

SYRIA – BEGINNING OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS, 1970 – 1973*

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Israel's military victory over the Arabs in June 1967 provoked a widespread reaction and a search for a way out throughout the Arab world and, in the case of Syria, led to the overthrow of the ruling regime. In the autumn of 1970 Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad seized power, and his regime represented the arrival of new elites from rural backgrounds to replace the traditional urban politicians and representatives of business circles. It was an authoritarian regime whose power base was the army and the Baʿth Party. The sole ruler wielded absolute power and became the object of a personality cult. The regime adopted socialist-type economic policies and advocated egalitarian reforms.

Keywords: Syria under the Baʿth in the 1960s, the role of the military; struggle for power, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad's bloodless coup, consolidation of power, political and social changes, preparation for the liberation of the occupied territories

The presidential system introduced in Syria in 1971 was the culmination of developments that had been under way in the country since the 1963 Baʿthist coup d'état. The *Socialist Arab Renaissance Party* (Ḥizb al-baʿth al-ʿarabī al-ishtirākī), or Baʿth Party for short, which was in power at that time, was weak and disunited, and over the next eight years there was a constant struggle for power and influence within the party among a number of groups and individuals. The group that had the strongest position was made up of the party members in the armed forces. They were well organised, wielded the levers of power and were prepared to use them. Most of them belonged to the so-called regionalists (al-quṭrīyūn) because of their focus on the Syrian "region" (al-quṭr)

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within the Arab homeland. This distinguished them from the party's "old guard", the traditional party leaders, more focused on the goals of the Arab nation (qawm), therefore referred to as nationalists (al-qawmīyūn). "In the reconstituted party a variety of ideological and personal factions worked to advance their respective causes: some preferred a Marxist program for social and economic affairs, others called for social justice, abolition of religious qualifications for public office and improvement of rural conditions".¹

When the Ba^ʿth Party took power in 1963 it completely changed the structure of the Syrian state and its social base. Already the land reform introduced during the United Arab Republic (1958 – 1963) had freed the agrarian sector from landlords who only used their land as rent. The Egyptian type of land reform was later modified to better suit Syrian climatic conditions. The military coup of 23 February 1966 ended the long struggle for supremacy in the Ba^ʿth Party between the old Ba^ʿthists, such as Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, and the new Ba^ʿthists, from the party's military committee, drawn mostly from poor provincial families, concentrated around Ṣalāḥ Jadīd and Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, with the victory of the latter group.² In the following period, power in both the state and the Ba^ʿth Party continued to be concentrated in the hands of members of the ʿAlawī community,³ but there was also a fierce power struggle among them.⁴ Ṣalāḥ Jadīd sought to gain primacy through control of the party machinery, while Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad built a position in the army, where he became commander of the air force and later minister of defence. Although the Ba^ʿth Party succeeded in stifling *nāṣirist* activity in Syria, it lost moral strength and appeal in the realm of pan-Arab politics. Despite the fact that, in terms of its programme, the Ba^ʿth Party was supposed to be the vanguard of the movement for Arab unity, when it was in power it effectively isolated Syria from the other Arab states.

The Ba^ʿthī governments of the 1960s, and especially the neo-Ba^ʿthist regime after the 1966 coup, reoriented Syria's private enterprise economy towards one based on state control.⁵ They achieved this by nationalizing the main

¹ DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 53.

² AL-ḤAWRĀNĪ, A. *Mudakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī* [The Memoirs of Akram al-Hawrānī]. Vol. IV, pp. 3378–3380.

³ A sect of extreme Shīʿites who consider ʿAlī (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad) the incarnation of the deity. Hence the name ʿAlawites given them since the French mandate was established in their territory. See HITTI, P. K. *History of the Arabs. From the earliest times to the present*, p. 449.

⁴ MA'OZ, M. *Asad. The Sphinx of Damascus. A Political Biography*, p. 66; VAN DAM, N. *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961 – 1978*, p. 86.

⁵ *Niḍāl Ḥizb al-ba^ʿth al-ʿarabī al-ishtirākī, 1943 – 1975. Dirāsa tāriḫīya taḥlīliya mūjaza* [The Struggle of the Arab Socialist Ba^ʿth Party. A Concise Historical-Analytic Study], pp. 109–111.

commercial companies, banks, industrial and transport enterprises. Large estates were also expropriated in pursuit of agrarian reform, and a slow programme of land redistribution began. The ruling left wing of the party called for sustained efforts to achieve “socialist transformation” (at-taḥwīl al-ishtirākī) through the expansion of the public sector and greater support for cooperatives in both agriculture and commerce.⁶ The Syrian economy was based largely on agriculture, and cotton was the main export product. Later, there was a shift to an economy dominated by services and the industrial and commercial sectors, and oil replaced cotton as the main source of convertible currency.⁷

In the second half of the 1960s, the government concentrated on creating state farms and cooperatives as agricultural production units. These gave the peasants land to use but not to own. The cooperatives provided seed, fertilizer and agricultural machinery, but in turn determined the crops grown and their sale.⁸ These measures, as well as the nationalisation of the means of production in the same period, fundamentally weakened the political and economic power of the former elites. They were forced either to leave the country with as much capital as they could take with them (which many did), or to cooperate or at least adapt to the new power structures. Consequently, the success or failure of a particular business was increasingly dependent on the degree to which these entrepreneurs were able to engage with the various social and political networks within the state and its institutions.⁹ However, even the Baʿthists in the armed forces were far from unanimous even about the proper course of Syrian affairs. The group led by the ʿAlawī officer Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, in collaboration with the civilian politicians guiding the Syrian governments between 1966 and 1970, ideologically pushed for a collective, state-controlled economy.

Upon the dissolution of the United Arab Republic in 1961, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was the first country to recognize Syria and to offer it support against political attacks by Egypt and other Arab countries for breaking up an “historical” union and becoming an isolationist.¹⁰ These improved relations lasted for a brief period, as the Baʿthist revolution in 1963 widened the ideological gap between the two countries. In 1966, when King Ḥusayn’s

⁶ LAWSON, F. H. Class Politics and State Power in Baʿthi Syria. In BERBEROGLU, B. (ed.). *Power and Stability in the Middle East*, p. 22.

⁷ PETRAN, T. *Syria*, p. 177; DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 83.

⁸ DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 78.

⁹ OLSON, R. W. *The Baʿth and Syria, 1947 to 1982. The Revolution of Ideology, Party and State*, p. 32; DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 55.

¹⁰ NEVO, J. Syria and Jordan: The Politics of Subversion. In MAʿOZ, M., YANIV, A. (eds.). *Syria under Assad. Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, p. 144.

relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) worsened, this placed a further strain on Syrian-Jordanian relations.¹¹ The Syrians supported the Palestine national liberation movement. However, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad and his supporters took pragmatic rather than ideological positions in dealing with Syria's problems at that time.

Disputes within the Syrian leadership escalated in autumn 1970 in the wake of the “Black September” events in Jordan. In an effort to re-establish the sovereignty of his government over the entire territory, King Ḥusayn on 17 September launched an armed campaign to crush the growing political power of the Palestinian guerrillas in Jordan.¹² The Syrian regional command of the Baʿth Party decided to provide military aid to the Palestinians.¹³ Only two members, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad and Muṣṭafā Ṭalās, opposed the action. On 20 September 1970 PLO troops with Syrian army units supported by tanks entered Jordanian territory and defeated the elite Jordanian 40th Brigade.¹⁴ However, the U.S. – apprehensive about the safety of the monarchy – threatened to intervene and the attacking troops had to withdraw.¹⁵ Lacking air cover, they suffered heavy losses.¹⁶ In Syria, the action received widespread condemnation, and the regional leadership of the Baʿth Party, which was dominated by supporters of Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, harshly criticized two of its members in October 1970, which brought the rift in the Baʿth Party into the open.¹⁷

The death of Egyptian President Jamāl ʿAbdānāṣir on 28 September contributed indirectly to Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad's decision to end the dual power in Syria.¹⁸ Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad's ascension to the top of the Syrian power pyramid clearly demonstrated that the party structures were also controlled by the military. At a congress of the Syrian regional organization of the Baʿth Party on 16 November 1970, a resolution was passed demanding the dismissal of the defence minister. Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad did not hesitate, and with his loyal troops surrounding the congress hall, he dismissed the newly elected Regional Command and appointed his own interim leadership, which he put himself at

¹¹ DALLAS, R. *King Hussein. A Life on the Edge*, p. 102.

¹² SALIBI, K. *The Modern History of Jordan*, p. 237.

¹³ The all-Arab Baʿth Party had its “national command” (al-qiyāda al-qawmīya) which had its subordinate yet autonomous “regional commands” (al-qiyāda al-quṭrīya) in different Arab countries. The national command had the right to dissolve the regional command. See HINNEBUSCH, R. *Syria. Revolution from Above*, pp. 60–61.

¹⁴ HOPWOOD, D. *Syria, 1945 – 1986. Politics and Society*, pp. 51–52.

¹⁵ Al-ʿASHĀ, Fuʿād. *Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. Qāʿid wa risāla* [Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. The Leader and Mission], p. 181.

¹⁶ Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram. *Mudakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī*. Vol. IV, pp. 3482–3483.

¹⁷ McHUGO, J. *Syria. A Recent History*, p. 152.

¹⁸ PETRAN, T. *Syria*, p. 247.

the head of.¹⁹ This event became a turning point in Syria's future development. When Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad assumed power in the state in the autumn of 1970, his regime marked the arrival of new men from rural backgrounds to replace the traditional urban politicians and representatives of business circles. It was an authoritarian regime whose power base consisted of the army and the Ba^cth Party.²⁰

Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad who took control of the party apparatus, also enforced the most significant political change at the level of state governance by establishing a presidential system in Syria. In Syria, where the majority of the population was Sunnī Muslim, the post of head of state had always been held by a representative of that community, and it was not easy to break this custom. According to tradition the Syrian head of state had to be a Muslim. However, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad belonged to the ^cAlawī sect, which was not officially accepted. To resolve this dilemma, he appealed to an influential Shī^rī cleric, the Imām Mūsā aṣ-Ṣadr, head of the Higher Shī^rī Council in Lebanon, who issued a religious ruling (fatwa) that the ^cAlawīs were indeed a community of Shī^rī Islām. His own authenticity as a Muslim was verified also by Sunnī Muslim ^culamā' including the Muftī of Damascus.²¹

Therefore, after the November coup, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad contented himself with the post of prime minister, and the new leadership of the Ba^cth Party, appointed an unknown 39-year-old Sunnī teacher, Aḥmad al-Khaṭīb, the former president of the teachers' union, as interim head of state.²² However, this unnatural state of affairs lasted only a short time: Aḥmad al-Khaṭīb resigned and, as early as 22 February 1971, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad assumed the presidency, confirmed in office by referendum on 12 March for a seven-year term.²³ In doing so, he also became commander-in-chief of the army and directed all areas of state policy: appointing and dismissing ministers and cabinet ministers and filling key positions in the judiciary, with the need to rebuild the Syrian state and society always to the fore. In forming the government, he appointed Major-General ^cAbdarrahmān Khulayfāwī on 3 April 1971 to the post of prime minister.²⁴

¹⁹ Al-^cASHĀ, Fu'ād. *Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. Qā'id wa risāla*, p. 190.

²⁰ Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram. *Mudakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī*. Vol. IV, p. 3487.

²¹ MA'OZ, Moshe. The Emergence of Modern Syria. In MA'OZ, M., YANIV, A. (eds.). *Syria under Assad. Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, p. 30.

²² SEALE, P. *Asad of Syria. The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 173.

²³ GOMBĀR, E. *Revolučně demokratické strany na Blízkém východě* [Revolutionary-Democratic Parties in the Middle East], p. 40.

²⁴ SEALE, P. *Asad of Syria. The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 173.

²⁴ HINNEBUSCH, R. *Syria. Revolution from Above*, p. 79.

After the November coup, Ḥāfīz al-Asad tried to end Syria's political isolation in the Arab world, which had been particularly severe in the period since February 1966. He sought a rapprochement with the "confrontation states" Egypt and Jordan, as well as with more conservative states such as Saudi Arabia, for the purpose of building up a unified military and political front against Israel.²⁵

The events of November 1970 became a turning point in Syria's future development. Within a short time, after the President's loyalists had sufficiently taken control of the party's decisive organs, the selection of delegates to the next Fifth Regional Congress of the Ba'ath Party, which met from 8–14 May 1971, took place. The congress, on the basis of the observation that "the development of the peoples of the Third World after their socialist revolutions has shown that there must be a leader of the march of the masses (qā'id al-maṣīra)", concluded that Ḥāfīz al-Asad was that personage.²⁶ The delegates at the convention approved Ḥāfīz al-Asad's programme, which they called the corrective movement (al-ḥaraka at-taṣḥīḥiyya).²⁷ They approved the composition of the new regional command of the Ba'ath Party and elected Ḥāfīz al-Asad as secretary-general. A committee was also approved to prepare for the party's next national convention. The new ruler wielded absolute power and soon became the object of a personality cult. The regime adopted socialist-type economic policies and advocated egalitarian reforms.

On 23–31 August, the Eleventh National Congress met in Damascus to elect the new National Command of the Ba'ath Party and Ḥāfīz al-Asad to head it.²⁸ The delegates stressed the need to permanently maintain the ideological and organizational unity of the party at the national (pan-Arab) level. They identified the liberation of the territories occupied by Israel as the primary goal on which the strategy of the struggle for unity and socialism in the coming period should focus. To achieve this goal, all human, military and economic resources should be mobilised to wage the liberation struggle.²⁹ Consequently, a parliament was formed as a unicameral House of the People (majlis ash-sha'b), which had largely symbolic powers but was the first legislative body since

²⁵ VAN DAM, N. *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961 – 1978*, p. 91.

²⁶ Quoted in GOMBÁR, E. *Dramatický pŕŕmĕsíc. Sýrie, Libye a Írán v procesu transformace* [A Dramatic Crescent. Syria, Libya and Iran in the Transformation Process], pp. 24–25.

²⁷ HOPWOOD, D. *Syria, 1945 – 1986. Politics and Society*, p. 56.

²⁸ DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 65.

²⁹ *Niḍāl Hizb al-ba'ath al-'arabī al-ishṭirākī, 1943 – 1975 Dirāsa tāriḫīya taḥlīliyya mūjaza* [The Struggle of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. A Concise Historical-Analytic Study], pp. 128–129.

1966. It had 173 members, 87 of whom were members of the Ba^cth Party, 8 were Communists, 36 were peasant representatives and the rest were independents.³⁰ When the long-delayed Local Government Act was passed in early 1972, elections to provincial assemblies could also be held.

Ḥāfīz al-Asad, as a pragmatist, made further democratizing gestures designed to win support for his regime by creating institutions of political participation that were more open and broader-based than what Syria had known in the previous decade. Since May 1971, there had been talks about forming a *Patriotic Progressive Front*, in which the Ba^cth Party wanted to include all relevant political parties.³¹ A number of rival parties (including the Communist Party of Syria), in agreed statutes, acknowledged the leading role of the Ba^cth Party, thus formally ensuring a degree of pluralism.³² The President's aim was to merge the *Patriotic Progressive Front* parties into a single party but due to strong opposition to this plan, not least from the Communists, he decided to postpone it until a later date.

In a relatively short period of time, Ḥāfīz al-Asad successfully managed to approach Syrian businessmen abroad asking them to return to the homeland with the promise that certain sectors of the economy would be open to private entrepreneurs. He also broadened the regime's base by establishing in 1971 the long talked-of *Patriotic Progressive Front* (al-Jabha al-waṭaniya at-taqaddumiya), controlled by the Ba^cth Party. Of eighteen seats on the governing board the Ba^cth Party had ten seats including the chairmanship reserved for the president. The *nāṣirist Arab Socialist Union* (al-Ittiḥād al-ishtirākī al-^carabī), the *Arab Socialist Party* (al-Ḥizb al-^carabī al-ishtirākī), descended from Akram al-Ḥawrānī's old party, the *Movement of Socialist Unionists* (Ḥarakat al-waḥdawiyyīn al-ishtirākīyyīn) (a Ba^cth splinter), and the *Communist Party* (al-Ḥizb ash-shuyūḥī as-sūrī) had two seats each.³³ In return for joining in a subordinate role, these parties were given the opportunity to function legally, cabinet seats and assured legitimacy. One key area was denied to them: the Ba^cth reserved to itself the conduct of political activity in the armed forces.³⁴

Ḥāfīz al-Asad became president of Syria at a time of rising tensions in the Middle East. A significant consequence for Syria of the 1967 war was that its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict increased following the loss of the Golan Heights. This conflict itself increasingly dominated its domestic and foreign policy, although it was not always consistent. On the one hand Syria's

³⁰ PETRAN, T. *Syria*, p. 250.

³¹ Al-^cASHĀ, Fu'ād. *Ḥāfīz al-Asad. Qā'id wa risāla*, pp. 215–219.

³² DEVLIN, J. F. *The Ba^cth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 319.

³³ SEALE, P. *Asad of Syria. The Struggle for the Middle East*, pp. 175–176.

³⁴ DEVLIN, J. F. *The Ba^cth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 319.

leadership was fundamentally committed to the Arab cause but on the other hand the practical and immediate considerations of “realpolitik” meant that it had to act in a way that was motivated more by the interests of its own state and the need to consolidate the regime than by the interests of the “Arab homeland”.³⁵

President Ḥāfīz al-Asad continued to rule on behalf of the Baʿth Party while consolidating his personal power. He abandoned efforts to precipitate a radical revolution in Syria and instead attempted to consolidate his party’s rule, broaden support for the regime and strengthen the armed forces against Israel – all in an attempt to gain legitimacy for his rule. He inherited a party that had gained some legitimacy but was not elected by popular vote. If he did not want to look like an absolutist dictator he had to try to win the sympathy of the majority of the population. He chose to emphasize his leadership, relying on the direct support of his ʿAlawī contemporaries. He sought to eliminate the previous factionalism in the party and to bring order to the governmental and representative institutions. By associating the presidency with his person (following the model of Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir) he found himself above all other members of the government and the ruling elite in the party and the military. This led to a growing personality cult, which Ḥāfīz al-Asad did not resist in any way.³⁶

The president had to build his power on other than an institutional basis – on a network of his ʿAlawī supporters in strategic positions in the army with several units personally loyal to him and in alliance with Sunni officers and Baʿth Party functionaries. Since Sunnis constituted the majority of the population he could not afford to alienate them, so he sought to force Sunnis from the urban population into the party leadership. He also approached middle-class professionals with offers of membership of the party or of progressive nonpartisan organizations. Ḥāfīz al-Asad, although he relied on the support of the ʿAlawī, had to try to balance tensions between the groups while maintaining his personal power; he was not always successful. Opposition was both regional and sectarian, personal and ideological, and he often had to deal with it ruthlessly.³⁷

President Ḥāfīz al-Asad maintained the principle of the predominance of the public sector in the economy but was less dogmatic than his predecessors in implementing change. He made a conciliatory gesture toward the Sunni urban merchant class by liberalizing the economy and relaxing some restrictions on private sector activity. The combination of a predominant public sector with

³⁵ ODEH, B. J. *Lebanon: Dynamics of Conflict. A Modern History*, pp. 184–185.

³⁶ HOPWOOD, D. *Syria, 1945 – 1986. Politics and Society*, p. 92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

private sector participation was successful for a time and Syria experienced an economic boom in the 1970s. Financial support from the Arab oil states, foreign loans from other states and rising revenues from its own modest oil industry allowed the government to embark on bolder development projects and to increase state participation in health, education, etc.³⁸ However, Syria's economic prosperity was tied to the Middle East political situation and, when the president's foreign policy alienated the oil states, the country's economy began to decline and the government was forced to impose austerity measures.

Syria's economic development was also plagued by domestic problems. The influx of skilled executives and technicians was not enough to fill the rapidly expanding state-run enterprises. In addition, top management positions were often awarded on the basis of loyalty to the Ba'ath Party rather than professional merit,³⁹ a practice that adversely affected economic efficiency. Finally, the regime's economy was also hit by the scourge of corruption. Although Ḥāfīz al-Asad lived modestly, many of the high-ranking officials who rose to power on his back did not. Many high-ranking officers, civil servants, and party officials financed their luxurious lives through smuggling, bribes, commissions and black-market machinations.⁴⁰ These malpractices were also exploited by the president's younger brother Rif'at, whose expensive hobbies and dubious financial dealings were widely known. The corruption associated with such public figures contributed to widespread dissatisfaction with the regime as a whole.⁴¹

Ḥāfīz al-Asad, perhaps because of his rural origins, placed a high priority on improving the living conditions of the peasants. The government expanded social services (education and health)⁴² in the countryside, developed transportation and irrigation systems, and established peasant cooperatives to provide peasants with seed, machinery and credit. Although these measures greatly improved living conditions in the countryside, the regime's efforts to manage agricultural production were not very successful. Plans were made to distribute land but most Syrian peasants remained landless. Moreover, the introduction of central planning led to an increase in bureaucratic decision-making in agriculture, creating situations where Ba'ath Party officials, ignorant of the issues, were empowered to make decisions. Cotton production increased

³⁸ OLSON, R. W. *The Ba'ath and Syria, 1947 to 1982*, p. 32.

³⁹ DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 82.

⁴⁰ LAWSON, F. H. Class Politics and State Power in Ba'athi Syria. In BERBEROGLU, B. (ed.). *Power and Stability in the Middle East*, p. 23.

⁴¹ GOMBÁR, E. *Dramatický pŕlměšíc. Sýrie, Libye a Írán v procesu transformace* [A Dramatic Crescent. Syria, Libya and Iran in the Transformation Process], p. 24.

⁴² PETRAN, T. *Syria*, p. 223.

substantially in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas food crop production lagged behind and did not keep pace with consumption demands: Syria had to import increasing quantities of food.⁴³

After Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad came to power in 1970 there was a degree of economic liberalisation. Under the policy of “liberation” (al-infirāj) or “opening up to the people” (al-infitāḥ ‘alā ash-sha‘b), restrictions and exchange were removed and trade regulations relaxed.⁴⁴ The return of Syrian private capital from abroad, coupled with substantial aid to Syria from wealthy Arab states after 1973, increased oil revenues and transit trade and the earnings of Syrian workers in the Gulf states sent home, all led to economic growth that lasted into the second half of the 1970s.⁴⁵ The Third Five-Year Plan (1971 – 1976) focused mainly on industrial development, and in this sector the state invested 46.3% of all public investment and launched several ambitious industrial development plans.⁴⁶ As most of these industrial projects required large amounts of investment, far beyond the capacity of domestic private capital, all key industries were transferred to state ownership.

Private manufacturing benefited indirectly from infrastructure improvements and overall market expansion and export opportunities. Furthermore, most private manufacturing enterprises, about 85,000 in number, were small enterprises because they employed fewer than ten workers, often family members. Only a smaller proportion, about 2,000, employed more than ten workers. The most profitable business sectors were construction and contracting, in which private individuals acted as intermediaries between private companies – both foreign and domestic – and the government.⁴⁷ As well as receiving much more investment, price controls on vegetables and fruit were removed. Despite agrarian reform, 70% of the land was still privately farmed.

The disinterest or incompetence of Syrian governments since independence in 1946 had hampered social and economic progress. In 1960, 60% of Syria’s population (over 10 years of age) was illiterate, and this number declined only slightly during the 1960s. When Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad came to power, he declared that his government would eradicate illiteracy within ten years but, despite a large

⁴³ CARR, D. W. Capital Flows and Development in Syria. In *Middle East Journal*, Autumn 1980, No. 34, pp. 459–464; FIRRO, K. The Syrian Economy under the Assad Regime. In MA’OZ, M., YANIV, A. (eds.). *Syria under Assad*, p. 54.

⁴⁴ LAWSON, F. H. Class Politics and State Power in Ba’thi Syria. In BERBEROGLU, B. (ed.). *Power and Stability in the Middle East*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ ZISSER, E. *Asad’s Legacy. Syria in Transition*, p. 10; DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ FIRRO, K. The Syrian Economy under the Assad Regime. In MA’OZ, M., YANIV, A. (eds.). *Syria under Assad*, p. 54.

⁴⁷ DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 90.

increase in the number of students, it failed to reduce it by more than another 10%. Fulfilling this promise was hampered by rapid population growth of 3.7% a year, which outstripped the government's ability to provide enough teachers and classrooms. Students who successfully completed secondary education were allowed to study at universities free of charge and without a selection process. Although this policy had a positive effect by widening access to higher education, it also had a negative side as it meant overcrowded lecture halls and a reduction in the level of education.⁴⁸

Many measures were taken by the new regime to reassure urban residents that it had their problems and interests at heart. Ḥāfīz al-Asad hoped not only to reach out to the urban middle classes but also to win them over to the new building effort. He freed up opportunities to travel abroad, especially to Lebanon, lowered the prices of many staple foods and increased family allowances. The general amnesty allowed many citizens to return to public life. The decision to allow the import of the Lebanese press, which was not openly hostile to his regime, was welcomed by the urban intelligentsia.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the president encouraged the return of a significant number of Syrian emigrants living in Arab countries by promising and providing business opportunities in some areas of the country's economic life, particularly in the service sector. This move did not change the socialist nature of the Syrian economy nor did it allow private participation in large enterprises but it did allow smaller entrepreneurs to make profits. The change of policy appealed to many Syrians, so that they returned, mainly from Lebanon, and many brought back substantial amounts of convertible currency.⁵⁰

Despite restrictions on political and intellectual freedoms, the regime pushed ahead with social reforms. The president made a public commitment to the equality of men and women, which was subsequently applied in all spheres of life. However, the practice followed was not always in line with the law and conservative attitudes in society continued to restrict women's participation in the labour market.⁵¹ Moreover, opponents of the president used the fact that the regime supported women's emancipation to highlight the secularism of the government and its lack of respect for Islamic values. When the regime sought to implement the Ba'ath Party's original principle of social transformation, it was accompanied by political rigidity, cultural colourlessness and intellectual obsequiousness, despite the fact that the president tried to show official Sunnī

⁴⁸ HOPWOOD, D. *Syria, 1945 – 1986. Politics and Society*, pp. 124–131.

⁴⁹ PETRAN, T. *Syria*, p. 251.

⁵⁰ DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, p. 66.

⁵¹ PETRAN, T. *Syria*, pp. 225–226.

clerics due respect and several of them made it into the House of People's deputies.⁵²

The personalities who consistently achieved the positions of prime minister, foreign minister and defence minister (ʿAbdalḥalīm Khaddām, Fārūq ash-Sharāʿ, and Muṣṭafā Ṭalās) had direct access to the president, while the other ministers tended to have little political clout and were in the cabinet only to carry out the president's decisions, whether they were members of the Baʿth Party or technocrats. The new constitution, which provided for an elected representative body (the House of Peoples), was adopted on 31 January 1973. However, the constitution gave the president such extensive powers that the House was only a kind of symbol of democratic government. Protests were, however, voiced at the fact that the constitution did not include the usual condition that the president must be a Sunnī Muslim.⁵³ To the shaken Sunnī majority in Syria, this omission implied that the regime of the ʿAlawī Cali ruler would be both secular and sectarian, and so they staged protest demonstrations in major cities. Ḥāfīz al-Asad reacted flexibly and had the relevant article of the constitution amended to state that the president must be a Muslim. He also saw to it that the eminent scholar and head of the Lebanese Shīʿite community, Imām Mūsā aṣ-Ṣadr, issued a decree (fatwa) affirming that the ʿAlawīs were Shīʿites, i.e., Muslims.⁵⁴ The protest and the response to it showed that sectarian tensions continued to play a significant role in Syrian political life.

Ḥāfīz al-Asad was not only determined but also pragmatic, and his main idea was to maintain his hard-won power. He used both the army and the Baʿth Party as tools to win the presidency and when he reached the top of the pyramid he made both of these institutions the mainstays of his regime. He himself took over as secretary-general of the party, thus combining the position of head of state with that of party leader. With an elaborate hierarchy, a network of affiliated popular organizations and branches in the armed forces, the Baʿth Party was transformed into an instrument of political control and education (indoctrination). Another mainstay of the regime, the army and internal security forces, reinforced the authority of the state and was deployed to suppress opposition when necessary.⁵⁵

Ḥāfīz al-Asad sought to ensure loyalty to his regime by appointing relatives and associates enjoying his confidence to key positions. In this respect, his

⁵² GOMBÁR, E. *Dramatický pŕŕlmĕšíc. Sýrie, Libye a Írán v procesu transformace* [A Dramatic Crescent. Syria, Libya and Iran in the Transformation Process], p. 35.

⁵³ SEALE, P. *Asad of Syria. The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 173.

⁵⁴ ZISSER, E. *Asad's Legacy. Syria in Transition*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ MA'UZ, Moshe. The Emergence of Modern Syria. In MA'UZ, M., YANIV, A. (eds.). *Syria under Assad. Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, p. 31.

personal triumph in winning the presidency marked a victory for the °Alawī community. Officers from this community were promoted and given the most important command posts in the army and the security forces and were thus involved in the maintaining of the regime. In addition, members of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad's family were put in charge of several Special Forces outside the official military structure. The most prominent of these was the elite Praetorian Guard, known as the Defence Companies (Sarāyā ad-difā°),⁵⁶ commanded by the president's younger brother Rif°at. The regime took on a distinctly °Alawī coloration that was viewed with suspicion by the Sunnī majority.

Real power remained in the hands of the armed forces, and it was there that the struggle for key positions and control that characterized the period up to 1970 took place. Although a few Sunnis retained their posts, all key positions in the armed and security forces gradually fell into the hands of members of non-Sunnī minorities, such as the °Alawīs, Ismā°ilīs, and Drūzes, who came from rural areas.⁵⁷ The Ba°th Party, which had only about 400 members in 1963, expanded substantially, especially in the aforementioned minority communities, and by the early 1970s reportedly had nearly a million members out of a population of 13 million. During the constant infighting that arose among the various factions of the Ba°th Party, political players increasingly sought support among their party colleagues in the military and within their own communities.

For Ḥāfiẓ al-Assad, the conflict with Israel took precedence over all other foreign policy issues. In his view, Israel was an expansionist state whose ambitions were confirmed by the United States. He believed it was Syria's duty to resist the Israeli threat and work for the cause of Arab unity. His view of Israel was in line with that of most Syrians, who felt the loss of Palestine much more intensely than did the inhabitants of other, more distant Arab states. In the last period of Ottoman rule, the territory that became the Palestine Mandate had been considered part of southern Syria, and its transformation into an Israeli state aroused strong emotions among Syrians.⁵⁸

Ḥāfiẓ al-Assad's primary concern was to regain the Golan Heights, territory Syria had lost in the June 1967 war. He was convinced that it could and should be won on the battlefield. Only by demonstrating military capability would the Arabs be taken seriously by the international community. Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad found a willing ally in Egyptian President Anwar al-Sādāt. Together they planned military action for October 1973, when both armies simultaneously attacked

⁵⁶ GOMBÁR, E. *Dramatický půlměsíc. Sýrie, Libye a Írán v procesu transformace* [A Dramatic Crescent. Syria, Libya and Iran in the Transformation Process], p. 28.

⁵⁷ Ar-RAZZÁZ, Munif. *At-Tajriba al-murra* [Bitter Experience], pp. 158–160.

⁵⁸ GOMBÁR, E. *Dramatický půlměsíc. Sýrie, Libye a Írán v procesu transformace* [A Dramatic Crescent. Syria, Libya and Iran in the Transformation Process], p. 28.

Israeli troops occupying Arab territory.⁵⁹ The goal of the Arabs when they unleashed this war was to break the deadlock reached in the negotiations to end the 1967 Israeli aggression and to trigger an international crisis that would force the superpowers to intervene and pressure Israel to withdraw from the territories it had occupied in the June War. Egypt's aim was to cross the Suez Canal by force and fortify itself on its eastern bank before diplomatic negotiations at the United Nations could begin. Syria's aim was to conquer the Golan Heights and push the Israelis out. Both Egypt and Syria had limited war aims because it was clear to them that they could not defeat Israel and push it out of all the occupied territories, so they were mainly concerned with political gain.⁶⁰ All previous Arab-Israeli wars had stalled after the fighting ended and remained politically open-ended. The October War was the first one to be followed by a partial political settlement.

Hāfīz al-Asad was aware that if Syria was to wage an Arab struggle against Israel, the Syrian armed forces had to be modernized. He persuaded the USSR, his main supplier of arms, to increase not only their quantity but also their quality. He therefore launched a massive build-up of the armed forces, which grew from 50,000 in 1967 to 225,000 in 1973 to over 400,000 in the early 1980s. Such an unprecedented growth of the army was expensive. In the early 1980s, Syria devoted over 20% of its GDP to military spending.⁶¹ Arms purchases were straining the country's economy and gobbling up funds that could have been invested in domestic projects.

On its front, Egypt, after overrunning the Bar-Lev line on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal and advancing into the Sinai Peninsula, ceased to develop its offensive and very quickly assumed a defensive position.⁶² This allowed the Israeli army to immediately deploy many more forces and assets on the Syrian front and to exert much more pressure than expected, and so the Syrian army did not succeed in liberating the Golan Heights but was pushed back.⁶³ As a result, relations between the two states deteriorated considerably, especially after it became clear in the second half of the 1970s that Egypt was willing to enter into separate negotiations with Israel. Another important consequence of the Arab-Israeli wars was the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a political and military force that caused problems for

⁵⁹ WANNER, J. *Krvavý Jom Kippur. Čtvrtá a pátá arabsko-izraelská válka ve světové politice* [The Bloody Yom Kippur. The Fourth and Fifth Arab-Israeli War in International Politics], pp. 119–120.

⁶⁰ SHLAIM, A. *The Iron Wall. Israel and the Arab World*, p. 320.

⁶¹ DEVLIN, J. F. *Syria. Modern State in an Ancient Land*, pp. 112–113.

⁶² BELL, P. M. H. *The World since 1945. An International History*, p. 4404.

⁶³ CALVOCORESSI, P. *World Politics, 1945 – 2000*, p. 416.

the armies and governments of other Arab states, as was demonstrated first in Jordan and then in Lebanon. In 1974, at an Arab summit in Rabat, Morocco, the PLO was recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, a development that expanded its own political role and changed the position of other players in the region, notably Jordan's King Ḥussein.⁶⁴

Although the war began well for both Arab allies, it ended with Syria's defeat and Egypt's lacklustre success. The battle for the Golan Heights was nevertheless quite even, and the new Syrian army did not fare badly.⁶⁵ Ḥāfīz al-Asad had reason to believe that in time some Arab coalition would wrest back the Israeli-occupied territories. However, the possibility of gaining credible partners began to fade when Egypt abandoned the anti-Israeli front. From the Syrian point of view, Anwar as-Sādāt betrayed the Arab cause by becoming a participant in pushing for a US-Israeli settlement in the Middle East. The Syrian president was determined not to allow this order to prevail. The situation after the October War was also discussed at an extraordinary regional Ba'ath Party congress in the first half of June 1974. It set as its main objective at that point in time the liberation of the territories occupied in the 1967 war and the securing of the national rights of the Palestinian people. It called for the strengthening of solidarity, for the mobilization of all forces and for the setting aside of ancillary divisions among the Arab countries.⁶⁶ Since no reliable Arab ally committed to the new order was emerging, Ḥāfīz al-Asad decided that Syria would proceed alone so as to achieve a military equilibrium with Israel. This decision resulted in the aforementioned large-scale armament.

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⁶⁴ ROBINS, P. *A History of Jordan*, pp. 138–139.

⁶⁵ ZISSER, E. *Asad's Legacy. Syria in Transition*, p. 9.

⁶⁶ GOMBĀR, Eduard. *Revolučně demokratické strany na Blízkém východě* [Revolutionary-Democratic Parties in the Middle East], pp. 42–43.

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