

The Class Character of Syria - From an Oriental Despotic State to Neo-Colony to Fascist Dictatorship to Civil War

Written, May 24, 2018; Part 1 web-uploaded November 2020; Hari Kumar

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Introduction

Middle East politics today are a complex maze. But the extraordinary, vindictive and destructive war launched upon the Syrian workers and peasants by Assad, demands Marxist-Leninist interpretations. As war grinds to a conclusion – which at the time of writing, appears to favour Bashar Assad remaining in power, the landscape of the Middle East has been transformed. Marxist-Leninists have had relatively little to say on the war and its forces, and in the main – they have taken the stance of a tacit or fully open support of Assad. We would disagree with this and offer a counter-point.

We suggest that a minimum of **four core historical features**, offer guides for Marxist-Leninists, to navigate the maze.

Firstly, is the nationalist fervour in the Middle East upon the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. Arab or Pan-Islamic nationalism, was seen as a solution for the masses. Ultimately it failed to establish meaningful independence in any of the Arab states. Nonetheless Arab (or pan-Islamic) nationalism wore progressive colours, when aimed against imperialism. The Communist International took critical and differing viewpoints to the pan-Islamic movements.

Under Lenin's direct supervision, the Comintern warned of the reactionary nature in the pan-Islamic content:

“It is necessary to struggle against the pan-Islamic and pan-Asiatic movements and similar tendencies, which are trying to combine the liberation struggle against European and American imperialism with the strengthening of the power of Turkish and Japanese imperialism and of the nobility, the large landlords, the priests, etc.”

(“Theses On The National And Colonial Question”; Adopted By The Second Comintern Congress; 28 July 1920; Protokoll,ii, p.224;. in Degras, Jane: “The Communist International”; p.143

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/documents/volume1-1919-1922.pdf>)

However later, the Communist International took a more flexible approach, stating that although it could take many “varied” forms, such movements against imperialism should be supported by communists:

“In Moslem countries the national movement at first finds its ideology in the religio-political watchwords of pan-Islam, and this enables the officials and diplomats of the great Powers to exploit the prejudices and ignorance of the broad masses in the struggle against this movement (English imperialism's game with pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism, English plans to transfer the Khalifate to India, French imperialism's playing on its 'Moslem sympathies'). But to the extent that the national liberation movements grow and expand, the religio-political watchwords of pan-Islam are increasingly replaced by concrete political demands. The struggle recently waged in Turkey to deprive the Khalifate of temporal power confirms this.... Taking full cognizance of the fact that those who represent the national will to State independence may, because of the variety of historical circumstances, be themselves of the most varied

kind, the Communist International supports every national revolutionary movement against imperialism.”.

(“Theses On The Eastern Question Adopted By The Fourth Comintern Congress”; November 1922 Thesen und Resolutionen,; In: Degras, Jane: “The Communist International”; p. 385-386 at

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/documents/volume1-1919-1922.pdf>)

Yet to date Arab or pan-Islamic nationalisms, have failed to alleviate the suffering of the masses. This failure followed Western imperialist attacks on the peoples and states of the Middle East on the one hand; and the fall into open revisionism of the socialist state of the USSR after 1951 on the other hand.

Secondly, the imperialist presence in the Middle East remains a major catalyst of wars. In order to firmly grip the Middle East, both Western imperialism and Putin-ite Russian neo-imperial pretensions have vied in the Middle East. They have both backed important stooges. The West has long backed Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as Turkey. With these forces, imperialism, especially the USA, has dominated the Middle East. This domination was easier, when the USSR dropped all façade and pretense at being a socialist state, and formally dissolved on December 26, 1991. As the Syrian war launched in 2011 made clear, the role of Saudi Arabia has been very pernicious. As far as Russian growing neo-imperial aspirations are concerned, shoring up the Assadite grip upon Syria was key. But this also meant supporting Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah Shi'ite forces, which together joined forces in suppressing anti-Assad Syrian revolutionary forces.

Cumulatively, this led to a war by proxy in which the pro-Western imperial forces vied against the neo-imperial forces headed by Russia and Iran. As the Syrian war nears its conclusion, this division will continue to light more fires in the Middle East.

Thirdly, the legacy of revisionism removed any leading role for Marxism-Leninism. The communist parties in the Middle East grew fast, but were under revisionist control even at their formation. In these countries, in particular in Syria, they merely served as a left mask for the national bourgeoisie. Consistent with this, Khalid Bakdash reneged on the launch of the second stage of the national democratic revolution – the socialist stage. It may be more accurate to say that Bakdash never embarked on a revolutionary road in the first place. At a critical juncture, the party did not move forward to socialism. In the ensuing vacuum, the Ba'ath Party enlisted Gamel Nasser to assist in destroying the communists. This was an attempt by Egypt to control Syria, by forming the United Arab Republic.

Subsequently, the CPs of the area were either massacred by nationalist forces, or openly subservient to national states for governmental seats. At times both occurred as in Iraq and Syria. As shells of a meaningful CPs, they were incapable of providing any convincing communist leadership. Unsurprisingly, many young, sincere revolutionaries in Syria, nowadays profess neo-anarchic forms of ideology, and organisation. This testifies to the shallowness of available communist models in Syria.

Finally, the state repressions of the Middle Eastern states removed any possible discussion of strategy, tactics and meaningful history. Many of these - ultimately

dependent upon imperialism - Arab states, adopted dictatorial and repressive policies. Their governments were just emerging from colonialism and semi-colonialism. Consequently they often had a very weak national bourgeoisie and a weak working class. In contrast they often had a large peasantry. Therefore, such struggling governments often ruled in the form of military dictatorship, reflecting their weak base, as they found the transition to democratic capitalism difficult. Moreover in their weakness, the national bourgeoisie found it expedient to use the imagery and rhetoric of 'socialism'. They often built a 'socialist' façade, and a 'mass' party. Many such states continued to rule using a form of Bonapartist military dictatorial government. In several – where a mass base had been built - this was virtually indistinguishable from fascism.

Yet such countries, still could not break out of the strait-jacket of imperial control. This became even more impossible after the final revisionist take-over of the USSR in 1956, and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. These governments increasingly retreated from even elementary democratic principles. Under siege at the ending of the 20th century, they were forced into the "neo-liberal" world of the new global economy.

The Case of Syria

This article places Syria today, within its history of class battles from a colonial and neo-colonial past, till 2000, when Bashar al-Assad "inherited" the state.

The 20th-21st century history of Syria, is one of a failed national democratic revolution. Following the First World War, Syria became a colony of the French in the period of the so-called French Mandate. After the Second World War Syria achieved a formal independence in 1945, but was in reality a neo-colony to France. The first post-war governments were military dictatorships.

During the neo-colonial period, Syria saw the rise of a Pan-Arab Nationalism, in the form of the Ba'ath Party, founded in 1947. Subsequently, the Ba'ath did not develop in an un-interrupted growth of a single party. In fact, the Ba'ath served as a flexible scaffold, around which three successive groupings created their own party base. This process unfolded from 1947 up to the year Hafiz Assad took sole power, in 1970, and extended till 2000. In 2000 it entered a new, fourth phase under Bashar al-Assad.

The first Ba'ath Party was a pan-Arabic pro-peasant and pro-urban trader party. It managed to form the first Ba'ath government in Syria in 1963, 18 years after independence. For a brief period the Ba'ath chose to ally with Nasserism. But it accepted a subordinate position to Nasserism and its' pan-Arabic, Wahd movement. This alliance was formed in order to crush the Syrian Communist Party and its followers.

After the Syrian Communists were crushed, the Syrian military nationalists, overwhelmingly from a peasant background, seized control of the state back from Egyptian hands. Around this period, the militarists formed the 'Military Committee', which hijacked the Ba'ath party, and turned it into a vehicle for the peasantry. The Ba'ath now became a cocoon for a coalition military dictatorship. The class basis for this specific Syrian form was primarily pro-peasant, explaining the important Agrarian reforms introduced.

When Hafiz Assad turned on his coalition, and took sole power in 1970, a new phase began. In this the Ba'ath was transformed into the mass 'people's' façade - of the fascist state of Hafiz Assad. This can be described early on as a Bonapartist military dictatorship under Hafiz Assad. But the character of the state became increasingly an open **fascist state**. Assad had created a **corporate state**, using the **mass base** of the Ba'ath Party. Under the Land Reforms, Ba'ath Party increased the land-mass of the rich peasantry, and enabled the high landlords to transform themselves into a capitalist class. This was the consolidation of a nascent weak national bourgeoisie.

In actuality, the very weakness of the Syrian national bourgeois forces, had made a corporate state structure attractive. This state took on the burden of building an infrastructure, and allowed a shallow capitalist accumulation. Yet it had arrived late on the international stage, and remaining a weak force - the national bourgeoisie were forced into a renewed dependency. For a time the state of Syria became a comprador state to then-revisionist USSR imperialism. After the USSR formally renounced any socialist pretensions in 1991, Syria was forced to rely again on Western imperialism.

By the start of the 21st century, Syria had plunged into a globalized neo-liberalism. The corporate state under Hafiz Assad, with its pro-peasant policies, did raise living standards to some extent. But now the living standards of the people again plummeted. Small surprise that the eruptions of the so-called "**Arab Spring**" resonated in Syria. The spark of the Syrian Resistance, or Uprising rapidly ignited the Syrian masses. A brutal suppression inevitably led to a Civil War. But in the Middle East, no peoples are allowed to play out class battles without the intercession of foreign powers. This is what duly ensued.

The repressive nature of the Syrian state under father and son Assad, should inform the strategy for progressives. It was never – and now especially no longer - adequate to support the Assad state as being 'secular', and struggling against a 'sectarian' opposition. For that matter the secular state had long been defended by an explicitly sectarian, praetorian guard of 'Alawites created by Hafez Assad, himself an 'Alawite. As David Hirst, historian of Lebanon pointed out:

"It is not in any real sense, the Ba'athists who run this country. It is the 'Alawites... In theory they run it behind the party, but in practice it is through their clandestine solidarity within the party and other important institutions... Behind the façade, the best qualification for holding power is proximity – through family, sectarian, or tribal origins - to the country's leading 'Alawite, President Assad."

(Hirst, D; Guardian; 26 June, 1979; Cited by Van Dam Nicholas: "The Struggle for power in Syria. Politics & Society Under Assad & the Ba'ath party"; London 1997 p. 100).

To denigrate the Syrian Opposition, interests close to the Assad family often fling religious labels ('Islamic' or 'Sunni Fundamentalists') at their opponents. But these are often misleading. While such labels can at times be accurate, they must be evaluated carefully. As **Enver Hoxha** said of the Iranian revolution that unseated **Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi** of Iran:

“It is the progressive, anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist and anti-feudal revolutionary movement of the popular masses of the Moslem Arab peoples, whether Shia or Sunni, that is the cause of... great difficulties. The whole situation in this region is positive, good, and indicates a revolutionary situation and a major movement of these peoples. At the same time, though, we see efforts made by the enemies of these peoples to restrain this movement or to alter its direction and intensity. Hence, we must regard these situations, these movements and uprisings of these peoples as revolutionary social movements, irrespective that at first sight they have a religious character or that believers or non-believers take part in them, because they are fighting against foreign imperialism and neo-colonialism or the local monarchies and oppressive feudalism. History gives us many positive examples in this direction when broad revolutionary movements of the popular masses have had a religious character outwardly. Among them we can list the Babist movements in Iran 1848-1851; the Wahabi movement in India which preceded the great popular uprising against the British colonizers in the years 1857-1859; the peasant movements at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century which swept most of the countries of Europe and especially Germany. The Reformation itself, although dressed in a religious cloak, represented a broad socio-political movement against the feudal system and the Catholic Church which defended that system. When the vital interests, the freedom and independence of a people are violated, they rise in struggle against any aggressor, even though that aggressor may be of the same religion.”

(Hoxha, Enver, January 1980. "The Events Which Are Taking Place In The Moslem Countries Must Be Seen In The Light Of Dialectical And Historical Materialism"; In "Reflections On The Middle East"; Tirana 1984; p.369;

transcribed by <http://www.enverhoxha.ru>

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/ebooks/reflections_on_the_middle_east.pdf

To be quite clear: we must condemn Islamic sectarianism.

At the same time we must support the anti-dictatorship struggle of democrats and revolutionaries inside Syria.

And lastly we reject the further penetration of imperialist powers.

Admittedly, these goals are difficult to achieve simultaneously, in the tumult of the Syrian uprising. Especially so, in the absence of a Marxist-Leninist party inside Syria.

Following, we first summarise the history, leading up to the characterization of the Assad regimes as, ultimately fascist. This then allows us, to detail the current civil war devastating Syria and its people.

We acknowledge documents from three defunct organisations. The more recent is Alliance Marxist-Leninist; and the older and more historically significant, are the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Britain, and Communist League. Some of these documents can be found at the archive at Alliance ML. The third document is Alliance 51: Pan-Arabic - or Pan-Islamic "Socialism". There are significant amendments to that earlier piece contained here.

<http://ml-review.ca/aml/AllianceIssues/SYRIAALLIANCE51.html>

<http://ml-review.ca/aml/PAPER/2006/Summer/HezbollahFinal.html>

http://www.allianceml.com/BLAND/Lebanon_WBB.htm

Bland W.B. "The War In The Middle East War Has Come Once Again To The Middle East"; in "Class Against Class" Organ Of The Marxist- Leninist Organisation Of Britain. No. 2. Special Edition October 1973. Reprinted Web Edition By Alliance Marxist-Leninist July 2003.

NOTE from November 23 2020.

This work was projected to be the third part of a detailed examination of the today's Middle East.

Our writings on Kurdish Nationalism began this project. Those two works were written with the benefit of frequent discussions with Garbis Altinoglu. They can be found at:

Theses on Kurdistan - A Marxist Leninist Framework, Part One July 2019; at ML Current Today <http://ml-today.com/category/history/page/2/>
and

Theses on Kurdistan - part 2; January 2020; at ML Currents Today: <http://ml-today.com/category/history/>)

It was all supposed to culminate in a Part 3 dealing with the conflagration in Syria.

However, regrettably the author became inundated with other work, and never completed it. However since questions continue to arise frequently upon the character of the Assad regime, Part 1 is here published of itself.

Part 2 will be joined to it, and a new web-publication will be completed shortly. That will finally complete the projected Third Part of the 'These on Kurdistan - A Marxist-Leninist Framework.

Pending that we hope this view of the Assad regime will benefit those who are puzzled as to whether the Assad regimes were indeed fascist or not.

The Class Character of Syria From an Oriental Despotic State to neo-colony to fascist dictatorship

The Country and its people

The historic term '**bilad al-Sham**' means "The Lands of Damascus", and refers to an extended "Natural Syria". This stretched from the Taurus mountains in the North, to the Western Mediterranean shores, the Eastern Euphrates, and the Arabian Southern deserts. Being so vast, it was frequently divided up during the centuries. Under the **French Mandate rule**, Syria consisted of both Syria and Lebanon in one administrative area (with Latakia and Jebel Druze) from 1925 to 1936. Syria later, refers to the **Syrian Republic** formed in 1936, from Syria, Jebel Druze and Latakia (also known as the State of the Alawis).

The population of Syria reflects a complex past, but it is now largely Muslim; by 1946 Arab speakers formed 85% of the population. Christian **Maronites** however always made a numerically significant minority. The population at the time of the French Mandate (1920-1946) consisted of: Sunnis (60% of the total population); 'Alawis 11.5%; Druze 3.0 %; Isma'ilis 1.5%; Christians 9.9%; Non-Arabs (Kurds 8.5%; Armenians 4.2%; plus small numbers of Circassians and Jews etc. (*Malik Mufti: "Sovereign Creations- Pan-Arabism & Political Order in Syria & Iraq"; Cornell; 1966; p.45).*)

Both these religious grouping, and some further sub-divisions into communal sects, retarded a united 'national' identity Syria. These divisions included religious differences. The main division spurring rivalry was within Islam - between Shi'ia and Sunni. On top, tribal differences played important roles even down to the battles within the Ba'th Party in the 1960s.

Colonising powers used these minorities to 'divide and rule'. The French imperialists were especially adept at using this age old tactic:

"The French favoured recruitment from the various religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Alawi, Druzes, Ismail'ilis, Christians, Kurds and Circassians, in the 'Troupes Speciales de Levant' – which later developed into the Syrian and Lebanese Armed Forces. At the same time however, members of the Sunni Arab majority of the Syrian population were not encouraged to enlist".

(*Van Dam Nicholas: "The Struggle for power in Syria. Politics & Society Under Assad & the Ba'ath party"; London 1997; Ibid p. 26).*)

"Discord between and within religious and ethnic minorities was also provoked by the fact that the French played off one tribal leader against the another".

(*Van Dam Ibid; p. 4).*)

The largest group of Muslims (both in the entire Muslim world and in Syria) are the **Sunni**, who adhere to the sunnah (practice) of Mohammed alone, whose sayings (hadith) form the Holy Words. According to **Ibn Khaldun** (1332–1406) Sunni are themselves subdivided into sects: the Hanafi, Zahari'te, Sha'fi'ite, Malikite and Hanbalite schools of legal thought. By the time of the Mamelukes and the Ottomans, the Zhaari'te was no longer formally recognised.

The **Salafi** or **Wahhabi** sect is largely based in Central Arabia, The Wahhabis are named after a jurist from the area of Najd, who was called **Ábd al-Wahhab** (1703-1791). During the Ottoman expansion, Wahhab founded a Puritanical sect. While adherents consider themselves as Sunni Muslims, they are rejected by most Sunni and Shi'ia as "a vile sect". This sect eschews idolatory and practices such as building of shrines. Wahhab became an ally of the House of Saud, and this sect is now headed by the Ibn-Saud_dynasty of present Saudi Arabia. (*Lewis Bernard, "The Arabs in History"; New York 1966; p. 161*).

The other main group within Islam is the **Shi'i (Or Shi'ia)**. In Syria, the **'Alawis** [or 'followers of **'Ali**] are Shi'i Muslims; as are the **Druzes** and the **Isma'ilis**. The Shi'ia in the 8th century, claimed that 'Ali - the Prophet Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law - was robbed of his inheritance by the first three Caliphs. The Shi'ites also claim that 'Ali was of divine status. They are therefore seen as 'infidels' by the Sunni Muslims. In Syria, the Alawi were concentrated in the mountainous areas. Previously, they tended to be dominated by the Sunni or the Christian-**Maronites**. The Sunnis were closely linked to the Turkish rulers of the Ottoman Empire, and oppressed the 'Alawis and the other minorities. However the French reversed the preferences." (*Seale P: "Assad - The Struggle for the Middle East"; London; 1988; p.17*).

The Tottering Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was an **Oriental Despotic** state, whose defining feature was the near complete absence of private property in land. Syria was central to it, under the **Umayyad Caliphate** of Mu'awiya in 661. But as the later Abbassi Dynasty waned in power, the **Mameluke** Sultans of Egypt, dominated Syria, ruling it as a single unit. When the **Ottoman Turks** displaced the Egyptian Mamelukes in 1516, the Osmani Sultans became the Caliphs. But as the Western democratic revolutionary winds reached the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire was challenged by **Ibrahim Pasha** of Egypt. He had already introduced some modern progress and education. As Ibrahim Pasha became emboldened, he wished to invade Constantinople in 1839. But he never invaded, as the 'Great Powers' intervened, to 'prop up the Sick Man of Europe' (the Sultanate of Constantinople.) Sultan Abdul Hamid occupied the throne 1876 through 1909, the epitome of a repressive monarch.

In 1908, a revolution took place in Ottoman Turkey against the despotic regime of **Abdul Hamid II**. All progressive forces participated in the 1908 revolution, including part of the armed forces, led by the **Committee of Union and Progress**. The Committee (including army officer **Enver Pasha**) unseated the Sultan. Enver Pasha at first was one of a ruling triumvirate, but he increasingly sought sole power. From 1909, the new regime became more repressive, following a series of workers' strikes and a reactionary Islamist rebellion. The Committee ensured Turkey entered the World War. Enver Pasha allied Turkey with Germany, and bombed Russian Black Sea towns. This led Russia to declare war on Turkey. Later the Committee destroyed Christian communities in Anatolia in 1915-16. **Churchill** noted that the alliance with Germany made the Allied division of Ottoman territories much easier. However, Allied forces were defeated by Ottoman forces, at Gallipoli, by November 1915.

As imperialists continued to attack the Ottomans, they searched for new allies. A

convenient imperialist vehicle was at hand. **Zionism**, since its inception at the end of the 19th century, was an ideology serving objectively the interests of developed capitalism, of imperialism. It presents workers and petty bourgeois of Jewish descent as members of "a Jewish nation", as "aliens" in the countries in which they live; it tells them that, to be "free", they must emigrate to their ancient "national homeland" in Palestine. Thus, the participation of a Zionist worker in the struggles of the working class for a better life, for socialism, can at best be only half-hearted, for he regards himself as an "outsider" whose eyes are directed towards "his own" country, which has now taken concrete shape in the state of Israel. Thus, Zionism is complementary to anti-semitism in its reactionary divisive effect.

The desire of the British imperialists to win the support of the Zionist movement for the Allied war effort in the First World War brought the **Balfour Declaration** of November 1917. This promised that the British Government would facilitate the setting up of "a National Home for the Jewish People" in Palestine.

The British imperialists were quite unworried that two years earlier, in July 1915, they had allied with **Husein Ibn Ali**, the Grand Sherif of Mecca (of the Hashemite Dynasty), They achieved this by promising to support the establishment of "an independent Arab state" in Palestine. Husein was to be made Sharif Caliph, and in this move, both religious and temporal power shifted away from Constantinople to Mecca–Arabia. Emboldened, Husein demanded an independent Arab kingdom under his rule, in the **Damascus Protocol**. Sir Henry McMahon, in the **McMahon-Hussein Correspondence**, used duplicitous wording suggesting a British commitment towards Palestine. This blithely ignored the 1916 secret treaty British imperialism had made with the French imperialists (**The Sykes-Picot Treaty**). Under Sykes-Picot, Palestine was to be divided between them. Palestine became "the much promised land".

To pay off his deal with France, McMahon forced Hussein to relinquish claims on Syria, Lebanon, Basra and Baghdad. This left Husein only Arabia, an offer that he rejected. Palestine was simply placed under an "international" mandate. Meanwhile Hussein "declared" war, leading to the abortive **Arab Uprising** in June 1916. It did not ignite any reaction, and the Arab tribes largely ignored the call.

The Zionist Seizure of Palestine – the imperialist foot in Arabia

When the First World War was over, the British and French imperialists took over the Arab Near East, disguising their colonial rule under the cloak of "**League of Nations Mandates**". As Jewish immigration continued, both legally and illegally into Palestine, Arab national liberation movements grew. This forced the imperialists to adopt new neo-colonial maneuvers of 'independence'. Iraq was granted "independence" in 1932, Syria and Lebanon in 1941, Jordan in 1946. And in 1947 the British government announced that it was ending its rule over Palestine in May of the following year and was transferring its "responsibilities" there to the United Nations.

The United Nations envisaged the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, with Jerusalem as an independent city. But this scheme was never put into effect. Instead on May 14th, 1948, the Zionists proclaimed most of Palestine "the state of Israel".

At the time of its formation, the state of Israel contained 1.3 million Arabs and 0.7 million Jews. The Zionists took steps to establish a Jewish majority. As Michael Bar-Zohar says in his sympathetic biography of the founder of Israel:

"Ben Gurion never believed in the possibility of coexistence with the Arabs. The fewer Arabs within the frontiers of the future state the better... A major offensive against the Arabs would... reduce to a minimum the proportion of the Arab population within the state.... He may be accused of racism, but in that case the whole Zionist movement would have to be put on trial".
(*Bar-Zohar, Michael; "Ben-Gurion: A biography"; London 1979*)

Thus, even before the declaration of "independence" Zionist armed gangs had begun a campaign of massacre and terror against the Arab population, driving great numbers of them to seek refuge in the neighbouring Arab states. By 1950 a million Arab refugees from Palestine were officially receiving United Nations aid, and by 1971 2.6 million of the 3.0 million population of Israel were Jews.

The establishment of a Jewish racist state in the heart of, and hostile to, the Arab world - gave world imperialism a valuable bridgehead against the Arab national liberation movement. This Israeli bridgehead depended upon the active support of world imperialism for its very existence.

At first Israel continued to depend upon British imperialism. It was Britain, together with France, which collaborated with Israel in the **Suez War** of aggression against Egypt, which began in October 1956. But the more powerful US imperialists were unwilling to allow their British and French rivals to extend their influence in the Middle East. The now revisionist and openly social-imperialist USSR agreed with the USA. Together these two compelled the British, French and Israeli forces to withdraw ignominiously from Egyptian territory. But they would of course then, fall out with each other.

Following the 1956 Suez Crisis, in September 1957, **Kermit Roosevelt** of the CIA was sent to Egypt to warn Nasser not to proceed with an arms agreement with the USSR. After the Suez incident, and the humiliation of the British and French, the USA ensured their own imperialism would dominate. This led to further USA attempts to destabilise Syria. A coup they had sponsored inside Syria had already failed in August (*Dilip Hiro; "Inside The Middle East"; London 1982; p.132*). So renewed anti-Syrian moves were arranged by the USA imperialists, with Iraqi and Turkish troop amassment on Syria's borders.

Nasser pre-empted the USA by a public announcement of an impending Russian arms deal. This transformed the Middle East from a pure Western preserve into one contested by the revisionist USSR. From Suez onwards, the Israeli ruling class transferred their dependence from British to US imperialism, which supplied huge quantities of military "aid" to Israel. Correspondingly the USSR started to funnel weapons aid to both Syria and to Egypt. Usually the amounts were far less than the US was sending to Israel.

As a result of this USA military "aid", in June 1967 Israel was able to launch its war of aggression against Egypt, Syria and Jordan, compelling these states to accept a cease-fire which left Israel in control of large areas of their territory.

Later, in the UN General Assembly, the United States representative defended the Israeli aggression as an action of "self-defence", but in November 1967 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution, drafted by Britain, which demanded that Israel withdraw all troops to her former boundaries and bring about a just settlement of the refugee problem. The Council appointed **Gunnar Jarring**, of Sweden, as UN Special Representative charged with securing the fulfilment of the resolution, but the Israeli government has always refused to carry out its terms.

The French Mandate in Syria

We return to Syria.

As pointed out, at the end of the First World War, Britain and France divided up the Ottoman territories. Sir **Mark Sykes** a Tory MP, who also chaired the De Bunsen Committee on the Middle East, decreed that five autonomous provinces should be created in the decentralised Ottoman Empire: Syria, Palestine, Armenia, Anatolia and Jazirah-Iraq. Now the United Nations "awarded" the French a Mandate over Syrian and Lebanon. France 'took' the North, which became the republics of Syria and Lebanon. Meanwhile in the South, Britain seized Palestine and Transjordan, despite the fact that:

"The inhabitants of the whole region made it clear that they wanted natural Syria to be independent and undivided: In July 1919 an elected body calling itself the **Syrian National Congress** repudiated the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration and demanded sovereignty status for a united Syria-Palestine".

(Seale; *Ibid*; p. 15).

The **Communist International** made a call to the peasants of Syria to reject the imperialist machinations:

"Peasants of Syria and Arabia! Independence was promised you by the English and the French, but now their armies are occupying your country, now they are dictating their laws to you, while you who freed yourselves from the Turkish Sultan and the Constantinople Government are now the slaves of the Paris and London Governments, who differ from the Sultan's Government only by being stronger and better able to exploit you".

(*To The Oppressed Popular Masses Of Persia, Armenia, And Turkey*"; *Extracts From An ECCI Appeal On The Forthcoming Congress Of Eastern Peoples At Baku*"; July 1920; In Degras, J: *Documents of the Communist International*"; p.108);

In the interim, an Arab administration led by **Amir Faysal** established itself in Damascus. The USA, was still only a nascent force in the Middle East. But wishing to block French imperialism, the USA used the **King-Crane Commission** to confirm the popular rejection of France. However, Syrian armed struggle was decisively suppressed by French troops under **General Geraud** at the **Battle of Maisaloun**. The French now set up a classic **colonial state**. On the principle of divide and rule, they created new states, and fostered the remaining divisions between people of the former bilad al-Sham – the Ottoman territory of a Greater Syria.

The modern Syria was carved out of the **State of Greater Lebanon**, by detaching Tyre, Sidon, Beirut and Tripoli, the Baqa' Valley and the Sh'i region of North Palestine. These were attached to Mount Lebanon - the fief of **Maronite compradors** of France. In 1921, France pulled back their troops from south and southwestern Anatolia, which included parts of the Ottoman sanjak (or province) of Aleppo. But the important city of Aleppo itself remained part of the French colony of Syria. That was true for Alexandratta (the present day Iskenderun) as well. The French then gave away Alexandratta and its environs to Turkey in 1938. This was a bribe to keep Turkey allied with Britain and France against Nazi Germany.

In further steps, Syria was divided into four parts: These were the mini-states of Damascus, Aleppo, and the "independent" Alawi mountains and the Druze mountains. Finally Northern Syria was colonized and further division fostered by encouraging settling by Christians and Kurds. Of course the purpose of all this sub-division of Syria was to 'ensure' French hegemony:

"The French fully understood that Syrian nationalist sentiment would be opposed to their rule. This in effect meant that the Sunnis were their principal antagonists and they thus proceeded to capitalise on the... Christians, their oldest friends, by creating a new state that stripped Tyre, Sidon, Tripoli, the Baaka valley & Beirut itself from Syria and added them to the Ottoman sanjak (administrative district) of Mount Lebanon the very backbone of Maronite Christianity. Syria was cut off from its finest ports and Damascus... was weakened at the expense of Beirut and the new Christian dominated regime".
(Fisk R; *"Pity the Nation - The Abduction of Lebanon"*; London 1990; p. 62).

Under colonial rule, political parties were suppressed. In 1925 the **Peoples Party** launched an armed liberation struggle, which was crushed within 2 years. In 1926 a great rebel uprising took place, led by **Sultan Pasha el Atrash** and the **Jabal Druze** peasantry. Many of the participants had descendants who took part in the 1960s nationalist movements. The rebellion spread widely, for instance, the Maydan suburb of Damascus (the grain trading area) joined it.

By 1928, a national assembly was allowed to convene, but was then dissolved in 1930.

By 1936, popular protests had compelled the French Government, to enter negotiations with the Syrian nationalists. The **Franco-Syrian Treaty** of September 1936, called for a Syrian [neo-colonial] 'independence' in return for French privilege in trading and military status. The **National Bloc** (formed in 1928) was elected to power, but the Second World War supervened. The French suspended the 1930 Constitution by the imposition of martial law. The National Bloc was dominated by land-owning compradors. It:

"was not a unitary party so much as a working alliance of individuals and groups. It including leading members of important land-owning families.. like Hashim al-Atasi, the President... individuals..."
(Hourani A.H. *"Syria and Lebanon. A Political Essay"*; 1968; Beirut; p.191)

It later dissolved into two smaller parties including the **National Party** (see below).

In 1943, the British pushed Vichy France, to hold elections in Syria. But the National Bloc was again elected. Britain recognised that unless the Syrians were allowed nominal 'independence', the whole Middle East was threatened from the perspective of imperialism. The British persuaded the French to adopt neo-colonialism. By April 1946, the French left Syria as an occupying colonial military power. As the 'History of Colonial France' puts it:

"The Syrian Affair had ushered in decolonisation at the worst possible time for France. It was under the very powerful menace of the British, and suffering from the injuries inflicted by the Arab League, that they were forced it to abandon its mandate without contradiction."

(Thobie J, Meynier G, Coquery-Vidrovitch C, Ageron C-R: "Histoire de La France Coloniale 1914-1990"; Paris; 1990; p.360; Tr H.K.).

Within the neo-colony, nationalist parties again took initiatives. The first Syrian Parliament was elected by the 1946 elections, was nationalistically inclined. It proceeded to block the so-called **TAP line (Trans-Arabian Pipeline)**. This was a project of the **Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco)** to move oil. While Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia all agreed to enable this, Syria refused. This prompted the direct entry of the USA into Syrian politics.

Syria by the time of the French withdrawal in 1946 had been whittled down to 185,190 square kilometers from 300,000 square kilometers in Ottoman times. As shown, open colonialism was replaced by a neo-colonialism. By the time of the 1946 'Independence:'

"Political power in Syria ... was controlled by land-owning feudal elites, many of them Sunnis with Turkish roots living in the larger cities, and by an urban elite composed of traditional families, merchants, a few industrialists, and a small professional class, in addition to tribal chiefs".

(Azmeah, Shamel; " Syria's Passage to Conflict: The End of the "Developmental Rentier Fix" and the Consolidation of New Elite Rule"; Politics & Society; 2016, Vol. 44(4) 499–523).

Classes and Major Parties in Syria Post First World War

At the time of this fragile 'independence', Syria was a very weak and poor country. In reality, the class character of Syria after the war, was that of a neo-colony dominated by French and British interests, with major landlord remnants. Several contending parties representing differing classes of society had arisen.

We discuss the class divisions in Syria, and the major parties they formed, before considering the temporal history.

1) The Comprador class and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), and the Popular Party

The most reactionary class, the main force opposed to the peasantry - were the landowners who made up the bulk of the pro-French imperialist forces in Syria. They formed the **comprador capitalist class**.

The French created a large comprador class by fostering various sections of the **'Alawis** (eg. The Kinj Brothers; the Abbas family); and in Mount Lebanon from 1860

onwards the **Maronite Christians**; and other **landowners** throughout the former bilad al-Sham. The French showed their pro-landlord stance by assisting them to expropriate peasant land.

These compradors were feudal-type latifundia land owners, initially led and represented by the French imperialists. Later they were represented by so-called 'Pan-Syrian' nationalists, of the **Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP)** or **Popular Party** (Parti Populaire) Syrien). This party was established by **Antun Sa'ada**. The Pan-Syrians wished that the territory of Syria and Lebanon remain undivided. They had established a management hold over the tobacco growers of the mountains, and had a monopoly with the French tobacco clearing house (regie de tabacs). They were known to be pro-Western and anti-communist. Sa'ada later on, flirted with the German Nazis.

The Popular Party was dissolved by a trial presided over by Colonel Serraj in 1955. It survived in exile in Lebanon. In 1949 Sa'da was executed for sedition by the first Lebanese Prime Minister **Riad Al Solh**, in concert with **King Faroukh** of Egypt and British intelligence.

2) The urban Petit bourgeoisie - Muslim Brotherhood or Brethren - (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen).

This reactionary current appealed especially to rural and urban petit-bourgeois traders and artisans, as well as some working-class elements. The Muslim Brotherhood was a trans-national organisation, that had first emerged in 1928. It was formed in Cairo, Egypt, by **Hassan al-Banna**, where it:

“Emerged partly as a response to the colonialist presence in the country but also to the end of the last Caliphate, the Ottoman Empire”.
(Pargeter A; *The Muslim Brotherhood. From Opposition to Power*”; London; 2013; p. 8).

The leaders of the Ikhwan tried to operationalize the writings of 19th century 'reformist' scholars (**Rashid Rida**, **Jamal al-Din al-Afghani**, and **Muhammed Abdu**). Its' purpose was to overcome colonialism by a return to the “uncorrupted values” of Islamism. By this was meant explicitly a 'pure' form of Sunni Islam.

Based in Cairo it was led by the **Murshid** (Supreme Guide). It appealed to Muslims repelled by colonialism but not advanced enough to be Communists or secular democratic nationalists. It also appealed to the section most marginalised and dispossessed, and can be glimpsed in words by Al-Banna:

“Western civilisation has invaded us by force and with aggression on the level of science and money, of politics and luxury, of pleasures and negligence, and of various aspects of a life that are comfortable, exciting and seductive”.
(Pargeter *Ibid*; p. 21).

Such Westernisation, said the Ikhwan, was to be combatted by upholding Islamic Sharia Law. The Ikhwan set up a military wing **Nizam al-Khass**. They had hopes of **Gamel Abdul Nasser**. But after he came to power in a military coup (1952) in Egypt, he dissolved the Ikhwan in 1954. When they attempted to assassinate Nasser, he severely retaliated, executing 6 members and carrying out mass arrests.

The Syrian branch of the Ikhwan was influenced by the medieval jurist **Ibn Taymiyyah** – and was intensely anti-‘Alawi (Pargeter *Ibid* p. 66). It was first set up in 1944 by **Mustafa al-Sibai**, who became the first Syrian General Guide. His successor was **Issam al-Attar**, who won parliamentary seats for the Ikhwan in the 1961 elections.

Under the post 1963 Military Ba’athist governments, a steady increase in the influence of the Shi’ite ‘Alawi section of society took hold, coupled with a pro-peasant orientation of the state. The Muslim Brotherhood launched two waves of uprisings. Both were brutally crushed. One of the young militants who attacked the moderate leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood named above, was **Marwan Hadid**. He took part in both the 1964 Hama Rising and the later 1976 Rising. In the 1964 Hama Uprising, the Ikhwan was not an effective fighting force. When Hama was crushed, Hadid moved to acquire military training with the Palestinian Resistance movement. Upon his return after 1970, he organized for further rebellions.

By the 1979 rebellion led by the Muslim Brotherhood, a division was apparent between several factions. Firstly a moderate wing was rooted in the Damascus faction of Al-Attar. This was supported by the “merchants of the capital who by and large, opposed a policy of violent confrontation with the regime” (Batatu *Ibid*; p. 263).

An intermediate wing was that of Shakyh “abd-ul-Fattah Abu Ghuddah was based in Aleppo and obtained the international Brethren recognition.

Increasingly these first 2 factions of the Ikhwan, were opposed by the avowedly militant “Fighting Vanguard” formed in 1973, by Marwan Hadid.

Objectively the Brethren represented the urban traders. Many of them were aggrieved later by the Ba’ath moves to favour the peasantry – including setting up of agricultural cooperatives (*Pargeter Ibid*; p. 77). As Sunni, they built upon an anti-‘Alawi sentiment of the largely Sunni population, who resented the elevated status under the Ba’ath Party.

3) The Peasantry and the Arab Socialist Party

Syria was predominantly a peasant-based society with a population of about 2 million peasants of a total population of 3.5 million. The peasantry was not a unitary class – it was divided not only by religion and tribal roots, but more fundamentally by relationship to land ownership:

“Syria’s peasants are also differentiable into peasants with more or less strong clan bonds or with clan ties that are in various degrees of decomposition...”

(*Batatu, Hanna: “Syria’s peasantry, the Descendants of its lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics”; 1999; Princeton, p.22*)

A collective type of farming, known as **musha'** had enabled the peasantry to gain a subsistence living. But after the Ottomans adopted a land code in 1858, they drew up a register of individual ownership. The musha' system was then destroyed, replaced by the seizure of legal titles.

Increasingly, the clan-based divisions in the peasantry was transformed into one between wage labourers and small landowners (*Batatu Ibid p.25*). This process reflected the growth of machinery in the countryside displacing the share-croppers:

“The musha land, that is, the land collectively owned by the tribe, had been divided up under the impact of the advent of mechanised agriculture, the advance of the money system and the profit motive, and the intensifying change from a subsistence to a market-orientated economy”:
(*Batatu, Hanna; Ibid; p. 23*)

The peasant masses were the most oppressed and their burdens were at the core of the national independence movement. As the **Comintern** saw it, the ‘agrarian question’ was of ‘primary importance’ in Syria – amongst other ‘eastern countries’:

“In most eastern countries (eg India, Persia, Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia) the agrarian question is of primary importance in the struggle for emancipation from the yoke of the great Powers' despotism. By exploiting and ruining the peasant majority of the backward nations, imperialism deprives them of their elementary means of existence. Meanwhile industry, which is only poorly developed and confined to a few centres, is incapable of absorbing the resulting surplus agricultural population, who are also deprived of any opportunity to emigrate. The impoverished peasants remaining on the land become bondsmen. In the advanced countries before the war industrial crises played the part of regulator of social production; in the colonies this part is played by famine. Since imperialism has the strongest interest in getting the largest profits with the least capital outlay, in the backward countries it supports as long as possible the feudal-usurer forms of exploiting labour power. In a few cases, e.g. India, it takes over the native feudal State's monopoly of the land and turns the land tax into tribute to great Power capital and its servants—the zemindars and taluk-dars; in others it makes sure of its groundrents by acting through the native organizations of the large landowners, e.g. in Persia, Morocco, Egypt, etc. The struggle to free the land from feudal dues and restrictions thus assumes the character of a national liberation struggle against imperialism and the feudal large landowners. Examples of this were provided by the Moplah rising against the feudal landowners and the English in India in the autumn of 1921 and the Sikh rising in 1922.

Only the agrarian revolution, whose object is to expropriate the large estates, can set in motion the enormous peasant masses; it is destined to exercise a decisive influence on the struggle against imperialism. The bourgeois nationalists' fear (in India, Persia, Egypt) of the agrarian watchwords, and their anxiety to prune them down as far as possible, bear witness to the close connexion between the native bourgeoisie and the feudal and feudal-bourgeois landlords, and to the intellectual and political dependence of the former on the latter”;
(*Jane Degras: Ibid Volume 1; p. 385-6.*)

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/documents/volume-1-1919-1922.pdf>

After the First World War, the division was between small landowners and **murabi** (**sharecroppers**). But steadily, the peasantry was expropriated and impoverished away from share-croppers (*Seale P; Ibid p.45*). As share-croppers they had been to obtain at least between 25-75% of the crop they worked, depending upon how much

they provided in money for seed, and water. However the French drew up a **land register** allowing local notables (land-owners) and tribal **shayks** to seize property by legal title, to build **large scale latifundia or farms**. This process was accelerated after World War II:

“World War II... brought in large British and French military forces. Their heavy purchase of Syrian grain... decline in imports induced by... war... and heated speculation and inflationary pressures,, produced unusual profits for Syria’s wholesale merchants and land ownership. This new wealth was used to improve cultivation... further the application of industry to agriculture... The carrying out by the state of irrigation projects... also facilitated the growth of cotton. These changes did not redound to the advantage of the sharecroppers... (who) were forced from their huts, thus losing their prescriptive rights of occupancy and the guarantees of subsistence they had enjoyed under the traditional arrangements..”
(*Batatu Ibid p. 129*)

After the Second World War, it was the ‘**mustathmirs**’ (“The investor – who.. “merely brings his capital to bear upon production in the form of money and modern machines”); (*Batatu Ibid p. 29*) - who were:

“The chief vehicle for the progress of capitalism in agriculture... as a rule consists of the larger landowners or lease holders, particularly in irrigated areas... that is owners or leaseholders of more than 100 hectares”.
(*Batatu Ibid p. 31*).

The interests of the peasants was represented by the **Arab Socialist Party (ASP)** of **Akram al-Hawrani**. This was formed in 1950. Hawrani’s family had always been non-conformists, having had a religious Sufi mystic figure in the 15th century. His father was an Arab nationalist who resented landed notables. Hawrani, a lawyer, first joined the **pan-Syrian PPS (parti Populaire Syrien)**, but left them in 1938. He then organised armed attacks on Zionist settlements in Palestine, but failed to stop expropriation of Arab land. He reflected that the main problem for Arab nationalism was the “feudal” problem, and turned to peasant organising. When the party was formed it was immediately flooded with members (*Batatu Ibid p. 128*).

4) The National capitalist class

Opposing the forces who wanted to retain ties to Western imperialists were the **national bourgeoisie**. However, they were weak, and remained so, even right up till the period of 1980s.

Nonetheless by the Second World War and immediately after, a small **industrialist class**, and its corollary a weak **working class** - had arisen in cotton and rayon cloth, soap, cement, glass, and matches. The weak national bourgeoisie had thrown up the **National Party**. After 1947 and formal national independence, the national bourgeoisie began to expand rapidly. Their roots lay in the large landowners in the rural areas. With the Agrarian reforms of 1958 and later, they began to transform themselves into capitalists:

“When Syria gained its independence in 1946, it was taken for granted that the country’s economy would be based on private enterprise. The leading

politicians in the independence period were pioneers of a rising bourgeois, which since the 1930s had taken the lead in establishing a relatively modern industrial base for Syria's postcolonial economy ... new agricultural entrepreneurs bought or rented land and extended cotton and grain production of the big landowners began introducing modern agricultural production ... and new industrial and commercial companies and establishments sprang up. The leading figures of this new entrepreneurial stratum which was to become known as the "**national bourgeoisie**," came mostly from the old landowning class whose wealth enabled those of its educated sons who wished to overcome the traditional parasitic life of absentee landlords and invest in modern agriculture and industry to do so. so. They were joined by a great number of craftsmen and less wealthy manufacturers and merchants who had benefited from the extraordinary foreign-exchange earnings resulting from the expenditures made by allied troops stationed in Syria during and after World War II, and, later, from the Korean War boom, during which Syrian cotton found a growing demand in foreign markets. Businessmen were thus able to import machinery and to set up or enlarge and develop industrial plants and workshops... The state took several measures, for example, to encourage and support industrial investments and to protect them against foreign competition, such as tax exemptions for new industries, protective tariffs, government control over foreign trade, and infrastructural investments by the state or by state-private joint ventures such as the Lattakia Port Company"; *(Perthes, Volker; "The Syrian Private Industrial and Commercial Sectors and the State"; International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 24, No. 2 (May, 1992), pp. 207- 230).*

But the fortunes of the weak national bourgeoisie went up and down. Throughout the period of the **United Arab Republic (UAR)** and Assad's accession to full power in 1970, the national bourgeoisie took major blows, as discussed below. In fact the **national bourgeoisie needed state help** to develop into an adequately funded class to develop industry. They received this from the Ba'ath Party in its' second and third forms:

"The Syrian national bourgeoisie was removed from political power with the Syrian-Egyptian Union of 1958. It regained it with Syria's secession from the union in September 1961, and was removed again when the Ba'ath took power in March 1963. Economically, some elements of the bourgeoisie received three blows. Their first with the land reform of 1958, their second with Abdel Nasser's nationalization measures of July 1961, which in Syria comprised the complete nationalization of all banks and insurance companies and three industrial firms and the partial nationalization of twenty-four others. Abdel Nasser's turn to "socialism" and nationalizations might not have been the only reason, but was surely one of the reasons, leading to the secessionist coup two months later. After the coup most of the nationalization orders were lifted. The third blow for the national bourgeoisie came with the wide-ranging nationalizations of the Ba'athist government in 1964 and 1965. ... the Ba'ath's argument was, and is, that in principle these nationalizations were necessary, because the national bourgeoisie was unable to provide the foundations for future independent development. In fact, private resources were limited and state involvement was necessary to secure a national development perspective".

(Perthes, Volker; "The Syrian Private Industrial and Commercial Sectors and the State"; *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 05/1992, Volume 24, Issue 2; pp. 207-230).

5) The Working class and the Communist Party

There was a small Syrian working class, which was based mainly in Damascus and Aleppo. It was initially led and represented by the **Communist Party Syria and Lebanon** (founded October 1924, which was admitted to the Comintern in 1928. After Syrian territory was divided into Syria and Lebanon, the two parties formed separate organisations in 1930, leaving in Syria the Syrian Communist Party (SCP).

The Syrian Communist Party was founded by **Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak**, from the paper (al-Sahafi al-T'eh or 'The Wandering Journalist'). **Fouad al-Shamli**, had formed the **Lebanese Communist party**. The two groups united to form the first Arab communist party in 1924.

They contacted the Comintern, who sent **Joseph Berger** of the **Palestine Communist Party (PCP)** an almost exclusively Jewish organisation, established in 1923, but a member of the Communist International (*Degras J: Volume 2; p. 95*). Berger was assigned the responsibility of "setting up the Lebanese CP", but insisted upon a PCP hegemony (*Tareq Ismael and Jacqueline Ismael: "The Communist Movement in Syria And Lebanon"; Gainesville Florida, 1998; p. 8*).

However, the PCP aspirations were soon curtailed by the Secretariat for Oriental Affairs of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, which in December 1926:

"censured" the Palestinian communists for their "ambitious demand to monopolize work in contiguous countries" and considered it to be a malady, harmful for the further expansion of communist influence in the region." (*Ismael and Ismael; Ibid; p. 8*).

The party put forward a short term programme including labour demands, and "promotion of Lebanese industry agriculture and trade" and nationalisation; and control of religious endowments by public agencies (*Ismaels Ibid; p. 10-11*).

In 1925, an Armenian organisation (**Spartacus League**) initiated contacts with the PCP, and they fused on May Day to form the **Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (CPSL)**. The first Central Committee also included a representative of the Palestine CP - Jacob Tepper (*Heikal M; "The Sphinx and the Commissar"; New York; 1978; p. 41*). The CPSL took part in the 6th Congress of the Communist International in September 1928.

During the French mandate, the Syrian CP (SCP) functioned legally, though it was harassed, including banning of its paper - **al-Insaniya** (Mankind - or Humanity). At the time of the partition of Greater Syria, the CP of Syria and Lebanon (CPSL) strongly objected. In 1930, it emerged from secrecy to become public (*Ismaels Ibid; p. 17*). Its first full programme was published in 1931.

The programme called for the national liberation of Syria and Lebanon and a democratic revolution to include land reform and abolition of feudalism. However, its

programme even at the beginning, was strongly influenced by an Arab Nationalist position. It did not adopt an unequivocal and explicit communist position. Yet it did initially serve the interests of the working class. Steadily as its' revisionist role became more overt, it became more obviously subservient to the national bourgeoisie.

Khalid Bakdash became the party Secretary-general in early 1932. The Comintern rejected the formation of a federation of Arab communist parties, on the grounds of security. However the CPCL was accorded in effect the guardianship of the region. Under Bakdash, the Party adopted several incorrect, or openly revisionist steps over the ensuing years. Moreover over the next years his leadership was marked by major swings in policy, and a general refusal of principled debate or criticism. In fact it never went beyond the demands of nationalism:

“the party never went beyond the rightist positions of support for the national bourgeoisie, as is borne out by a programme which speaks only of independence and social justice, without daring to propose an agrarian reform. For fear of alienating the bourgeoisie”.

(Amin, Samir: "The Arab Nation. Nationalism and class struggles"; London; 1983; p.46).

“In the last analysis it is thus Arab communism, in its weaknesses which is responsible for petty bourgeois hegemony.”

(Amin, S; ibid; pp. 85-6).

By 1942 Bakdash was making goodwill moves towards the landlords:

“We assure the owners of the land, that we do not and shall not demand the confiscation of their poverty.. All that we ask is kindness toward the peasant and the alleviation of his misery”. The rationalization... involved the premise that Syria was still in “the stage of national liberation”.... The new line was ill received by communists in the provincial party organisations who knew about rural problem at first hand”.

(Batatu, Hanna: "Syria's peasantry, the Descendants of its lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics"; 1999; Princeton; p. 119).

In 1943, Bakdash assisted the French colonists, by weakening the party. It did this by splitting the party into separate organisations for Syria and for Lebanon. It argued that the:

"national movement in Lebanon was less developed than in Syria", and that "democracy is more deeply rooted in Lebanon than in Syrian, where the feudal landlords still continue to rule."

(Ismaels Ibid; p.35).

The CPSL supported the **Leon Blum Popular Front** government in France, and hoped it would lead to the independence of Syria. During this time, the first legal organ of the Syrian CP (SCP) was formed - **Sawt-al-Sha'b (People's voice)**. However the SCP remained small, in the range of 200 members, rising to 2000 by 1939. In the mid-1930's an internal purge was undertaken of those calling for collaboration with Arab Nationalists (*Ramet, Pedro: "The Soviet Syrian Relationship*

Since 1955 - A Troubled Alliance"; Boulder; 1990; p.65).

When German fascists invaded the USSR, the CPSL correctly came to the aid of the Allied efforts against fascism. During the war, significant steps towards downplaying the revolution were taken. In the elections of August 1943, the CPSL declared:

"We assure the national capitalist, the national factory owner, that we do not look with envy or malice on his national enterprise. On the contrary, we desire his progress and vigorous growth. All that we ask is the improvement of the conditions of the national worker. We assure the owner of land that we do not and shall not demand the confiscation of his property... All that we ask is kindness towards the peasant and the alleviation of his misery."
(Ismaels Ibid; p. 32).

While it was correct to fight for a national democratic revolution – such promises went too far - and violated a principled united front. Similarly, Bakdash was prepared to accept the leadership of the National Bloc. Bakdash went so far as to state that the CPSL was:

"Above all, and before every consideration, a party of national liberation, a party of freedom and independence."
(Ismaels Ibid; p. 33).

He completely negated the leading role of the admittedly small, proletarian elements:

"What is new in this process (ed-of the non-capitalist path') is that the transition from the national to social emancipation began before leadership of the movement passed into the hands of the working class In fact it is still led by non-proletarian elements."
(Cited Ramet Ibid; p. 50).

Furthermore he traced the attraction of the party to the USSR, in a nationalist perspective:

"We approach this [issue of relation with the USSR] as patriots and as Arabs... not because the Soviet Union has a particular social system";
(Ismaels Ibid; p. 33).

Over the next years Bakdash and the party continued to vacillate dramatically on the role of the CP in the national democratic and socialist revolutions (*See Alliance 51*). Clearly, this could have been only either due to a failure of understanding or a rank sabotage. At best, it can be concluded that quite early on, Bakdash was a representative of the national bourgeoisie.

In the post Independence year of 1947 - the new Syrian government again banned the CP - the two sections of Lebanon and Syria amalgamated again, up to 1958.

From its inception the Syrian CP had been anti-Zionist. However the hidden revisionists dominated the diplomatic corps of the USSR. Consequently the USSR voted at the United Nations for the creation of Israel. This led the Syrian CP to reverse itself (*See Alliance 30*). As a result of this the Syrian party rapidly lost public

support, and membership sank from near 35,000 in both Syria and Lebanon to "several hundreds" (*Ismaels Ibid; p.39; Batatu Ibid p.120*). Bakdash refused any criticism of this position within the party, which was purged. At the Central Committee meeting of 1951, he reasserted control.

By 1951, Bakdash had swung again, and was now calling for the break-up of the big landowner estates. Yet in 1958 he did not support the Agrarian Reform Law, bizarrely arguing that "it supported the Egyptian upper bourgeoisie" (*Batatu Ibid p.121*).

In the 1954 general election, in Damascus **Khalid Bakdash** became the first Communist deputy to be elected, his margin was 11,000 votes. (*Mohamed Heikal "The Sphinx and the Commissar - The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East "; New York; 1978; p. 48*).

At the same 1954 elections, the Arab Ba'ath Party also won several seats, and were cooperating with the Syrian CP in the control of the streets (*Hiro Ibid; p. 131*).

The correct Marxist-Leninist policy for the Syrian CP, would have been to move from the first stage towards the second stage of the National democratic liberation struggle - for socialism. Yet one year after, after the USSR 1956 20th Party Congress, Bakdash again steered the party towards purely national goals rather than a stage to the socialist revolution.

Despite its weak understanding and implementation of the revolutionary process, by 1957, the Syrian party was one of the strongest in the Middle East. At the same time, the alliance with the Ba'ath party, was stronger than ever (*Mohammed Heikal; Ibid; p.76-78*).

6) The Ba'ath Party – primarily a peasant party until 1970

Ba'ath means "re-birth", meaning the renaissance of the Arab movement.

This Party would wield decisive power in Syria during the late 20th and early 21st century, but it took a complex path. This went through several 're-births' of its own.

Batatu explains that there were in reality, three distinct Ba'ath Parties, though sharing the same name and history. Indeed they also served the interests of the same class by and large, the peasantry. Importantly however, support of the Ba'ath moved at an early stage, from the strata of poor peasantry to the rich peasant or landed peasantry or rural notables. The Ba'ath also served the urban traders as a secondary class role.

The three forms taken by the Ba'ath are described by Batatu:

"In the modern history of Syria, Ba'athism has not been one force acting in a single direction... but a mantle for ,, three Ba'ath parties, which thought interlinked in a complex way, have been quite distinct in their social base.. and the interests served.

The earliest Ba'ath formed its first executive bureau in 1945. ... The party came to the political foreground. Only after its merger in 1952 with the Arab Socialists. By 1958, with the creation of the short-lived United Arab Republic, its role had been played out... it was reduced to insignificance.. in 1966. The Ba'ath that succeeded it was in essence a transitional formation and received

its impulse from the secret Military Committee that took place in Cairo in 1959. It did not outlive the 'corrective' coup of 1970 (*Ed of Hafiz Assad*) but many of its followers were coopted into the new Ba'ath.. to the retrospective eye, the old Ba'ath, at least in its first decade, was powerfully moved by ideals,,,, For the new Ba'athists, pan-Arabism has never been at bottom a live issue .”

(*Batatu; Ibid p,133*).

Originally in 1943, the **Arab Ba'ath Party** (or Baath), was secretly created out of two small groups. The legal establishment of the Ba'ath Party in Syria came only in 1947, after the French military departure in 1946.

At the time of formation, the party was created in order too weld a party for Arab nationalism, that avoided Marxism-Leninism. A completely reactionary Islamism - a mystical **Pan-Arabism** was invoked. This appealed to the petit bourgeoisie, and the traders. It was led by Damascenes **Michel 'Aflaq, Salh al-Din Bitar** and **Midhat al-Bitar**, and **Jalal as-Sayyid** from the nearby trading center Dayr az-Zur. They were all either sons of the urban small traders and merchants or traders themselves:

“Born to wholesale grain dealers (**bawaykiyyah**) in the outlying Damascus quarter of **al-Maydan**, the chief center for the grain trade of Southern Syria... the world of merchants. From the standpoint of this class, the fragmentation after 1917 of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire constituted an abiding hindrance to the old trade channels and the free flow of commerce. It members resented being confined within narrow borders and favoured large and expanding markets, unhindered by tariffs and custom duties or by a multiplicity of economic rules and regulations. In brief, to no other element of the population was a pan-Arab horizon more natural, .. scions of some of the mercantile families who were or had been involved in long-distance trade.. gravitated towards the Ba'ath Party in the 1940s, when it had not yet shifted to a pronounced 'leftist' orientation.”

(*Batatu Ibid; p.134*)

“urban bawaykiyyah – or whole sale grain dealers.. that fostered receptivity not only of the urban intelligentsia but also of the mercantile class, to whom the break-up after 1917 of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire entailed a grave impediment to the free flow of native commerce.”

(*Batatu Ibid; p.325.*)

These leaders were intellectuals, mostly educated in Paris. But they repudiated Marxism, and were explicitly anti-communist. The Ba'ath movement adhered to a religious interpretation dominated by the Sunni sect. This alienated some non-Sunni Muslim Arabs. However the Ba'ath ideology was supposed to be secular and based itself on all Arabs irrespective of sect of Islam, or even of Islam itself.

'Aflaq viewed Ba'ath nationalism as comprising 'Unity, Freedom, Socialism' (*Seale Ibid p.31*). Shortly afterwards, the 'Alawi dominated Arab Nationalist Party (formed 1939 by **Zaki al-Arsuzi**) merged into the Ba'th, brought over by **Wahib al-Ghanem**. At this stage the active members were largely urban intelligentsia, and a predominance of schoolteachers and physicians, bringing them a large student base.

The Ba'ath Party intended to embrace all Arab countries, not just Syria. In the first **pan-Arab Congress** of 1947, the programme called for land reform and nationalisation of major parts of the economy, and a constitutional democracy:

"In Damascus... delegates from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Morocco adopted a constitution and a programme. The party's basic principles were described as: the unity and freedom of the Arab nation within its homeland; and a belief in the 'special mission of the Arab nation', the mission being to end colonialism and promote humanitarianism. To accomplish it the party had to be 'nationalist, populist, socialist and revolutionary'. While the party rejected the concept of class conflict, it favoured land reform; public ownership of natural resources, transport, and large-scale industry and financial institutions; trade unions of workers and peasants; the cooption of workers into management, and acceptance of 'non-exploitative private ownership and inheritance'." It stood for a representative and constitutional form of government, and for freedom of speech and association, within the bounds of Arab nationalism."
(Hiro; *Ibid*; p. 130).

As the Ba'ath Party appeal was mainly to sections of the urban petit-bourgeois, the mass peasant base of the **Arab Socialist Party** was attractive. As it shifted to embrace the peasantry, it lost some of the appeal to the traders (*Batatu Ibid p.134*). Nonetheless it adopted a peasant orientation.

The two parties fused, forming the **Arab Socialist Ba'ath party** (ASBP) in 1953. Its' leaders, were Michel 'Aflaq, Salh al-Din Bitar, and Akram al-Hawrani. The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party restated the Ba'ath's founding aims, stressing 'socialism' more prominently:

"Drawn together by their opposition to the dictatorial regime of Colonel **Adib Shishkali**, the leaders of the Baath and the ASP decided in September 1953 to form the Arab Baath Socialist Party... The new party re-stressed the Baath's central slogan: 'Freedom, unity, socialism'."
(Hiro, *Ibid p.131*)

This combined party therefore, now represented both the rural peasantry, and the urban petit bourgeoisie (white-collar urban workers school-teachers, government employees, large sections of the army and the air force). Initially the section of peasantry the Ba'ath most appealed to was the poorest and smallest peasants, By the 1960's the Arab Baath Socialist Party:

"Accorded from the outset a high priority to peasants and their concerns. They markedly raised the share of the produce due to the landless underclass, reduced further the permissible size of private landholdings, speed up the redistribution of the land expropriated under agrarian reform laws and freed peasant beneficiaries from $\frac{3}{4}$ of the price and the land.. they also intensified the organising drive among the peasants... (giving) peasant unions in more than 1,500 villages...
Until 1967, the... Ba'ath rested uneasily on an uneasy alliance within the armed forces between varying groups that shared similar rural roots.."
(*Batatu Ibid; pp. 325.*)

The Arab Baath Socialist Party retained a mystical Pan-Arabic vision, as illustrated by their Constitution:

"The Arab nation constitutes a cultural unity. Any differences existing among its sons are accidental and unimportant. They will disappear with the awakening of the Arab consciousness ... The national bond will be the only bond existing in the Arab state. It ensures harmony among the citizens by melting them in the crucible of a single nation, and combats all other forms of factional solidarity such as religious, sectarian, tribal, racial and regional factionalism."

(Bashir al-Da'uq ed; Nidal al-Ba'ath; Volume 1; Beirut 1970; pp172-6; Cited by: Van Dam Ibid; p. 15).

What did "socialism" mean for the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party? It was a very vague and imprecise ideology:

"Socialism, which comes last in the Baath trinity, is less a set of socio-economic principles than a rather vague means of national moral improvement. . . . All they [Ba'athist leaders] said was that socialism was a means of abolishing poverty, ignorance, and disease, and achieving progress towards an advanced industrial society capable of dealing on equal terms with other nations."

(Hiro Ibid; p.131).

As the Ba'ath acquired a mass peasant base (primarily appealing to the small peasantry at this stage), initially large sections of urban traders were alienated. In the 1954 elections following Shishakali's fall, the Ba'ath gained a parliamentary base. Only very much later, well after Assad's accession to power in 1979, would sections of the urban merchants again cautiously follow the Ba'ath. However an especial appeal of the Ba'ath was to army personnel:

"In Syria the party drew its initial support either from the urban Sunni (Muslim) and Orthodox (Christian) petty bourgeoisie, or the rural notables, particularly those in the Alawi and Druze areas of Latakia. 'The party's social base remained the petit bourgeoisie of the cities, and in the countryside middle landlords with local social prestige,' notes Tabitha Petran. 'However, the Ba'ath did not develop much in the cities. Most of the Sunni petit bourgeoisie, even in Damascus, was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and later also by President Nasser. But the Ba'ath won a following among students and military cadets: future intellectuals and army officers.'"

(Dilip Hiro; Ibid; p. 130).

In fact with the 'leftist' orientation of the Ba'ath, the enemies of the Ba'ath were:

"Merchants, landowners, and city notables";

(Seale Ibid; p. 60).

But the party was hijacked after the episode of the United Arab Republic (See below), in the militarist period. The Ba'ath initially enabled small peasants to regain a measure of control and their own land. But this proved insufficiently large to obtain a

subsistence living.

Ultimately the Ba'ath apparatus came to increasingly support the entry of capitalist relations into the countryside. The Ba'ath now helped mainly the rich peasantry. Through to 1956, reforms benefiting this class layer took place, under the influence of the Ba'ath. This continued right up to the period of the 1960s, under the Militarist Ba'ath governments (described below):

“The abolition of the tribal law by the state in 1956 and the implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law of 1958 and the related decrees of 1963-1964 undermined the power of the wealthy shaykhs, and led after 1966 to the demise of their political influence, at least at the national level. The same measures contributed to a further weakening of tribal bonds. The division of property also decreased the cohesion of the extended family”.
(*Batatu Ibid p.23*).

By 1970-1971, class relations in the countryside had been thoroughly capitalised:

“Even though the number of landowners increased from an estimated 292,273 in 1958 to 468,539 in 1970-1971, that is by more than 60%, the emerging tenurial systems continued to reveal glaring inequities. .. Owners of fewer than 10 hectares.. formed 75.4 % of all landowners in 1970-71 but had title to only 23.5% of the total area of private fully owned agricultural land. Land under lease was even more unevenly distributed: 1.9% of all leaseholders controlled 35.5% of all land held by lease.. After 1970 the fortunes of the capitalised middle size and large farmers and mustathmirs waxed, even as the position of the small-scale land owning peasants became less secure. ... Agricultural employers increased from 25,850 in 1972 to 49,690 in 1984, and 137,004 in 1989, but dropped slightly to 131,282 in 1991. The reasons are fairly clear. By dint of their possession of money, agricultural capitalists were before 1958 and have been since 1970 more able than any other class to make efficient use of artificial manures and modern machinery, extract from their land greater produce with less labour and at a smaller cost.... The mustathmirs and the middling and rich landed peasants have improved their holdings, or purchased more machines... gained control of small peasant lands that have been thrown together and exploited along capitalist lines... Their increasing weight after 1970,.. accords with the interests of powerful elements in the state apparatus””.
(*Batatu Ibid; p.35; 37*).

Having now described the class contours and the parties in those contours, we can describe how the class struggle played out in temporal history.

Military Dictatorship: The CIA led coup to the “Rule of the Colonels 1949-1954”
Between 1946 to 1956, there were a total of 20 cabinets and 4 separate constitutions
(*Wikipedia 2017*).

The first independent government of 1946, as we saw, had blocked the TAP line. This led to a CIA sponsored coup, which was carefully incubated by **Miles Copeland Jr.** It signaled a switch of neocolonial masters – from France to the USA. Opposition was shut down by a military coup led by Colonel **Husni al-Za'im** in March 1949. It

came after the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948 in which the Syrian army was defeated. After the coup, Za'im resumed peace talks with Israel and signed the Syro-Israeli Armistice and pledged to resettle Palestinians. Conveniently for his paymasters, he now ratified TAPLine. His brutal regime banned the Communist Party (See below) and jailed dissidents. He was succeeded within months by Colonel **Sami al-Hinnawi** in August, who also did not last long. However his successor Colonel **Adib al-Shisakli** – lasted till 1954. He launched an incomplete land reform.

But a growing United Front for reforms developed. It held a large United Front meeting at Homs in July 1953. Here the **National Party, the People's Party, the Arab-Socialist party, the Ba'ath party and the Communist Party** signed a **National Pact** to overthrow the Shishakli dictatorship. In 1954, after continued unrest, Shisakli was overthrown by a further military coup. At this time, parliamentary democracy was restored.

The ensuing poll in September 1954 was the first in the Middle East undertaken with full women's suffrage, and was generally 'free'. At this election, the Ba'ath won 22 of 142 seats. The Communist Party of Syria, saw its first Arab Communist to be elected to parliament in the Middle East – Khalid Bakdash (See below). The Ba'ath extended their power, helped by the head of Security, **Lt. Colonel Serraj**, who had joined the Ba'ath. The Popular Party who had won 28 seats, were suppressed by Serraj.

Ba'ath Invites Nasser to a Union of Egypt and Syria

After the fall of Shishakli, the 1954 free election discussed above, resulted in several parties winning seats. But as seen, the Ba'ath allies controlled the Security forces. Over the next years the Ba'ath came to struggle for the same social class base as the Communists, who became their main rivals.

Shortly after the election, a member of the SSNP or Popular Party, assassinated Ba'athist colonel **Adnan al-Malki**. Upon this trigger pretext, the Ba'ath launched a purge to eliminate the SSNP.

Since the political programmes of the Syrian CP and the Ba'ath agreed upon Syrian nationalism, they now entered a united front. By this time also, several barter agreements were made between the USSR and Syria, and in 1956 an arms deal was signed. The Syrian CP now also held positions in the army, rivaling the Ba'ath army followers.

Inevitably, as the Ba'ath domination became threatened, an intense struggle developed:

“By the end of 1957, they (the Syrian CP) threatened Baathist domination of the radical alliance. Moderates in Syria and abroad feared an imminent Communist takeover. The Baathists became alarmed when a new radical party was formed to counter their influence and to cooperate with the Communists. The last months of 1957 saw a fierce behind-the-scenes struggle for supremacy within the radical camp”.

(Thomas Collelo, ed. Syria: A Country Study. Washington: US Government Publishing Office for the Library of Congress, 1987. At:

<http://countrystudies.us/syria/13.htm>)

This struggle with the communists inspired the Ba'athist search for new allies. In addition, the Syrian Ba'athists were feeling threatened by the USA imperialists and Israel. Their gaze was drawn to Egypt. When **Gamel Abdul Nasser** nationalized the Suez Canal Company, in July 1956 against the British and French interests, he won the respect of all Arab nationalists. The Syrian Ba'athists were among Nasser's admirers.

Accordingly, the Ba'athist Party initiated a **Union with Egypt**. They pressed for an immediate union, to be called the **United Arab Republic (UAR)**:

“Fearing that without Nasser's weight they would be outmanoeuvred by the Communists, who were then enjoying a moment of unprecedented popularity because of Soviet arms deliveries to Syria and promises of economic aid.”
(*Seale Ibid p. 54*).

“The SCP weakened the Ba'ath Party to such an extent that in December 1957, the Ba'ath Party drafted a bill calling for a union with Egypt, a move that was very popular. The union between Egypt and Syria went ahead and the United Arab Republic (UAR) was created, and the Ba'ath Party was banned in the UAR because of Nasser's hostility to parties other than his own. The Ba'ath leadership dissolved the party in 1958, gambling that the legalization against certain parties would hurt the SCP more than it would the Ba'ath.”

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Socialist_Ba'ath_Party_-_Syria_Region)

Nasserism was a specific form of Pan-Arabism, named for Nasser. Starting in the context of a nationalist movement in Egypt alone, Nasser struck a renewed hope for liberation from imperialism throughout large sections of the Middle East. Nasserism used instead of Ba'ath - the notion of **Wahda** - to mean ultimately the same. **Wahda** (Arabic for union – and the name of Nasser's nationalist movement) was to be a renewal of Arabic "culture", under the twentieth century guise of nationalism. It was a strategy of the national bourgeoisie, similar to that of the Ba'ath. Both aimed to contain the mass movement, emphasising the 'Arab peoples', at the expense of class content.

Revisionism in the parties of the entire Middle East had by 1956 deprived the working class of capable genuine leadership. Nasserism was only able to consolidate itself because the **Egyptian Workers Party**, the **Communist Party**, was itself under the influence of the now Soviet-revisionist leaders.

Despite their strong statements, the weakness of the Middle Eastern individual state's national bourgeoisie was palpable. Accordingly, Wahda called for unity of several different struggling national bourgeoisies against imperialism. It hoped to avoid the social revolution, by using nationalistic demagogic slogans. Effectively a United Front of all the national bourgeoisies, was supposed to lead a class coalition including the working classes and peasantry of the **different countries**.

It was hoped, this would enable the singly weak national bourgeoisie, together to be strong enough to fight imperialism, and yet able to contain the social revolution. Until the Ba'athist request, Nasser had been primarily thinking in a limited fashion, of a cross-national solidarity (*Seale P Ibid p.54*). But the Syrian overture appealed to him.

Ultimately Pan-Arabism in the forms of Ba'athism and Wahda, failed. The main reason was the power of the single dominant Egyptian national bourgeoisie, which itself tried to suppress, or create "comprador" relations with the other weaker national bourgeoisie. The possibility of Egypt and Syrian unity was started in 1955. This created the **United Arab Republic**, consisting of Egypt and Syria. However the dominant Egyptian bourgeoisie, could not entirely suppress the Syrian national bourgeoisie of the coalition.

The Syrian CP reneges on the second stage of the National Democratic Revolution as the Ba'ath call for Nasser's help to defeat communism

From the beginning the Syrian SP had always tended to an Arab nationalist – rather than a communist position. Communists had been poised to likely gain control of the leading positions in the coalition government with the Ba'athists. But when the Ba'athist leaders called for Union with Egypt – they were in reality seeking Nasser's aid in fighting off the communists. The Syrian CP had a choice.

A situation analogous to the Shanghai massacre of the peasants and workers during the 1928 Chinese Revolution, was in the making. (*Alliance Notes on "Stalin & the 1928 Chinese Revolution"*). Stalin had repeatedly urged the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), through 1926 and early 1927 to break the bloc with the right KMT and move to a militant revolutionary struggle. The CCP did not heed this. Stalin's assessment was the "independence of the CP must be the chief slogan":

"The victory of the revolution cannot be achieved unless this bloc is smashed, but in order to smash this bloc, fire must be concentrated on the compromising national bourgeoisie, its treachery exposed, the toiling masses freed from its influence, and the conditions necessary of the hegemony of the proletariat systematically prepared... The independence of the Communist Party must be, the chief slogan of the advanced communist elements, of the hegemony of the proletariat can be prepared and brought about by the Communist party. But the communist party can and must enter into an open bloc with the revolutionary part of the bourgeoisie in order, after isolating the compromising national bourgeoisie, to lead the vast masses of the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie in the struggle against imperialism."

(*J.V. Stalin "Stalin's Letters to Molotov"; Edited Lars T.Lih; Oleg V. Naumov; and Oleg V. Khlevniuk; Yale 1995; p.318-9." at: [Stalin & China](#)*)

The situation of the Syrian Ba'ath and the Syrian CP - was similar. The Ba'ath were preparing to renege, and the Syrian CP were aware of this. Yet the Syrian CP refused to take the struggle forward, instead they tried to preserve the united front. This was especially astonishing, since it was already well known that Nasser had brutally suppressed Egyptian communists.

The Syrian army strongly supported the offer to Nasser, made by the Ba'ath leadership. But the Syrian CP refused to go beyond their "national front". The Syrian CP refused to launch the second stage of the national democratic revolution. They were therefore faced with the Ba'athist and Nasser-ite embrace. Now in an extraordinary reversal, the Syrian CP rather than oppose Nasser, abandoned their prior insistence on a loose federal formula with Egypt. They now outdid the Ba'ath,

and insisted on a "total union" with Egypt (*Ismaels; Ibid; p. 50*). Belatedly they had again changed tack, but it was now too late.

Nasser seized the invitation to form the disastrous (For Syrian workers and peasants, and national bourgeoisie) **United Arab Republic** (UAR) in February 1958. This was the formal amalgamation of Syria and Egypt, and represented an expansionist phase of Egyptian national capital.

After the UAR was formed, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath party was completely dissolved by its leaders on Nasser's insistence. (*Seale Ibid; p. 60*). Naturally, the first target were the Communists, who were duly purged when the Syrian CP refused to dissolve. The Egyptian suppression extended, and both Ba'athists and communists were targeted. Syria's government lead was transferred to Nasser's aide, **Marshall 'Amer** (*Seale Ibid; p. 59*).

In Iraq, related contemporary developments saw General **Abdul Karim Qassem**, toppling the Iraqi monarchist regime. Qassem was supported by the USSR military. Nasser tried to entice Qassem into the UAR also. However Iraq, was effectively now a client state of the USSR. The military dictator Qassem turned instead, to the Iraqi CP, and refused Nasser's offer to join in the UAR. Correspondingly, Nasser sponsored a rebellion of Iraqi nationalist officers, which was resisted by the Iraqi Communist Party and defeated. Later on, in 1963, Qassem was deposed by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party coup. In the short term, Syria, the situation became worse for Syrian communists, as the Syrian CP openly supported Qassem

The Reversal of the UAR Union with Egypt and the Rise of the 'Military Committee'

It was not only the Syrian communists who found the Egyptian domination in the UAR intolerable. The Ba'ath had been forced by Amer and Nasser, to dissolve themselves in a Congress in August 1959. But in 1960 this was reversed, by the newly secretly formed "Military Committee", whose undercover envoys took part in the new congress. Considerable confusion reigned within the Ba'ath party, as discussed below..

Meanwhile, still in 1961, Nasser promulgated wide sweeping nationalisation measures in the UAR. This would have amounted to an Egyptian expropriation of native Syrian capital. So blatant was the demand, that right wing Syrian nationalists in the army (Lieut Col '**Abd al-Karim Nahawi**), launched a new coup. The coup was strongly supported by Jordan and Saudi Arabia, fearful of growing Egyptian power. Of course Syrian national capitalists supported this also:

"Jordan and Saudi Arabia and by Syria's disgruntled business community":
(*Seale Ibid p. 67*).

This coup now once again separated the states of Egypt and Syria.

Because the key Ba'ath leading politicians ('Aflaq and Bitar and Hawrani), had initiated and supported the Union with Egypt, they were now discredited. This was sealed by a new condemnation of the UAR, signed by Akram al-Hawarani and Salah al-Din Bitar. This 180 degree turn from their prior support for the UAR, viewed as

hypocritical. But a vacuum developed as these previous leaders were disgraced.

Into the vacuum, other non-Ba'ath nationalists took control of the state, led by Dr **Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi**, then Dr **Bashir al-'Azmah**, and finally, **Khalid al-'Azm** (*Seale Ibid p. 72*). On 1 December 1961, new elections brought **Nazim al-Qudsi** to the presidency.

But there were by now many wings of Ba'ath discontents. Some Ba'ath discontents in the army, had as discussed above, secretly formed a "**Military Committee**". Initially this was composed of 5 (Captain Hafiz **Assad**, Lieut.Colonel Muhammed '**Umran**, Captain 'Abd al-Karim **al-Jundi**, Major **Mir**, and Major Salah **Jadid**). Importantly, all came from national minorities: 3 were 'Alawai Shi'is and 2 were Isma'ili Shi'is. Moreover they were all originated from the class of **middle or lesser notables**, but were not from small or landless peasantry or share-croppers.

The 'Military Committee' was collectively antagonistic to the political wing of the Ba'ath that had fostered the UAR, and especially did they suspect 'Aflaq. They actively recruited young military cadres of peasant origin, who had been inspired by Hawrani to become educated via the army.

Over the next 3 years a confusing series of coups and counter-coups took place during which the Military Committee continued to work in secret. By 1962 a six-man junta composed of 3 of the Military Committee (Assad, 'Umran and Jadid) joined with 3 other army leaders – to seize power. Their programme was to restore formally the Ba'ath party to power. But the Committee did not step into the open.

The secret Committee became expanded to six members. Several of the Military Committee members were jailed first by Egypt, then by Lebanon, and then by Syria. Yet they finally built a coalition of army officers to take their steps to full power.

Hijacking the Ba'ath Party by the Military Committee

In an initial step, the still secret Military Committee temporarily and uneasily, took advantage of a weakened Michel 'Aflaq. They united with the political founders of Ba'athism under 'Aflaq. In the 1962 Congress of the Ba'ath, 'Aflaq officially rescinded the prior dissolution of the Ba'ath, that had been forced by Nasser. 'Aflaq reformed the party, while making secret promises to the Military Committee to support a coup.

Over the border, in February 1963, the **Iraqi Ba'ath Party** unseated the **dictator 'Abd al-Karim Qasim**. The leaders who were a combination of the army (**'Abd al-Salam 'Arif**) and Ba'athists (**'Ali Salih al-Sa'di**), now slaughtered Iraqi communists.

The Syrian Military Committee launched their own coup in March 1963 and took power. At this stage, they still hid behind a complex coalition with both party Ba'athists and elements of ex-Nasserites. Assad was still very much in the background.

Confusingly a Nasserite wing remained in the Ba'athist party. They joined with yet other military elements, and were prompted by Egypt to seize power. But in a pitched battle on 18 July 1963, the Ba'athist loyalists of the army won.

Increasingly from now on, the 'Military Committee' of the Ba'ath elements came more openly into conflict with the Ba'ath political leaders. The military Ba'ath repeatedly used the accusation that the latter had first urged fusion with Egypt.

By the 1963 post-coup Congress, the Ba'ath had effectively sidelined 'Aflaq from leading positions in the Ba'ath. The army officers of the 'Military Committee' undertook a purge of the officer corps, to remove non-'Alawi officers which ensured a strong rural middle to upper landed nobility representation.

As Batatu says, this ensured:

“the “political dominance of 'Alawi officers in the second half of the 1960s and in subsequent decades”
(*Batatu Ibid p. 157*).

At the same time an ideological **mask of 'socialism'** was maintained. But this was enclosed within a **corporatist framework**. A key ideological document to depict this was drafted by **Yasin al-Hafiz** – an ally of the Military Committee who posed as a Marxist. This was entitled 'Some Theoretical Propositions'. In it the army's hijack of 'Aflaq's party was defended as follows:

“The organic fusion of the military and civilian vanguard sectors is an urgent prerequisite for ... socialist reconstruction”.
(*Seale Ibid p. 88*).

The military leaders formulated the leading role of the Ba'ath in Syrian public life in a:

'genuine popular democracy' – as opposed to a parliamentary democracy which would be a “front for feudalism and the grande bourgeoisie, incapable of ushering in socialist transformation”;
(*Seale Ibid p. 89*).

Meanwhile, in Iraq, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party was displaced by a coup led by '**Abd al-Salam 'Arif**'. Very shortly, Arif called for unity again with Nasser. Now the Ba'ath and Michael 'Aflaq lost even more credence in Syria. The erst-while Syrian 'semi-Marxist' theoreticians such as Yasin al-Hafiz were also discredited and were expelled or sought exile.

Relations with the Revisionist CPSU

After the 1963 coup returned the left wing of the Ba'ath to power, there was a turn towards Russian revisionism for funding and support. But Khrushchev imposed some conditions. Bakdash, the leader of the Syrian CP, had been previously expelled from Syria. The Khrushchevites demanded his return in lieu of payment for the construction of the Euphrates Dam (*Ramet Pedro: Ibid; p. 38*). Bakdash was now allowed back to Syria in 1966, although under severely restricted conditions.

As the revisionists of the USSR took a more pro-Ba'ath position, Bakdash took another theoretical turn, he suddenly appeared to take a “correct Marxist-Leninist line”. He took an apparent position against the Russian revisionist positions on the national liberation struggles. These were led by **R.A.Ulianovsky**, **Boris Ponomarev**, and **Mikhail Suslov**. It is likely that the opportunist Bakdash was simply reacting to

the USSR revisionists who were now favouring the Ba'ath Party, rather than the Syrian CP. The official answer to Bakdash came in an article by R.A.Ulianovsky entitled: "Some problems of the Non-Capitalist Development of liberated Countries" - which appeared in the Soviet monthly magazine "Kommunist" for January 1966. Here Ulianovsky repudiated these points on behalf of Khrushchevite revisionism. (*Heikal Ibid; pp.158-161*). These events are covered in depth in prior Alliance articles.

The Hama(h) 1964 Uprising

As seen above, the minority (non-Sunni – i.e “Alawi and Druze) peasant access to the army, was supported by the Hawrani wing of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. In 1964 a major revolt occurred in Hama. Hama was:

“the citadel of landed power and the capital of rural oppression”:
(*Seale Ibid p. 42*).

The revolt was led by the Muslim Brothers. In 1958, a partial Agrarian Reform had challenged the power of the town notables and the large landowners in the countryside. Class tensions rose steadily:

“The influence of the Damascene merchants and creditors which had permeated local society down to the late 1950s had also been broken. Busra's shopkeepers are no longer, as formerly Damascenes but native Busrites... In the 1940s and 1950s Hamah was sharply divided: on one side stood the **dhawat** – the notables of families of distinction – and on the other the people.”
(*Batatu; Ibid; P.25; 124*).

The revolt was sparked by militants of the Muslim Brotherhood, who attacked a person they had assumed to be an 'Alawi. A brutal suppression led by the Druze Ba'athist **Colonel Hamad 'Ubayad**, bloodily put down the rebellion. He was driven partly, by revenge for the Sunni officer suppression of a prior Druze uprising in 1952 (*Van Dam Ibid p.20*). The suppression leveled Hamah:

“Funded by the old families and the merchants and egged on by Shakyh Mahmud al-Hamid from the pulpit of the Sultan mosque, the Muslim rebels .. underwent 2 days of street fighting. The National Guard Commander Hamad “Ubayad .. shelled the mosque .. some 70 Muslim Brothers died”.
(*Seale Ibid; p.93*).

The position of the small scale traders became even worse. Later on in 1982, another bloody uprising here was also brutally suppressed. Again, it was led by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In-fighting – Wings of the ‘Military Committee’ and their objective basis

By 1966 the leading lights of the political section of the Ba'ath had been summarily dealt with: **Amin al-Fafiz** was arrested, **Michel Aflaq & Salah al-Bitar** were expelled (*Seale Ibid p.102*). Hence the original ‘idealist’ leaders of the Ba'athism were gone. Effectively the party had been hijacked by the military, and the still secret Military

Committee.

Meanwhile, counter-revolutionary events led by **Khrushchev** had eliminated Marxist-Leninists from leadership positions in the USSR. **Shepilov, Molotov, Kaganovich**, were all removed from any control in the party of the USSR by July 1957.

The Syrian state was now a client state of revisionist USSR imperialism. In Syria, the USSR had two potential vehicles for the USSR. Firstly, the Syrian CP, but this was small and less important. Moreover the SCP had been severely purged during the UAR, and had by 1963 lost ability to move to power.

Now, increasingly important to the USSR, and over-taking the SCP was the Ba'ath. In particular one wing of the Ba'ath was in favour of using the USSR to achieve modernisation.

Although the secret Military Committee had fought together for many years, by 1967, some clear fault-lines had developed. There had always been personal rivalries, displayed as greed for power. Now however these became expressed as ideological differences between two wings.

One wing was objectively a **pro-USSR comprador faction**, who posed as 'socialists'; and was led by **Jundi and Jadid**. Opposing them was a **'nationalist' wing** led by **Assad**:

“During 1967 the factionalisation within the Syrian ruling elite assumed clear contours as two distinct currents emerged: “radicals” (Whose top priority was the socialist transformation of Syria and who viewed that transformation as a prerequisite to effective struggle against Israel), and “nationalists” who (whose top priority was the struggle against Israel and who believed that socialist transformation would draw resources away from that struggle). This factionalisation also had the character of interest groups polarization to the extent that the radical’s base was largely in the Ba’ath Party and the civilian apparatus, while the nationalist’s strength lay in the army. However the radical faction was itself further factionalised. The first radical sub-faction was led by Minister of Information Zu’bi and Chief of Staff Ahmad as-Suwaydani. (By February 1968) they were replaced by Mustafa Tlas (a ‘nationalist’). The second radical subfaction- the “Dayr al-Zur group” was headed by Prime Minister Zu’ayyin and Foreign Minister Makhus, and enjoyed the support of Abd al-Karim al-Jundi (Editor: one of the Military Committee).. they were removed from power in October 1968. ... The third and largest faction was Salah Jadid’s group. As Deputy Secretary of the Ba’ath Party Jadid had considerable control of the Ba’ath Party apparatus. After the Ba’ath Party Congress of Sep-Oct 1968, it was the last surviving radical faction, now clearly locked in a power struggle with the nationalist faction headed by .. Hafiz Assad.”
(*Ramet Ibid p, 52*).

“Differences of political opinion between Jadid and al-Assad became obvious at the Regional and National Bath Congresses held in Damascus in Sep. and Oct 1968 where two main political trends were manifest. One trend advocated top priority for the so-called ‘socialist transformation

(tahwil ishtiraki) of Syrian society and was dominated by civilians including Salah Jadid, 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, Ibrahim Makhus.. and Premier Yusuf Zu'ayyin... This socialist-orientated group openly rejected the idea of political or military cooperation with regimes it branded as 'reactionary, rightist or pro-Western; such as Jordan, Lebanon or Iraq, even if this should be at the expense of the struggle against Israel. This group had objection to increased dependence on the Soviet Union and other Communist countries of the Eastern Bloc, as long as this would benefit socialist transformation.

The second trend showed strong Arab nationalist leaning and demanded top priority for the armed struggle against Israel is a strengthening of the Arab military potential, even if this should have temporarily negative effects on Syria's socialist transformation. A policy of military and political cooperation and coordination was advocated with other Arab states such as Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, without much concern for their respective political colour, as long as this would be in the interests of the Arab struggle against Israel. This nationalist trend was represented at the Congress by most of the military delegates, the most important being Hafiz al-Assad minister of Defence and Mustafa Tals, chief of staff of the Syrian Army";
(*Van Dam N; Ibid; p.63*)

Assad and his grouping objected to the pro-USSR tendency, using the grounds that the struggle against Israel was being compromised:

"Assad's nationalists argued... that Syria was becoming too dependent on the USSR and that socialist transformation had to take back seat to recovery of the Golan Heights and the achievement of a satisfactory peace in the Middle East... Not surprisingly, the USSR supported Jadid's faction. In October 1968, at the 10th national Congress of the Ba'ath Party, Assad accused P Zu'ayyin of "behaving like a Soviet agent"... he was relieved of office of PM)".
(*Ramet Ibid p, 32*).

As Assad moved steadily to control the party press, he removed communist sympathizers. In response Jadid tried to use the Syrian dominated "Palestinian" guerrillas organisation **al-Saiqa** to counter Assad's control of the regular armed forces.

To capture a dominant position, Jadid urged on by the USSR, tried to invade Jordan to overthrow King Hussein – who had been attacking the Palestinian Fedayeen. Between September 19-30 1970, 300 Syrian tanks, disguised as those of the Palestinian Liberation Army invaded Jordan. But at a crucial point, Assad in control of the air force, denied air support against the Israeli air force. The Israelis were able to fly to the support of King Hussein. ((*Ramet Ibid p, 54-6*).

At end October, at the 10th Extraordinary Congress of Ba'ath, Jadid demanded the resignation of Assad and Tlas. But on November 13 1970, Assad seized power and arrested Jadid, who lay in jail until a much later death. (*Ramet Ibid p, 56*). All his comrades of the Military Committee were vanquished.

Assad's State

Assad's takeover of the Ba'ath was designed to take the mass base of the Ba'ath, weld it with corporatism (such that no independent worker organisations can be formed) –

in order to build a fascist state.

The creation of a fascist state (defined here as an authoritarian non-parliamentary democratic state with a mass base) would assist the capitalist class. In this instance this was the small weak national capitalist class.

This weak national capitalist class arose from the rural notables, who were enriched by Land Reforms of first, the pre-Assad Ba'athists, and then Assad. In addition the Assad state used state financing, to further help the weak national bourgeoisie - to create an industrial base. His first moves were rapid:

“Assad started consolidating his position at once. A new constitution affirmed the role of the Ba'ath Party as the “leading party in state and society” and gave the president very wide legislative and executive powers. Overall, Assad aimed at representing a more moderate face of the Ba'ath both internally and externally”.

(Azmeah, Shamel; “ Syria’s Passage to Conflict: The End of the “Developmental Rentier Fix” and the Consolidation of New Elite Rule”; Politics & Society; 2016, Vol. 44(4) 499–523)

Ensuring ‘Alawi Domination of the army

During Assad’s rule, the rural and ‘Alawi character of the B’ath became steadily more accentuated. As well as packing the army officer corps with ‘Alawites, party members were 87.4 % were from rural areas (village or small town) (*Batatu Ibid p. 162*). Moreover the state bureaucracy was filled with recruits from rural backgrounds and of middle to high landowning status:

“Many if not the bulk, of the new bureaucrats were from rural backgrounds. Indeed at the bottom of much of the recurring discontent of the urban traders in the post-1963 period – apart from the adverse events upon them of the ... nationalization decrees – was the fact that they frequently found themselves compelled to deal with state employees .. of rural original, and if not hostile to the urban trading community, had little understanding of the intricacies of trade..” (*Batatu Ibid p. 160*).

The Agrarian reforms of Agrarian Reform Law No.161 of September 27 1958

Under an Agrarian Law No.161 of September 27 1958, there had already been a lowering of size of landholdings. Maximal ceilings were to 300 hectares of rain-fed land or 80 hectares of irrigated land. But by **Decree No.8 of June 1963**, the land ceilings was lowered further, to 15-55 acres on irrigated land and 80-300 hectares on rain fed land.

Excess holdings became seized estates, which were re-distributed to small peasants. Initially they had to purchase these at easy installments, but this re-distribution was then made free (*Batatu; Ibid p. 163*). Moreover by 1969, the pace of redistribution was dramatically increased such that:

“More reform and state lands were distributed to the peasants in the course of 6 months in 1969 than in all the preceding years of Ba’ath rule”; (*Batatu Ibid p. 169*).

Assad establishes Cult of Personality and a corporate state

As seen, by 1970, Assad first ensured the fall of Jundi, who committed suicide as Assad's forces encircled him. Subsequently, Jadid was imprisoned for decades to rot in jail, until his eventual death. So, this left Assad in sole control of the military dictatorship, the last of the old Military Committee to survive the pruning on the road to power.

Already in 1969 he had wanted to diminish the urban-rural divide. Now:

“Assad.. built bridges with the urban merchants and industrialists, and gave them a stake in his regime. He thus allowed them to rise to a greater role in the country's economy, at first in a moderate way but more meaningfully since the middle 1980s. He also supported the enactment of laws in the early 1990s encouraging private investment and markedly scaling down the tax liability on net profits from business” (*Batatu Ibid; pp. 326*)

“When Assad took the presidency in November 1970, he gave the communists a second cabinet post and 8 seats in the 173 member People's Council.. the CP's adhesion to the national Progressive Front in March 1972 brought the party de facto legality”:
(*Ramet Ibid p. 74*)

He proceeded to rapidly build a Bonapartist leadership cult.

“As early as May 1971, the new Ba'ath Command hailed its chief as **Qa'id-ul-Masih** or “**the Leader of the Nation's March**”, thus initiating the Assad cult. In the next two decades the party congresses and commands would, on appropriate occasions, profess feelings of elation for the “exceptional historical leadership” personified by Assad.. in 1985.. the watchword (became) “Our Leader Forever the Faithful Hafiz al-Assad!”.
(*Batatu Ibid p.177*)

A security apparatus was erected:

“under Assad the (security forces) became .. sheer instruments of the ruler with their forces harnessed to his needs and their chiefs ultimately accountable to him alone. .. In posthumously published observations made prior to his assassination (Ed- By Assad agents) in 1977, the Druze leader of the **Lebanese National Movement Kamal Jumblatt** described Syria in that year as a “big prison in which pullulate the agents of the secret police (they have attained according to some reports, the extravagant number of 49,000).” four ,major security and intelligence networks namely, Political Security, General Intelligence, Military intelligence and Air Force Intelligence, All answer ultimately to the Presidential Intelligence Committee.”
(*Batatu Ibid. p. 239*)

As well, he built an even larger mass base to the Ba'ath, surpassing prior membership numbers:

“Under Assad the character of the Ba’ath changed. For one thing it became, in a numerical sense, a mass party, its total membership greatly increased, rising to 1,008,243 in 1992. Its auxiliary organizations also spread out widely, Its peasant association for example, had by 1992 taken roots in 5,061 villages and by 1995 incorporated 801,230 members, that is ... no fewer than 95% of all Syrians active in agriculture, excluding employers.. the party became in effect another instrument by which the regime sought to control the community at large or to rally it behind its policies... only at the top level of the present political structure (is) power primary. Here Assad alone holds the sinews of real authority”:
(*Batatu Ibid; pp. 326-7.*)

As a device to ensure that all political activity was taking place within the Ba’th Party, and thus state purview - he allowed limited opportunities to non-Ba’athists to join the **‘Peoples Assemblies’**. This effectively formed the basis of his corporatization:

“In the 1990s he used a new watchword, that of **at-ta’addudiyah-s-siyasiyyah** or ‘political pluralism’.. “which we have been practicing for more than 20 years” .. an obvious reference to the circumscribed role that independent elements and non-Ba’athist parties such as the Nasserites, the Communists, and the Arab Socialists have been allowed to play in the government, the People’s Assemblies and the system of local administrative councils”;
(*Batatu Ibid p. 205*)

Assad Pushes Agrarian reform further

The party tilted towards the class that Assad had been born into, to the **middle peasantry**, who benefited the most from the land reforms:

“As for the distribution of the private landholdings, the available figures – those for 1970-1971 – indicate that the main beneficiaries of the major agrarian reform measures were not the small but the middle peasants, from whom stemmed many of the chief figures of both the Assad regime... middling landowners, that is, owners of 10-100 hectares, constituted in 1970-71 only 23.8 % - and owners of less than 10 hectares, constituted in 1970-1971 only 23.8 % of all landowners. (But) the former had title to 58.7 %, and the latter to only 23.5% of the entire area of fully owned agricultural land. Disparities in lease holdings were even more glaring: 1.9% of all leaseholders held 35.5 % of all land under lease”.
(*Batatu Ibid; pp. 328-9*)

This class preference adversely hit the small-scale manufacturing or artisans, and associated traders - of Hama(h). Hama had long been a center of cotton and agricultural good processing, based on artisan manufactures. The rural notables were tied into this matrix from their cotton production. At the same time the small artisans acted as money-lenders to the poorer sections of the peasantry:

“Hama has a long history as a center for both small-scale manufacturing and the processing of agricultural goods. Cotton ginning, cloth-weaving, leather working, tobacco processing and sugar refining are the major economic

activities carried on within the city. Twenty percent of cotton gins and butter factories are located in Hamah province, as are 10 of Syria's 52 cheese factories. These industries are relatively small compared with those in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia. In 1965, there were 4,603 unionized workers in Hama, divided among 22 separate trade unions. By contrast, Damascus had 23,827 workers and Aleppo, 23,899 workers among 28 unions. The government unionized Syria's workers during the mid-1960s, primarily at the expense of manufacturers in the larger cities. The persistence of small-scale units within the official trade union organizations of Hama at that time indicates the degree to which independent artisan operations remain predominant in the city's economy. As late as the 1970 census, 31.5 percent of this province's urban workers were considered to be self-employed. This compares with 26.0 percent of those in Homs and 20.5% of those in Damascus”:

(Lawson, Fred H: Middle East Research and Information Project; MERIP Reports, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), pp. 24-28).

“Whereas Syria’s urban traders and artisans had long formed the backbone of the economy in Syrian cities, and particularly in Hama, traditional economic and social structures were eroded under the Ba’th. This led to a recalibration of the socioeconomic hierarchy in Syria and an elevation of Syria’s peasants at the expense of urban populations. Hama’s long-time urban dwellers became the new poor in Ba’thist Syria, brewing a deeply felt sense of grievance that led to the protests, riots and strikes in the early 1980s.”

(Conduit, Dara (2017) The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 44:1, 73-8)

These tensions in part, fueled the resentments. These would result in the Hama uprisings as discussed above, when we outlined the rise of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Assad pushes large scale industrialisation

But as well as wanting to promote the peasantry, as time went on, Assad wanted to also develop industrialisation (*Lawson FH; Ibid*). His policies were to culminate in a stronger urban national bourgeoisie. This would be an additional source of discontent that spurred Hama discontent.

In the 1970s, the Assad government began a policy of industrialization. This also had several negative effects on the artisan manufacturers. One in especial was the proletarianisation of many seasonal agricultural workers, with jobs in these capital-intensive large industries raised their wages. This coupled with a new minimal wage standard, led them to lose their older reliance on the urban small traders who had been the money-lenders that they had relied upon. At the same time, the cotton farms were deprived of their seasonal agricultural workers, who were sucked into the factories by the larger pay.

It was the middle-large landowners who formed the bulk of the growing capitalist class. The capitalized machine owning landed farmers and ‘**mustathmirs**’ were dominating the countryside.

“In 1976 when the Muslim Brotherhood launched out against Assad’s rule, and again in 1980 when its activities were approaching their peak, Assad eased matters for the merchants by sharply increasing their import quotas for consumer goods, The value of their registered imports rose from 1.72 billion Syrian pounds in 1975 to 3.63 billion pounds in 1976 and 4.17 billion pounds in 1980... (but) the business class as a whole, having steered clear of formal affiliation with any political party has had no footing in any of the Ba’ath commands since 1963, and occupied only 3 out of the 186 seats in the 1973-1977 sessions and 18 out of the 250 seats in the 1990-1994 sessions of the largely ceremonial People’s Assembly... Things have been going the way of the business leaders... uninterruptedly since 1970, and increasingly more meaningfully since the middle 1980s, in matters affecting not only commerce but also other parts of the economy’s private sector... The 50% increase in the “special” membership of the Damascus Chambers of Commerce and the tripling of its ‘first class’ membership between 1971-1990... The maximum tax liability on net profits from business fell from 70.74% in 1974 to 45% in 1992. Even more favourable from their standpoint, is Law Number 10 of May 5 1991, for the Encouragement of Investment. Under this law, investment projects with tangible assets of more than 10 million Syrian pounds... and duly approved by the Supreme Investment Council headed by the PM, enjoy other among advantages exception from all taxes for a period of five years, if undertaken by mixed companies with a public sector participation of at least 25%. If more than 50% of project’s output is exported and the proceeds are transferred in hard currency through Syria’s banks, its tax holiday may be extended by two years.”

(Batatu pp. 208; 209; 211)

In addition, smuggling and illicit trade also expanded, often in association with corrupt bureaucrats. All this also fostered burgeoning trade.

The Muslim Brotherhood Rise Again – the Hama revolt of 1982

As seen ‘Alawite domination had been ensured. However, the Sunni presence could not be forgotten entirely. After all as shown above, they remained the bulk of the population.

Especially after the Hama Rising, the Ba’ath leaders of all factions tried to ensure Sunni “buy-in”. After his 1970 coup, Assad made it a point every year, to break his fast at a time during Ramadan with the principal ‘Ulama. In 1973 the Constitution dropped the phrase “That Islam is the religion of the state”. The resulting furor for the Sunni populace, quickly led Assad to amend this to “The religion of the President of the Republic is Islam”.

While some of the Ulama were prepared to support Assad, especially those who were elevated to positions such as “Mufti of the Republic” – more were not. Many other Ulama were petty traders or handicraftsmen, as they were unable to support themselves only by religion *(Batatu Ibid pp.260-262)*.

Nonetheless, Assad had effected a new ‘Alawite domination. We saw how both the peasant reforms, and the promotion of large-scale industry, had both adversely affected the power of small traders, urban petty-bourgeoisie, and lenders. Moreover

there was a move to development of production for foreign export. This accentuated the rise of a connected, "parasitic class of state contractors":

"After 1975... the flow of Arab oil money which had been copious diminished sharply; the heightened scale of peasant migration and a mounting rate of inflation deepened the injury... rents became impossibly high for the middle and humbler classes... (in the city)... the small scale trading class from which the Brotherhood drew part of its membership was adversely affected by the rise of agricultural cooperative in rural districts and consumer's cooperatives in urban sellers. Sellers who travelled from village to village and constituted a large group at Hamah... known as al-muta'iyishin)... were apparently similarly hurt. The growth of a parasitic class of state contractors, the rampant corruption in the upper layers of the bureaucracy and the fat commission made on government contracts by men close to the pinnacle of power added to the popular discontent".
(*Batatu Ibid p. 264*).

"The regime's programme of large-scale industrial development... involved opening Syria's domestic market to foreign investment and imported goods, and encouraging large- and middle-scale landholders in the countryside to expand cash crop production for overseas markets".
(*Lawson, Fred H: MERIP Reports, Ibid*).

These various forces— the empowerment of the poorer and middle peasants, the large-scale factory developments, the opening of production for export – all depressed the artisan cotton-based industries of Hama:

"The February revolt was primarily a reaction by small manufacturers and tradespeople in Hamah to the regime's programme of large-scale industrial development. ... These (ed-Government) policies have led to a decline in the importance of small-scale cotton police manufacturing within Syria's economy. At the same time, they have given richer peasants in the north-central part of the country incentives to consolidate their holdings, enabling these farmers to threaten the social position of regions of already-disaffected artisans and traders".
(*Lawson, Fred H: MERIP Reports, Ibid*).

As Lawson concluded in 1982:

"In present-day Syria, the most compelling elements of "Islamic thinking" are anti-statist. They are not very tolerant of heterodoxy. As in Algeria, they help to set small-scale manufacturers "both against rustic ignoramuses" and "against those who aspire to or possess privileges in virtue of their ties to the West. Hamah's artisans and shopkeepers, urban-based large landholders and more or less peripheral cotton and textile merchants can best use these aspects of Islam in their struggles against the coalition of state officials, industrial managers and rich Damascus import-export merchants who buttress and benefit from the present regime".
(*Lawson, Fred H: MERIP Reports, Ibid*).

All these factors fostered the Hamah Revolt. The Muslim Brotherhood had not been

completely destroyed in the post-1964 Hama rising suppressions. Their resentment grew:

“But from the standpoint of the Muslim Brethren, the most aggravating factor was the sharpened ‘Alawi bias of the regime and the deepening erosion of the power of the Sunni community”.
(*Batatu Ibid p. 265*).

“Popular unrest took place primarily in the souks and commercial districts of the old city, rather than in the countryside.
Syria’s shopkeepers formed ‘the most important private sector in this largely socialized country’. Shopkeepers and small traders played an integral role in strikes elsewhere in the country too—in Damascus, the government had to send its own militias into the souks to force shops open. But the trend was even more noticeable in Hama, where shops were closed for months.
According to a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood report that was published in the aftermath of the Hama uprising, the Syrian government was aware of the demographic challenge and specifically targeted shops in the old quarters of the city during the 1982 uprising, destroying more than 500 during a single phase of the operation.”
(*Conduit, Dara (2017) The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 44:1, 73-87; p. 79*)

Assassinations of army officers began. While an important Muslim Brotherhood leader, **Marwan Hadid** was killed in jail, his successor ‘**Abd-us-Sattar az-Za’im** took over his leadership role. However the leaders were split into factions counseling an uprising, opposed by those urging militant violence. Tensions rose steadily, as the moderate wing of the Brotherhood could not effectively control rising discontent. Finally, in June 1979, a militant section - **the Fighting Vanguard**, shot 32 ‘Alawai cadets of the army, at a military academy. In the ensuing crisis, all factions (moderate to militant) of the Muslim Brotherhood now joined in a Joint Command.

To defuse the situation, Assad appointed more Sunnis to government high-profile posts. But by 1980:

“The scale of unrest widened and strikes and demonstrations - .. but not in Damascus.. increased in extent and intensity”.
(*Batatu; Ibid; p. 272*)

In response, the favouritism towards the ‘Alawites in the army was partially curbed. In February 1980 the proportion of Sunnis at the Ba’ath Regional Command level was increased from 57.1% to 66.7%. Also the proportion of ‘Alawis was decreased from 33.3% to 19%.

An attempted assassination of Assad in June 1980, failed. Assad’s brother **Rif’at Assad** – who had considerable Army power - in reprisals, led a massacre of 500 prisoners from the Muslim Brothers in a jail in Palmyra.

Yet, this repression did not prevent further resistance to Assad’s regime by the Muslim Brotherhood. During the months of March-April 1980, Aleppo was for several

weeks out of state control. Following this:

“A particularly bloody retribution ... was wreaked on Aleppo in August 1980.”
(Seale *Ibid.* p. 329).

In February 1982, Hama, the site of the 1964 rising, saw a new but wider, general insurrection. Again a major counter-assault by Syrian Army killed considerable numbers. The brutality of the battle in April presaged the destruction of Syria by Hafiz's son, a generation later:

“scores of males over the age of 14 were rounded up almost at random and shot out of hand... The battle of Hama raged for 3 weeks. ... Altogether Hama was besieged by some 12,000 men (Government troops)... it was more of a civil war..

After heavy shelling.. whole districts were razed...

Entire families were taken from their homes and shot.. The price of rebellion was paid by Hama as a whole: large numbers died in the hunt for the gunmen (Ed-Of Muslim Brothers)..a figure of between 5,000 and 10,000 (deaths) could be closer to the truth.. the pounding of the town.”

(Seale, *P: Ibid p.329; 333-334*).

The leader of the Aleppo uprising, **'Adnan 'Uqlah** – was disowned by the Joint Command.

Assad's strategy to grow the economy

The Assad state set out to build a 'modern state'. To do this it had to build a fascist type state which would use the resources of the state to build an industrial state. In the beginning its policies were land reform and nationalization of the small industrial forces there were. Naturally the latter upset those capitalist owners.

To build its state, the Assad forces established a class alliance of the middle peasantry and those elements of the larger commercial bourgeoisie prepared to cooperate:

“We can speak of a social alliance formed by the military-bureaucratic state bourgeoisie with the new commercial bourgeoisie that emerged after 1963. This alliance mainly relies on the security forces and, throughout the 1970s at least, on the growing salaried middle classes and the intermediate stratum of the peasantry, which is the main source of recruitment for the bureaucracy and the military”.

(Perthes *Ibid; p. 210*)

After the Hama Revolt of 1982 in particular, Assad assiduously tried to build a coalition to involve the Sunni commercial trading class and its leaders. Conveniently, this was also of benefit to building the industrialised sector:

“This situation slowly developed into ... a low-trust alliance between the Alawite dominated state-elite and certain Sunni capital holders. The state-elite, needed the entrepreneurship and capital of the business class, while the business class needed state protection to operate. Furthermore, the regime needed the support of certain Sunni business and religious figures to

counter accusations by Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, that it was an Alawite regime oppressing the Sunnis.”

(Azmeah, Shamel; “*Syria’s Passage to Conflict: The End of the “Developmental Rentier Fix” and the Consolidation of New Elite Rule*”; *Politics & Society*; 2016, Vol. 44(4) 499–523).

While wanting to establish a powerful national capitalist class, the Assad forces were not able to keep free of foreign capital penetration. But in contrast to an exclusive dependence upon the revisionist Khrushchevite USSR, Assad adopted an ‘**infitah**’ – an opening to the West. This was a juggling act to try to balance opposing imperialisms. The Syrian State – attempted to retain the ‘leading role’:

“In the early 1970s, and after the war in October 1973 in particular, Syria, like Egypt followed a political strategy described as **infitah**, which involved growing political and economic cooperation with the West and greater freedom for private business. Compared to Egypt, the Syrian version of **infitah** was far more state-capitalist: the state continued to control strategic areas such as foreign trade, it played the leading role in industry and state expenditure programs directed the course of development.”

(Perthese V; *Ibid*; p. 209)

In addition, Syria had started to export oil as a commodity from 1968:

“Starting in 1968, following the completion of the pipeline that connected producing regions in northeast Syria to the port of Tartous on the Mediterranean, Syria became an oil exporter, and growth in oil rents was subsequently rapid (Figure)

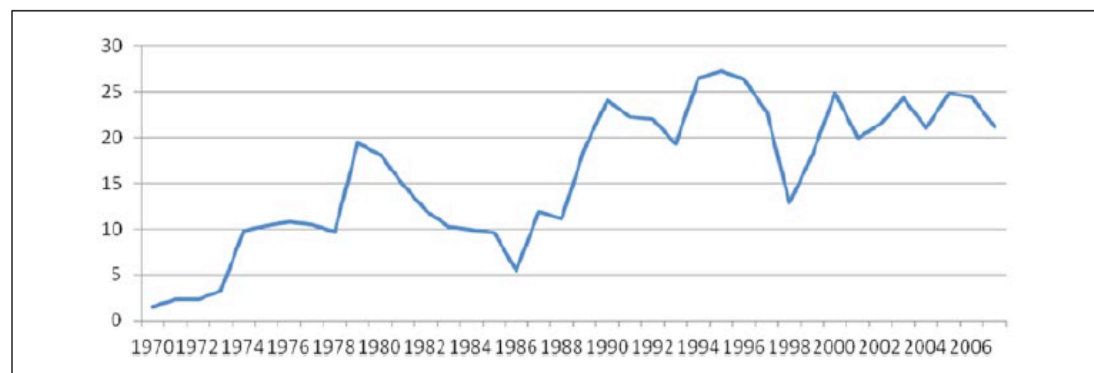


Figure 2. Oil Rents as a Percentage of GDP.

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators (<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>).

(Azmeah, Shamel; “*Syria’s Passage to Conflict: The End of the “Developmental Rentier Fix” and the Consolidation of New Elite Rule*”; *Politics & Society*; 2016, Vol. 44(4) 499–523).”

It is not that the revisionist USSR was ignored – to the contrary. Because the Syrian industry was still producing goods of ‘relatively low quality’, it was exporting to the USSR market heavily, as Western countries did not accept this lower quality:

“Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, specific opportunities for Syria’s private industry lay in exports to socialist countries. Since 1973, Syrian payments on its military and civil debt to the Soviet Union had to be made partly in goods. In practice, payments were almost entirely made in goods; no cash payments were made, at least not from Syria directly. The USSR and, on a smaller scale, Iran, as well as other socialist countries that temporarily had similar payment agreements with Syria would simply buy from the Syrian market, and the cost of these purchases was subtracted from Syria’s debt. The producers would be paid in local currency from the Syrian Central Bank. In the 1970s, profits from such deals could be extraordinary. The Soviets would buy large quantities, offering a vast market with relatively low quality standards. Because of the structure of Syrian industry, the Soviets were practically forced to buy out of a limited assortment and often paid over price. Clothes manufacturing benefited the most, though because Soviet buyers placed huge orders, only fairly large establishments could deal with them. Several factories were set up for the sole purpose of exporting goods to the USSR. Over years, more and more manufacturers lined up for Soviet orders, and the Syrian assortment of modern import-substitution commodities grew considerably. Several Syrian industrialists producing foreign license goods obtained marketing rights for the East European countries—as they did for Iran and the Gulf states—and Syrian-made “French” and “German” perfumes and cosmetics made up a considerable part of Soviet purchases. As Syrian production now offered greater choices, Soviet buyers became less willing to pay exaggerated prices. According to industrialists profit margins decreased from over 100 percent to somewhat between 20 and 30 percent. Still, these deals on the Syrian debt remained highly attractive and important for private industrialists. Private-sector exports to the USSR alone constituted an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of all Syrian exports to that country, and to a third or more of all private exports.”

(Perthes Ibid p. 221).

But, the net influx of foreign capital in the 1970-1980 period came to dominate. This can be seen in the figure below, stated as external debt. It also shows how this fell off dramatically after 1988.

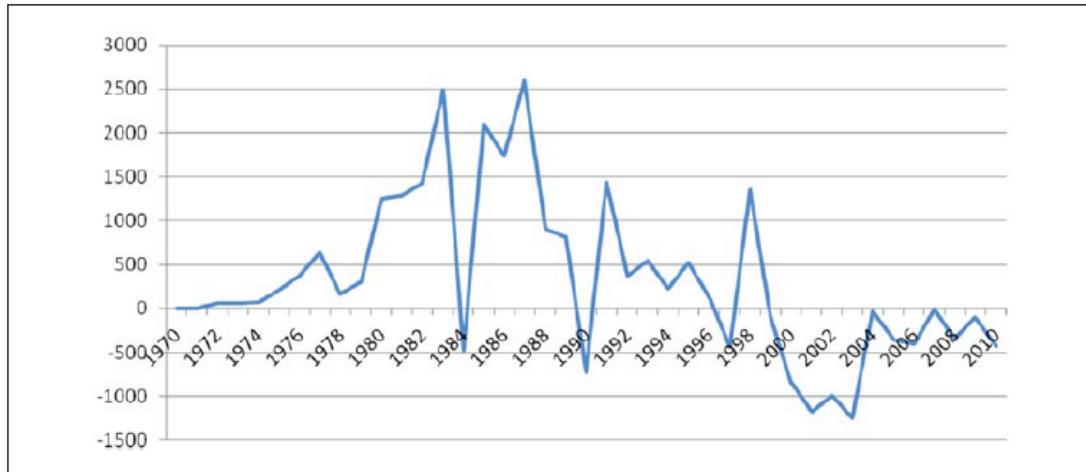


Figure 4. Net Annual Flows of External Debt (US\$ Millions).

Source: World Bank World Development Indicators.

(Cited by: Azmeh, Shamel; “Syria’s Passage to Conflict: The End of the “Developmental Rentier Fix” and the Consolidation of New Elite Rule”; *Politics & Society*; 2016, Vol. 44(4) 499–523).

That considerable fall in from the late 1990s onwards, underlies the crisis for the state as the Syrian working and unemployed peoples suffered intense privation. Initially, the Syrian economy had experienced an impressive growth of the economy, but this had stagnated by the 1980s.

This stagnation was due to several factors: the lower influx of ‘petrodollar’ aid from the Gulf States; the inflexible authoritarian and bureaucratic state apparatus; and, the ultimate inability to build a substantial heavy industrial base, the only method that could have ensured true ‘independence’:

“During the 1970s, the Syrian economy realized considerable growth in all sectors; real GNP increased more than 150 percent. In the 1980s, however, growth was placed by stagnation; at the end of the decade real GNP hardly exceeded the 1980 figures; per capita it even decreased about 20 percent. The commodity-producing sectors were particularly hard hit: construction, trade, and services still grew until at least 1985, but income from agriculture and industry was declining in real terms. The crisis of the 1980s was mainly an effect of the development strategies of the foregoing decade. Agriculture had been neglected. Industry, on which development efforts had concentrated, had not become the basis for further self-sustained growth. Industrial plants purchased in the 1970s, when development budgets soared as an effect of petrodollar assistance, Syria’s own oil revenues, and foreign credit, were often ill-fitting to the country’s economic structure and needs, and for the most part highly import dependent, while their contribution to exports was almost negligible. Syria’s balance of trade became increasingly negative. In addition, foreign aid, which had disguised structural weaknesses in the economy, substantially decreased after 1983.....

In fact, the Syrian economy’s low performance was caused not only by economic and technical problems, but also by social and political factors such

as authoritarian and bureaucratic structures, lack of public participation, and growing social equalities.”.
(Perthes *Ibid* p. 210).

This economic crisis led to ‘**liberalization**’ or ‘**privatization**’. Now the state resources to investment were curtailed in favour of private investment. These private investors included local capitalists:

“In facing the crisis of the 1980s, the Syrian regime embarked on a course of austerity-including reduced public investments, restrictive wage policies, and subsidy reductions -and, since the mid-1980s in particular, of step-by-step liberalization or privatization. Referring to these policies, Syrian merchants frequently speak of a new *infatih*”.
(Perthes *Ibid*; p. 210)

“Gross private investments, which had counted for more than 40 percent of the country's entire investments in 1963 and had dropped to less than 30 percent under the Ba’athist governments of the 1963-70 period, ranged around one-third in the 1970s, realizing a 16-fold increase in absolute terms and a 400 percent increase in constant terms between 1970 and 1980. In the 1980s, the private sector's contribution to gross investments further increased, amounting to almost 50 percent by the end of the decade. In real terms, however, the value of annual private investments remained almost unchanged from 1980 through 1987, while the value of public investments decreased. In 1986, for the first time since the early 1970s, the private sector's share in the Syrian economy's gross output-as far as this can be determined-exceeded that of the public sector.”
(Perthes *Ibid*; p. 211)

These new private investors – the Assad-ite commercial capitalists - were still intimately tied to the state. In fact they utilised the state’s contacts and bureaucracy in an enriched **nepotism**:

“The emergence of a new commercial bourgeoisie, and in particular an elite group of new businessmen often referred to as **al-tabaqa al-jadida (the new class)** was closely connected to all sorts of business with the state. In wealth and influence they soon outgrew Syria's mainly petit-bourgeois trade sector and the remnants of the old, pre-Ba’ath, commercial bourgeoisie. They prospered from imports and other transactions related to foreign trade, services, and construction. A handful of Syrian businessmen, for example, obtained contracts to build pipelines, grain silos, motorways, and hotels, and for the modernization of Syria's telephone network. ... Transactions with the state generally secured high profits and it was not surprising that corrupt practices to obtain or mediate contracts with the public sector be widespread”.
(Perthes *Ibid* p. 240).

By the late 1980s the Syrian economy had revived. Some larger industrial centers had been established. But at the same time, there had been a serious penetration by either foreign or Syrian expatriate capital:

“On the whole, the private industrial sector has recovered from the setbacks of the 1983-86 period. With the continuing crisis of public-sector industries, political encouragement for private industrial activities has been increasing. Among other things, the scope of industrial activities open to the private sector has gradually been expanded. Bureaucratic procedures were - according to businessmen - remarkably simplified, and formerly unlicensed establishments have been legalized. The liberalization measures mentioned - allowing Syrian expatriates, Syrians, and other Arabs to rather freely import goods and capital - seem to have been effective. Since 1985, there has been a substantial increase of private industrial investment. In addition, for the first time since the 1960s, a considerable number of relatively large industrial establishments - in terms of capital - have been set up, many of them with foreign or Syrian expatriate capital.”
(Perthes *Ibid* p. 223).

This recovery of Syrian industry, was ‘marginal’ to any meaningful development of note for the Syrian people. The industries were aimed at export of consumer goods:

“In contrast to Syrian industries established in the independence period, these new, bigger projects almost exclusively comprise finishing industries, producing - under license for the most part - certain previously imported higher-standard consumer goods. Private industrial projects set up between 1985 and 1988, with a capital investment of Sy Pound 5 million or more (approximately \$450,000) include some outerwear factories, establishments for the production of ice cream and cardboard; for the assembly of air conditioners, solar collectors, and washing machines; and for the licensed production of shaving cream, shoe polish, toothpaste, cough medicine, meat preserves, disposable diapers, and tissues. The two largest establishments on this list, with a capital investment of up to Syrian Pounds 40 million, are a factory producing French perfumes under license and another producing biscuits.

These industries are largely marginal in their contribution to the country's development. They are organized for export markets mainly in the USSR and the Gulf, but they import up to 100 percent of their raw material and all their machinery and spare parts. Production techniques are in no way adapted to the Syrian capacities. These industries create little employment, and they attract scarce capital away from sectors where it is urgently needed.”
(Perthes *Ibid* p. 223).

Even though the aim was to build large-scale enterprise, the scale of enterprise was still rather small:

“As in the 1970s, the vast majority of private manufacturing establishments remain rather small scale, and the distance in size between this majority and the group of new big establishments has been increasing rapidly. Out of the 85,000 industrial establishments registered at the Ministry of Industry at the end of 1987 62,000 counted as artisan (*hiraf sinfiyya*), with a total registered labor force of not more than 130,000, owners included. In industry as a whole, the average number of registered persons employed-excluding, however, public-sector employees moonlighting for private employers, children employed illegally, and other registered to avoid social security

payments-does not exceed 2.5 per establishment. Investments remained low for the most part. In contrast to the 1970s, the 1980s only a few small producers have been able to modernize machinery and appliances; even spare parts for imported machinery were in short supply";
(Perthes *Ibid* p. 224).

Of course the Syrian capitalist class is not homogenous. By the late 1980s two factions of bourgeoisie had appeared. An older industrial element that had never been reconciled to Ba'th the state-led industrialization; and the commercial class. It was this commercial class who had in particular been 'state' made and who now, in reciprocity – could be said to in fact, be the state:

“The Syrian bourgeoisie is uniform neither in its appearance nor in its attitude towards the Baathist regime. Remaining members of the old industrial bourgeoisie, which has been seriously affected by the nationalizations of the 1960s, as well as certain new industrialists are generally more opposed to the regime and less eager to cooperate with it than the commercial class. They complain about the burdens of dictatorship and bureaucracy and criticize the government's bias in favor of commercial activities. The material interests of the commercial bourgeoisie were less affected than those of the industrialists by the egalitarian policies of the 1960s. The disdain some of its elements felt towards the regime was soon to disappear, or to be disguised, behind economic interests that led them to respond positively to the demonstrative friendliness the new regime displayed towards the merchants in general and the Damascus Chamber of Commerce in particular.

It is the new commercial bourgeoisie, and especially its top group or "class", who, having profited the most both from the state-led opening of the 1970s and the privatization of the 1980s, supports the regime and cooperates with it actively. The alliance between the commercial class and the state bourgeois been strengthened by a variety of economic, social, and even family relationships and it is likely that in the coming years these two groups will gradually amalgamate. Some of the bureaucratic, political, and military elite, and a growing number of their sons and daughters, have already begun to commit themselves, and the wealth acquired in the past two decades, to various commercial ventures. Several prominent merchants have recently entered the Syrian parliament, thereby combining political and commercial interests and demonstrating "bourgeois" support for the president. As noted above, the mutual interests of this alliance have donated Syria's development under Assad, especially”.

(Perthes *Ibid* p. 225-6).

Bashar Assad - Continues as a Hereditary Fascist

In June 2000, Hafiz Assad died. By the time of his death, Hafiz had built a fascist state. This cracked down on any political dissent. Its most notorious prison was Tadmor:

“In the 1970s, under the rule of Hafiz al-Assad, the state expanded the prison with the addition of new buildings. According to a 2001 Amnesty International report, the military prison was “designed to inflict the maximum suffering, fear and humiliation on prisoners and to keep them under the strictest control by breaking their spirit.” Prisoners were isolated from the outside world and

forbidden to communicate with each other; death could come at any time.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, much of the prison's population consisted of those charged with political crimes. Between 1980 and 1990, again according to Amnesty International, the regime imprisoned an estimated 20,000 people in Tadmor” .

(Shareah Taleghani R.: 'Breaking the Silence of Tadmor Military Prison; MER275; Middle East Research & Information Project Reports)

The level of people's suppression went far beyond the proscription of political activity. The Syrian Human rights Committee (SHRC) estimated from a proposed amnesty (which never took actual effect) that 11% of the population were incarcerated for mere 'economic, conscription crimes' and 'juvenile delinquencies'. The degree of tyranny over daily life was described, when effects of a proposed amnesty were considered:

“Official Syrian Newspapers said that citizens benefit from this amnesty would be tens of thousands. Tishrin newspaper said that the number would total 120,000, while Reuters reported from authorised Syrian sources that more than 200,000 Syrian citizens would benefit from this presidential amnesty. This means that economic and conscription crimes, and juvenile delinquencies total 7.50% among Syrians as a whole, rising to 11% when children and elderly people are excluded. Both rates constitute an appalling indicator to the abyss Syria plunged into under President Assad's regime... The rise of a new class in Syria, who came to power in destitute situation, but grew millionaires in no time. This parasitic class resorted to the worst abuse of authorities. Citizens who refuse to deal with members of this corrupted class will be outlawed and forwarded to exceptional courts, or a deliberate trap could be laid to them and consequently prosecuted. This evil methodology planned and practised by influential ruling elite and individuals posed many Syrians to dangers of punishment, bankruptcy and imprisonment. ... It is the misfortune of Syrian people that all corruption files and cases throughout the long rule of president Assad have been supervised by and dealt with corrupted high-ranking individuals involved in embezzling public funds and properties. The majority of their victims are citizens, dealt with them on good faith or those who just come to be familiar with them, so that they have been criminalised while the true perpetrators escape justice. In such deteriorating economic circumstances and domination of parasites, many Syrian citizens were obliged to do more than one job, so that many people spend about 16 hours at work a day. These long hours at work have their negative and counterproductive implications on their psychology, health and families, but have never been for the benefit of citizens or the country. Syrian jurisdiction was among the best and most neutral justice institutions in the world, however under the solitary party rule and the harsh security corpses grip, it was converted into an instrument to serve the influential, but depriving people from their natural rights. Therefore, overnumbered punitive sentences and condemnations have been witnessed in Syria under President Hafez Assad's rule”.

(“Human Reading in The Amnesty decree issued by President Hafez Assad on 3/07/1999”; 13-FEBRUARY-2004 BY SHRC_ADMIN. At: <http://www.shrc.org/en/?p=19882>)

Within days of Hafiz's death, his son, **Bashar** was appointed president. In 'Syria: a family business' – Derek Brown explained the rapid events:

“Syria's ruling clique has moved swiftly to fill the power vacuum created by the death of Hafez al-Assad.

On Saturday, when the old dictator died, the country's complaisant parliament rushed through a constitutional amendment reducing the minimum age required of a president from 40 to 34. That, conveniently enough, is the age of Assad's oldest surviving son, Bashar. Bashar al-Assad has also been declared head of Syria's armed forces. He is, effectively, acting president....”
Bashar is an ophthalmologist by profession, He was catapulted into the heir-apparent role when his elder brother, Basil, was killed in a road accident in 1994.

Basil had been groomed for the succession virtually from birth. Bashar seemed apolitical until his brother died..”

(Derek: *Syria: a family business* ;12 June 2000; *The Guardian*, London;
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/jun/12/comment.israelandthepalestinians>)

There were high hopes for better times, as he promised 'reforms'. They quickly faded. Economically Syria was in retreat as the oil reserves were depleted and foreign investment had further re-structuring Syria's economy. Syria's economy faced serious concerns as follows:

“When Bashar replaced his father in 2000, it was clear that economic changes were needed if the regime was to maintain its power. By 2005 and 2006, Syria's non-oil budget deficit stood at 22.7 percent and 27.4 percent, respectively, of GDP and Syria was expected to become a net oil importer by the end of the decade. Reflecting that most of the agricultural production was for domestic consumption, Syria had a highly undiversified exports structure with minerals, mostly oil, accounting for almost 70 percent of exports. With declining oil reserves, Syria was becoming an oil-based political, economic, and social system but without the oil. Parts of the regime were aware of these trends. In 2004, Nibras Al-Fadel, an economic adviser to Assad, told the Arabic newspaper Al-Hayat :

‘The factors that make economic reforms in Syria inevitable are mainly internal. . . . the exhaustion of oil reserves and Syria becoming a net oil importer will mean, with other factors remaining equal, a drop in GDP, living standards, and in the revenues of the state. Thus, the current economic trends are going in a direction that is ... a time-bomb in the heart of the Syrian economy and society. We only have few years to dismantle this bomb.”

(Azmeah, Shamel; “ *Syria's Passage to Conflict: The End of the Developmental Rentier Fix*” and *the Consolidation of New Elite Rule*”; *Politics & Society*; 2016, Vol. 44(4) 499–523)

Instead of dismantling this 'time-bomb', Bashar al-Assad chose the path of profiteering for a narrow cadre of his families and members of the top levels of the army and bureaucracy. He instituted even further waves of privatization and foreign capital imports. In essence, these removed any progressive features of the prior era

of state led nationalisations:

“President Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000 promising political reform and the liberalization of the Syrian economy.... By 2000, Syria’s ageing economic system was holding back the country’s growth, with bloated government departments and inefficient state-owned enterprises putting pressure on the government treasury. Thus, even though Syria’s state-driven economic system had formed a major part of the Syrian social contract, it became unsustainable. The depletion of Syria’s oil reserves also put significant pressure on government income, with oil revenue decreasing from 14 percent of GDP in the early 2000s to just four per cent by 2010. This led to a winding back of the state subsidies that had long bolstered the livelihoods of many citizens. In addition, the Syrian economy opened up to foreign investment, with Western businesses such as Costa Coffee and KFC flooding into the market. State assets were privatized, banking and lending laws were relaxed and a consumption tax was implemented. Western construction companies led a construction boom in Damascus and Aleppo. Consequently, Syria displayed strong macroeconomic indicators and sustained an average annual growth rate of five per cent in the second half of the decade before the uprising. The reforms fundamentally changed the way that the Syrian economy operated. One government advisor remarked in 2011, ‘the last five years have been about deconstructing the socialist ideology in favour of the market’. The changes also unravelled the government’s economic relationship with its rural constituents, because the economic reform fomented increased inequality, particularly in rural areas”;

(Conduit, Dara (2017) The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 44:1, 73-87; p. 81)

An intent to reverse state led progressive gains was announced very early on. Within 6 months of his rule, Bashar re-erected private property relations in the countryside, reversing the whole history of Ba’thist land Reforms. It was a “counter-revolution” against a progressive aspect of the Ba’th peasant land reforms:

“Under Bashar al-Assad, the deepening of economic liberalization spread to the agricultural sector. Combined with a severe decline in agricultural production and extensive corruption in the state farms, the new policy led to the privatization of all Syrian lands by virtue of Decision 28 on December 16, 2000. According to this decision, the state farmland was parceled out in shares of 3 ha for irrigated land and 8 ha for non-irrigated land. The decision formally allocated ‘right of use’, and not property. It also called for land to be distributed to, in order of priority, the former owners, the farm workers, and employees of the General administration of the Euphrates Basin.. Thus the change in the property structures and the nature of exploitation was radical, Land passed from state farms to large private domains, which the Ba’th Party ideology had wished to limit. It was indeed a form of counter-revolution”.

(Ababsa, Myriam: “The end of a World. Drought and agrarian transformation in North Eastern Syria 2007-2010; Contained in: Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl, titled “The End of the World: Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007-2010)

This climate of privatization provided a bonanza for the leading families including Bashar's cousin **Rami Makhlouf**, or 'Mr. Ten Percent':

"Privatization and the opening up of the economy presented an opportunity for entrepreneurship across the Syrian population, but in practice saw state assets and contracts snapped up by a small group of economic elite with close or familial relationships with political leaders. President Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf was one of the best-known members of this cohort, becoming known as 'Mr. Ten Percent' because he was rumoured to control up to one-tenth of the Syrian economy. The ostentatious show of this wealth in the cities, especially in Damascus, became a hallmark of Bashar al-Assad's regime."

(Conduit Ibid; p. 81-82)

"Political control over the new urban economic boom remained a concern to the regime both for self-enrichment and to prevent the emergence of an elite that is not linked to the regime. As a result, regime insiders were at the heart of the new business boom and the first to benefit from these opportunities.

The key figure in this process was Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, who became a symbol for Syria's economy in the 2000s".

(Azmeah, Shamel; "Ibid)

The net result was a catastrophic poverty for the people and a rising inequity. But the Syrian Government was "in denial", as a Cabinet minister declared "poverty is not very deep":

"In 2005, a UN poverty report noted that while overall poverty declined in Syria between 1996 and 2003, the gap between rich and poor increased. Landis noted in 2012 that 'since then, both the wealth gap and poverty have been on the rise'. In addition, despite healthy economic growth, unemployment rates skyrocketed. Although official estimates suggested that unemployment sat at 8.9 per cent, some observers argued that it could have been as high as 22 per cent, with youth unemployment around 26 per cent. Despite five per cent annual GDP growth, jobs were not being added to the market. Moreover, there were no unemployment benefits to support those without work. Rapid inflation compounded these difficulties, with food prices increasing 20 per cent in 2010 alone, well above wage rises. The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics acknowledged that between 2004 and 2007, the rate of Syrians living in 'extreme poverty' increased from 11.4 per cent to 12.3 per cent of the population. In real terms, this meant that more than two million Syrians in the 2000s were unable to afford their basic needs, and by 2007 one in three Syrians was living in 'poverty'. Data for later years are not available, but it seems likely that poverty levels worsened following the cessation of fuel subsidies in 2008, which led to diesel prices tripling overnight. In 2010, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, estimated that up to three million Syrians were living in extreme poverty. In the face of this increased socioeconomic deprivation in parts of the population, the Syrian government remained in denial, with the chief of the economic technical team in the Syrian Cabinet, Joma'a Hijazi, saying that 'poverty is not very deep' in Syria."

(Conduit Ibid p. 82).

Compounding the problems for the state, were the numbers of Iraqi refugees from the USA imperialist led war of aggression in Iraq; and Syrian-Lebanese refugees after the murder of PM Hariri; and finally a drought:

“Other factors... (included) the more than one million Iraqi refugees who flowed into Syria during the Iraq War, adding to employment pressures and raising housing and living costs. Unskilled Syrians, who had long worked as labourers in Lebanon, also lost their jobs after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the subsequent Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. In addition, the drought that rocked Syria between 2006 and 2010 saw a 25 per cent decrease in agricultural output. Given that 20 per cent of Syria’s labour force worked in the agricultural sector, Syria experienced another mass urban migration, similar to that in the lead-up to the 1980–1982 unrest. In 2003–2004 alone, between 1.2 and 1.5 million rural residents moved into Syria’s cities. As a result, the largest cities, including Homs, developed sprawling suburbs on their urban fringes, where rural migrants—Syria’s new urban poor—lived in slum-like conditions. By 2011, Syria was facing considerable economic difficulty, particularly in rural and new urban areas. Citizens from these demographics played a leading role in the unrest. Syria’s poor, young and unemployed, those with ‘little stake in the status quo’, initially drove protests in villages and medium-sized cities, rather than in the Syrian capital.
(*Conduit Ibid p. 83*)

Yet, through the first decade of the 21st Century, Bashar’s twin policies, of privatization and opening the doors to foreign ‘development’ continued to hold:

At the same time, the government implemented a range of policies that aimed to boost private investments and to integrate Syria into the global economy. These policies included a comprehensive trade liberalization process and a free trade agreement with Turkey in 2004 in addition to negotiating with the European Union for a free trade agreement. As a result, Syrian non-oil imports increased from US\$ 4.3 billion in 2001 to US\$ 14 billion in 2010 with a rapid increase in garments and textiles, simple electronics, food products, shoes and leather products especially from Turkey, China, and Arab countries. Syria’s non-oil trade deficit increased to US\$ 8.4 billion by 2010, around 15–20 percent of Syria’s GDP. These economic policies opened up more opportunities to private investors. New laws opened sectors such as telecommunications, banking, insurance, real estate development, and education to private investment, followed by the launch of the Damascus Stock Exchange in 2009. The government made a strong attempt to attract foreign investors, particularly from the oil-rich Gulf States. The dramatic increase in oil prices in the 2000s (up to 2008) meant that these countries had capital surpluses and foreign direct investment to Syria did indeed increase in the 2000s. The majority of these investments went into tourism, real estate development, leisure activities, and financial services.”
(*Azmeh, Shamel; “ Syria’s Passage to Conflict: The End of the “Developmental Rentier Fix” and the Consolidation of New Elite Rule”; Politics & Society; 2016, Vol. 44(4) 499–523*)

At the end a very narrow circle of a new ruling class – numbering about 100 – who stands with Bashar:

“Under Bashar al-Assad, state-business networks were established or modern- ized, a stock exchange was introduced in 2009, and joint ventures in 2010. The main economic beneficiaries of Syria’s political system under Bashar who alluded to a ‘New Syria’, have been a small core of about 100 individuals which includes political leaders, entrepreneurs, senior army and intelligence officers (or retirees) followed by a second strata of their own sons and relatives and a third strata of business tycoons (and other politicians) All stand to lose substantially should Assad fall”.

Zuhur, Sherifa; The Syrian Opposition: Salafi and Nationalist Jihadism and Populist Idealism Contemporary Review of the Middle East 2(1&2) 143–163 2015

The state of the people of Syria by 2011

What did Bashar’s policies lead to for the people of Syria?

The initial benefits to the poor from the pseudo-socialism of the early Ba’th, were rapidly dissipated. After 2005 unemployment rocketed. By 2004-2007 1 in 3 families were in poverty:

“In 2005, a UN poverty report noted that while overall poverty declined in Syria between 1996 and 2003, the gap between rich and poor increased. Landis noted in 2012 that ‘since then, both the wealth gap and poverty have been on the rise’. In addition, despite healthy economic growth, unemployment rates skyrocketed. Although official estimates suggested that unemployment sat at 8.9 per cent, some observers argued that it could have been as high as 22 per cent, with youth unemployment around 26 per cent. Despite five per cent annual GDP growth, jobs were not being added to the market. Moreover, there were no unemployment benefits to support those without work. Rapid inflation compounded these difficulties, with food prices increasing 20 per cent in 2010 alone, well above wage rises. The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics acknowledged that between 2004 and 2007, the rate of Syrians living in ‘extreme poverty’ increased from 11.4 per cent to 12.3 per cent of the population. In real terms, this meant that more than two million Syrians in the 2000s were unable to afford their basic needs, and by 2007 one in three Syrians was living in ‘poverty’. ... In 2010, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, estimated that up to three million Syrians were living in extreme poverty.”

(Conduit, Dara (2017) Ibid)

It was especially bad in certain parts of the country. Since Homs figured early in the Syrian uprising of 2011, it is worth discussing this in a little bit more detail:

“There were a number of indicators prior to the uprising that showed the extent of economic strain in Homs, both in the city and the province. The UN reported that between 2008 and July 2009, the Syrian government provided 3037 ‘severely affected households’ in Homs province with food assistance. ... Another indicator of economic pressure appeared in statistics of ‘minimum

caloric requirement' published by a Syrian research institute, which identified the relationship between average income in each region and the cost of purchasing enough staple foods to meet the minimum daily food intake. The research found that six per cent more residents in Homs Governorate were unable to cover basic food expenses than the average Syrian rate, making Homs the third poorest province in the country. Accordingly, Mousab Azzawi from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights argued that poverty and government corruption were key factors behind Homs' participation in the unrest. This was underscored by a Homs resident who told *The Economist* that 'this poverty was in part what inspired people to take to the streets'. (*Conduit, Dara (2017) Ibid*).

Part 2 will be continued shortly.

