The rise of the Ba'ath party in Syria in the 20th century: The role of pan-Arabism and Arab socialism

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The rise of the Ba'ath movement marked the first half of the 20th century in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq. The Ba'ath is an Arab socialist movement founded in the late 1930s and early 1940s by Michel' Aflaq, an Orthodox Christian, and Salah al-Din Bitar, a Sunni Mulsim (Devlin, 1991; Larkin & Kerr 2015). This period featured "intense nationalist activity in Palestine, Greater Syria, and Iraq [...] against the continued direct control of the area by Britain and France (Galvani, 1974). Thus, a lot of middle-class and pluralist political parties rose (Larkin & Kerr 2015). The pan-Arab socialist narrative was instrumental to the rise of the Ba'ath because the movement itself "was the first to advocate Arab Socialism and to formulate its characteristic" (Lenczowski, 1966). In 1956 it developed into a political party and became a driving force in Syrian politics. Eventually, it came into governance via a coup in 1963 (Lenczowski, 1966; Larkin & Kerr 2015). Pan-Arabism and the movement's secular ideas and lack of religious identity made it favorable to the population. There are more factors at play on an international, regional and internal level that allowed the Ba'ath to rise. However, this paper focuses on the influence of pan-Arabism on the development of the Ba'ath movement as a political party in Syria from its formation to the 1963 coup. In order to do so, it discusses the effects of the United Arab Republic as a pan-Arab state as well as its failure. It explores anti-western and anti-Israeli Syrian sentiments and their alliance with Palestinian refugees. Furthermore, it explains France's reaction to the rise of pan-Arabism and its influence on Syria's internal politics.

1. Pan-Arabism & Arab Socialism

European imperialism created a desire for self-determination amongst Arab countries under imperial rule, which led to a rise in Arab nationalism during the 1950s and the demand for self-governance (Lenczowski, 1966). Pan-Arabism and socialism were a strong reaction towards imperialism; specifically, the economic toll took on the mandate countries. Hence, Greater Syria witnessed a shift toward socialism during that time (Keilany, 1980; Lenczowski, 1966).

Under the French mandate, the unequal distribution in place from the Ottoman Empire worsened, as the French preferred the growth of privatized 'latifundia,' which were vast agricultural lands. As a result, a small group of landowners, urban contractors, and tribal sheiks profited at the expense of the rest of the population (Keilany, 1980; Salem-Murdock, 2019). For instance, Keilany (1980) notes that the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) found that an estimate of 82% of the rural population was "either landless of owned [...] less than 10 hectares." In addition, 13% of landowners held no more than 10 hectares, while 49% of landowners possessed over 100 hectares of land. Moreover, peasants working the land referred to as sharecroppers had to give a portion of their crops as rent. Often, they only received 30% of their harvests, which increases to 70% if they invested capital in addition to their labor (Keilany, 1980).

1.1 The United Arab Republic's role

The United Arab Republic (UAR) was created in 1958 to cultivate Arab unity under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. That period witnessed the institutionalization of Arab socialist ideologies; for example, land reforms took place, and the unequal distributions of private land that took place under the French mandate were reduced. Namely, they implemented laws such as The Agrarian Reform Law No. 161, which disallowed a single person to own more than "80 hectares of irrigated land and 300 hectares of rainfed land" (Keilany, 1980).

The Ba'ath's movement fundamental ideology, that "united Arab nation had been divided by imperialist intrusion," confirmed with pan-Arabism ideas, which granted it support from a large fragment of the Syrian population (Galvani, 1974). Here, pan-Arab ideals allowed the movement to grow, especially when the UAR failed because it paved the way for the party to gain more influence.

The UAR was unsuccessful for two reasons. First, Egypt's insistence on being at the forefront of pan-Arabism with Nasser as the face of the movement created division within the state (Lenczowski, 1966). Regardless of their support for Arab unity, they disagreed on who ought to lead this movement; therefore, the UAR featured an internal competition over power (Torrey, 1970). Second, within Syria, they implemented the Egyptian agricultural model without altering it to fit Syrian land, which led to a reduction in crops and a decline in the agricultural sector (Keilany, 1980). As a result, Syria sought to break away from Egypt, which was realized in 1961. This was followed by the governance of Bashir Azmeh, who overturned the land reform laws and allowed landowners to possess 200 (irrigated) to 600 (non-irrigated) hectares of land (Keilany, 1980). Given that pan-Arab socialist thoughts were still prevalent, there was increased

frustration within the Syrian population. Subsequently, the Ba'ath party promised harsher land reform policies and to better cultivate the land, which resulted in a two-year growth in the movement (Lenczowski, 1966).

1.2 Israel & Palestinian Refugees

The creation of Israel in 1948 raised anti-western sentiments and furthered Pan-Arabism and socialism (Torrey, 1970). Accordingly, the Ba'ath party established a Palestinian wing named Sa'iqah, which mobilized Palestinians and promoted guerilla actions against Israel. The party advocated for liberating Palestine and endorsed it as a "people's war" (Torrey, 1970; Brand, 1988). This resonated with the Syrian population who saw their struggle against western domination as a struggle against Israel due to the link between the two (Galvani, 1974). The feelings of oneness intensified due to pan-Arabism, and the Palestinian issue became a Syrian concern, especially since Palestine was part of Syria under the French mandate, "a permanent opposition to Zionism among Syrians" (Galvani, 1974). Syrian support for Palestine increased even more after the 1955 attacks on Gaza (Galvani, 1974).

Moreover, Palestinian refugees in Syria played a significant role in the rise of the Ba'ath movement as a political party. According to Brand (1988), after the 1948 Nakba, Syria took in an estimate of 90 thousand to 100 thousand Palestinians who were forced out of their homeland. At that time, Palestinians did not compromise more than 3% of the Syrian population; however, they were instrumental in helping the movement rise as a political (Brand, 1988). The Ba'ath party was successful in channeling "Palestinian political energies in Syria" (Brand, 1988). This was possible because, unlike neighboring countries, Syria made an effort to integrate them into Syrian social and economic structures. Thus, they were granted equal status to the Syrian citizens, which paved the way for their prominent participation in civil societies and then politics (Brand, 1988). For example, Syria allowed Palestinians to form unions and provided them with "forums for expressions of Palestinian national identity" (Brand, 1988). In addition, Syria allowed for 70% of Palestinians to live outside the camps, which furthered their integration in the country (Brand, 1988).

1.3 France's influence & the Alawis

From 1839 to 1871, under Ottoman rule, Tanzimat reforms were implemented, which granted France and England capitulations including, making non-Muslims communities such as the Marinates, Druze, and Alawis subjects to the western countries (Lust, 2014). As a result, they were provided with western education, and subject to urbanizing, and held high positions in the military. After the Empire's collapse, Syria was under the French mandate, in which the Alawis and other minority groups were "granted political, social and economic privileges that were unavailable to it in Ottoman times" (Larkin & Kerr 2015). However, the Alawis benefited the most from the French mandate, as they were given more political autonomy and given their own state (Fildis, 2012).

Syria was swamped with Arab nationalism, which was developed by Sunni Muslims; thus, it was "articulated in explicitly Sunni Muslim terms" (Fildis, 2012; Larkin & Kerr, 2015). The French, as well as "Christians and heterodox Muslims," including the Alawis, perceived the development of a sectarian form of pan-Arabism as a threat.

This is because minorities felt excluded from the narrative, and hence, the Ba'ath's secular nature attracted non-Muslim minorities (Lenczowski, 1966). In addition, the Ba'aths advocated for equality based on being Arab rather than Sunni Muslims, and "promised other aspects of social reforms" (Galvani, 1974).

The French took the opportunity to combat this form of pan-Arabism by implementing a "divide-and-rule" strategy, which resulted in having Sunni Muslims dominating politics but underrepresented in the military. On the other hand, Alawis were overrepresented in high-ranking military positions military but limited politically; "regardless of constituting only 9.1% of the population, the Alawis held the majority of military positions high in the party (Fildis, 2012; Larkin & Kerr 2015). Thus, the French successfully increased tensions between the Alawis and Sunni Muslims increased, as there was a lack of a unified Syrian identity (Fildis, 2012). Their strategy worked to the advantage of the Ba'ath because the Alawis, who were behind the movement, were able to achieve adequate military power, which was developed further under the UAR (Fildis, 2012). This is significant because the Alawis were not simply a part of the Ba'ath party, but they administered it; once they've "risen to such prominence inside the armed forces and the Ba'ath that some started to refer to it as an "'Alawite plot' destined to take over Syria" (Khatib, Lefèvre & Qureshi, 2012).

Moreover, during the rise of pan-Arabism, the French supported the Ba'ath party and helped them gather support from other religious and ethnic minorities such as the Druze and Isma'ilis (Larkin & Kerr 2015). They backed the party's promise promised to secure the rights minorities received under the French mandate as well as integrate them in Syria's political and economic structure (Gambill, 2001). Consequently, by the 1960s, the party secured support from the entire Alawite community, which constituted 12% of the population. In addition, the party appealed to "workers and professionals" belonging to the public sector and "rural peasants," especially minorities due to its "non-sectarian pan- Arabism, its interest in social reform, [and] anti-communism (Galvani, 1974; Gambill, 2001).

Conclusion

Pan-Arab socialist ideas were instrumental in the rise of the Ba'ath party in Syria. Its secular ideas, as well as its approach to people's concerns, as well as minorities' interests, granted it much support. It was able to appeal to an adequate proportion of the population, including a minority of Sunni Muslims. At its outset, Sunni Muslims were suspicious of Ba'athist ideology due to its secularism; however, it eventually appealed to some of them because of the Ba'ath's acknowledgment of "Islam as an embodiment of Arab national genius" (Galvani, 1974; Lenczowski, 1966). In addition, it was more appealing than their competing parties; namely, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which was led by a Christian and the Muslim Brotherhood (Larkin & Kerr 2015). This is because the SSNP was eventually suppressed in 1949, and its leader was executed. In addition, regardless of their nationalism, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to maintain Islamic culture as the basis of Syrian society (Galvani, 1974). The party utilized the failure of the UAR and Azmeh reversal of previous land reforms to gain rural peasant and workers' support that constituted more than half of the population (Galvani, 1974). They set up several organizations to gather support from various sects of society, including a Women's federation, peasant movements, and trade unions, as well as organized student youth movements (Galvani, 1974). This enabled the Ba'ath to address diverse interests with their pan-Arab socialist narrative.

Palestinians were also crucial to their rise. The Ba'ath supported anti-Israeli and anti-western sentiments in Syria and mobilized Palestinians, including women. They offered education, specifically, political education, established a Palestinian Baathist wing, and allowed them to pursue their goal to liberate Palestine (Galvani, 1974; Brand, 1988). Furthermore, shaping pan-Arabism as a Sunni Muslim movement triggered a reaction from France, which sought to protect its interests in Syria. As a result, it supported the Ba'ath party since Alawis mainly led it. This resulted in substantial support from minorities who wanted to maintain the privileges they gained under the French mandate (Gambill, 2001; Larkin & Kerr 2015).

All in all, Ba'ath doctrines paralleled pan-Arab socialist ideas, and hence, pan-Arabism became a central force behind the Ba'ath movement. Pan-Arabism manifested in several ways, which all presented themselves as opportunities for the Ba'ath to progress. That being said, it is important to note that regardless of originating as a civil society, the Ba'ath party came into power via a coup in 1963. Therefore, the party's eventually came into power through a top-down approach rather than a bottom-up approach.