaged in faux representation of all ethnic and sectarian components of the Syrian population, using pseudo-quotas to don the image of inclusiveness. However, recent organizational changes that carried two Kurds to the Central Committee of the party in unprecedented fashion, along with the open discussion of Kurdish cultural rights (within a unified Syria), seem to indicate that the party is for all Syrians. This may be indicative of a change in the party's Arab nationalist ideology to garner support from religious and ethnic minorities. Yet at the same



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time, Assad's speech during the party conference repeatedly emphasized the Syrian state's identity as part of the Arab nation and that the war in Syria primarily targets Arab nationalism. He stressed that what is happening in Syria is simply a "continuation of the [historic] struggle between secular forces, represented by the Ba'ath Party, and political Islam, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood." He reminded the audience of the Ba'ath party's commitment to the national, pan-Arab agenda, stating "the battle between the [Ba'ath] Party and the fanatical currents of the Muslim Brotherhood is not a new one. It goes back to the 1960s. One of the major goals of that war was to undermine nationalist thought and force Syria to abandon pan-Arab thought." In essence, Assad's discourse sought to reinforce Syria as part of the Arab nation and the role of the Ba'ath Party therein.

These assertions, made at this particular time, aimed to send specific signals to different stakeholders. First and foremost, the Syrian state's Arab identity was reinforced to Kurdish political entities, including the Kurdish National Council and the Kurdish self-administration. The speech also renewed the party's strong rejection of any participation by political Islamist entities – particularly, the Muslim Brotherhood – in the future of the country. Yet importantly, it represented a rejection to the Russian draft of the constitution, which removed the word "Arab" from the official name of the Syrian Arab Republic. All of these messages come at a time when concerns about a separatist agenda and attempts to erase the Syrian state's Arab identity are growing among the Arab majority, in both the opposition and loyalist factions. The Ba'ath Party currently wants to portray itself as the savior and unifier of the nation.⁶

Consolidating International Support

The changes within the Ba'ath Party come at a time when Russian and Iranian influence dominate Syrian policy-making and military strategy through direct military support for the regime on the ground. While these changes might seem to contradict with the interests of the regime's external supporters, and in particular Assad's emphasis on the Arab identity of the state and pan-Arab nationalism, they actually coincide. For Iran, a regime and party with an Arab nationalist ideology supported by Tehran is consistent with propaganda that Iran supports the regional resistance and the denial that Iran has a "Persian" agenda in Syria. On the



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contrary, a weakening of the Ba'ath Party and a trend toward political pluralism could create a vacuum that may be filled by religious parties, as occurred in Iraq. This would not be in Iran's interests, as religious parties would likely reflect Syria's Sunni majority. As for Russia, the political investment in Syria began in 2015 through the so-called political platforms of Moscow, Hmeimim, Cairo, and Astana. Although billed as "parallel" peace negotiations to the official UN-sponsored process, these platforms are insignificant to the Syrian public, loyalists, and the opposition. They were created and fed by Moscow, which aimed to create a counter-weight to the UN documents regarding the political transition in Syria (the "Geneva communiqués") and to break the monopoly of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) in representing the opposition. Continued Russian presence in Syria requires a reliable political ally for Moscow; the Ba'ath Party, which has an historical relationship with Russia, not only fulfills this role but also could block the progress of religious parties, which Russia deems future enemies.

The organizational changes in the Ba'ath Party are also significant for the remnants of the nationalist movements in the Arab world. The most important message, that "the Ba'ath Party and Syria remain committed to the pan-Arab nationalist agenda," could boost Bashar al-Assad from being a dictator confronted by a popular revolution to a nationalist leader that "defends the pan-Arab nationalist movement against a Western agenda of division." These messages are well received by the remnants of the nationalist movements in some Arab countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Algeria). In fact, before the party conference even concluded, the Regional Command had received several commendations and letters of support from nationalist groups in Yemen and Lebanon – the very groups that have supported Assad throughout the Syrian crisis.

Conclusion

The organizational changes to the Ba'ath party signal that it perceives the gravity of current developments in Syria and their impact on the party's future. The party is trying to exploit these developments to prepare for the range of possible political transitions. Its Syrian Regional Command, the National Command (which represents Ba'ath Party branches in other Arab countries), and the Assad regime's backers (Russia and Iran) are all aware of the importance of restructuring the



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party, and controlling its supporters, in anticipation of the various potential political solutions that could emerge in Syria, including Assad's departure. On the one hand, the Ba'athists want to protect themselves through a strong political party that is popular among loyalists. Thus, their role in Syrian political life will continue through manipulating the democratic system and pluralism. Their base will be the remaining loyalists who support the party. On the other hand, the pan-Arab nationalist movement (the Ba'ath Party branches in the other Arab countries and the non-Syrian nationalist currents) shares the Syrian Ba'ath Party's concerns regarding a de-Ba'athification process, similar to Iraq's. This would destroy the nationalist movement, as Syria is the last stronghold of pan-Arab nationalism, and the Ba'ath Party is the strongest pan-Arab nationalist political party in the region. As for the regime's backers (Russia and Iran), the political process will act as a perfect cover for their interference in Syrian political affairs, even if Assad ultimately leaves power.

Given these preparations for the post-war era, it would behoove the Syrian political opposition to realize that a political solution could create a significant political competitor. Despite six years of war and the consequent damage to the country, the Ba'ath Party remains an experienced party with a wide base across Syria. Some party organizations even still function in areas outside regime control (i.e. in the Kurdish self-administration areas). In addition, Ba'ath cadres competently work within the state bureaucracy, which enables the party to appeal to groups who are loyal or neutral in the conflict better than the opposition parties, which still lack a unified vision and the political experience to run the country. The Syrian opposition will confront serious challenges in revisiting its political vision, and in translating that vision into sturdy and solid political formations. Their lack of a unified platform and image for reshaping Syria's national identity provides an important political gap for the continued assertion of the Ba'ath party.



Endnotes

1. Six of the 15 members of the Regional Command lost their positions: Najm al-Ahmad (Minister of Justice before joining the RC), Malek Ali (former Governour of Suweida [2009] and Quneitra [2012] and Minister of Higher Education [2013]), Ms Fairous Almouss (Head of the Bureau of Higher Education), Khalaf Almiftah (Head of the Ideological Preparation Bureau), Arkan al-Shouf, Abdelnasser Safih, and Abdul Mouti Mashlab. The new Regional Command includes Bashar al-Assad (Regional Secretary-general), Hilal al-Hilal (who retained his position as Assistant Secretary of State), Hadia Abbas, Imad Khamis, Fahad Jassem al-Frej, Hussein Arnous, Yousef Ahmad (who retained his position as Head of the Organization Bureau), Mohamad Ammar Sa'ati (who retained his position as Head of the Youth Bureau), Mohsen Bilal (Head of the Bureau of Higher Education), Mahdi Dakhllallah (Head of the Bureau of Culture and Information), Huda al-Homsy (Head of the Bureau of People's Organizations and Professional Associations), Yasser al-Shoufi (Head of the Bureau of Education and Scouts), Ammar Sibaii and Hamouda Sabbagh (President of the Bureau of Peasants), and Mohamad Shaaban Azzouz (who retained his position as Head of the Bureau of Workers).
2. The new Central Committee of the Ba'ath Party includes Bashar al-Assad (head of the Central Committee), Hilal al-Hilal, Hadia Abbas, Imad Khamis, General Fahad Jassim al-Fareej, Hussein Arnous, Yousef Ahmad, Mohamad Ammar Sa'ati, Mohamad Shaaban Azzouz, , Huda al-Homsy, Walid al-Mouallem, General Ali Mamlouk, Mohamad Husam al-Samman, Bishr Sabban, Rama Aziz, Atef Naddaf, Ahmad Humam Haidar, Jamal Kadiri, Khaled Halbouni, Walid Abazah, Khaled Khaz'al, Ayman Harrouk, Fadel najjar, Ahmad Saleh Ibrahi, Mahmoud Hazouri, Mohammed Nayef Al-Salti, Rana Al-Yousef, Amira Steifo, Ahmad Alhamo, Zaher al-Yousufi, Sherin Al-Youssuf, Ziad Sultan, Mohamad Khaled El Hanous, Talal Brazzi, Salam Sankar, Mohamad Ali Makhlof, Saher Al-Sakar, Raed Alghadban, Maan Aboud, Ammar Sibaii, Nizar Yazigi, Hala Atassi, Butheina Shaaban, Muhannad Ayoub, Mohamad Issa, Faisayasl Mekdad, Mahdi Dakhllallah, Ayham Hourani, Shahira Faluh, Yasser Al-Shoufi, Luna Al-Shibl, Hasan al-Atrash, Issam Saleh Naeem, Mohsen Bilal, Ali Ghanem, Ali Hammoud, Issam Al-Dali, Khairuddin al-Sayed, Nada Mad Ali, Hussein Makhlof, Alaa Ibrahim, Mohamed Shritih, Louay Sabouh, Faiha Tarifi, Bassem Soudan, Nicolas Martisho, Ahmad al-Kadiri, Hamouda Sabbagh, Jazia Sheikh Ali, Sulaiman Al-Nasser, Riad Tawoos, Ali Al-Ajeel, Hind Al-Tarif, Hazem Abdul Ghani, Haitham Satayhi, Salam Saffaf, Fadel Wardeh, General Ali Ayoub, Maj. Gen. Osama Khaddour, Major General Ahmad Balloul and Brigadier General Maher Al-Assad. It is worth noting that two Kurdish members from Amouda (Hassakeh Province), Ahmad Alkadiri (former Minister of Agriculture) and Riad Tawoos, joined the Central Committee for the first time. The members of the Party Monitoring Committee are Ghassan Khalaf (Chairman), Omeima Saeed, Ziad Sabbagh, George Al Rayes and Mohammad Ashraf Bashouri.
3. Al Watan, "An Expanded Meeting of the 'Central Committee' of the Ba'ath Party and Changes in the Regional Command and the Central Committee and Party Monitoring Committee", www.alwatan.sy/archives/100862
4. The ideological branch consists of General Ali Ayoub, Major General Osama Khaddour, Major General Ahmed Balul and Brigadier General Maher Al-Assad.
5. Al-Ba'ath News, "Comrade Assad: Development of the Party's Performance to Meet the Various Challenges," ww.albaath.news.sy/?p=135591
6. For more on the letters of support received by the Ba'ath Party in Syria from some Arab nationalist entities following the organizational changes that affected the ranks of the party, see the comprehensive report on the changes of the leadership of the Qatari Ba'ath Party by the Arab Honor Center for Civilizational and Strategic Studies <https://goo.gl/s3TH35>



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- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
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