

# **The Political Culture Of Modern Syria: Its Formation, Structure & Interactions**

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No introduction to the political culture in a given country could be more suitable than a quick review of its modern history and regional context. This general principle seems to apply more specifically to Syria, since there was no such country prior to the end of WWI, with the exception, that is, of the secret maps of the French and the British.

Moreover, this situation seems to be related to Syria's inability, to date, to reach stability as a fully sovereign national state for reasons pertaining to its geographic location at the heart of the Middle East, and for special considerations related to its formation in accordance with the plans of its European occupiers.

## **Syria: The Formative Experience**

The region of the Arab East that contained Natural Syria (including the contemporary states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine/Israel<sup>2</sup>) and Iraq formed a political unity, administratively pluralistic and, up until the conclusion of WWI, subject to the control of the imploding Ottoman Empire. History then gave the opportunity to the French and British to dominate that critical moment when the Ottomans were defeated and the weak Arabs began to feel their way towards independence and the establishment of their own special political entity.

This meant that these two European powers were now occupying the most suitable position to steer the various international and regional interactions into a direction that is more commensurate with their own particular interests and to bestow upon the "primordial Arab plasma" certain convenient forms.

Syria endured for two years as an independent Arab kingdom ruled by Faisal, a son of Sherif Husain, the Governor of Hijaz, who cooperated with the British against the Ottomans in creating what was to be known, undeservedly, in the Syrian historical literature as the Great Arab Revolution. In 1920, however, the French came to occupy the country in the aftermath of a battle in which the Syrian War Minister himself, Yusuf Al-Azmah, was killed.

Shortly thereafter, the French conqueror of Syria, General Gouraud, transferred the jurisdiction over four Syrian provinces to Lebanon, which, prior to that, had only encompassed the area of Mount Lebanon, with a population made up solely of Druzes and Maronites. This move by the French, however, did not generate much sorrow in Syria at the time, since the Syrian national elite considered the ancient region of Lebanon Minor as being part of Syria itself.

In the meantime, the British bestowed the territory that would later be known as Transjordan on another of Sherif Husain's sons, Abdallah, who ruled Transjordan until his assassination in Jerusalem in 1948 amid allegations of collaborating with the Zionists.

As for Palestine, the British had already promised in 1917, that is, even before they had wrested control of the land from the Ottomans, to establish a national home for the Jews therein. This promise would in fact be fulfilled in 1948, following the end of WWII, spurred on by the feelings of sympathy and guilt on part of the Westerners vis-à-vis the Holocaust.

Even "Syria Minor", or, according to Ghassan Salameh,<sup>3</sup> "the state of what was left", was further divided by the French on the basis of superficial sectarian considerations into four states, which were not destined to survive. In the following decades Syria witnessed many revolutions against the French, and the Syrians offered many martyrs. Still, in 1939, the French ceded control of the Alexandretta Province to the Turks. But Syrian maps to date still show the "annexed province" as part of the country. The annexation spurred another wave of refugees, that was not the first and will not be the last, to the "state of what was left".

Nonetheless, French occupation of Syria came to an end in 1946 in the aftermath of WWII and the major international changes that it had wrought. A year before, Syria had already taken part in the founding of the Arab League, which the British wanted to use as the organizational framework for their continued hegemony over the Arab part of the Middle East.

In 1947, a party destined to rule Syria for four decades and counting, beginning in 1963, was formed. It is the Arab Socialist Baath Party – a dogmatic Arab nationalist party whose ideology is based on the assertion that Arabs belong to a single nation and that Arab unity constitutes the primary goal for Arab struggle.

In 1948, the Zionists occupied 78% of the Palestinian territory and created a diaspora of 750,000 Palestinians scattered all over the Arab world. In 1949, Syria witnessed the first of a series of military coups (three of them took part in that selfsame year) reflecting popular discontent over failure to prevent the Palestinian tragedy. The frailty of the country became more manifest with the increasing tension in the Middle East due to various regional and international pressures associated with the early days of the Cold War.

With this, the formative phase of the history of modern Syria comes to an end and a new phase, no less unstable, begins: the phase of Syrian patriotism with its strong ideological affiliation with Arabism (in fact, more so than any other Arab country). This phase signalled the onset of the crystallization of Syria as a distinct entity.

Throughout the 1950s, Syria distanced itself from the western circles supporting Israel and which clearly had hands in organizing the various military coups the country witnessed. In this manner Syria found itself, according to the logic of international polarization, entering, unwittingly perhaps, into multi-dimensional relations with the then Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries.

In 1958, and under the increasing influence of Arab nationalist sentiments and by way of a forward-escape from the acute internal strife within the ranks of Syrian ruling elite,<sup>4</sup> Syria entered into a merger-type union with Nasserist Egypt, which had already set the foundations for a popular political paradigm far removed from

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and totally antagonistic to the pluralistic and competitive liberal paradigm<sup>5</sup> that had previously set the tone for political activity in the two countries, and that had failed to address a number of critical issues, including dealing with the acute problems faced by the peasantry in both countries, showing a convincing response to the Israeli challenge, guaranteeing the political stability of the country, and launching an active developmental programme.

Another factor which could be added in retrospect is the impact of modern Syria's formative experience itself, as an experience with separation and downsizing on the one hand, and foreign hegemony and occupation on the other.

In 1961, the hasty union broke up. Two years later, Arabists, of mostly Nasserist and Baathist persuasions, took over the rule of the country. But within the same year, the Baath Party turned against its former allies and usurped the reins of power to itself. Under the Baath, the problems with the peasantry that had begun to be addressed and resolved in Union times, found a more integrated solution. But the price paid, as the years will show, was too great: Syria was transformed from a multi-ethnic society with a plurality of religions, sects and affiliations into a one-party state.

The most important development in this period, however, a development that also marked its end, was the June 1967 war which ended with the utter defeat of the Arabs and the occupation of Egyptian and Syrian territories, in addition to what was left of Palestine. Three years after this defeat, whose impact on the consciousness of modern Arabs plays a role similar to the concept of original sin in Christian theology, Minister of Defence Hafiz Al-Assad took over the reins of power in the aftermath of the eighth military coup that the country had witnessed in 21 years.<sup>6</sup>

The reign of Hafiz Al-Assad lasted until his death in 2000; that is, it was longer than the period that had elapsed between the country's independence and his accession. For this reason, the state-monopolized media always focus on the political stability that marked the reign of Hafiz Al-Assad, contrasting it with the days of continuous coups and instability.

With the death of Hafiz Al-Assad, his son, Bashar Al-Assad, simply inherited the rule of the oldest of all Arab republics, a matter that testifies to the success of the one-party state in voiding Syrian society of the very concept of politics per se, and public opinion.

Many Syrians can only remember now, with a mixture of nostalgia and sad pride, the statement attributed to Syrian President, Shukri Al-Quwatli, made to his Egyptian counterpart, Gamal Abdul Nasser, on the eve of the establishment of the Syrian-Egyptian Union in 1958: "You have no idea, Mr President, of the immensity of the task entrusted to you ... You have just become a leader of a people all of whom think they are politicians, half of whom think they are national leaders, one quarter that they are prophets, and one tenth that they are gods. Indeed, you will be dealing with a people who worship God, Fire and the Devil."<sup>7</sup>

Syria is currently surrounded by five countries: the non-Arab states of Turkey and Israel, both of which occupy Syrian territories, and the Arab states of Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. Moreover, Syria's relations with its Arab neighbours have gone through many phases of tension and changes and are not fully stable.

But the most tense relations throughout the reign of Hafiz Al-Assad (until the mid nineties) were undoubtedly those with Iraq. For both countries are being ruled by the same party that adopts an extremist political and ideological culture.<sup>8</sup> This imposed political reality does not correspond to the deep pluralistic nature of both Syrian and Iraqi societies. Fear with regard to any potential American dabbling or experimentation with this Baath-dominated plurality, lest this dabbling proves to be a mere dress-rehearsal for eventual dabbling in Syria itself, among other countries of the Arab East, is exactly why the Syrian regime is so worried about current American and British preparations for the invasion, "de-Baathification" and regime change in Iraq.

Syrian-Jordanian relations have also been through many ups and downs, alternating between short warm intervals and long lukewarm periods. The choices made by the ruling elite in both countries were often conflicting. Jordan has always been closer to the Western camp and Syria to the Soviet bloc. Moreover, Jordan has generally distanced itself from the Arab-Israeli confrontation while the Syrian ruling elite has elected to shoulder the burden. Even on the eve of the Second Gulf War, the choices made by the two countries diverged. This time, however, they did so in a manner unexpected considering the ideologies to which each country has traditionally subscribed, with Jordan standing by Iraq and Syria joining the international alliance led by the United States.

As for Lebanon, Syria has been maintaining a military presence in that country since the breaking of the Lebanese war in 1976. Lebanon embodies more than any other neighbouring country the particularity of the Syrian political and social system, and its loathing of private initiative, although it likes to absorb it somehow. For despite the many failures of Lebanon's own political and social system, it has, nonetheless, maintained a good measure of respect for basic freedoms, especially freedom of expression and the media. It is for this reason perhaps that a strong security concern imposed itself on Syrian-Lebanese relations, especially after the signing of the Taif Accord in 1990.

Nevertheless, the most important constituent of the Syrian geopolitical system must surely be its closeness to Israel,<sup>9</sup> and the Israeli occupation of Syrian lands since 1967.

The second important constituent is Syria's closeness to NATO member Turkey, which has chosen, ever since its modern reformulation in the 1920s, to distance itself from its Arab and Islamic environment, allying itself with the West. This notwithstanding, Turkey has been occupying Syrian territory for more than six decades now, and has, little less than five years ago, threatened to wage war against Syria within the framework of various regional complications associated in particular with Kurdish affairs, but connected as well with water issues, various regional and international alliances, and the particular choices of the ruling political elite.

This brief review, however, will not be complete unless we draw the reader's attention to the fact that Syria lies in the heart of that part of the world called the Middle East, whose modern existence and future seems to rest on three main pillars:

- maintaining the stability of oil production, and ensuring the safety of oil transport routes and maintaining the stability of its prices.

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- maintaining Israel's central role and guaranteeing its immunity with regard to international law, as it seems to represent this region's unique pole, just as the US is currently the world's only pole.
- Ensuring that no regional power of consequence could emerge or that any merger between the region's countries could take place, developments which could offset American and Israeli regional hegemony.

For all these reasons, the Middle East remains the most internationalized part of the world and the least stable one. Undoubtedly the two facts are connected.

On the other hand, the Syrian formative experience does not speak for itself. Rather, its influence is filtered through a set of interlocking and interacting factors that no researcher should ignore: the collective memory of the country and its cultural heritage and traditions, the country's various educational, political and social institutions, and the choices of the acting political and cultural elite.

We will quickly consider each of these factors in the next couple of pages. But it will be of use to mention here that Syrian political culture has much in common with the political culture in other Arab countries, a fact that does not simply emanate from the commonness of the historical experience, but also from similarities in the patterns of this experience, especially in modern times, and the choices made by the various ruling elites involved. This is also related to the fact that the modern international order seems to ascribe similar marginal positions to these countries.

Whenever the word heritage is mentioned, minds quickly recall the Arab and Islamic heritage in the Golden Age. For the ancient past made many vital contributions to the experiences of the modern era, including a certain manner of discourse, and certain perceptions and symbols, which helped in giving it its particular shape. The most important contributions are probably: the notion of the centrality of justice,<sup>10</sup> a sense of deep pride and commitment to Islamic culture, and an endemic popular suspicion with regard to authority, although the "higher Islamic culture" has always favoured an unjust authority over "trial".<sup>11</sup> This pre-modern past will always be taken by the Arabs as one of two comparative frameworks when it comes to the present (the other framework being the modern West).

But the living and decisive memory that has entered in the making of the contemporary Arab consciousness, that is the formative experience of this consciousness, must be the interaction, with varying degrees of violence, with the emerging industrial and colonizing West. The essential aspect of this experience is that the West, to the modern Arab, comes out as both a source of threat and of renewal. It undoubtedly represents the superior civilization, but he is, also undoubtedly, the colonizing aggressor. With time, and the repeated collisions between these two worlds, the political unconscious of the Arab will form and will devolve around this experience, and some Arab intellectuals will indeed begin to speak of the "Andalus Complex"<sup>12</sup> which has been affixed in the Arab spirit, first by the European conquest of the East, and then by the loss of Jerusalem. This is why the Arabs began speaking of the Crusades when George Bush Jr spoke, shortly after September 11 2001, of an American crusade against terrorism and its protectors.

Ever since the beginning of this West-dominated phase of the East-West interaction, each call for renewal and each attempt to change or call for openness had to justify itself and establish its legitimacy by showing its usefulness in responding to external threats and fortifying the country in the face of dangers.

This deeply ingrained constant operates on all levels, including the political unconscious, culture and ideologies, down to the level of simple daily demands at times. Its constant and permanent presence reflects the true reality of a country that has lost its sense of immunity and security. But it also proved quite useful for the ruling political elite, as we shall see.

It is not a rarity to see this constant operating as a passport for some Arab opposition to enter into the narrow political field in some Arab countries.<sup>13</sup> But, more often, it works as a justifying dogma for the ruling regime and a means for muzzling dissent and waylaying active political opposition. Indeed, here we stumble upon a major pillar of contemporary Syrian political culture: the alarmist and mobilizationist pillar.

But there is another pillar to the contemporary Arab political heritage. For inasmuch as the task of dealing with backwardness and catching up with the civilized world asserts itself as the decisive mission for all activists in the region, it also contributes to the centralization of power in an attempt to decrease the time-span required and speed up the process. This creates the necessary setting for a "revolutionary" situation (in the old sense of *role-reversal*) where the ruling elite monopolizes the only effective role while ascribing to the society the role of the "primordial plasma" (to be fashioned) or the "white page" (to be written on), just as European colonizers had done before. All ideologies in modern Syria seem to be based on this tendency, thus transforming the state into the only active centre for initiative. We shall call this second pillar the "Revolutionary" Pillar.<sup>14</sup>

For their part, the institutions responsible for the political education of the "masses," especially the official ones, including the school system, NGOS, or what has become known under the reign of the Baath Party as the Popular Organizations, and the media (most notably TV), have actively worked to consecrate the first pillar, thus helping to develop and promote a persecution complex vis-à-vis the outside world and a narcissistic one vis-à-vis the country itself.

This paranoid tendency became more pronounced during the rule of "the eternal leader", President Hafiz Al-Assad, who is quoted in the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade National Social Education textbook as saying: "Syria is fighting a multi-faceted battle, a patriotic and national battle, a battle for building and development, and a battle for self-defense and liberation."<sup>15</sup> One can find similar statements on a daily level in all Syrian media, and in the various speeches of officials from different levels.

These very institutions, however, serve to implant conservative values quite antagonistic to change, and quite paternalistic in nature, linking everything from the people to the state and, of course, the Party to the person of the President, without giving up its revolutionary role, which had given it birth. We should never misunderstand these endlessly repeated mobilizationist calls, for they are a tried and true means to turn the people into a homogenous flock, borrowing from the Arab and Islamic heritage all those factors that can help those in position of authority ensure the obedience and the submission of the populace.

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There are, nonetheless, two institutions for social and political habilitation that are as impossible to cancel as they are difficult to commit to the official discourse, namely the family and the mosque.<sup>16</sup>

The Syrian family, in general, is quite suspicious of politics, if not downright antagonistic to it. The main lesson it tries to convey to its children is "to leave politics to its people" and shy away from opposition parties. This quietist attitude emanates quite simply out of fear of the authority, especially in the aftermath of the bloody events of the 1980s, the Decade of Syrian Terror. But, at the heart of it, there lies as well the ancient Arab suspicion with regard to political authority, mixed with a deep Islamic pessimism regarding the possibility of establishing a just state,<sup>17</sup> and the original constant of the Bedouin political culture (in some parts) innately antagonistic to the very concept of authority.

Therein lies the real source of frailty for all contemporary Arab states, Syria included. For, while these young states cannot hope to achieve certain critical levels of political and cultural development and stand firm in the face of the challenges posed by regional and international transformations without attracting the majority of their peoples to the field of public work, letting them partake in the making of their future, the ruling elite in these countries behaves as if the state is its own private enterprise which they refuse to share with anyone.

Insisting on the concept of one-party state whose very constitution names the Baath party as the leader of state and society, came as the Syrian "solution" for this paradox and a way for hiding it as well.

The Syrian family has thus managed to become a fort in the face of the state, but the price of fortification was this negativity and withdrawal from the public domain and the destruction of the notion of public interest.

While the mosque remained outside the control of the state throughout the history of modern Syria, the era of the Baath Party inaugurated a conflict between state and religion beginning in 1964, and recurring in 1972, 1979 and 1982. Indeed, the page of this conflict has not been turned to date, and it has long become a national crisis in which thousands of people have fallen victims. Still, one of the main results of this conflict was the extension of state hegemony over the religious institutions, especially the mosques.

This is the problem with this approach: putting mosques under state control does not only diminish the independence of society, but is a main factor for stultifying Islamic religious thought. This takes place in two ways: first, by abolishing the freedom of opinion and expression, and hence the freedom to think, as part of an overall project for domination by the one-party state, and, second, by re-ascribing to religion the task of legitimizing authority, which makes entering into a religious debate too dangerous an undertaking.

It seems, in this regard, that the best way for a renewal of Islamic thought is to separate the ruling party (or family) from the state, and to bestow back on the state its proper public and national identity.

It should not be understood from the above that we mean to imply that the political culture is merely a direct outcome of the choices of the controlling elite in the political and social systems. Rather, political culture represents a set of values,

stands and attitudes regarding politics, which, in an unstable country like Syria, tend to be more influenced by the choices of the controlling elite.

## The Basic Characteristics Of Syrian Political Culture

- The first characteristic of the Syrian political culture is its hyper-sensitivity with regard to all that is external, and the constant and heavy presence of an inside/outside dichotomy therein, with the implied outside here being mostly, though not exclusively, the West. This situation is mainly the product of the colonial experience (around which modern Arab consciousness had been formed), and the continued western (especially American) support for Israel.

One of the major manifestations of this hyper-sensitivity is the rejection by the various Syrian human rights and NGO activists of any form of financial aid from the outside. Another variation on this theme, perhaps more related to the sense of Arab Islamic pride we alluded to above, is the early schism within the ranks of the Syrian Communist Party in 1972, with one independent faction gradually moving towards more democratic alternatives, while the other faction affiliated itself simultaneously with Moscow and with the Baath regime in Damascus.

Suspicion of the West in the Arab World expresses itself in a variety of discourse forms: a Marxist discourse (calling for resisting imperialism), a nationalist discourse (calling for liberation from the occupiers), and a religious discourse (calling for Jihad against the international evil-mongers). Today, we can also add an anti-globalization discourse.

In this regard, it is quite difficult to determine to what extent the growing anti-globalization discourse poses a real and present danger against the social and economic policies related to globalization, and to what extent it comes merely as a continuation of an older discourse reflecting a certain hyper-sensitivity with regard to the outside world. What makes this a legitimate question is the all too general tone of the Syrian anti-globalization e-bulletin, whose specific stances tend to be mere quotations of European and international anti-globalization activists.<sup>18</sup>

- The second characteristic of Syrian political culture is the distinct alarmist or mobilizationist aspect that imbues all speeches and political ideologies in the country. The Arab Nationalists, be they Baathists or Nasserists, the Communists and the Islamists all exhibit this unique extra-ideological tendency to draw attention to the "critical nature of the current phase", the "looming danger", or "the burgeoning conspiracy that threatens the safety of the homeland". The enemy is forever at the gates, it seems.<sup>19</sup>

This particular discourse reflects the internationalized and unstable character of the Middle East where the people are not in control of their destinies, a condition that suits the ruling elite, be they in a position of power or members of one of the clandestine opposition parties. It also helps justify the continuation of the longest declared state of emergency in the history of the world, which has been in force ever since the usurpation of power by the Baath Party in 1963.

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This state of affairs also furnishes a fertile soil for the spread of conspiracy theories, which means, in the context of Syrian politics, personifying the West and looking at it as a source of threat. In their turn, conspiracy theories reflect the major role that the "outside" (once again the West) has actually played in the shaping of the contemporary Middle East. Their spread also suits the authorities, which thus do not need to invent as many enemies.

- Another constant of Syrian political culture is the treatment of homogeneity as a high and quintessential virtue, while difference and plurality are dismissed as occasional and ephemeral phenomena. Indeed, the children of the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade learn that Arab culture "is a homogenous culture, all existing differences between its children are temporary and false. They will all disappear as soon as Arab conscience is awakened."<sup>20</sup>

In this regard, some authors go as far as considering "homogeneity as one of the Images of the Arab historical mind", with image here used in its Kantian sense.<sup>21</sup> Here, the interests of, and choices made by, the ruling and leading elites meet with the objective need of the youthful societies to show greater solidarity and homogeneity.

- Syrian political culture is also distinguished by its strong "statist" character. The concept of state is well-nigh synonymous with that of politics and social and public life. Moreover, each political strand of thought, including oppositionist thought, is, in the final analysis, a thought about the state.<sup>22</sup> This element probably reflects the total presence of the state in all aspects of life and societal interactions even when they have no connection to politics. The result is the exclusion of civil society from engagement in the political and intellectual life of the country. Indeed, the difficulties faced by emerging civil society organizations, which sprang to life after the passing of President Hafiz Al-Assad, come perhaps as reflections of this statist political culture.

The phenomenon of statism manifests itself in the circles of the opposition as well, albeit in a passive manner with excessive criticism of the political authority often reflecting unreasonable expectations on the part of the opposition, or demands for the redressing of the sort of problems that are not in nature state-related. As such, we find such demands as the release of all political prisoners and the lifting of the state of emergency and martial law listed side by side with demands for "constructing new channels for dialogue among the Syrians ... and pushing all files and programmes tabooed through the controls established by societal traditions into the forum of public debate".<sup>23</sup>

- We have pointed out earlier how each demand for renewal cannot justify itself except by using a patriotic discourse and by stressing its potential ability to strengthen the national fibre and help consolidate the national stand and fortify national unity. This in effect weakens the stand of the democratic opposition, which finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place: the oppression of the one-party states which monopolize patriotism, and the false calls to democratization issued by certain international powers concerned only with maintaining an open Middle East, true to its enduring strategic, economic and security vulnerability.<sup>24</sup>

The response of our generally weak political culture vis-à-vis this statist patriotism, combined with the presence of a relatively real foreign occupation, including the Israeli occupation, and the preferences and interests of the dominating elite serve the interests of the latter and could compel the democratic forces to try to outdo the established authority in this regard.<sup>25</sup>

- Both the mobilizationist and the revolutionary factors, with all the statism and collectivism they inspire, contribute jointly to the weakening of the chances for growth of liberal elements within the Syrian and Arab political culture. Indeed, there is always a strong need for a powerful internally interventionist state in our part of the world, but perhaps it is time we established a state based on a social contract and a guarantee of pluralism and individual liberties.

What stops this development is not so much the nature of the political culture as the density and the power of current international wagers in the region and the lack of stability therein, ever since it was fashioned by its European creators, a situation which fosters the formation of an internationalized and consolidative political culture. This situation, well-maintained by the US and its Israeli agent, all but dooms the possibility of sprouting the liberal seeds, those which already exist in the Islamic tradition and those received by modern Arab culture through its difficult interaction with western culture. This becomes more like challenging fate.

- Finally, and as we might expect, there is a strong utopian and salvific tendency in Syrian political culture, manifesting itself in a variety of forms: secretive, militant, extremist, party-centred, and ideologically centred (Marxist, Arabist and Islamic). Still, all these forms are currently receding, as we shall see.

## **The Transformation Of Syrian Political Culture**

It is still difficult to speak of any change in the popular political culture in Syria, for all the activities witnessed by the country since June 10, 2000, took place within the ranks of a narrow and elitist framework. Moreover, popular culture changes at a much slower pace than high culture. The culture of the elite, however, did witness some changes, including the retreat of the militant ideological character and the mobilizationist function. But this retreat is more due to the breaking up of the ideologies that conquered and fed our culture than to any independence declaration vis-à-vis these ideologies.

We can also note, with the beginning of the period called "the Damascene Springtime", the introduction (or the return) of new concepts and tools, such as civil society (which became both a political slogan and a tool), human rights, and semi-public forums. The Internet has also helped in the creation of virtual communities, which has so far managed to escape state control, especially seeing that they failed to add any article to the Publication Law (declared in September, 2001) punishing the use of the Internet for the expression and exchange of ideas and information.

By personally following the development of these activities, I find in it a clear shrinking of the utopian, salvific and revolutionary elements, and a visible aversion

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with regard to secrecy (which used to reflect a militant and ideological political culture inasmuch as it was a means for protection). Still, I did not sense any meaningful change in the statist tendency nor a strong participation by the liberal elements.

I have also noticed a larger acceptance of Syrian patriotism expressed in the majority of the Syrian intellectual writings in the last few years.<sup>26</sup> Naturally, this development has its own particular meaning, seeing that the ideologies of the Syrian ruling elite used to be based on a non-acceptance of Syria as a legitimate national state, or "the final state for all its children". Should the domestic and regional circumstances become more acceptable, and I would not necessarily say good, Syrians will perhaps learn to accept their country in a sound manner and become reconciled with themselves without isolating themselves from the Arab World.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Ammar Abdulhamid. Caution: the titles of foreign books was translated directly from Arabic, so they may not be identical with original titles.

<sup>2</sup> The ancient Arabic name of Natural Syria was Bilad Al-Sham.

<sup>3</sup> Salameh, Ghassan, *State and Society in the Arab East*, (Beirut: The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1987), 1<sup>st</sup> edition, p59, (in Arabic).

<sup>4</sup> Seale, Patrick, *The Struggle For Syria*, Tr Sameer Abdo & Mahmoud Fallahah, (Beirut Dar Al-Kalimah, 1980), 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, p104ff. Barut, Muhammad Jamal, *Power Polarizations among Syrian Elite 1918-2000*, Dar Sindbad, Amman, forthcoming 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Barut, *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Modern Syria witnessed ten military coups throughout its history. The last two of them came against the late President, Hafiz Al-Assad, but failed.

<sup>7</sup> Laurence, Henry, *The Great Game: the Arab East and International Schemes*, Tr Abdulhakeem Al-Arbad, (Bengazi, Dar Al-Jamhiriyyah, 1993), 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, p238.

<sup>8</sup> Article 52 of the Party's constitution drafted in 1947 (not to be confused with the country's constitution) says that the principles of the Party are "unchangeable and lay no foundation for future revision or amendment. They have been decided by a certain generation and should not be changed." Of course, the article was never truly implemented, but does reveal the existence of a certain political culture that lifts ideology, constancy and extremism to the highest level.

<sup>9</sup> Whose existence, security and qualitative lead over all Arabs put together is guaranteed by the very power that makes sure that Arabs can never come together, namely the US.

<sup>10</sup> In this regard some scholars often refer to the temptation of the idea of "the just despot" in the Islamic political tradition. *Al-Jabiri, Muhammad Ali. The Arab Political Mind: Its Limits and Revelations*, (Beirut: The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1990), p356. Here Al-Jabiri returns the temptation posed by the idea of "the just despot" to the fact that "the Arab political mind is fashioned on the basis of identification between the roles of God and the Prince, which implants in the political consciousness that idealistic paradigm for rule which has been alluring in the Arab political mind ever since antiquity to this very idea: the paradigm of the Just Despot."

<sup>11</sup> Ie popular unrest or civil war.

<sup>12</sup> The Arabs having ruled the Andalus (in South Spain) for eight centuries. In Arab culture, the Andalus always invokes a vision of beauty and nostalgia.

<sup>13</sup> On this score, see my article "Syrian Opposition: Sometimes Late, Sometimes Wrong," in the Annex to the Lebanese newspaper Al-Nahar, dated 17 February 17 2002.

<sup>14</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Textbook on National Social Education for the year 2002-03, quotes a definition of the Bath Party taken from its 1949 constitution: "a national popular revolutionary movement fighting for the sake of Arab unity, freedom and socialism", p29. Moreover, my article "The Crisis of Syrian Opposition: No opponent but an enemy," published in Al-Nahar on 4-5 June 2002, should be consulted.

<sup>15</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Textbook on National Social Education for the year 2001-02, p13.

<sup>16</sup> We will point out shortly how making the religious establishment succumb to external pressures leads to the emergence of more rigid forms of Islamic thought.

<sup>17</sup> This while constantly accepting the necessity of the state.

<sup>18</sup> We are referring here to the e-bulletin *Al-Badeel* prepared by a group of Syrian anti-globalization activists: [www.moaten.com](http://www.moaten.com)

<sup>19</sup> The recent book by the long-standing Vice-President of Syria, Abdulhaleem Khaddam, begins with this sentence: "In this difficult phase of the life of the Arabs ..."  
Khaddam, Abdulhaleem. *The Contemporary Arab order: Current Reality and the Future Prospects*, (Beirut: the Arabic Cultural Centre), 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Textbook on National Social Education for the year 2001-02, p15. This instructional statement comes within the framework of "Establishing an Ideological Baathist Generation". But the real product of this system is an alienated, deeply apolitical and easily corrupted generation, because the Baath had long ceased to be an actual political Party becoming more an instrument of power and its immediate interests.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Azmeh, Aziz, *Secularism from a Different Perspective*, (Beirut: The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1992), 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, p324.

<sup>22</sup> Ghalyoun, Bourhane, *The Assassination of the Mind*, (Beirut, Dar Al-Tanweer, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> "Together towards a Modern and Democratic Syria". A Manifesto of the Party for Syrian Modernity and Democracy, published on the 16 September 2001. It does not occur to the mind of the Party here that calling upon the state to interfere in such matters leaves the doors wide open to inquisition, rather than opening the "tabooed files". The Party seems also unaware that it cannot combine the call for separating state and religion with the demand that the state should interfere in matters of religious and social beliefs.

<sup>24</sup> Such as "the American Middle East Partnership Initiative" launched by US Secretary of State Colin Powell on January 2002.

<sup>25</sup> The discourse of the Syrian semi-declared opposition party, the National Democratic Assembly, falls back on calling to democracy so that the country could withstand external storms. See in this regard: "Cultural Papers: An intellectual political non-periodic book", issued by the Information Council in the National Democratic Assembly (npd).

<sup>26</sup> There is no research effort to date that examines this issue, but most of the intellectual and political contributions seem to imply it. See for instance: Bourhane Ghalyoun's lecture: "The Future of Reform and Change in Syria: Towards a new National Covenant". This lecture was delivered as part of the National Dialogue Forum on 5 September 2002. See also the documents of the Syrian Modernity and Democracy Party, although this later refers to Syrian patriotism within a militant ideological framework that ignores Arabism.

### Disclaimer

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