

Islamic and Islamist Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Secularism in Ba‘thist Syria.

Line Khatib ©

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Abstract

This study explores Islamic and Islamist revivalism in Baʿthist Syria. It addresses how the secular regime of both Hafez al-Asad and Bashar al-Asad paradoxically paved the way towards Syria's current Islamization.

The study examines the following questions: Who are today's Syrian Islamic and Islamist groups? Why and how are they re-emerging after 22 years of relative silence as an important political and socio-economic force in Syria? How has the regime contributed to their re-emergence? Does Syria find Islamist groups to be a mechanism for wielding influence in the region, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon? If yes, how is this affecting the Syrian domestic scene? How successful are Syria's Islamic groups in recruiting followers within the authoritarian context of Syrian politics, and how is the Syrian regime dealing with their re-emergence in light of Syria's multi-sectarian society on the one hand, and its Pan-Arab foreign policy on the other hand?

These questions are considered through a comparative examination of the shifts in the state's responses to, and relations with, the Islamic movement (independent variable) and the impact of these shifts on Islamic revivalism (dependent variable) in the Syria of Hafez al-Asad and Bashar al-Asad. This examination offers an explanation of the Populist Authoritarian regime's shift from muting secularism and co-opting the religious class under Hafez al-Asad to endorsing Islamic revivalism under Bashar. In this shift, the Baʿth regime stimulated the creation of a new relationship between the state and the Islamic groups, with the aim of retaining a considerable degree of control over the latter. However, the results of the regime's co-optation strategies have been the provision of an important organizational space for Islamic groups to grow and recruit members.

The major conclusion of this study is that the mixture of the current formula predicts that Islamic revivalism is set to engulf the country, with or without the regime's blessing.

Résumé

Cette étude examine la renaissance islamique et islamiste dans la Syrie baasiste. Elle analyse la manière dont le régime laïque d'Hafez el-Assad et de Bachar el-Assad a paradoxalement favorisé l'islamisation actuelle de la Syrie.

L'étude se pose les questions suivantes : quels sont les groupes islamistes et islamiques dans la Syrie d'aujourd'hui ? Pourquoi et comment, après vingt-trois ans de silence relatif, ces groupes resurgissent-ils en tant que force politique et sociale importante ? En quoi le régime autoritaire et populiste a-t-il contribué à leur réémergence ? Dans quelle mesure ces groupes parviennent-ils à recruter des disciples dans la Syrie autoritaire et laïque ? Comment le régime syrien gère-t-il leur réapparition dans le contexte de l'intervention menée par les Américains en Irak à partir de 2003 et de la montée nouvelle d'une menace existentielle islamiste dans la région ? Enfin, la Syrie perçoit-elle ces groupes islamistes comme un outil permettant d'exercer une influence dans la région, en particulier en Irak et au Liban, et comment cette stratégie affecte-t-elle la scène politique intérieure ?

Ces questions sont envisagées à travers un examen comparatif des changements ayant affecté les réponses et les relations de l'Etat au mouvement islamique, ainsi que de l'impact de ces changements sur la renaissance islamique dans la Syrie d'Hafez el-Assad et de Bachar el-Assad. Elle offre une explication de l'évolution du régime autoritaire et populiste, qui est passé d'une politique visant à réduire le sécularisme au silence et à coopter la classe religieuse sous Hafez el-Assad à un appui de la renaissance islamique sous son fils. A l'occasion de ce changement, le régime baasiste a employé toute une série de stratégies destinées à consolider son pouvoir et à garantir sa survie. Ce faisant, il a stimulé la création d'une nouvelle relation entre l'Etat et les groupes islamiques, dans le but de conserver un contrôle important sur ces derniers. Cependant, les résultats des stratégies de survie du régime se sont surtout caractérisés par un changement significatif de la nature de l'Etat et de la société en Syrie.

Chapter One

The Subject of Islamic Revivalism in Syria¹

Scope of the Study

Despite the rise of Islamic activism in the Middle East and the eclipse of secular ideologies as the primary source of political activism, many present-day studies on Syria assume that Syria's Ba'thist rule has been effective, since the Hama massacre of 1982, in subduing and muting the country's Islamic opposition. Yet the resurgence in 2004 of Islamist militantism in the country represents a key analytical puzzle in Syrian politics. This study posits that the current rise of an Islamist opposition warrants a closer examination of Syria's Islamic movement. It argues that the death of Hafez al-Asad in May 2000 marked not only the end of his personal rule, but also the beginning of an era of more complex and shifting relations between the secular Syrian state and Syria's Islamic movement, relations that are characterized by a mixture of cooptation, coexistence, and confrontation.

This new dynamic was evident almost from the outset. In spite of the fact that the new President of Syria, Bashar al-Asad, followed in his father's secular footsteps and chose not to open his inaugural presidential address to the Syrian People's Assembly with the traditional *Bism Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim* (in the name of all-merciful God) used by all other present-day Arab leaders, he nonetheless made as one of his first executive decisions after assuming power the repeal of his father's 1982 decree prohibiting the wearing of Islamic headscarves by girls and women in any part of the country's educational system.² In addition, in September 2001, Bashar al-Asad allowed the return to Syria of Abu Fateh al-Bayanuni, the brother of the Muslim Brotherhood's leader 'Ali Şadr al-Din al-Bayanuni. The Ba'th regime also released, a year into Bashar al-Asad's presidency, around 700 Muslim Brotherhood political prisoners, as well as drafting a bill allowing those in exile to return safely to Syria. Another 112 political prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood were released in December 2004. Even the Syrian military was

¹ Syria is witnessing a general increase in religiosity amongst its two major religions communities. That is, the country is not just seeing increased Islamization, but also increased religiosity amongst Christians. For instance, in 2009, many Syrians celebrated the year of Paul the Syrian Apostle, and the government declared Syria to be the "cradle of the Christian message." During the festivities, Syria's Grand Mufti, Badr al-Din Hasoon, said: "our faith is our way of life...we [Syrians] do not monopolize the light of Apostle Paul." Moreover, the last few years have seen Christmas parades in Damascus for the first time. But this Christian aspect to the de-secularization of Syrian society is outside the scope of this work.

² Eyal Zisser's article "Syria, the Ba'th Regime and the Islamic Movement: Stepping on a New Path?" *The Muslim World*, Vol. 95 (January 2005), p. 54.

affected by this trend, with Asad's 2003 lifting of a long-standing ban on prayer in the military barracks.³

In February 2004, Syria hosted for the first time in 40 years an Islamic conference entitled, *Tajdeed al-Khitab al-Dini* (The Religious Message and its Renewal). At the Ba'th Party Conference of June 2005, the Syrian regime, under a president claiming that Syria should "champion" the revival of a moderate Islam, declared that it would be a grave mistake not to give Islamists a platform to express their views given that, according to the regime, frustration only leads to fundamentalism.⁴ That same year, Syria established a Financial Intelligence Unit to counter money laundering and to combat the financing of terrorism.⁵ Early in 2007, the Syrian military academy invited religious authorities to lecture cadets for the first time.

Indeed, the reappearance of a religious bourgeoisie considered an important client to the regime, Syria's economic crisis, and US intervention in Iraq coupled with the emergence of a militant Islamist activity in the region, have forced the Syrian government to further compromise with domestic Islamic groups. It has promised them not only social acceptance, but also the creation of an Islamic political party within the confines of the Syrian Progressive National Front⁶ or even that of an independent party, something that would have been unthinkable less than ten years ago.⁷

Yet these compromising measures have not stopped the resurgence of a militant Islamist activity in the country. Indeed, in 2004, Syrians witnessed what was later labelled the Mezzeh Attack, an attack by an "al-Qaeda-linked group" on an empty UN building at the heart of Damascus.⁸ Moreover, early in 2005 one man was arrested and another was killed after the discovery of an alleged plot to launch an attack in Damascus on behalf of Jund al-Sham, an al-Qaeda-linked Jihadist organization.⁹ In July 2005, several terrorists were apprehended after a shooting created panic among picnickers on

³ *Ibid.* p. 43 and pp. 54-55.

⁴ Ba'th Party Conference in June 2005.

⁵ See article 7 of the Legislative Decree No 33 of 2005 which states that "An independent judicial Commission called CMLTFC with legal personality shall be created at the Central Bank of Syria, with the following mission: Perform financial investigations in operations which are suspected to include illicit money laundering or terrorist financing, and comply with the rules and procedures provided for in this LD; Provide judicial authorities and other bodies in charge of the implementation of this LD, with information required by these authorities regarding the LD."

⁶ The National Progressive Front (*al-Jabha al-Wataniya at-Taqqaddumiya*, NPF), established by Hafez al-Asad in 1972, is a coalition of left-wing political parties in Syria that support the socialist and Arab nationalist orientation of the government and accept the leading role in society of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party.

⁷ Sami Moubayed, "The Islamic Revival in Syria," *Mideast Monitor* 1, 3 (September-October 2006) at http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0609/0609_4.htm (Last viewed 3 May 2009)

⁸ *Al-Ba'th newspaper*, 11 April 2004; *SANA news agency*, 11 April 2004.

⁹ *Al-Ba'th*, 4 July 2004

Mount Qasyun.¹⁰ In June 2006, the people of Damascus awoke at dawn to the sound of heavy gunfire in the heart of the capital, while in September 2006, an attempt by 10 armed men to attack the American embassy in Damascus was thwarted.¹¹ In July 2008, a protest by prisoners at the Sednaya political prison, most of whom were said to be Islamists and Muslim Brothers, was quelled.¹² Finally, in September 2008, a car packed with 200 kilograms of explosives exploded on the Damascus Airport road near the area's central intelligence headquarters, killing 17 people and wounding at least 14. The regime later described it as an Islamist terrorist attack.¹³

Based on all of this activity, it is safe to say that some 20 years after the Ba'athist regime's harsh victory over the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama, not only is secularism receding in Syria's political and social domains, but a new battle is underway between religious interests and the Ba'athist regime.¹⁴ Islamic groups in the Syria of Bashar al-Asad are, as I will demonstrate, no longer under the efficient control of the ruling regime.¹⁵

Key Research Questions and Key Variables

In my dissertation, I shall attempt to answer the following empirical questions: Who are today's Syrian Islamic and Islamist groups? Why and how are they re-emerging after 22 years of relative silence as an important political and socio-economic force in Syria? How has the regime contributed to their re-emergence? Does Syria find Islamist groups to be a mechanism for wielding influence in the region, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon? If yes, how is this affecting the Syrian domestic scene? How successful are Syria's Islamic groups in recruiting followers within the authoritarian context of Syrian politics, and how is the Syrian regime dealing with their re-emergence in light of Syria's multi-sectarian society on the one hand, and its Pan-Arab foreign policy on the other hand?

To answer these questions, the present study presents a political economy explanation for the re-emergence of Syria's Islamic movement as an important socio-economic and political force (see methodology section). In so doing, it will begin by examining the ways in which the secular Ba'athist regime dealt with the Islamic militant

¹⁰ SANA, 6 July 2005; *Al-Hayat*, 10 July 2005.

¹¹ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 8-14 June 2006.

¹² SANA, 6 July 2008.

¹³ *Syrian TV*, 29-03-2008; SANA, 30-03-2008.

¹⁴ Ziesser, "Syria, the Ba'ath Regime and the Islamic Movement," p. 44.

¹⁵ To cite a few of the articles foreseeing an Islamist revival in Syria, see Ba'athist website All4Syria which routinely criticizes the new Islamic trends 'restricting' Syrians' daily lives. See also "Syria, Long Ruthlessly Secular, Sees Fervent Islamic Resurgence," *The New York Times*, 24 October 2003; "In Secular Syria, an Islamic Revival," *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 October 2003; "Religious Surge Alarms Secular Syrians," *The Washington Post*, 23 January 2005; "Outside Iraq but Deep in the Fight: A Smuggler of Insurgents Reveals Syria's Influential, Changing Role," *The Washington Post*, 8 June 2005.

opposition from its rise in 1963 to the seeming demise of the Islamist movement in Syria at the beginning of the 1980s. This section will illustrate how the current Ba'athist regime is re-deploying, in the face of recent existential threats that are similar to those faced by the previous regime --that is, the economic crisis and the new regional reality-- and will highlight its similar economic and socio-political survival strategies. These strategies are intended to keep religious discontent from spilling over into militancy, to eradicate the militant religious opposition, and to limit popular restlessness while still maintaining the unity of the regime's ruling coalition.

More formally, this study explores the above-mentioned questions through a comparative examination of the shifts in the state's responses to, and relations with, the Islamic movement (independent variable) and the impact of those responses on Islamic revivalism (dependent variable) in Hafez al-Asad's Syria and Bashar al-Asad's Syria.

In so doing, this dissertation offers an explanation for the Ba'ath regime's shift from muting secularism and co-opting the religious class under Hafez al-Asad to promoting Islamic revivalism under Bashar. In causing this shift, the regime has employed an admixture of incentives and disincentives to consolidate its power and ensure its survival, in a manner typical of Populist Authoritarian (PA) regimes. Thus it has concocted a new state-Islamic relationship in an attempt to retain a considerable degree of control over one of the most active sectors in society, namely the Islamic groups. This, I will argue, has ironically resulted in an opportunity for Syria's Islamic groups to mobilize and recruit.¹⁶ In other words, the Syrian regime's reorganization of state-society relations and socio-political manipulations of the Syrian Islamic element has played a key and decisive role in promoting both Islamic and Islamist revivalism in Syria.

My research is focused upon the evolving nature of the ruling regime's attempts to create a balance between its own interests, domestic concerns about terrorism, and the rising domestic influence of various neo-fundamentalist groups. Before providing a literature review, discussing my methodology and outlining the manner in which this research will unfold, two issues need to be addressed: The first is a brief discussion of the meaning and use of terms such as Islamic, Islamist and neo-fundamentalist, and the second is to offer some comments on the significance of Syria's often conflictual relationship with its Islamic and Islamist movements.

“Islamic,” “Islamist” and “Fundamentalist” Defined

The use of the term “Islamic” in this dissertation means that the group mentioned is simply composed of Muslims.

The term “Islamist” is used in this dissertation to indicate that the group mentioned has a particular reading and understanding of Islam that has become political and at times militant in nature.

There is also a slight variance between “Islamist party” and “fundamentalist party” or “neo-fundamentalist party” in this dissertation. An Islamist party leans towards political action through the state. It aims at struggling to change the political regime and

¹⁶ Other than the known failures of populist authoritarian regimes such as the Ba'ath, and the widespread feelings of powerlessness in the Arab mind.

imposing Islamic values on society after a revolution from above. A fundamentalist party can also have political aims, but it is first concerned with the restoration of an Islamic ethical model through the “re-establishment” of Muslim law and the “re-Islamization” of each individual. This is in the aim of creating a perfect Muslim society from below. The rationale behind giving precedence to ethics over political activism for the fundamentalist parties is that this passive islamization from below will supposedly ultimately result in the creation of an Islamic state.¹⁷

The term “Islamic Revivalism” follows Saba Mahmood’s definition of the term. She writes that it “refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies. This sensibility has a palpable public presence...”¹⁸ In Syria, this means the adoption of the veil, the reinvention of an attire tradition, the flourishing of neighbourhood mosques and Islamic institutes, along with the proliferation of Islamic organizations in poor neighbourhoods, often partly replacing the state in providing social welfare and medical assistance.

“Islamic Activism” is defined as “The mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes.”¹⁹

Why Study Syria’s Conflictual Relationship with its Islamic Movement?

Patrick Seale explains that each of the major political players in the Middle East can claim to be at the center of something or other. For Syria, “...its centrality derives from the fact that it lies at the heart of the Arab Asian power system where, for good or ill, it affects every political relationship in the region. All must take it into account.”²⁰ He adds, “...to ignore the reasons for local tension and its history, worse still to drive local forces to the wall, to unleash the demons of terrorism against which even the mightiest have no adequate support.”²¹ In other words, Syria is a pivotal country in the Middle East where outcomes of domestic politics have wide regional implications. Having even a small part of Syrian society engaging in Islamist militantism will not just destabilize Syria; it will also help bolster the forces of dissidence in the region. Furthermore, Syria’s ideological and political centrality as a bastion of Arabism means that examining the resurgence of its Islamic movement can shed light on future ideological trends within the regional political context.

¹⁷ It is important to note that parties often oscillate between Islamism and fundamentalism and neo-fundamentalism. See Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996, chapter 3.

¹⁸ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 3.

¹⁹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Approach*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 2.

²⁰ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1986, p. xxii.

²¹ Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, p. xxii.

Yet beyond Syria's active role in the region, visiting Syria today, one cannot but notice the growing Islamic forms of sociability within Syria's public space, once known for its secular characteristic. In my fieldwork, it became clear that Islamization of Syria has in the last 10 years become a fully developed movement with direct bearing on the daily living of Syrians. Many aspects of social life were impacted. Public daily conduct, styles of dress and speech, charity work, schooling, 'morality' lessons, entertainment activities and places, financial institutions, even architecture (when one looks upon Damascus from Mount Qasiyun for instance) reflect the increasingly palpable impact of Islamization trends in the country. There is hardly any neighbourhood in the capital city that does not have a mosque or two. Indeed the total number of mosques increased exponentially in the last 15 years (see chapter 6). And while secular governance still remains the guiding principle of the Syrian state, this movement of 'Islamic Renewal' is infiltrating every aspect of Syrian life, including the political as the movement challenges—although still indirectly—the secular apparatus.

Syrian Secularists, non-Sunni and non-Muslim minorities with whom I talked expressed their apprehension of the movement and recognized the impact that the movement has had on their daily lives. Some stressed the fact that they do not desire to stop an increasing number of pious Syrians from performing their religious duties and acts of worship according to the principles of Islamic piety. However, they argued that the pious' desire to uphold a normative Islamic lifestyle should not in return be a hindrance to others' own freedoms. They referred to the closing of pubs in the nearby of mosques and to a number of incidences during which women were harassed for wearing short skirts, and restaurants owners were hassled for serving alcohol or having loud music on during the call to prayer.

These palpable transformations in the Syrian environment were perceived inconceivable less than ten years ago. I suggest that, unless a comparative examination is conducted into the Ba'th regime's responses to the Syrian Islamic movement, particularly under the administrations of Hafez al-Asad and that of Bashar al-Asad, an understanding of the significant components underlying Islamic revivalism and the resurgence of Islamism in Syria will remain elusive.

Importantly, despite (or perhaps because of) the attention devoted to the question of Syrian Ba'thist struggle with the Muslim Brethren in the 1970-early 1980s, none of the works published so far has dealt extensively with the impact of that struggle on Syrian society today. Nor has any of these works dealt with the considerable social and political influence that the new Syrian Islamic movement has attained under the new Bashar al-Asad regime, a development that is especially significant in light of the country's 'fragile mosaic' of ethnic, religious, regional and class contrasts.²²

²² "Fragile Mosaic" was used by CIA Syriologist Martha Kessler in 1987. In terms of ethnicities, Syria is 90.3 % Arab, 9.7% Kurds, Armenians, and others. And in terms of religions: 74% are Sunni Muslim, 16% are other Muslim (includes Alawite, Druze), 10% Christian (various denominations). It also includes small Jewish communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo. See the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009 Syrian Statistical Abstract at <http://www.cbssyr.org>; the CIA World Factbook at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/goes/sy.html>

Contribution

Therefore, while some scholars have addressed the earlier phase of Syria's Islamic movement, my dissertation complements these studies by addressing the root causes, social profile, and ideology of the new Syrian Islamic groups. As stated earlier, my findings suggest that there has been an important change in state-Islamist relations in Syria, as well as an important change in Syria's Islamic movement.

This study will also offer a typology of Syria's current Islamic movement, dividing it into two streams: one that is pro-capitalism and business-oriented – this in spite of its charitable discourse and associations – and that is in alliance with the regime, and another that is anti-regime, driven by a clear populist thrust. In this typology, the two streams are not hermetically sealed off from each other – if anything, it will be argued that they can each empower the other, while the leftist elements within the Syrian regime and Syrian society continue to grow weaker. Indeed, the Islamic groups could conceivably draw upon the same center of support that once propelled the statist Ba'ath to power, by focusing on the marginalized elements in society that are today in particularly dire need because of the country's ongoing transition toward economic liberalism. In so doing, Syria's Islamic movement, which is now very much in control of the social milieu, could potentially finally achieve the political position that it has sought since the early 1930s.

Contending Perspectives

Although no previous study has yet addressed the social profile, ideology and typology of the new Syrian Islamic movement, a number of works and authors have tackled the issues addressed in this dissertation and arising from the resurgence of Islamic movements, whether in the Arab world or in the international arena. Among them, a few bear mentioning for the quality of their efforts to fill the gap in scholarship on two particularly pertinent and often intertwined topics: authoritarianism in the Middle East (more specifically in Syria), and Islamic activism or Islamism in its modern form. In the following pages, I organize the different authors according to the approach that I believe they mainly use in their analysis, namely the political culture approach, the political economy approach, and the social movement theoretical model, with a fourth category covering authors whose works emphasize regional and international contexts.²³ Several

²³ This taxonomy of the key theoretical issues involved in this analysis is built on the introductory chapter in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble's *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

very important descriptive works dealing with contemporary Syrian politics do not fall within any of these categories, thus a final section covering them has also been added.

Political Culture Studies

According to political culturalists, the Political Culture Approach is necessary for a proper understanding of politics. In the case of the Middle East, it helps explain such issues as the lack of democratic values, primordial and sectarian loyalties, patriarchal behaviour, and gender biases (Pipes, 1983, 1992; Perlmutter, 1992; Keddourie, 1992; Lewis 1993; Joseph, 1999). Critics of this theoretical model emphasize the preconceptions and prejudices that accompany scholars when examining the roles of Arab and Islamic cultures in determining political behaviour, and they note the shortcomings, abuse and misuse of the cultural approach to “explain” Arab politics (Anderson, 1995). Nonetheless, a number of researchers suggest that if this approach is used in conjunction with a consideration of structural factors and away from reductionist and essentialist assumptions, and disaggregated political cultures that have a residual explanatory function, the political culture approach can allow one to successfully study dependent variables such as legitimacy and stability, trust and effectiveness, authoritarianism and despotism (Hudson, 1977, 1995; Waterbury, 1994). These supporters of the approach indicate that political culture is not a fixed variable, and that doctrinal readings of Islam can include an illiberal as well as a liberal interpretation (Binder, 1988; Esposito, 1992; Mayer, 1993; Krämer, 1993, 1995). Michael Hudson explains that the use of a multiplicity of complementary methodological techniques, coupled with a focus on certain elements of political culture such as group identities, as well as orientations toward authority, principles of equity and justice, allow scholars to stay away from reductionist assumptions.

In its examination of the bearing of culture on Arab politics, Mark Tessler’s “Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes towards Democracy in Four Arab Countries” (2002) tests the validity of one assumption: The influence of Islam on attitudes toward democracy, using public opinion data collected in Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza), Morocco, Algeria and Egypt. Tessler argues that this data provides a strong empirical foundation for addressing questions about the relationship between Islam and democracy at the individual level of analysis. He concludes that Islam appears to have less influence on political attitudes than is frequently suggested by students of Arab and Islamic society.

Gudrun Krämer’s “Islam and Pluralism” (1995) addresses the issue of Islam and democracy from a textual perspective, and debates whether Islam is essentially anti-pluralist or not. Krämer says that at the theoretical level, two opposing theses are in competition with one another. One, which is endorsed by the majority of Islamic scholars, stresses the unity of the community and is legally based on *tawhid* (unity) and *ijma* (consensus). The other, endorsed by a minority of scholars, stresses diversity and pluralism and focuses on *ra’y* (personal opinion) and *urf* (local customary law). Yet Krämer points out that in general, in order to be tolerated, divergence must concern the details of Islam (*furu’*), not its foundations (*ususl*), and Muslim society has often been characterized as plural, yet not pluralist. However, she adds, the fact remains that the Quran does not say much about political leadership, and indeed it is not a faith that demands a unified and singular leadership. She suggests that beyond the “metaphysical,”

the real test of pluralism and democracy arises when the “Islamic framework” is exceeded. She concludes that in practice, it seems to be political experience and the regime’s strategy that determine the political strategy of the Islamic opposition. In other words, while political culture is an important explanatory tool, Islamic political discourse and practice are far from monolithic.

Dealing more specifically with Syrian politics, Eberhard Kienle’s “Entre jama’a et classe: le pouvoir politique en Syrie contemporaine” (1990) views Syrian politics as primarily primordial. Kienle focuses on Syrian sectarian loyalties in his examination of Ba’thist authoritarianism. He addresses the multi-faceted question ‘who holds the political power in Syria, and why?’ In his answer, he gives priority to Michel Seurat’s “Jama’a” (core group) concept (see Seurat’s *L’Etat de barbarie*, 1989). This says that the new group in power is not an economic class in the sense of controlling the machinery of production, but a parasitic class that is connected by its primordial ‘Alawite “group feeling” or “asabiyya”, and which uses its political power to extract funding from a collaborating Syrian bourgeoisie.

Interestingly, it is this same Political Culture conceptual approach that has been mainly endorsed by certain Syrian Islamists to explain their fight, such as: Habanaka al-Midani’s and ‘Abd al-Rahman’s *Sira’ Ma’ al-Malahida Hata al-‘Azm* (1974); Mustafa al-Siba’i’s *Asdaq al-Itijahat al-Fikriya fi al-sharq al-Arabi* (1998), and his *Islamuna* (2001); Sa’id Hawwa’s *Fi Afaq al-Ta’lim* (1980), *Jund Allah Thaqafa Zu Akhlaq* (no date) and his *Tarbiyatuna al-Ruhiya* (1979); Al-Buti, *al-Ta’aruf ‘ala al-Dhat Huwa al-Tariq ila al-Islam* (n.d.); and Abu Mus’ab al-Suri in his *Da’wat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*. In these writings, the core problem for Arab and Islamic societies is located within the peoples’ abandonment of their true culture. According to this position, an Islamic resurgence will originate in the grievances of the masses, who view Islam as their natural salvation from both authoritarian regimes and the cultural domination of the West.²⁴

Although political culture approaches are “part of any effort to understand politics, whether in the Arab World or elsewhere”²⁵, the focus of researchers on culture as a determining variable is believed by some to be a narrow reading of the complexities of Arab politics. As a result, despite the fact that culture has some role to play in politics, other structural variables need to be considered first (Anderson, 1999). More fervent critics argue that cultural behaviour is in itself determined by structural variables (Dunn, 1993; Norton, 1993; Esposito, 1993), and hence should not be used as an explanatory tool. Furthermore, despite having the advantage of explaining the key discourse of Islamism and other Arab socio-cultural ethos, political culture explanations are ultimately incomplete when analyzing Islamic revival and activism, as they do not explain why and how cultures or subcultures vary over time. In the case of this study, they fail to shed

²⁴ Sa’id Hawwa, *Fi Afaq al-Ta’lim*, Cairo: Maktabat Wahaba, 1980 ; idem, *Tarbiyatuna al-Ruhiya*, Damascus/Beirut: dar al-Kutub, 1979; idem, *Hadhihi Tajribati wa-Hadhihi Shahadati* Cairo: 1987; Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, *Da’wat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*; idem, “Mulahadhat Hawl al-Tajruba al-Jihadiya Fi Suriya” (Observations on the Jihadi Experience in Syria) in *Al-Thawra al-Islamiya al-Jihadiya Fi Suriya* (The Islamic Jihadi Revolution in Syria). Extracts available at: <http://www.muslm.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-159953.html> (Last visited on 11 Novembre 2008).

²⁵ Brynen, Korany, and Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives*, p. 9.

light on the heterogeneity of the Syrian Islamic movement. They also fail to explain the political flexibility of a movement whose doctrinal foundations are more or less fixed. They do not elucidate the changing nature of state-society relations (including those of the Islamic society). They also fail to explicate how and why the Syrian Islamic movement has re-emerged as an important player on the Syrian social and political scene when it had failed to do so some 30 years earlier.

Political Economy

In contrast to analysts of political culture, political economy scholars emphasize economic factors as the main explanatory variables when studying political behaviour. Researchers and academics who adhere to the political economy theoretical model traditionally support the thesis of a positive relationship between economic and political liberalization. Generally speaking, political economists suggest that economic liberalization, the growth of a private sector, and the creation of a new bourgeoisie will disempower the state, since the latter will no longer control the economic resources needed to bolster its authority (Lipset, 1990; Waterbury, 1990; Huntington, 1991; Springborg, 1993; Sikkar, 2000). The implications of these occurrences go some way to fostering the resurgence of dissenting Islamic groups in the Syrian case given current aims at economic liberalization.

Yet other political economists assert that there is no necessary correlation between economic and political reforms (Hinnebusch, 1992, 1998; Ayubi, 1992; Brumberg, 1995, 1996; Anderson, 1997; Heydeman, 1999). The notion of the “rentier state” is often mentioned to elucidate this anomaly in the Arab World. Indeed, the connection between petroleum wealth and powerful governing neo-patrimonial networks, linking poor states to rich states in a web of migrant labor and petrodollar foreign aid, is a well established model (Luciani, 1987; Brynen, 1992; Brand, 1992).

Analysts dealing more specifically with the Syrian Ba’thist context insist upon the utility of the concept of ‘Populist Authoritarianism’ for understanding Syrian contemporary politics (Hinnebusch, 1991, 1995, 1997, 2001; Heydemann, 1999; Waldner, 1999). They look at a number of elements within Populist Authoritarian (PA) regimes, stressing Syrian corporatist institutions, statist economies and broad social bases of support, as well as eroding political legitimacy, as all being inherent to these regimes and to this regime structure. Writing about the 1990s and the selective economic liberalization implemented by the Syrian Ba’th, these authors suggest that in order to avoid political reform and the likely collapse of the regime itself, populist authoritarian regimes tend to use a combination of political and economic survival strategies aimed at attracting foreign investment, reducing debt payment, and raising foreign exchange reserves, without however undermining the fundamental interests of the political and economic elites. However, they also argued that such survival strategies will tend to only temporarily postpone structural adjustments, and an eventual move towards deeper political changes is inevitable (Luciani, 1995; Brumberg, 1995; Hinnebusch, 1998; Boissiere, 2005).

For instance, in “Calculated Decompression as a Substitute for Democratization: Syria,” (1998), Hinnebusch lists the reasons why Syria is lagging behind when it comes to liberalization and democratization in the Middle East. He says that the Ba’th regime’s populist and statist constituency, its patrimonial and Leninist structures, and its

independent economic base are an obstacle to democratization. However, the need to advance economic liberalization and the rising numbers of the new bourgeoisie, comprising both 'Alawis and Sunnis, make calculated decompression the best strategy for enhancing regime legitimacy while avoiding any real political reforms. Hinnebusch affirms that this decompression strategy is sufficient to contain the pressures for democratization; however, economic development is "bound to deepen civil society, and continuing social mobilization in this context will generate stronger, more autonomous social forces that cannot readily be controlled except through greater political liberalization." Indeed, Volker Perthes has made a strong case that the 1990s witnessed the resurgence of a new 'state bourgeoisie' (Perthes, 1995; see also Haddad, 1999).

When it comes to Islamist movements, most of the orthodox literature adopting the Political Economy approach suggests that the rise of political Islam is a result of 20th century socio-economic shifts and modernization (Anderson, 1997; Guazzone, 1995; Esposito and Tamimi, 2000). Laura Guazzone's article "Islamism and Islamists in the contemporary Arab World" (1995) argues that "Islamism is not a unique and isolated phenomenon, either historically or culturally." (p.6) Guazzone studies the effects of modernization on politics in the Arab world, and she lists three major interacting factors: the cultural predicament (unemployment, pollution and urban alienation), the political predicament (crisis of legitimacy and efficiency of present political ideologies and systems), and the economic predicament (intense demographic growth without adequate development). She states that Islamist movements represent the only means of expressing popular opposition to the corrupt and inefficient regimes of the Arab region.

More specific to this dissertation, other political economists focus on the economic variables behind the failure of political Islamists in Syria. They point to the coercive policies of the ruling Syrian bourgeoisie, buttressed by *Infatih* politics ensuring the collaboration of the wider Syrian bourgeoisie, which resulted in the complete suppression of dissident Islamic forces and other potential rival political movements. (Batau, 1982; Hinnebusch 1982, 1996; Thomas, 1983; Emadi, 1998, 2001).

Although he does not address the recent resurgence of Islamism in Syria, Hanna Batatu's "Syria's Muslim Brethren" (1982) provides answers to several of the major questions in my dissertation. Questions addressed by Batatu include: Who are the Muslim Brethren in Syria? How are they related to Syria's social structure? And, what is the social meaning of their ideas and values? Batatu focuses mainly on the economic and political reasons for the emergence of the Syrian Brethren, and confirms that "it is quite plain that the conflict is not about religion." (p.13). He then adds "it is not the beliefs of the Sunnis that have been in danger or under attack since the Ba'athist take-over in 1963, but the social interests of the upper and middle elements of their landed, mercantile, and manufacturing classes." (p.13) He shows that there is a positive correlation between small free enterprise and the religious class in Syria (p. 15). He concludes that "so long as the present regime remains narrowly based and unrepresentative of the country's majority, there is bound to be a revival of the spirit of revolt which no repression, however brutal, can extinguish." (p.20)

Mayer Thomas supports, in his historically descriptive article "The Islamic Opposition in Syria: 1961-1982" (1983), the thesis of a positive relationship between the Syrian socio-economic developments in the 1960s and the 1970s and the emergence of an increasingly violent Islamic opposition. Although his article is mainly descriptive rather

than analytical, many of his conclusions are still pertinent today, particularly his observation that the struggle for Syria's soul has been postponed until the fall of the Ba'thist Syrian regime, or at least until its radical retransformation.

Hinnebusch's landmark "The Islamic Movement in Syria" (1982) underlines the socio-economic and political factors that triggered the increasingly violent Islamic Movement in the country. Hinnebusch argues the specificity of the Syrian case, since in most of the Arab World – at least according to him – Islamic fundamentalism expresses the 'nativist' and populist rebellious inclinations against Westernized and upper class-based regimes. He says that in Syria, "the Islamic movement is closely linked to the traditionally privileged classes and opposes a regime long regarded as troublesome by the West and currently in the front line of Arab resistance to Israel." (p.138). Additionally, the Islamic movement has become a general umbrella for resistance of the ruled against the corrupt ruler. However, Hinnebusch argues that despite its limited strength, the Ba'th regime has a popular base that reaches relatively far into the rural areas and cuts across sectarian lines, which "represents an obstacle to the spread of political Islam." (p.150)

The political economy approach has played a crucial role in complicating and expanding debates about politics in the Middle East beyond the sometimes reductionist cataloguing of cultural differences with the West (Beilin, 204). It explicates political and ideological change over time. Indeed, in the Syrian case, the Political Economy Approach has provided insights into the sudden transformation of Syria's Islamic movement into a violent opposition, after having used peaceful means in the 1940s and 1950s. Today, it explains the Syrian regime's policies aimed at retreating away from statism and populism, and addresses the possibility of economic and political structural adjustments. If applied to the question of the resurgence of Islamic activity in Ba'thist Syria, the Political Economy Approach can explain the paradoxical Islamic revivalism and the resurgence of Islamism within the supposedly anti-Islamic context of Syrian politics, which –as will be explained hereinafter-- is the purpose of this dissertation.

Having said this, the political economy viewpoint to some degree skims over the independent force of ideology and the framing of norms in ways that facilitate collective action within the context of authoritarian states such as Syria. It does not explain the mechanisms of the progression from grievances to collective action, especially that accumulated grievances do not guarantee the success of movement mobilization. By contrast, social movement analytical approaches offer a perspective that seeks to draw insights from both the political culture and the political economy approaches in order to explain the resurgence of Islamic activism. In using the concept of informal institutions within authoritarian structures, many of these scholars focus on the important role that informality, decentralization and gender play in mobilization.

Civil Society and Islamic Activism Approaches

Islamic activism in the Arab world has yet to be fully integrated into social movement theory because such activism transcends the confines of Islam. After all, "social organization outside the auspices of the state is important because it counterweighs the power of the state, dilutes its control over society, and articulates and advances various societal interests vis-à-vis the dominant political elites."²⁶ However, the resurgence of civil society seems almost impossible within the context of authoritarian

²⁶ Brynne, Korany, and Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and democratization*, p. 11.

rule. Furthermore, it is not clear whether primordial illiberal organizations are part of civil society, in spite of their authoritarian character (Layne, 1994; Brynen and Korany, 1995)

In their attempts to answer these questions, the following works try to come to terms with why actors risk joining Islamist movements under the hostile gaze of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East: *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (2004), edited by Quintan Wiktorowicz, addresses a myriad of case-studies of Sunni and Shi'i Islamic activism, though remains silent on the Syrian case.

In *Mobilizing Islam* (2002), Carrie Rosefsky Wickham examines the rise of Islamic activism in Egypt from 1984 to 1994 through the lens of the social movement model. Wickham answers very important questions related to why and how Islamic groups in Egypt were successful in attracting and galvanizing educated Egyptian youth, particularly in comparison with their secular rivals. These are very important questions to answer for the study of Syria today. Wickham's main argument is that a social movement approach focused on interests and motives is not enough to explain youth progression from initial, lower risk forms of participation to higher risk, overtly political forms of participation. It is as much through a massive project of ideological outreach – engaging cultural contexts for movement purposes – as through an appeal to youth interests that movement leaders succeeded in attracting lower middle-class, educated youth. Wickham points to the movement's leadership, strategy and ideology. Basing her analyses on Brysk's "symbolic politics" and Snow and Benford's analysis of framing, she argues that a successful ideological outreach requires a resonant message, credible messengers and effective mechanisms of transmission, or in other words what she calls context specific "movement frames". She concludes that by introducing new values and developing new repertoires of personal and collective action, Islamist mobilization can contribute to more enduring forms of political change in the Muslim world as much as it may lay the foundation for new forms of authoritarian rule. The direction of this political change depends on the social and political forces with which those Islamic movements deal.

In *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (2006), Jillian Schwedler examines the assumption that there is a causal relationship between the inclusion of Islamist parties in the political process and their moderation (Abd Allah, 1983; Burgat, 1993; Kepel, 1986; Anderson, 1997; Esposito, 1997). She focuses on "ideological commitments" rather than just behaviour. In so doing, she rejects the causal model based on institutional constraints, and instead adopts a process-model approach. This approach combines three interconnected dimensions: political opportunity structures, internal group structures, and boundaries of justifiable action. Indeed, the main question that Schwedler answers in this book – does political inclusion produce "ideological" moderation?, to which she answers not necessarily, depending on the interaction of the three above-mentioned dimensions – is one that the Syrian regime is especially interested in, as it attempts to silence Islamists at the expense of its secular partisans by creating a new 'moderate Islam', and maybe even by creating an Islamic political party within the confines of the Progressive National Front.

Regional and International Contexts

Although very important and useful, social movement approaches neglect the international variables and the regional context that are so important in understanding

mobilization within and across different cases. This is of course key when studying Syria, which has been at the frontline of regional conflicts throughout its modern history.

A number of major studies have dealt with Syria's foreign policy, and its independence from, and impact on, the Syrian domestic scene. Most important amongst these are Patrick Seale's *Asad: the Struggle for the Middle East* (1988), and Moshe Maoz's *Asad, the Sphinx of Damascus: a Political Biography* (1988). These two works stress the ability of Hafez al-Asad to consolidate his power and get rid of enemies while also emerging as a main player on the regional and international scenes.

Basel Salloukh's PhD dissertation (McGill 2000) is also an important source when studying Syria. Salloukh's comparative study assesses how different ways of organizing state-society relations affect regime autonomy to take particular foreign policy and alignment choices. Departing from neorealism's insistence on the centrality of external military power or threats in determining foreign policy, he mainly shows that the more corporatist the organization of state-society relations, the larger the regime's autonomy in taking foreign policy and alignment choices. In Syria, the ensemble of corporatist institutions organizing the country's populist authoritarian system of rule has allowed the regime under Hafez al-Asad to enjoy a substantial degree of autonomy when responding to shifts in the external geopolitical security environment. One wonders if Bashar al-Asad will succeed in upholding his father's legacy in this regard given Syria's turn to a market economy and the resultant constraints on the regime's freedom of action. Answering part of this question is Leverett's *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (2005). Leverett's monograph is timely and much needed as it is one of the first books dealing with the rise of Bashar al-Asad to power in Syria. Leverett paints a portrait of Bashar al-Asad as a national leader, and he addresses the role Syria plays as a regional player, the enduring and evolving dynamics of Syrian politics and policymaking, and Syria's centrality to U.S. foreign policy.

As for Political Islam, it is largely left to the French school to highlight the regional and international dimensions of Islamism in ways that complement the other approaches' explanations of the transnational character and content of Islamism. Authors from the French school link local dynamics with shifts in global politics, underpinning what they refer to as "global political Islam." For example, in *L'Echec de l'islam politique* (1992), Olivier Roy demonstrates that the political Islam of today is the Third Worldism of the 1960s, and argues that it has similarly dim prospects for success. François Burgat also links the rise of Islamist movements to geo-political forces, and moreover entirely rejects the cultural approach to studying the Islamist phenomenon. In *Face to Face with Political Islam* (2002), Burgat focuses on the international dimension and deals with how, in the post-Cold War era, the 'Islamic threat' has come to replace Communism as the West's new global adversary. Similar to *L'Echec de l'islam politique* in its conclusions, Gilles Kepel's *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (2003) is one of the most valuable works on the phenomenon today. Kepel argues that the rise of militant Islamism is due to a combination of a deeply religious society turned explosive because of the many internal and external deceptions it has endured. Since the end of the 19th century, various Muslim intellectuals and organizations, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, have attempted to articulate an alternative to Western-style modernity, through a reassertion of a re-invigorated Islam as the guiding principle of a new social

order. These ideas have gained renewed attraction as the region's secular regimes have stagnated.

Not many recent works have dealt with Syria's Islamic movement, maybe due to the movement's political quietism. Most works have stressed the ethical dimension of the new movement, its moderation and growing strength.

Descriptive Works

Other major works that are more descriptive in nature, and that discuss the modern history and politics of Syria without necessarily focusing on its Islamic movement, are: Nikolaos Van Dam's *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (1996), which focuses more on Syrian ethnic politics; and Umar Abdallah's book *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (1983), which explains the leadership, the ideology and the program of the Islamic Front in Syria from an Islamic point of view.

In addition, the following Arabic works are crucial to any study of contemporary Syrian politics: Michel Aflaq's works, such as *Fi Sabil al-Ba'ith* (1959), *Ma'rakat al-Masir al-Wahid* (1959), and *Nuqtat al-Bidaya* (1971), and Zaki al-Arsuzi's *al-Mu'alafat al-Kamila*, which are excellent expositions of essential Ba'thist ideology, notions of Arabism and standpoints toward the West, as is George Jabbour's book *Al-Fikr al-Siyasi al-Mu'aser fi Suriya* (1987). And last but not least, Sadeq Mahmud's *Hiwar Hawla Suriya* (1993). The importance of the latter two books stems from the fact that they are written in Arabic by Syrian scholars, and therefore provide an insight into the Syrian political arena from an insider's point of view.

Crucial Arabic books examining the religious element in Syria – which are also mainly descriptive – include the following: Muhammad Habash's *Al-Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaru* (1996); al-Buti's *Manhaj al-'Awda ila al-Islam* and *Abhath fi al-Qima*; Faysal Daraj and Jamal Barut's *Al-Ahzab wa al-Harakat wa al-Jama'at al-Islamiya* (2006); and finally Muhammad 'Umar al-Haj's *'Alamiyat al-Da'wa ila Allah Ta'ala* (2007).

As stated earlier, Arab authors do not differ much in their analysis of Islamic revivalism in Syria from their Western counterparts. Islamic Arabs tend to view the rise of the Syrian Islamic movement as a cultural phenomenon, thus holding opinions that are very similar to the ones adopted by Western culturalists, notwithstanding the difference in emphasis.

By way of Conclusion

The different works cited in this section point toward some very important questions regarding what accounts for Islamic revivalism and the re-emergence of Islamism in Syria. Indeed my contribution to the literature lies partly in integrating and adjudicating between these alternative approaches through an empirical analysis of the various factors, in an effort to test and verify the different theories outlined above against the Syrian case. In so doing, I look at questions arising from each alternative approach, such as: How did sudden shifts in ideational culture promote Islamist militant activity? How do class issues, poverty and the economy trigger the seeming re-emergence of Islamist activity within Syria, and allow the Islamists to successfully expand their platform?

The Social Movement approach in particular exposes other very important questions, such as: Are more actors willing to join the Islamist movement in Syria today compared to 20 years ago? If yes, why, given that the same authoritarian Ba‘th regime is still in power and the same kind of economic and political grievances are still largely present? What kind of informal institutions have evolved in the last 25 years that have enabled Islamists to mobilize more actors? And finally, how has the authoritarian Ba‘thist State played a role in unintentionally supporting this mobilization?

The focus of the French school on the regional and international dimensions suggests different but equally important questions: What are the regional and international changes that have triggered Syria’s Islamists to re-emerge and mobilize? Did the “Islamic International” play a role in their recent successes? And, what has the global environment contributed in terms of cultural polarization?

Methodology

Although this study will consider relevant works from the different alternative approaches and their intervening variables in explicating the revival of Islamic activity in the country, it primarily explains Islamic revivalism and the resurgence of Islamism in Syria through the lens of the political economy approach. In so doing, the study supplies a new case for testing the limits of the Populist Authoritarian model.

It will thus illustrate how the process of a selective economic liberalization meant to maintain the political power of the Syrian regime has been intimately linked to the opening of an important space for Syria’s Islamic organizations to organize and recruit a growing pool of members. The study will also show that understanding this connection requires recognition of how this process has been shaped by other intervening variables at the domestic and regional levels. These intervening variables include: 1) the Syrian Islamic movement’s successful use of the space provided; 2) their internal methods of outreach developed in the last 20 years (such as the role of ideology, the role of informal institutions in providing an important space for Islamic groups to expand their membership and activities, and the role of women); and 3) the need for the Syrian regime to control its regional environment in view of Syria’s central role in the Middle East.

Accordingly, the contribution to the scholarship arising from this dissertation’s case study is indeed part of an emerging trend that bridges area studies, Islamic studies, and broader political science theorizing, in an attempt to broaden the boundaries of research into Islamic groups. But, while this dissertation employs theories and concepts from comparative politics and the political economy approach as a unifying framework of analysis, its interdisciplinary sensibilities and focus on intervening variables such as ideology, the role of women and informal institutions, allow it to also contribute to theory building in the domain of social movement theory. This is because it delineates new testing grounds for such theory, through an empirical analysis of the factors resulting in the seemingly surprising re-emergence of the Syrian Islamists within a secular authoritarian setting.

Given the many political barriers to fieldwork in Syria, as well as the relative absence of reliable research focusing on this study’s subject, my methodology was

developed in such a way as to combine several data-collection techniques. These include in-depth, focused interviews, more open-ended interviews, research based on a variety of primary sources, from Islamic sermons and published materials to government archives and Ba‘th party documents, and research based on many secondary sources, from both the West and from the Arab world.

More specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with Islamic individuals, whether pro-regime or anti-regime. The kind of information that I sought in these interviews was my interlocutors’ characterizations of the strength of the Islamic movement in Syria, whether they foresee a mainstream Islamic awakening in Syria, and why and how they perceive their own influence on the population.

I conducted more open-ended interviews with Syrian secularist political figures with an interest in the regime’s Islamization strategy, as well as with political activists, secular dissidents, prominent journalists, and other individuals with particular expertise and insight to the phenomenon of Political Islam. My aim was to understand whether they envisage an outbreak of violence inside Syria, and what influence they believe the Islamic and Islamist groups, as well as regional and international forces, have on Syrian society.

My methodology also included interviews with members of small and large Islamic institutions, most of which were open-ended in format. These interviews served to define the boundaries of the “legal” and “official” mainstream Islamic message in Syria, and what kind of future its members foresee for Syrian society and political life.

Most of my interviewees agreed to talk to me “off the record,” though with full knowledge of how I would be using the information provided. They voiced their reservations about being identified or quoted given the perceived sensitive issues dealt with in this work, and the bloody history of the Syrian regime’s conflict with the Syrian Islamic movement. Hence in nearly all cases, only the date and the location of the interview are mentioned. Only sometimes is the title of the contributor also provided, as per the interviewee’s wishes.

I also undertook the collection and content analysis of a sample of Islamic materials, including live and recorded sermons, religious lessons, pamphlets, and books, whether from Syria or Syrian websites, in order to understand the not-so-legal Islamic message within the country.

In addition to this fieldwork, my research is also based on secondary material which includes analyses of Arabic and Syrian print media, historical records, memoirs, Islamic programs and pamphlets, and Arabic and Western qualitative sources including works from both official and opposition presses available mainly on the internet. I also consulted primary sources such as government archives, Ba‘th party documents, and government agencies’ data – for instance, electoral records, parliamentary membership, and electoral programs – in order to trace the ascent of Islamic individuals to government positions and to assess the shift of a supposedly secular Syrian regime towards an evident tolerance of overt religiosity, whether in the education sector, on television programs, or in the news media.

Map of the Work

Part One of this work – chapters two and three of the dissertation – provides historical context, by examining the rise to power of the secular Ba‘th party and the formation of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, first as an Islamic political democratic party and then in its shift toward militant Islamism. While much of this information is already familiar to some readers, Part One provides an essential background to those who are less familiar with the Syrian case. It also examines fundamental aspects and questions that inform the rest of the study.

Part Two of this work examines the conflict between Hafez al-Asad’s regime and the Muslim Brotherhood between 1970 and 1982 (chapter 4), and the resulting decline in the 1980s of political Islam as a model for change in Syria (chapter 5). It does so by tracing the domestic socio-economic and political roots of the conflict, and by unravelling the bloody contours of the clash between the regime and the Muslim Brothers, paying special attention to the secular aspect of the conflict. Part Two’s main contribution is an examination of the survival strategy of confrontation and compromise deployed by the Populist Authoritarian regime in an attempt to subdue and institutionally co-opt Syria’s Islamic sector. Ultimately, Parts One and Two of this work will have demonstrated both why and how Hafez al-Asad’s regime paved the way towards today’s Islamic and Islamist revivalism after 22 years of relative silence on the Syrian social and political scenes.

In Part Three, the focus is on the Syrian domestic and regional contexts since Bashar al-Asad’s rise to power in June 2000 until the writing of this work. In so doing, it answers such questions as: who are the Islamists in Syria today, and how is the regime under Bashar al-Asad dealing with their re-appearance? In answering these questions, Part Three will unpack the weaknesses and complications underlying today’s relations between Syria’s various Islamic groups and the Syrian regime under a new President. It will become clear that the regime’s balancing act between the different social forces, while successful in the 1980s, became more tenuous in the 1990s and increasingly so under under Bashar al-Asad’s government (chapter 6), resulting in a significant change to the nature of both state and society in Syria (chapter 7).

Chapter 8 of this work recapitulates the study’s general themes and generates a number of concluding arguments about the regime’s strategies, particularly their enabling and constraining impacts, and focuses in particular on the question of whether the new Islamic/Islamist pressures are detrimental to the regime’s survival as a secular state.

Part I

The Origins of the Conflict

Chapter 2

Rise of a Secular Socialist Party: The Ba'th in Power

Introduction

It is important to note at the outset that any understanding of the rise of Islamic and Islamist activity in contemporary Syria requires an historical analysis of the factors contributing to the origins and evolution of Ba'thism in the country. Moreover, what is notable in this regard is the role of Islamic ideology in the formation and trajectory of Ba'thism in Syria. Consequently, this chapter explores the rise to power of *Hizb al-Ba'th al-'Arabi al-Ishtiraki* (Arab Socialist Ba'th Party, hereafter called ASBP or Ba'th Party), shaped as it was by domestic constraints and the regional context. The chapter opens with a brief survey of the Ba'th doctrine and paradigm, as articulated by its different ideational sources and dominant theorists. The Ba'th party's route in its ascent to power, as well as the implications and predilections of this route are subsequently explored. The chapter then moves on to examine the Ba'th regime's actions and first salient policies from 1963 to 1970, that is until the period of Hafez al-Asad's rise to power.

The Arab Socialist Ba'th Party Doctrine

The Ba'th (Resurrection) Arab Party was founded in 1942, four years before Syria's independence from French control,²⁷ by two upper middle class Damascenes: Michel 'Aflaq (1910-1989), a privileged Christian Arab Orthodox raised in the old Damascene Maydan quarter, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar (1912-1980), a Sunni Muslim, also from the Maydan Quarter and the son of a well-off grain merchant. Both founders had studied and graduated from the Sorbonne University in Paris in the late 1920s, 'Aflaq in history and al-Bitar in mathematics. Upon their return to Syria in 1932, they enrolled as

²⁷ Syria had been under the control of the French since July 1920. For works relating to Syria's formative years after its independence, see Zeine N. Zeine, *The Struggle for Arab Independence*, Beirut: Khayats, 1960; A.L. Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, London: Macmillan, 1969. On the Syrian state that emerged in the aftermath of independence, see Tabitha Petran, *Syria*, London: Ernest Benn, 1972; and Moshe Maoz, "Attempts at Creating a Political Economy in Modern Syria," *Middle East Journal* 26, 4 (1972): 389-404.

teachers at the renowned *al-Tajhiz al-Ula* Secondary School (First Preparatory School), from which emerged the majority of the Party's first supporters.²⁸

In 1940, inspired by Syria's unstable yet promising domestic and regional contexts,²⁹ the two men founded *Harakat al-Ihya' al-'Arabi* (Arab Revival Movement), which would a few years later give birth to the Ba'th party. In 1942, they abandoned their teaching careers and dedicated themselves to political activism against the French and British colonizers who manipulated the region's mixture of religious, socio-economic and political divisions to their advantage, thereby impeding the growth of national unity.³⁰

It was finally in 1946 that the Ba'th officially achieved the status of a political party, a milestone that was followed by the adoption of its constitution during the first conference, between the 5th and the 7th of April, 1947, in Damascus' Rashid Coffee House. Some 240 young men showed up at the small cafe, most of whom were from Syria but some of whom had arrived from Lebanon, Iraq and Transjordan. The year 1946 ultimately came to mark the beginning of the end of Syria's so-called 'politics of the notables' era.³¹

In 1952-1953, a reconfigured political landscape saw the Arab Ba'th Party merge with *al-Hizb al-'Arabi al-Ishtiraki* (Arab Socialist Party, hereafter called ASP) of Akram al-Hawrani. 'Aflaq and Bitar had previously met Hawrani in prison in 1941 after having organized strikes against the French and the British colonizers. The ASP, whose constituency was mainly the rural lower middle classes from the Hama region, an area noted for its feudal culture and its military cadres, was to form the pro-Soviet left wing of the party. The merger producing the ASBP "was an impressive coalition of complementary class allies bound together by grievances against common class enemies: the agrarian oligarchy and commercial and industrial bourgeoisie."³²

²⁸ See Sami al-Jundi, *Al-Ba'th*, Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1969. See also Muta'al-Safadi, *Hizb al-Ba'th: Ma'sat al-Mawlid, Ma'sat al-Nihaya* [The Ba'th Party: The Tragedy of Birth, the Tragedy of the End] Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1964; George Jabbour, *al-fikr al-siyasi al-mu'aser fi Suriya* (Contemporary Political Thought in Syria), London: Raid el-Reyes, 1987.

²⁹ At that time, the French and the British colonial powers were engaged in WWII and were willing to accommodate more autonomy for the colonies. Moreover, the region was embroiled in independence movements, affected by the socialist and communist thoughts. In Syria itself, there did not exist any governing strata to stifle any upcoming and possible change. [refer to pages 38 and 56 for more details].

³⁰ At the time, Arab Sunni Muslims amounted to around 57.4 percent of the population in Syria. 'Alawis amounted for around 12%. Christians to around 14%, the Isma'ilis comprised 1.5 % of the population. The Druze amounted to around 3%. A small Jewish community also existed reaching 30,000. the majority of these religious minorities considered themselves Arabs and spoke Arabic. Ethnic minorities such as the Armenians, most of whom arrived after WWI amounted to 4%, the Kurds amounted to 8.5%, the Circassians and the Turkomans amounted to around 3.5 %. The last three ethnic minorities are predominantly Sunni Muslims. If divided along religious lines, Sunni Muslims in Syria amounted to 68.7% of Syria's then 5 million.

³¹ Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of the Notables," (1969) in Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 36-66.

³² Basel Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World: State-Society Relations and Foreign Policy Choices in Jordan and Syria," McGill University: PhD Thesis, 2000, p. 192.

The party's earliest supporters belonged to the urban middle classes, mainly white-collar urban workers, but it also included the rural intelligentsia, rural migrants who had come to the cities for further education, and the peasantry, becoming an instrument of empowerment to a middle-class and peasant coalition, as well as successfully linking the urban middle class to the village.³³

That the majority of the earliest members of the new party came from minority and rural backgrounds can be linked to the appeal of its emancipatory ideas amongst people from these backgrounds, an appeal that was burnished by the fact that these ideas were usually promoted by local supporters rather than simply emanating from Damascus. Indeed, the Ba'th doctrine would soon become the villages' vehicle of revolt against the city, which had historically been dominant in terms of power and wealth, and continued to be the long-established birthplace of the ruler.³⁴

The roots of the Ba'th doctrine can be traced directly to the League of National Action of Zaki al-Arsuzi (1899-1968), which had challenged the traditional land owning urban elite after World War I. The League of National Action paved the way to a more radical Arab nationalism in Syria, one that did not shy away from contesting the docile, elite-advanced Arabism of the inter-war period.³⁵

Yet while the Ba'th party was founded through traditional channels – in terms of process and elite -- the party's doctrine, inspired by Arsuzi's ideology, aimed at challenging the traditional patrimonial political and social structure that was prevalent in Syria in the 1940s. Thus in the interest of insulating the domestic arena from external manipulation by the Western bourgeoisie, Syrians were to abandon divisive sectarian, regional and tribal group feelings and to unite with the larger Arab World. To do so, Ba'th Party ideologues, namely Michel 'Aflaq, Salah al-Din Bitar and others, posited a direct relationship between the periphery of the Arab world and its center, and between economic socialism and a secular version of Arab nationalism.³⁶

³³ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Class and State in Ba'thist Syria," in Richard T. Antun and Donald Quataert, eds., *Syria: Society, Culture, and Polity*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 32. See also Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996, pp.15-16.

³⁴ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria: Sectarian Conflict and Urban Rebellion in an Authoritarian-Populist Regime," in Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, ed., *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, New York, N.Y.: Praeger, 1982, pp. 138-139.

³⁵ Zaki al-Arsuzi was a 'Alawi intellectual and philosopher born in Latakia. He studied philosophy in Paris from 1927 to 1930, and founded the Arab Nationalist Party (*al-Hizb al-'Arabi al-Qawmi*) in 1939, and then the Arab Resurrection (*al-Ba'th al-'Arabi*). Most of his followers joined 'Aflaq and Bitar's party when Arsuzi grew increasingly suspicious of political involvement. For more on Zaki al-Arsuzi and his role within the Ba'th, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 135. See al-Jundi, *Al-Ba'th*, pp. 19-36. See also al-Safadi, *Hizb al-Ba'th: Ma'sat al-Mawlid, Ma'sat al-Nihaya*, pp.55-66. See also Zaki al-Arsuzi, *al-Mu'alafat al-Kamila* [The Complete writings] Damascus: 1972.

³⁶ See Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Ba'th Socialist Party: History, Ideology and Organization*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966; John Devlin, *The Ba'th Party: A History from its Origins to 1966*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1976; and George Jabbour, *al-fikr al-siyasi al-mu'aser fi suriya*.

Nourished on the dream of Arab unity and highly disillusioned with the 'religious absolute state' of the European Christian powers of the Middle Ages and the failings of the historical Islamic Ottoman *Khilafa*'s (Caliphate) treatment of its subjects, they all supported the then-rising tide of political secular Arabism.³⁷ At the same time however, the Ba'ṯh recognized the importance of religion in the lives of many Arabs, and especially the role of Islam in having once united and empowered the nation. Yet rather than label Islam as the ideal expression of Arab identity and thus the ideal vehicle for Arab unity, Ba'ṯh doctrine redefined Arab nationalism away from religion and more importantly, away from Sunni Islam. Indeed, the Ba'ṯh ideology differed from the notables' more traditional expressions of Arab identity in that it relegated Islam to a secondary role, choosing instead to emphasize secular values and stripped religion of its role.³⁸ In describing Arab nationalism prior to the emergence of the Ba'ṯh ideology, Nikolaos Van Dam writes:

In the past...the Sunni Arabs, who usually played first fiddle in this [Arab nationalist] movement, assigned in Arabism such an important role to (Sunni) Islam that heterodox Muslims, let alone Christians, were allotted a secondary place.³⁹

The position being articulated by the Ba'ṯhist Arab nationalists was therefore one that recognized Islam as an important cultural and revolutionary heritage for all Arabs, whether Muslims, Christians, Kurds, Berbers, or Armenians, but that simultaneously rejected the use of Islam as a divisive force or as a tool to empower one group at the expense of others. "The Ba'ṯh wanted a united secular Arab society...a society in which all Arabs would be equal, irrespective of their religion."⁴⁰ Aflaq writes:

Cela signifie-t-il que l'Islam apparût au seul bénéfice des Arabes? L'affirmer serait fort éloigné de la vérité, et contraire à la réalité. Chaque grande nation qui se penche sur le sens éternel de l'univers s'avance, dès ses origines, vers les valeurs éternelles et universelles. L'Islam est la meilleure expression du désir d'éternité et d'universalité de la Nation arabe. Il est arabe dans sa réalité, et universel de par ses idéaux et sa finalité. Le message de l'Islam, c'est de créer l'humanisme arabe... Ce que nous révèle l'Islam, à cette époque d'importance historique, et à ce point crucial de son évolution, c'est que tous les efforts doivent

³⁷ 'Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba'ṯh*, Damascus: 1963, pp. 177-185. On the rise of Arab nationalism in Syria, see Ernest Dawn, "The Rise of Arabism in Syria," *Middle East Journal*, 16/2 (1962), pp. 145-168; James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire*, Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1998; Muhammad Muslih, "The Rise of Local Nationalism in the Arab East," in Rashid Khalidi ed., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991.

³⁸ Michel 'Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba'ṯh*, pp. 105-129. See also Salem Babikian, "A Partial reconstruction of Michel Aflaq's Thought: The Role of Islam in the Formulation of Arab Nationalism," *Muslim World* 67, 4, (October 1977), pp. 280-294.

³⁹ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* See also 'Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba'ṯh*, chapter 1, parts 4 and 5.

viser à renforcer les Arabes, à les réveiller, et que ces efforts doivent se développer dans le cadre du nationalisme arabe.⁴¹

In assigning to religion a secondary role, Bitar and 'Aflaq diminished the domination of Syrian political life by the urban Sunni elite, and promised to increase the role played by the lower classes and rural minorities. In so doing, these previously disenfranchised groups had the possibility of achieving social mobility and higher social status regardless of their geographical, tribal, sectarian or religious identities.⁴² This implicit promise was made explicit in a trinity of cardinal slogans which the Party advanced: *Wihda* (Unity), *Huriya* (freedom) and *Ishtirakiya* (Socialism).⁴³

In Ba' thist parlance, the term unity symbolized the unity and oneness of the Arab nation and of the Arab Land. The Arab nation⁴⁴ constitutes a cultural and an historical unit that is to be the foundational ontological basis of Arab nationalism. In the words of 'Aflaq:

Arab unity is an ideal and a standard, not the outcome or a consequence of the fight of the Arab people for liberty and socialism. It is a new ideal that should accompany and direct that fight. The potentialities of the Arab nation are not the numerical sum of the potentialities of its parts when they are in the state of separation; they are greater in quantity and different in kind.⁴⁵

Freedom for the Ba' th meant an emphasis on personal freedom, but also freedom of the people from the corrupt status quo of political tyranny and exploitation at the hands of the oligarchy, as well as freedom from institutionalized religion, factionalism and the intrusion of foreign powers.⁴⁶

Socialism was to be the social equalizer and the instrument for morally improving the Arabs, by awakening their consciousness. Socialism was also seen as the empowerment of the underprivileged in order for all to enjoy a prosperous and just life. Only then could unity and freedom be achieved.⁴⁷

Another important value beyond this trinity of concepts was secularism, which was understood as being necessary for transforming and reforming the Arab self, as well

⁴¹ See 'Aflaq, *A la Memoire du Prophete Arabe*, Avril 1943. Available at : www.albaath.online.fr/

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ These axioms were organically linked objectives that will posit Syria for long years to come as the bastion of Arabism and the heart of the Arabs.

⁴⁴ According the Ba' th constitution, the Arab Homeland is the land inhabited by the Arab Nation, extending from the Torus Mountains and those of Bishtekwih, Basra Gulf, the Arab Sea, Ethiopia Mountains, the Greater Sahara, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea (article 7 of the General Principles). The Arab person is the one who speaks Arabic and lives on the Arab territory, or aspires to do so, and believes in his/her affiliation to the Arab Nation (article 10 of the General Principles).

⁴⁵ 'Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba' th*, pp. 206-207. Translation available at: www.albaath.online.fr/

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

as for combating factionalism and all other divisive solidarities, whether amongst the Arabs or with the rest of the world: "Humanity is a whole solidified in its interest and commonly linked by its values and civilization. Therefore, the Arabs give the world civilization and take from it. They extend a brotherly hand to all other nations and cooperate with them for establishing just systems, which safeguard, for all peoples, peace, prosperity and sublimation in spirit and temper."⁴⁸

Economically, the Ba'ath chose to rely on a populist path for the redistribution of resources and the regulation of ownership of land and of small industries. The Ba'ath socio-economic strategy aimed at social and economic transformation (*inqilab*) by nationalizing public utilities, major industries and medium-sized companies, "The establishment of public interest, huge natural resources, and means of transportation shall be directly administered by the State. All companies and foreign concessions shall be cancelled" (article 29 of the Ba'ath constitution). The party's rural policies promised to link the rural masses to the urban political center, and to "undertake a socialist transformation in the countryside"⁴⁹ by reforming agriculture, by funding infrastructure projects and the agro-industrial economy, and by partially cooperatizing land under state control.⁵⁰

The Ba'ath's social strategy involved the creation of a nexus of modern social institutions, unions and collective organizations under a strong party apparatus, with the goal of establishing a progressive culture that had "human aims" that empowered the masses, and that broke the traditional elitist structure of power.⁵¹ Education was to become a right of every citizen and thus was to be free for all. The educational curriculum's aim would be the creation of a new Arab generation that believed in the importance of a united Arab nation, one that adopted scientific thought free from superstitions and reactionary tradition, so that the Arab world could once again contribute to the progress of humanity.⁵²

It is important to note that the Ba'ath party was devised to be the vanguard of the spiritual resurrection of the Arab homeland, and not just of any homeland. Moreover the spirit to be resurrected was the Arab spirit, in contradistinction to that of the French, the British, the German, or the North American. For the Ba'ath, the Arab spirit needed to be transformed and awakened so as to ultimately create a viable non-reactionary, non-

⁴⁸ Later on, we will see how Islam, interpreted to exclude socialism, will serve as a medium for the traditional merchant community - historically linked to the religious community in Syria - to contest the Ba'athist rule. For the Constitution of the Ba'ath party, see <http://www.baath-party.org/eng/constitution.htm>. For the interpretation of those slogans and the ideology of the Ba'ath, see Michel 'Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba'ath*; idem, *Ma'rakat al-Masir al-Wahid*, Damascus, 1958; idem, *Nuqtat al-Bidaya: Ahadith Ba'da al-Khames min Huzayran*, Damascus, 1971. See also John, F. Devlin, *The Ba'ath Party: A History from its Origins to 1966*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976, pp. 23-45.

⁴⁹ Olson, *The Ba'ath and Syria*, p. 55.

⁵⁰ See articles 26 to 37 in the declaration of principles of the Ba'ath Party.

⁵¹ Olson, *The Ba'ath and Syria*, p. 55. See also article 38 to 43 in the declaration of principles of the Ba'ath Party.

⁵² See articles 44 to 48 in the declaration of principles of the Ba'ath Party.

religious, non-sectarian structure for a majority of people who share a language and a history, of which a key aspect has often involved being controlled by others.

As a result of its social populist thrust and its implications for the Syrian subalterns, the Ba'ath doctrine appealed to the rural masses, to minorities, and to the lower and middle classes who were naturally drawn to the secular, social reformist, populist ideology of the party. However as we will see in the next section, it was access to education and the military that finally broke the political monopoly enjoyed by Syria's oligarchy rather than the Ba'athi revolutionary ideology.

The Ba'ath Party's Ascent to Power

The socio-political and strategic challenges that the Ba'ath regime faces today under Bashar al-Asad are not new. Hence before examining the current rise of Islamist activity in Syria and its opposition to the Ba'ath regime under Bashar al-Asad, it is important to examine the nature of Syrian politics after the 1963 coup that brought the secular Ba'ath regime to power, and has since re-shaped the Syrian political order and social structures.

The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party emerged as a reaction to a number of challenges that faced post-independence Syria. At the time, Syria was a multi-factional and fragmented society clearly lacking an overarching national identity. The state that emerged in the last year of the French mandate was a truncated one, in that it represented only a small part of the Syrian population, namely the old urban mercantile class and landowners who had gained much power as intermediaries between the foreign rulers and the local population.

As the pre-World War I period started witnessing the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the mercantile and political elite were also slowly abandoning their allegiance to the failing Empire in favour of the rising tide of Arab nationalism. The latter was rightfully perceived as a means for them to maintain their social status and political power despite the desire of the French to be the sole rulers of Syria. As well, the Syrian notables successfully conveyed to the new colonizer that their presence as intermediaries within a patronage system linking the French to the locals was a political necessity.

Yet the post-WWII era brought an end to this balancing act. As France vacated Syria on the 17th of April 1946, a newly emerging generation of intellectuals felt that the politics of the notables were self-serving at best, and lacked legitimacy. At the time, the Syrian political environment was one of successive and unstable short-lived coups. Moreover, Syria's economy was weak, it faced the new phenomenon of rural exodus and high rates of social mobility. Beyond that, the regional environment was antagonistic and dominated by more cohesive powers, usually dubbed as "the West."

The new context meant that the ASBP now stood a chance against the traditional parties such as the Damascene National Bloc and the Aleppo-based People's Party,

whose infighting in a last struggle to maintain power opened the door wide open to the new progressive parties.⁵³

As explained earlier, the Ba'ath Party was initially created and to a significant extent operated through the traditional social and political channels that governed Syria's political order in the 1940s. Nonetheless, it adhered to a more radical understanding of Arab nationalism, and aimed at challenging the traditional social and political structure that governed Syria in the post-independence era.

In 1954, at the September Parliamentary elections held on the morrow of President Shishakli's overthrow, the Ba'ath party's hard-core nucleus consisted of 6,000 members, the majority of whom came from Damascus, Homs, Hama and Jabal al-Druze. "Of 142 seats, 64 went to independents, 30 to the People's Party and 22 to the Ba'ath."⁵⁴ Akram al-Hawrani was elected in Hama with four other Ba'ath candidates in a clean sweep against the agrarian oligarchy, while Bitar was elected in Damascus. These results registered the decline of the traditional notables' parties, to the advantage of alternative ideological currents such as the Ba'ath, the Communists and the Syrian Social National Party. For example, the People's Party (considered one of the important notables' parties) took 43 out of the 119 seats in the 1949 parliamentary elections, but won only 30 seats out of a total of 142 in the 1954 contest. By contrast, the Ba'ath had held only one seat in 1949, but took 22 seats in the 1954 election.⁵⁵

From 1955 to 1963, Islamists, Communists, secular nationalists and independents all battled each other as much as they did the traditional ruling elite. Further destabilizing the fragile situation in Syria was the penetration of Syrian politics by Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, each of whom backed competing factions and military conspirators. It is fair to say that it was partly the political instability of post-independence Syria in general that opened the door to the Ba'ath revolution.⁵⁶

In that same period, the Syrian political leadership, as well as the military apparatus, were fragmenting as a result of widespread corruption within their ranks. Coincidentally, it was during this phase that a fragmenting Ba'ath staged its ascendancy to power. In fact, although partly witnessing the rise of praetorianism within its own ranks, the Ba'ath party used praetorianism to ensure the end of its evident political antagonists. A succession of failed political maneuvers, particularly the assassination of Ba'athist Colonel 'Adnan al-Malki, led to the discrediting and ultimately to the defeat of the Syrian Socialist National Party (hereafter referred to as the SSNP). SSNP officers were systematically purged from the army to the advantage of Ba'athist officers. Then the 1956 Suez war that pitted Britain, France and Israel against Egypt, coupled with the earlier triumph of Nasser, helped remove another of the Ba'ath formidable enemies, the pro-Iraqi People's Party. In 1957, Akram al-Hawrani, whose practical vision and championing of

⁵³ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Syria under the Ba'ath: State Formation in a Fragmented Society", *the Arab Studies Quarterly*, 4, 3, 2003, p. 178.

⁵⁴ Robert, W. Olson, *The Ba'ath and Syria, 1947 to 1982: The Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State*, Princeton, N.J.: The Kingston Press, Inc., 1982, pp.24-25.

⁵⁵ Olson, *The Ba'ath and Syria*, p. 25. See also Khalid al-'Azm, *Mudhakarāt Khaled al-'Azm*, Vol. II, Beirut, Lebanon: al-Dar al-Muttaḥidah lil-Nashr, 1973, pp. 285-324.

⁵⁶ On the destabilizing effect of Syria's regional environment, see Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*.

peasants rights in Hama had saved the Party from demise in 1953, was reprimanded and de-legitimized for warning against the union with Egypt. By late 1957, the Ba'th were apprehensive of the growing popularity of the Communists, as well as of their forceful and well-organized presence in the army. Fearful of losing to them at the polls during the municipal elections scheduled for November 1957, the Ba'th opted to play the unity card with Egypt. Union, they thought, was the only way to eliminate their rivals. They also believed that, having initiated the unity process, they would play a major role in the delivery and rearing of the United Arab Republic.⁵⁷

On the 1st of February 1958, and after much deliberation on the part of Nasser, the United Arab Republic was proclaimed. By then the Ba'th, which had successfully rid itself of most its political enemies - including the redoubtable Communists under Khaled Baqdash - was hoping Nasser would reward them for their efforts to promote the union.⁵⁸

At the outset, this was a formidable plan to end all intertwined and competing civilian and military coalitions. Michel 'Aflaq stated that "we will be officially dissolved, but we will be present in the new unified party, the national union. Born of the union of two countries, this movement cannot be inspired by principles other than those of the Ba'th."⁵⁹ Yet the Ba'thist leaders' hope that Nasser would share power with them once the Union was in place did not materialize.

In fact, Nasser agreed to an immediate merger with Syria based on three conditions that ended up shaping Syrian politics for years to come. First, that the merger be a union rather than a federation, with a presidential political system rather than a parliamentary one like that in Syria prior to the union. Secondly, that the Syrian army be de-politicized and Nasser given the right to appoint and dismiss officers to civilian posts. Finally, "that all Syrian political parties dissolve themselves into a single corporatist political organization called the National Union (*al-Ittihad al-Qawmi*)."⁶⁰

The short-lived union years witnessed the purging and transfer to Egypt of anyone suspected of posing a threat within the Syrian branch of the army. These purges included the Communists, what was left of Hawrani's followers, and Ba'thist officers and supporters of 'Aflaq and Bitar. In fact, anyone who was suspected of opposing the union was either expelled from the Syrian army or transferred abroad.⁶¹

However this divisive strategy ended in a backlash, as a number of exiled Ba'thist officers, fed up with the 'Egyptianization' of Syria, set up a secret military committee (*al-lajna al-'askariya*) in Cairo, whose members later would end up staging Syria's bumpy ride toward Ba'thist rule. The Military Committee officers placed blame on the Ba'th's founding fathers for the disintegration of the party. They considered themselves to be the

⁵⁷ See Nabil M. Kaylani, "The Rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940-1958: Political Success, Party Failure", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3, 1 (January 1972).

⁵⁸ Khaled Baqdash was the first Communist to be elected in the Arab world. He won a seat in the 1954 parliamentary elections in Damascus. See Nabil M. Kaylani, "The Rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940-1958: Political Success, Party Failure."

⁵⁹ Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World," p. 200-201. *L'Orient*, 25 February 1958.

⁶⁰ Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World," p. 201. See also al-Jundi, *Al-Ba'th*, p. 85.

⁶¹ Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria*, pp. 32-33.

only hope for rebuilding the dismantled party, and awaited an opportune moment to take Syria out of the union.⁶²

The Military Committee, which was initially formed by Lieutenant-Colonels Mazyad Hunaydi, Muhammad 'Umran, Bashir Sadeq, and Captain 'Abdul Ghani 'Ayyash in 1959, ended up in 1960 being comprised of the following majors and captains: Majors Muhammad 'Umran, Salah al-Jadid, and Ahmad al-Mir, and Captains Hafez al-Asad, 'Abdul Karim al-Jundi, Hamad 'Ubayd, 'Uthman Kan'an, and Munir el-Jerudi. The predominant majority of these officers came from rural minority backgrounds in the Latakia district. This was not surprising, given that the majority of the officers exiled by Nasser belonged to minority groups.

At the Fourth Ba'th National Congress of August 1960, disillusioned Ba'thists fought over how to re-build their party and to stop the 'Egyptianization' of Syria. Hawrani's faction called for immediate secession, while others were much more committed to the union and chose to split from the Ba'th.⁶³

While Nasser was fending off the Syrian left, the coup against the union was undertaken by right-wing Syrian officers on the 28th of September 1961. Syria's business people and their representatives sought through the coup to immediately organize a new socio-economic coalition in the cabinet. However, amongst a back and forth of business-dominated coups, the victory of the right was to be short-lived. On the 8th of February 1963, the Iraqi branch of the Ba'th seized power in Baghdad, giving a significant moral push to the Ba'thist officers in Syria. The arrival to power of the Ba'th party in Syria would follow swiftly.⁶⁴

The Ba'th in Power

The divorce from Egypt revealed a myriad of rival power blocs from within the Ba'th Party's ranks. Among these were Bitar and 'Aflaq's group, who controlled the so-called National Command; the Social Unionists' Movement led by Sami al-Jundi and Sami Sufan; Hawrani and his supporters; and the so-called *Qutriyun* or Regional Command formed in December 1961, which advocated a Syria-first policy, hence their name.

These emerging blocs first became visible during the Fifth Congress of the Ba'th Party held on the 8th of May, 1962 in the city of Homs. 'Aflaq, then secretary general of the National Command, expelled Hawrani and his supporters from the Ba'th because of their condemnation of Aflaq's hopes of reviving the union with Egypt. As mentioned earlier, Hawrani and his supporters opposed the National Command because they were first pan-Syrian and then pan-Arab in orientation, and therefore condemned the resurrection of the union with Egypt in any form, at least until Syria had completed its

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 34. See also al-Jundi, *Al-Ba'th*, pp. 85-86; Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: the Struggle for the Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 1988, pp. 60-64; Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, pp. 144-156.

⁶³ Devlin, *The Ba'th Party*, pp. 169-186.

⁶⁴ On the 8th of March 1963.

socialist transformation. This rejection was even extended to the federal de-centralized form that the National Command was proposing.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the right-wing secessionist regime was growing increasingly unpopular. On the 8th of March, 1963, a revolution from above was set in motion by a coalition of non-Hawrani Ba'thists, Nasserists, and other anti-secessionist independent officers led by Major Ziyad al-Hariri. The latter, who was a relative of Hawrani and the commander of the Syrian forces on the Israeli border, staged a military coup against the traditionalist coalition which had brought down Syria's very brief union with Egypt in 1961. Salah al-Din Bitar was tasked with forming a new government, while Amin al-Hafez, a non Ba'hist Sunni army colonel, was promoted to the rank of major general and was appointed minister of the interior.⁶⁶ The events of the 8th of March 1963 would set the stage for subsequent events in Syria.

The Ba'ith had an advantage within this coalition. Unlike the rest of the officers, Ba'hist commanders had both military power and a Ba'hist civilian wing as backbone to undertake the task of state formation. State formation was hence dominated by Ba'ith members, and deployed under the watchful eye of Ba'hist army officers. Within the Ba'ith party however, and very shortly after the successful coup, urban-rural splits between its members began to appear as sectarian blocs, tribal blocs, and personal blocs that pitted rural members against urban members. Emphasizing personal alliances became a major tactic to gain power, which concretely resulted in the National Command or old guard being separated from the younger and more radical populist Regional Command. This latter was composed of rural petit bourgeois army officers rather than peasant leaders.⁶⁷

The Military Committee was the real repository of power after the March 8, 1963 coup, and its members felt it imperative to purge the army of anyone threatening their rule, particularly the Nasserists and the independents including Hariri, the lead-officer of the coup.⁶⁸ This resulted in a clear "Ba'ithization" and "ruralization" of the army. It also resulted in the 'Alawization⁶⁹ of the army, since the purged Nasserite Officers were in majority Sunnis. The bureaucracy was also indoctrinated and reshaped, with between 30 and 300 civilians ousted from the civil administration in favour of Ba'ith loyalists.⁷⁰ This

⁶⁵ See Kaylani, "The Rise of the Syrian Ba'ith, 1940-1958: Political Success, Party Failure."

⁶⁶ See Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 143; Olson, *The Ba'ith and Syria*, p.92.

⁶⁷ See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 98-103.

⁶⁸ These purges did not go unnoticed; the Nasserites, with full Egyptian coordination, attempted on the 18th July 1962 to overthrow the Ba'ith. Plotters were executed.

⁶⁹ The 'Alawis, or Nusayris, were considered an extreme sect of the Shi'a; they were considered infidels by Sunnis in general and, under the Ottomans, were heavily taxed. For a brief history of Ottoman Syria and Syria's heterogeneous population, see Moshe Ma'oz, "Society and State in Modern Syria", Milson, Menahem, ed., *Society and Political Structure in the Arab World*, New York: Humanities Press, 1973, pp. 29-92.

⁷⁰ Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World," p. 222. The terms "Ba'ithization" and "Ruralization" are Batatu's in *Syria's Peasantry*, chapter 12, and Hinnebusch's in "Class and State in Ba'hist Syria," p. 35. See also Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *Linkage Politics in the Middle East*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983, p. 127.

favouring of a Ba'hist minority would later be viewed as confessional politics by the Muslim Brotherhood, as will be seen later in this work.

On the 25th of September 1965, the Regional Command voted 'no confidence' in Bitar's government, and Amin al-Hafez became head of the presidential council. By that time, the civilian faction (that is, the National Command) under 'Aflaq and Bitar had lost a large portion of its power, and was no longer capable of ousting the Military Committee and its civilian partner, the Regional Command.⁷¹

With the Military Committee -- composed of Ba'hist officers -- now firmly in power, the populist corporatist revolution intensified. "Liberal parliamentarism" was judged a bourgeois aberration and was replaced by "popular democracy," by which was

⁷¹ For 'Aflaq's comments on this period of time, see 'Aflaq, "al-Mu'amara al-Tarikhiya 'ala Hizb al-Ba'th, also available in *Niqat al-Bidaya*, under the title "Tariq al-Wihda Tamur Bi-Filastine," p. 281 (delivered in July 1970).

في إطار هذه الملاحظة العامة نجد تفسيراً ليس فقط لانتكاسة ٢٣ شباط وإنما لكل التشويه الذي طرأ على الحزب قيل تلك الانتكاسة بسنين، وخاصة لذلك التزييف الكامل الذي وقع الحزب ضحيته من بعد انقلاب الثامن من آذار. ليس من المجدي ان أدخل في تفاصيل ولكن لا بد ان أصحح للرفيق قوله بأن قيلول ٢٣ شباط أشرت بإصبع الاتهام الى القيادة القومية، كانت تلك الإشارة ليست الى القيادة القومية بل الى الفئة التي كانت تتحكم بسورية في ذلك الحين من وراء جميع القيادات. كذلك احب ان اصحح قول الرفيق بأننا نحن الذين اضطهدنا الشعب وعملنا كل ما عمل في تلك الفترة من اضطهاد واستغلال وغير ذلك. أقول بأن الحزب بريء والحزب اخطأ عندما وثق بتلك المجموعة من العسكريين واعتبرهم رفاقاً حزينين وإذا باللجنة العسكرية تدبر مؤامرة لتزييف الحزب تزييفاً كاملاً وللاستيلاء عليه معتمدة على السلاح الغاشم، على الدبابة والمدفع، وقد لجأ هؤلاء الى اخبث الاساليب من اجل تحقيق اغراضهم وتزييف الحزب فشجعوا الانتهازية الى أبعد الحدود وشجعوا الفساد وحاربوا الاخلاص وحاربوا العقيدة الحزبية المؤمنة وأتوا حتى بأعداء الحزب وأدخلوهم في الحزب ليكونوا عوناً لهم ضد الحزب الأصيل. فشهوة السلطة عندما تسيطر على النفس توصل الى الخيانة وهذا ما قصده مشبوهة وان الاستعمار قد دخل الى داخل الحزب وقد لا ينطبق هذا الاتهام الا على أفراد قلائل واحداً أو اثنين أو ثلاثة. أي الاشخاص الرئيسيين وهذا كاف لا يصال البلاد الى كارثة.

ensured by a single, Leninist-style party. In fact, in order to retain power and compensate for the lack of party discipline of past years, the Ba'ṯh in its new radical populist form felt it necessary to expand its social base of support. Organizational networks and popular councils were created to indoctrinate and empower the 'ensuring of the revolutionary and popular practice of democracy.' "By the late 1960s, they had created an amazing array of social and political institutions, ostensibly to incorporate peasants, workers, students, youths, women, and professionals into the Ba'ṯh's populist ruling coalition, but also to control them along rigid corporatist patterns."⁷²

Furthermore, between 1964 and 1966, legislative decrees (mainly decrees 46, 35, 36, 76, 24, 57, 77, 84 and 88) nationalized all Syrian banks and about three-quarters of Syrian businesses. These decrees set in place strict trade barriers and placed nationalized companies under the administration of 'state capitalism.'⁷³ One hundred and fourteen businesses were nationalized, and agrarian reforms were "sped up."⁷⁴ This populist-étatist thrust and social engineering from above did not go unnoticed. Up to one billion Syrian liras were smuggled out of the country by the business class, while the religious leaders preached civil disobedience and organized a number of strikes, which were dealt with firmly and swiftly by the authorities. Through such measures, Syria's traditional elite was essentially silenced.⁷⁵

In 1966, the Military Committee itself was fragmenting due in part to the heterogeneity of the main group that was leading the Ba'ṯh. Two interlocking conflicts defined the party's inner workings:

One largely ideological, generational and urban-rural in which the party's moderate, older urban leaders confronted younger rural radicals; the other a personal competition between the three ranking party officers, Amin al-Hafiz, Salah Jadid, and Muhammad 'Umran, each of whom, in the end, joined either the moderate or the radical camp.⁷⁶

The radicals under Salah Jadid finally staged a coup against Amin al-Hafez on the 23rd of February 1966. Al-Hafez had made a number of mistakes, one of which was to accuse Salah Jadid of engaging in sectarian politics. His use of the sectarian and minority card backfired, and more officers defected towards Jadid's radical satellite, most of whom were Druze.⁷⁷

⁷² Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World," p. 220.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225. See also Hizb al-Ba'ṯh al-'Arabi al-Ishtiraki, *Hawla Maḥmūl al-Hizb al-Thawri wa al-'Ilaqa Bi-al Bunyatayn al-Fikriya wa al-Tanzimiya* [on the Concept of the Revolutionary Party and the Relation with the Ideological and Organizational Foundations] Damascus: Maktab al-Thaqafa wa al-Dirassat wa al-I'dad al-Hizbi, n.d., pp. 17-19.

⁷⁴ Olson, *the Ba'ṯh and Syria*, p. 92.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

⁷⁶ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 143.

⁷⁷ Olson, *the Ba'ṯh and Syria*, pp. 98-99. The subsequent coup was led by Salim Hatum and 'Izzat Jadid, and resulted in the defeat of a number of prominent factions who were perceived as being loyal to Amin al-Hafez. Members of Umran's faction were also purged. See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 47.

Under Jadid, a prominent Sunni party politician, Nur al-Din Atasi, became Head of State, Ahmad Suwaydani, a prominent Sunni officer, became Chief of Staff, and Hafez al-Asad, an 'Alawi officer who had contributed enormously to the coup, was appointed Defence Minister. Al-Asad subsequently resigned from the Regional Command and focused exclusively on the armed forces.⁷⁸

This was the end of the 'Aflaq-Bitar domination of the Ba'th Party's National Command, and it marked the rise of what was to become informally known as the neo-Ba'th Party. The neo-Ba'th Party was made up of three main groups: the Atasi-Jadid group supported by Chief of Staff Ahmad Suwaydani, by Head of Military Intelligence 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, and by the Commander of the 70th Regiment, 'Izzat Jadid, as well as by a number of neutral officers; the al-Asad group, supported mainly by the Air Force; and the Hatum group, supported by the Druze of Hamad 'Ubayd.⁷⁹

This version of the Ba'th party, purged and redirected, was more hard-line, seeing itself as part of the World Communist Revolution and subscribing to radical secularist and scientific socialist positions, which would become a major problem for religious leaders and for the religious class of Syria and the rest of the Arab world. On the international front, Syria strengthened its ties with the Soviet Union and took a strong stance against Zionism and Israel.

In an effort to entrench itself further within the army and the bureaucracy, the radical Ba'th purged officers and other elements considered unreliable due to their historical loyalty to the traditional parties or to Nasserism.⁸⁰ Yet the purges took overt sectarian overtones when Druze officers, dissatisfied with what they perceived as their exclusion from the inner circles of power, attempted a coup against Jadid under the leadership of Salim Hatum.⁸¹ Hatum's power play on the 8th of September 1966 soon collapsed, resulting in the decimation of the Druze elite and a threat from Hafez al-Asad to bomb the Druze capital of Suwayda after Hatum sought refuge there with Hasan al-Atrash, a traditional Druze leader.⁸²

Following the Syrian and Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, Chief of Staff Ahmad Suwaydani was replaced by another Sunni, Mustafa Tlas. Meanwhile, Hafez Al-Asad managed to hold onto his post of Defence Minister. Despite attempts by the ruling coalition to ensure sectarian balance amongst the political elite, the top of the political pyramid exhibited strong rural 'Alawi predominance.⁸³

⁷⁸ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 144.

⁷⁹ Bar-Siman-Tov, *Linkage Politics*, p. 148.

⁸⁰ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 139.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144. Earlier, Hamad 'Ubayd and Salim Hatum were not re-elected in the new Regional Command despite their vital role in deposing Amin al-Hafez. See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, pp. 50-51.

⁸² Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 144; Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, pp. 50-53. Hatum will be accused of treason following the 1967 War and executed in July 1967.

The 1967 Syrian defeat had the additional impact of undermining the leaders' confidence in charting a radical course for the country, and ended up further splitting the Ba'athist elite (mainly Jadid and al-Asad) over what steps to take next. This disagreement between Jadid, who by now controlled the civilian party apparatus, and Hafez al-Asad, who controlled the armed forces, dominated Syrian politics from 1969 to the 13th of November 1970, "Once again both coalitions in the intra-elite conflict cut across sectarian lines and were largely cemented by personal and ideological loyalties, but the fact that both sides were led by Alawite officers indicated for many Syrians the ascendancy of this sectarian community."⁸⁴

The November 1970 'Corrective Movement' of Hafez al-Asad finally managed to break the see-sawing power struggle, concentrating power in the hands of his faction's officers, much to the dismay of competing elites such as the Arab Socialists of Hawrani, the Nasserites and the Muslim Brethren. In February 1971, al-Asad became Syria's first 'Alawi President, much to the alarm of the traditional Sunni elite.

The rise of Ba'athism was, therefore, a result of the forging of a new ideology based on a particular social base and which followed a new economic outlook of state socialism. In other words, economic, ideological as well as social forces were key in its advance. Equally important were Syria's external relations and the state's strategic considerations.

But the development of the Ba'ath party and the eventual ascension of al-Asad to power was not the only significant political development in Syria. In the following chapter, we turn our attention to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood both as a political party in the country and in its later shift towards Islamic militantism.

⁸³ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 144. After an abortive plot prepared by Ahmad Suwaydani in August 1968, Suwaydani was caught in July 1969 and imprisoned until 1994. All his Hawrani followers were also arrested or purged from the military.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Chapter 3

Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood

Introduction

This chapter explores the formation and the rise of Syria's Islamic movement via an analysis of *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (the Muslim Brotherhood) in the country. However, before explaining the rise of the Syrian Muslim Brothers as a political party and as an Islamic opposition, it is important to say a few words about the movement's social base and the kind of socio-economic and political program its creators advanced. This is important because it will unpack their positions on certain issues in their quest to recapture an elusive Syrian *imaginaire*, albeit under the tenure of power of the Left.

The Muslims Brothers: A Different Kind of Social Base and Agenda

At its inception, the Muslim Brotherhood was not one of Syria's largest political organizations. Indeed, Syria's Islamic movement never established the size and importance of comparable movements in the Arab World, such as in Egypt and Jordan. One main reason for the movement's disadvantage in Syria is that in contrast to Egypt and Jordan's overwhelming Sunni majority, Syria is a blend of some 17 different ethnic and religious groups, with over 30 per cent of the population not Sunni. As a result, there is a large proportion of Syrians who are unlikely to support a rising regional Sunni movement.⁸⁵ A further factor is that secular ideologies had eclipsed Islam as a primary source of political activism in Syria very early on in the 20th century. This was mainly due to late 19th century Ottoman policies that modernized the Syrian political, judicial and educational systems, and firmly secularized the leading urban elite. As a result, Syria's independent Islamic movement was a late-arrival on the pluralistic parliamentary political scene. Moreover, it had not actively fought against the French occupation of Syria, and so was superseded in the popular imagination by a myriad of secular nationalist forces who had resisted French rule, such as the People's Party, the Nationalist Party, the Communist Party and the Syrian Social National Party.

Another reason that could explain the weakness of Syria's Islamic movement in the early to mid 20th century is more closely related to the ideological factor. Unlike in

⁸⁵ In Syria, there is no Shi'i Islamic movement, and Syrian 'Alawi culture was and remains for the most part, despite today's attempt at Islamizing this minority (which will be discussed in later chapters) a secular culture.

Egypt, Syria's Muslim Brothers have embodied the defensive ideological protest of the traditional bourgeois class in decline, and indeed have historically been associated, at least in the popular imagination, with that societal class. Because of this, their socio-economic program was perceived as serving an elitist status quo and hence did not appeal to the increasingly educated middle to lower urban and rural strata of society, whose political awareness was by then permeated with secular Arabism.

A final element is best summed up by Hinnebusch, who points out that given "the diversity of elements and ideological shadings embraced by the Islamic movement [in Syria]...it is unclear whether it should be considered one movement or many and to what extent it has been able to act in a unified way."⁸⁶

The totality of this complex reality resonated in the words of the movement's first superintendent, Mustafa al-Siba'i: "Our movement is neither a society nor a political party but a spirit that permeates the very being of the *ummah*: it is a new revolution."⁸⁷

Although more apparent and partly radicalized during al-Asad's first term, Syria's Islamic Movement did not initially emerge as a reaction to the Ba'th or to al-Asad's rule, nor was it the result of secularization and modernization attempts by the Ba'th regime or 'Alawi leaders in Damascus. In fact, Syria's religious scholars (*'ulama'*), recruited mainly from notable urban and merchant families, had long been important actors on the Syrian political stage. And although they were significantly weaker than the Ba'th, the leaders of the Muslim Brothers had to ward off the same political challengers as the latter. These were mainly the secular-oriented traditional notable parties such as the Aleppine People's Party, the Damascene National Front, the Syrian nationalists, the Socialists and the Communists, in which originally rural middle class and minority groups played an important role.

Interestingly, the Syrian Islamic movement emerged as a reaction to almost the same challenges that had produced the Ba'th Party in post-independence Syria. Most important among those challenges were: Syria's domestic and regional environment, dominated as it was by Western powers; an unstable economy coupled with high rates of social mobilization; and Syria's diverse religious communities, which were believed to be responsible for an increasingly fragmented society, a situation that was problematic given the absence of an overarching national identity.⁸⁸ However, it is important to reiterate that unlike the Ba'th party, the Muslim Brothers defended the socio-economic status quo, in which they actually flourished.

It was in this context that a number of political associations, initially social-welfare societies, gained considerable ground in the 1930s. These associations were

⁸⁶ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p.153. That said, and for practical reasons, whenever discussing Syria's Islamic political movement in this chapter, the main focus will be on the ideology and actions of the Muslim Brothers for the simple reason that they represented the majority of the Sunni political Islamic movement in Syria, notwithstanding their leaders' quarrels, different visions and their sponsors' ideological diversity, as we will see hereafter. Therefore, throughout the following chapters and until the end of Part II, "the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," and "Syria's Islamic Movement" are interchangeably used to denote the same political movement.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Umar Abdallah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983, p. 21.

⁸⁸ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Syria under the Ba'th: State Formation in a Fragmented Society," in *the Arab Studies Quarterly*, 4, 3, 2003, p. 178.

primarily concerned with providing Islamic education and health care, though later switched their attention to broader cultural and political objectives. In their initial iterations, they believed that a sound Islamic education and a strong social welfare net would re-establish Islamic culture in its true essence and thus remove the West's unwelcome authority over Syria and the rest of the Arab world.

Among these social-welfare associations were *Dar al-Arqam* (the Arqam House) in Aleppo, *Jam'iyat al-Rabita al-Diniya* (the Religious Accord Organization) in Homs, *Ansar al-Haqq* (the Supporters of Righteousness) in Dayr al-Zor, and the association of the Muslim Brothers in Hama. These urban organizations met regularly to discuss social reform, and were collectively known as *Shabab Muhammad* (Youth of Muhammad). In 1944, *Shabab Muhammad* joined together into a unified group under the name of the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria and Lebanon,⁸⁹ and it is then that the movement began its shift from being a mere social-welfare organization towards becoming an established political party. 'Abd Allah writes:

By the summer of 1946, the newly formulated Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had elected as-Siba'i to the position of general supervisor (*al-muraqib al-'amm*), the highest position within the organization, and a central committee had been established in Damascus that linked the Syrian Brotherhood to the Egyptian Brotherhood under its general director (*al-murshid al-'amm*), Hasan al-Banna.⁹⁰

The majority of the leaders of Syria's Muslim Brothers were young men who came from a small yet powerful group of urban merchant and notable families that combined great wealth with religious office. These men, whom Hanna Batatu calls the "religious class,"⁹¹ went on to press political Islam into joining the fight against the West, as well as to defend religion and private property.

For the most part these men were attending *Shari'a* schools in Syria or al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo when they became acquainted with the ideas of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the ideological inspiration for the Syrian Islamic movement. The group of young men included: Muhammad al-Mubarak; Salah al-Shash; Mustafa al-Siba'i, who became a professor of Islamic law at the Syrian University in Damascus and the first superintendent general of the Muslim Brothers society from 1945 to 1961; 'Umar Baha' al-Amiri, who was one of the first founders of Dar al-Arqam; Muhammad al-Hamed, one of the founders of the Muslim Brothers of Hama; 'Isam al-'Attar, who succeeded Mustafa al-Siba'i as superintendent general of the Muslim Brothers and who was also the *imam* at Damascus University's mosque; 'Abdul Fatah Abu Ghuda, who as a *Shari'a* teacher set up the Aleppo branch of the Muslim Brothers in 1935, and who in 1972 led the group that seceded from the Muslim Brothers.⁹² Interestingly, and unlike the Muslim Brotherhood movement in

⁸⁹ Faysal Daraj and Jamal Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya* [The Islamic Parties, Movements and Groups], Syria: The Arab Center for Strategic Studies, 2006, p. 255.

⁹⁰ Umar 'Abd Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983.

⁹¹ Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *Merip Reports* 110 (Nov.-Dec. 1982), p. 14. The "religious class" accounted for around one man for every 2500 Syrians in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁹² Faysal Daraj and Jamal Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, pp. 255-258.

Syria's neighbouring countries, there were no *muftis* and only a few judges (*qadis*), despite the Muslim character of the organization.⁹³

Ideologically, although committed to Salafism in their outlook, Syria's Muslim Brothers were loyal to Hasan al-Banna's inclusion of Sufi elements in the Muslim Brothers' belief-set. This balancing act was made much easier by the fact that in Syria, the Salafiyya movement had been mostly allied with orthodox Sufism since the late 19th century. Indeed, Sufism was Syria's overarching Sunni dogma, for the simple reason that the early representatives of Salafism in Syrian cities tended to come from an orthodox Sufi background, and thus believed that Sufism provided Islam with an important spiritual-ethical component. As a result, the Syrian Muslim Brothers believed that the Sufi *tariqas* were an efficient tool for attracting the masses to their new, populist Islamic association.⁹⁴

At least initially, the Muslim Brotherhood "did not contribute greatly to the Syrian discourse on the definition of nationhood and the nation" as it did not have a specific program or charter, instead concentrating almost exclusively on emphasizing the importance of Muslim history and heritage. Accordingly, it was left to the '*ulama*' to call for an Islamic state in opposition to the French occupation in particular and the Western powers in general.⁹⁵

Once Syria became independent, the Muslim Brothers were confronted with the secularizing tendencies that constituted the overarching trend in Syria at the time. In the 1940s and 1950s, shaykh Mustafa al-Siba'i often initiated major debates and led demonstrations against secular politicians, especially during the drafting of the 1950 Syrian Constitution. He finally agreed to a secular 'Constitution with an Islamic bearing'. Talhami explains:

Siba'i led the fight over declaring Islam the sole religion of the state. But he lost in favor of those who insisted only on delineating Islam as the religion of the president of the republic. This statement was then buttressed by declaring Islamic jurisprudence to be the main source of legislation and the state to be the sustainer of all divine faiths. The debate over secularizing the state was also joined by some of Syria's Christian religious leadership. The Greek Orthodox Bishop of Hama, Ignatius Harika, protested in the pages of the national press that the new constitution threatened to relegate Christians to the status of a permanent minority.⁹⁶

By the time of its official formation in 1946, Syria's Muslim Brotherhood party had already broken ranks with its Egyptian counterpart over the issue of whether or not to

⁹³ Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," p. 14.

⁹⁴ See Itzchak Weismann, "The Politics of Popular Religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim Brothers in 20th-Century Hamah," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2005, 37, pp. 39-58; idem, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya and Arabism in late Ottoman Damascus*, Leiden: Brill, 2000.

⁹⁵ Ghada Hashem Talhami, "Syria: Islam, Arab Nationalism and the Military in Syria," *Middle East Policy* 8, 4, December 2001, p. 113.

⁹⁶ Talhami, "Syria: Islam, Arab Nationalism and the Military in Syria," p. 120.

be part of a non-Islamic political system, by agreeing to actively participate in Syria's emerging parliamentary life. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also departed from more 'orthodox' interpretations of Islam by including elements of social reform and socialist solidarity in its program, in an attempt to reconcile traditional Islam with the new concepts of modernism and progress.⁹⁷ Talhami writes, "the presence of a distinguished Sharia college in Syria fostered and intensified modern Islamic studies in a manner that was lacking in countries without such institutions, such as Jordan, Lebanon or even Palestine."⁹⁸ Hinnebusch further explains that "Siba'i held that the Quran supported state ownership of key industries and a more equitable distribution of wealth than obtained in traditional Syria...Siba'i went so far as to favour closer relations with the USSR as a means of neutralizing Western influence."⁹⁹

Furthermore, notables who supported the Muslim Brothers in a behind-the-scenes capacity often moved from the left to the right within the ideological spectrum, thus adding to the already difficult task of defining the social position of the Syrian Brothers. One example of such a notable was Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi, an Aleppine politician who in the 1950s was considered a member of the left in the traditional Peoples Party, but who was at the same time a religious shaykh and a councillor to the Wahhabi court of Saudi Arabia. Al-Dawalibi was an important voice of opposition to the rising Ba'th, but was also outspokenly anti-Western and anti-Israel, and went so far as to advocate relations with the USSR to thwart the West. In addition, he was unequivocally in favour of land reforms, which earned him the unusual title of the 'Red Sheikh.' Yet in the early 1960s, as Prime Minister of the pro-notables Separatist Regime that advocated breaking up the United Arab Republic and the separation of Syria from Egypt, al-Dawalibi presided over reversals of the land reforms initiated under the United Arab Republic. After the Ba'thist coup on March 8, 1963, al-Dawalibi was accused of collaboration with his backer and silent partner Saudi Arabia, as well as with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, in order to bring down the Ba'th regime.¹⁰⁰

What emerges therefore is that the Brothers' initial lack of a clear and consistent political ideology within an Islamic rubric could be attributed to the umbrella-like structure of the group, as well as to the ideological diversity of both its members and its supporters.¹⁰¹ Yet another explanation put forward by a number of observers, such as Michel Seurat, is that the priority for the leading Muslim Brothers simply lay elsewhere. According to these observers, they felt that it was more important to reclaim Syria's 14

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115. See also R. Bayly Winder, "Islam as State Religion—A Muslim Brotherhood View in Syria," *The Muslim World*, 44 (1954), pp. 215–226; Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," in F. Halliday and H. Alavi (eds.), *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Education, 1988), pp. 115–122.

⁹⁸ Talhami, "Syria: Islam, Arab Nationalism and the Military in Syria," p. 113.

⁹⁹ Hinnebusch, "the Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 151.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁰¹ This ideological uncertainty is particularly clear in the scattered views published in its clandestine journal issued in Syria throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, *al-Nadhir*.

century long Islamic legacy, with an eye to emphasizing the ‘inalienable’ right of the country’s Sunni constituency to lead and manage Syrian affairs.¹⁰²

It was only in January 1981, even as it was losing its battles on the Syrian front, that the Muslim Brotherhood finally published a comprehensive and detailed program, in an official manifesto entitled “Declaration and Program of the Islamic Revolution in Syria”. This publication was aimed at attracting the support of a larger section of the Syrian population.¹⁰³ The program, characteristic of most revolutionary documents, is indeed unique in view of the fact that it is the first working guide ever published by an Islamist movement in the Arab world that discusses in such detail the ideal life of an Islamic polity. The 65 page document consists of a strategy and an ideological platform according to which Islamic laws are to organize the constitutional, legal, economic, cultural, military, intellectual and educational affairs in Syria.¹⁰⁴

In the program, freedom of expression and the rights of minorities are to be guaranteed, political parties are to be allowed to compete freely as long as they do not oppose the main precepts of monotheistic religions and are not bound by loyalty to a foreign state. Arab unity under the wider umbrella of the Islamic *Umma* is to be pursued. At the social level, gambling, alcohol and nightclubs would be eradicated and the citizenry would be morally regenerated by a return to *Sunna*. Economically, the Brotherhood promised a return to free enterprise, privatization, and *zakat*, although natural resources and “special economic interests” were to be kept nationalized.¹⁰⁵

The economic aspect of the program is significant, since it showed that the Muslim Brothers of Syria did not come from the same background as Islamists in the rest of the Arab world. In Egypt for instance, the Muslim Brothers came from the middle to lower-middle classes, and more often than not came from rural backgrounds. They shared feelings of estrangement from the existing system, having experienced in Cairo the ‘moral decadence’ of urban ‘Westernized’ life for the first time. Often enough they were young men, longing for the strong communal attachments that they had once had, even while pursuing professional, technical and scientific education as a way to move up the social ladder. Studies explaining the rise of Islamic movements in the Arab world tend to identify the economic crisis, especially following the defeat in the 1967 war by Israel, as partly responsible for the successful mobilization of this rural youth within the Muslim Brotherhood.

In contrast, Syria’s Islamic Movement was initially drawn from an entirely different class and background. Moreover its membership gravitated toward the movement for slightly different reasons than their counterparts in Egypt, as is made clear by the fact that Syria’s movement advocated a return to free enterprise and an

¹⁰² Michel Seurat, *L’Etat de barbarie*, Paris: Collection Esprit/Seuil, 1989, p. 60.

¹⁰³ Mayer, *The Islamic Opposition in Syria*, pp.599-600.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 603.

¹⁰⁵ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 95. See also Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*.

independent economy.¹⁰⁶ Later on, in the late 1970s, the Syrian Islamic movement's support base did expand to include a number of young students from the lower classes.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, the Syrian branch of the Brothers was not pretending to be an ally of the workers and the rural constituencies. Indeed there is some question as to whether such an alliance could even be forged, given that the poor and the rural minorities were more interested in challenging the long-standing hold on power enjoyed by the Brothers' core support groups – the urban traditional middle class and traditional labour – rather than in joining the organization that they controlled.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Islamic revivalism did not enjoy wide support at Syrian universities, and in fact religion in general did not rank high on the students' priorities according to a number of surveys conducted in the 1960s.¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, despite the disintegration of notable parties and the decline of Nasserism in the 1970s in Syria, the salaried middle class and the professional upper middle class, traditionally secular and liberal - due to the earlier rise of secular education and the prior rise of the liberal secular notable parties to the Muslim Brotherhood - remained deeply opposed to the rise of a non-secular movement to power despite some's tactical applause, economic in nature, of the Brethren's challenge to the socialist Ba'ath.¹¹⁰

Urban highschool students did however display some openness towards the Islamic movement, albeit in an uneven fashion according to their place of residence – indeed, many Syrian street activists have been shown to have emanated from these institutions.¹¹¹ Finally, the traditional working class was also relatively receptive to the Muslim Brothers' calling.

This overview of the Brothers' base of support underlines that the spread of Islamic ideology was overwhelmingly reliant on Syria's traditional urban Sunni heritage, and that this spread was efficiently contained by Ba'athist mobilization of students and workers. It is important to note that both high-school students and organized workers supportive of the Muslim Brothers happened to stem chiefly from the older city quarters of Damascus, rather than from the newer urban neighbourhoods and rural districts, as was the case in Egypt. One main reason for the success of the Muslim Brothers in recruiting these elements in Syria was the historical influence of the '*ulama*' and this latter's permeation of religious institutions in traditional quarters of the city such as *al-Midan* and *al-Shaghur* in old Damascus, a situation that they did not enjoy in modern parts of the city nor in the villages. The corollary of the '*ulama*'s influence in the traditional

¹⁰⁶ In the Syrian Islamic Front's program, "[t]he liberation of the economy from internal domination and and external bondage...individual ownership should be protected and private capital encouraged..." See Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, pp. 220-221.

¹⁰⁷ Due to government patronage, favouritism of minorities and corruption. Hinnebusch, *Syria: revolution from Above*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁸ See Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, pp. 97-98. The Syrian Islamic movement's support base will be further discussed in chapter 4.

¹⁰⁹ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 98.

¹¹⁰ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 154; idem, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 98.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

quarters of the city was that these areas were less receptive to the secularizing program of the Ba'ṯh,¹¹² confirming Hinnebusch's conclusion that:

The strongest mass support for the Islamic movement seems to come from the traditional urban quarter, that is, from merchants, big and small, artisans, 'ulama', and the labouring and lumpen proletarian elements under their influence. Since the Ba'ṯh power seizure, moreover, elements of the urban establishment, heretofore linked to the notable parties, have gravitated toward the Islamic coalition.¹¹³

By contrast, attempts on the part of the Islamic movement's leaders to convince Sunni inhabitants of the newer urban quarters that the Ba'ṯh regime was unrepresentative, sectarian and corrupt and thus deserving of being brought down by political Islam were and still are very difficult.

But in spite of all of these societal cleavages and their own limited base of support, the seeds of Islamist popularity were successfully laid in the fertile soil of disillusionment with the Ba'ṯh ideology and the increasingly authoritarian nature of its rule. And over time, Syria's Islamists were able to turn themselves into an internationally based umbrella for the Syrian opposition movement, both religious and secular.

The Muslim Brothers: An Islamic Party

As noted earlier, the majority of the Muslim Brotherhood's members were drawn from the urban traditional classes – that is, notables, the middle class and traditional labour – and especially from bazaar merchants and professionals who inhabited the traditional popular quarters of Damascus and Aleppo, as well as the older sections of smaller towns. These members aimed at challenging the authority of the ruling elites, who were liberal and secular in their political outlook, and thus competed with the Ba'ṯh and other leftist parties for influence over their peers.¹¹⁴ However, despite al-Siba'i's serious flirtation with Islamic socialism in his political program, the Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to become an activist mass movement by galvanizing the urban masses as well as by penetrating the ranks of the armed forces met with no success, unlike in Egypt, where the Brotherhood made considerable headway amongst these segments of society.

In 1947, Mustafa al-Siba'i represented the movement in the national Parliament, and the organization won only four seats out of 119 in Parliament.¹¹⁵ From that year until President al-Shishakli's imposition of a dictatorship and suppression of all political parties in 1952, the Muslim Brotherhood competed in parliamentary elections, openly organized and rallied the public, and although it was not a dominant actor within Syrian political life, did play an important role in several important political developments such

¹¹² Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," pp. 154-55. We will discuss further reasons for the successful recruitment of those within the Muslim Brothers in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.155.

¹¹⁴ See Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, p. 90, 92-93. See also Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," p. 16. Batatu argues that the 1948 Arab defeat "gave a considerable impetus to the movement."

¹¹⁵ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p.322.

as reaction to the Palestine question, agricultural amendments, and certain Syrian constitutional matters. A more specific example is al-Siba'i's efforts to advance a constitutional article stipulating that the President of Syria was to be a Muslim. Al-Siba'i, who initially pressed for the clause to state that Islam was the religion of the state, agreed to the compromise article and subsequently used it as the basis for insisting upon the Islamic nature of the secular Syrian constitution.¹¹⁶

From 1954 to 1961, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had to avert sweeping challenges and face some remarkable rivals. This was partly due to President al-Shishakli's direct repression of the Muslim Brothers, but also to Egyptian President Jamal Abdul Nasser's attempts to crush the Muslim Brothers in Egypt through the use of propaganda and the promotion of his own program amongst the same urban masses that the Brothers were appealing to. But in spite of these challenges, the 1957 elections saw the Syrian Muslim Brothers win 47 percent of the vote in a contest that pitted them against a pro-Nasser Ba'athist candidate in Damascus.¹¹⁷

The 1958 joining together of Syria and Egypt in the United Arab Republic led to Syrian political parties being dissolved. This included the Muslim Brothers, who in spite of the fact that they supported President Nasser, felt that the best strategy was for them to dissolve themselves under his rule, though they did continue some of their political work underground. At the time, the Muslim Brotherhood lost many of its members to the Unionists.

Yet as soon as Lieutenant-Colonel al-Nihlawi's 1961 coup moved Syria out of the United Arab Republic, the Muslim Brotherhood, under the new leadership of a Damascene Arabic literature teacher named 'Isam al-'Attar, formed a close alliance with Nihlawi's conservative government and as a result won an unprecedented six percent of the seats (10 deputies) in the Syrian parliament.¹¹⁸ 'Isam al-'Attar ranked third in Damascus with 28,404 votes, falling close behind Khaled al-'Azam (independent, close to the National Bloc coalition, 33,278 votes) and Ma'mun al-Kizbari (independent, 31,935 votes). The Muslim Brothers did not however win a single seat in Hama – a city whose political inclinations were split between the Socialists under Hawrani and the Muslim Brotherhood – and their candidate in Aleppo, 'Abdul Fatah Abu Ghudda, came in fifth.¹¹⁹ The new Islamic bloc in the national Parliament thus positioned itself closer to the conservative and traditional urban right, and moreover reflected the period's domination of the Damascene traditional right in Parliament.¹²⁰

But the Syrian Islamic movement's political success was very short-lived, coming to an end when the leftist Ba'ath-led coup against the Nihlawi government toppled their

¹¹⁶ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 258.

¹¹⁷ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 154. The role of repression might have given an important push to the Muslim Brothers. For more on this, see chapter 4, the social movement theory school.

¹¹⁸ It is important to note that the Ba'ath party had won around 18% of the seats during that year. Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," p. 18.

¹¹⁹ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 264.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

allies, on the 8th of March 1963. This unexpected setback set the stage for a new kind of Islamic activism, one that would take shape outside the now forbidden political realm. Indeed, as a result of the coup, a number of significant events directly linked to the arrival of the Baʿth party in power would ultimately promote militancy outside the political arena for a new generation of Muslim Brothers. Before this could happen however, Islamic leaders had to convince the majority of the Sunni urban masses, who were traditionally unreceptive to the Islamic movement, that the Baʿth was unrepresentative in that it only represented one minority sect, impious, and corrupt.¹²¹

Beginnings of Low Intensity Islamist Militancy

The arrival of a populist nationalist party, namely the Baʿth, to power in March 1963, drastically changed the political and socio-economic environment in Syria's urban centers. The Baʿth was a rigorously secular and populist regime, whose minority and rural membership threatened the urban, mainly Sunni, merchant class in two main ways. One was tangible, i.e. political and economic, while the other was more subtle, consisting in the loss of prestige that resulted from the erosion of their position as cultural shapers and dominators of the Syrian environment.

This erosion was evident right from the beginning. During its Sixth National Congress in 1963, the Baʿth put forward a text called *Baʿd al-Muntalaqat al-Nazariya* (Some of the Theoretical Starting Points) in which it advanced its secular, if not atheist, ideology, by proposing a revolutionary social and educational transformation of Syria along rigorously scientific and socialist lines.¹²² In the text, the ideal of Arab unity was replaced by Arab revolution. Liberal parliamentarianism was judged unfit for Syria's socio-political realities, and was replaced by a *dimuqratiya shaʿbiya* (popular-democracy) supervised by the Baʿth party through corporatist channels and a democratic-centralist system that linked all public organizations to the Baʿthi National Committee. More importantly given this dissertation's focus, the Baʿth's Sixth National Congress called for the radical social transformation of Syrian society through the removal of religion as a taught subject in the nation's schools, as well as the secularization of the *shariʿa*-based Syrian Personal Status Law. The mere introduction of these measures infuriated certain religious figures attending the congress.¹²³

To add insult to injury, and in tandem with the purges in the army and the state bureaucracy, large-scale dismissals dared to discharge certain important religious figures. Thus Grand Mufti Abu al-Yusr ʿAbidin was dismissed from his post, and the Baʿth-backed Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro was elected in place of the popular Shaykh Hasan Habanaka in 1964. Bottcher explains that "The Sunni clerical establishment never forgave Shaykh Kuftaru for his willingness to run against Shaykh Habanaka and has

¹²¹ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 140.

¹²² See *Baʿd al-Muntalaqat a-Nadhariya li-Hizb al-Baʿth al-ʿArabi al-Ishtiraki: Aqaraha al-Muʿtamar al-Qawmi al-Sades* [Some of the Theoretical Starting Points of the Arab Baʿth Socialist Party: Adopted by the Sixth National Congress], Damascus: Ministry of Information, n.d.).

¹²³ *Ibid.* To indoctrinate the army, al-Arsuzi, known for his radical secularism, was recalled from retirement.

remained at distance from him, isolating him from an important power base.”¹²⁴ On the 28th of January 1965, the Ba’thist government gave itself the right to dismiss and appoint religious leaders, in an attempt to neutralize these leaders and to weaken their grasp over the traditional segments of society.¹²⁵

In February 1966, as part of the Ba’th’s own internal transformation, moderate party members were purged, thereby increasingly emphasizing the rural and secular minority character of the regime, a development that further alienated traditional Sunni urbanites and conservatives. Hinnebusch notes that “[c]o-optation into government, the forging of a close alliance with the Soviet Union, more overt secularism and antagonism toward the urban establishment, tightened control over commerce...further alienated conservative and pious Islamic opinion.”¹²⁶

On the 25th of April 1967, an article entitled “The Means of Creating a New Arab Man”, which was written by a junior ‘Alawi officer named Ibrahim Khalas for the Syrian People’s Army (*Jaysh al-Sha’b*) newspaper, called on the people to deliver themselves from “God, religion, feudalism, capitalism, colonialism, and all the values that prevailed under the old society”, which he described as “mummies in the museums of history.” He added, “There is only one value...the new man who relies on himself and on his own contribution to humanity.” This article caused widespread religious right-wing protest strikes and clashes.¹²⁷ Bar-Siman-Tov summarizes the ensuing response as follows:

On 4 May, Muslim religious leaders (the ‘Ulama’) met in Damascus to discuss steps to be taken against the regime. The following day (Friday), Shaykh Habanka, head of the ‘Ulama’ in Damascus, gave a sermon attacking the regime in the Manjak mosque. A large state demonstration followed the sermon; more than 30,000 people (including Christian religious leaders) attended, shouting anti-Ba’th slogans. Other religious demonstrations were held on the same day in Aleppo, Homs and Hama. Violent clashes resulted when security forces attempted to break up these demonstrations; three people were killed.

The religious community perceived the article as having sent an alarming message. Not only had the Ba’th leaders institutionalized state intervention in the economy, but now they were boldly moving to take away what control was left to the religious class. This was accompanied by a public verbal attack by Khalid al-Jundi, head of the workers’ military unit, who unequivocally stated that in his view, religion was indeed the opiate of the people.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Annabelle Böttcher, *Official Sunni and Shi’i Islam in Syria*, Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 2002, p. 8.

¹²⁵ For a better understanding of this process, see <http://www.syrianawka.org>; See also Batatu, “Syria’s Muslim Brethren,” p. 14; Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, p. 93; Tabitha Petran, *Syria*, New York: Praeger, 1972, p.178; see also Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria*, pp. 172-175.

¹²⁶ Hinnebusch, “The Islamic Movement in Syria,” p. 159.

¹²⁷ Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, p. 113; Bar-Siman-Tov, *Linkage Politics*, p. 158.

¹²⁸ See Hinnebusch, “The Islamic Movement in Syria,” p. 159.

Two days later, the Syrian regime arrested Shaykh Habanka and 40 other opposition religious figures. When Damascus businesses closed their shops and demonstrations erupted in Homs, Aleppo and Hama, the regime retaliated by issuing a decree confiscating the Shaykh's property and that of some 45 other Damascene merchants. Over almost three weeks, some 3,000 'ulama', merchants and notables were arrested, including for the first time Christian clergymen and merchants. Then on the 15th of May, 1967, 300 people were arrested at the Aleppo mosque during clashes with the security forces.¹²⁹

In addition to the domestic instability and due to events related to the 1967 War, other neighbouring states, fed up with Syria's new Ba'th leadership, deployed much energy in inciting the Syrian religious class by denouncing the Syrian government's actions and calling on the Syrian people to overthrow the "Godless" Ba'th.¹³⁰

Ultimately, the 1960s proved to be a period of profound crisis for the Islamic sector in Syria. Not only did President Nasser's crushing of the Egyptian Islamic movement weaken the Syrian Muslim Brothers, but the Ba'th's decision to exclude the Muslim Brothers from any participation in the national political and ideological-social scene served to isolate them and stop them from playing any role in the new political and social developments. Without a concrete blueprint, they risked losing all their social standing over the course of one generation or two. Some maintain that it was as a result of the ban, and more importantly the Ba'th's 1963 publication of *Ba'd al-Muntalaqat al-Nazariya* (Some of the Theoretical Starting Points), that the radical part of the Muslim Brothers emerged as an active opponent of the Ba'th party leadership.

Furthermore, the Muslim Brothers were also facing an internal crisis. On the 3rd of November 1964, Mustafa al-Siba'i passed away, leaving the leadership of the Muslim Brothers to his deputy. The new Muslim Brotherhood leader, 'Isam al-'Attar, was a Salafi Muslim who condemned the traditional schools of Islamic law for their alleged deviation from the Quran and the *Sunna*. Al-'Attar's views alienated the majority of the Syrian 'ulama', who not only adhered to one of the traditional schools, but who were also Sufis rather than Salafis in their religious outlook and practice.¹³¹ Additionally, al-'Attar, who by December 1964 was exiled and prohibited from returning to Syria, was always conscious of his party's limitations; he did not believe in armed struggle and for a while categorically refused to declare jihad against the Ba'th.¹³²

As a result of these changes, a rift formed within the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders. One faction under the leadership of Marwan Hadid, an agricultural engineer and philosophy graduate, became a fringe movement on the periphery of al-'Attar's political Muslim Brotherhood. This faction undertook the militarization of what Marwan Hadid called in 1964 "Muhammad's Battalions," which would later become known as "The Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood," and sometimes as "The Fighting Vanguard of the Party of God"¹³³, hereafter called "the

¹²⁹ See Bar-Siman-Tov, *Linkage Politics*, p. 159.

¹³⁰ Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria*, pp. 112-113.

¹³¹ Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, p. 102.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Fighting Vanguard". Despite the Sufi roots of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Marwan Hadid faction held a paramount Salafi outlook and believed in a radical Islamic *sahwa* (awakening), in opposition to 'Issam al-'Attar's acquiescent *salafijya*. Juridically, following one of Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas, the Fighting Vanguard advanced the proposition that Syria was a Muslim state ruled by a *murtad* (heretical) *batini* sect, and therefore that there was no escape from violent confrontation. Effectively therefore, a militant sort of Jihad needed to be waged in order to guide the community back to Islam.¹³⁴

For its part, the state took measures to shrink the circle of social power left to the religious class by invading and controlling the informal religious apparatus in Damascus. Repression through political de-liberalization forced the Muslim Brothers to choose between pre-emptively moving against the government or risk losing all of its power. In April 1964, Marwan Hadid and his colleague Sa'id Hawwa staged a widespread uprising in Hama that tactically included the Communists and the Nasserites.¹³⁵ The uprising lasted 29 days, but did not include the Damascus branch of the Muslim Brothers. Despite Hadid and Hawwa's pleas, the Damascus branch of the Brothers under al-'Attar refused to follow the Hama branch's lead. Al-'Attar declared that he would rather gain power through a democratic election, even if to do so would take him 500 years.¹³⁶ The uprising ultimately proved to be too small and too weak to present a real challenge to the new regime, and thus did not succeed. It was not until 1976 that the Fighting Vanguard really began its *jihad* against the Ba'th.

Meanwhile, Marwan Hadid allied himself with Dr. Ishaq al-Farhan, the general inspector of the Muslim Brothers in Jordan, and formed a common *fida'i* cell with the Jordanian Muslim Brothers that was under the control of Fatah (the Palestinian movement led by Yassir Arafat, which later formed the Palestinian Authority). This was in spite of al-'Attar's rejection of the project. It is said that at least 30 cadres were trained in Jordan under Fatah.¹³⁷

A new initiative under Marwan Hadid called for the abolition of both al-'Attar's (Damascus) and Abu Ghudda's factions (Aleppo), and accused them of allying themselves with anyone willing to work with them, as well as of becoming mere *tabligh*

¹³³ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 268.

¹³⁴ Although Ibn Taymiyya's fatwa concerns the Isma'ili sect rather than the 'Alawis, however according to the Salafi interpretation, the fatwa can be applied to any other *batini* sect in the Muslim world. It is important to add here that there are variances in Marwan Hadid's and Sa'id Hawwa's interpretations of who the *Murtaddun* are and how they are to be fought, yet in general, the *Mujahidun* did not have enough time to grasp nor follow the different formulations. The Syrian Salafis will be discussed further in Part III of this work. See Sa'id Hawwa, *Hadhihi Tajribati was Hadhihi Shahadati*, Cairo: 1987, p. 58; idem, *Jund Allah Thaqafa zu-Akhlaq*, 2nd ed., Beirut: n.d., pp. 380-387. See also Itzhak Weismann, "Sa'id Hawwa and Islamic Revivalism in Ba'thist Syria," *Studia Islamica*, No. 85. (1997), p. 152.

¹³⁵ The Nasserites were angry for they were not given any position within the new state.

¹³⁶ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 269.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

and *da'wa* (preaching and missionary) groups. Hadid then issued a letter demanding true Muslims and Islamic groups to wage war against the “heretic” Syrian regime.¹³⁸

In 1975, weary of Hadid's actions, the Damascene Muslim Brotherhood leaders elected a new *shura* (advisory) council under the leadership of 'Adnan Sa'ed al-Din. Despite having the approval of the International Muslim Brotherhood, neither al-'Attar nor Hadid accepted the new group. As a result, and to distinguish itself from the new Muslim Brothers, Hadid's group called itself “The Fighting Vanguard of the Party of God” (*al-Tali'a al-Muqatila li-Hizb-illah*). This group was later to become an important breeding ground for paramilitary cells.¹³⁹

On the periphery of these organized cells, it is important not to overlook the flexibly organized network built by the Muslim Brothers and the Fighting Vanguard, around a number of shaykhs benefiting from a large urban audience. In Damascus, Shaykh Sa'id Ramadan, professor of Islamic law at the Shari'a faculty, Shaykh Muhammad 'Awwad, whose Friday sermons attracted a very attentive audience to al-Iman mosque, and Shaykh Khayrallah in Aleppo, all effectively promoted and participated in the city-based agitation. Thus the relations of the religious leaders and many others with the Muslim Brothers and the Fighting Vanguard went from hostility to clandestine collaboration. It remains unclear whether they at times also negotiated the space for action with the regime, or when they served as intermediaries for such negotiations.

Conclusion Part I

In the first part of this work, I outlined the history and the social background of the main players in the subject under study, namely the Ba'th and the Muslim Brothers. This background is necessary for understanding the conflict that arose between the Ba'th regime and the Syrian Islamic movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as its consequences (Part II), but is also vital if one is to fully comprehend the reasons underlying today's complicated relations between Syria's various Islamic groups and the Syrian regime under a new President (Part III). In other words, the causes and consequences of the conflict between Syria's Islamic movement and the Ba'thist regime are more than simply of historical importance, since the way that the conflict was overcome was an experiment that has had a significant bearing on present-day Syria.

In the following section of the dissertation, the era of Hafez al-Asad is examined. The focus is on the roots of the shift in the early 1970s on the part of the Syrian Islamic movement from an Islamic opposition movement to a militant or Islamist movement. This focus is contextualized by consideration being given to the unravelling of the Syrian Ba'th ideology, as well as the country's selective economic liberalization, which resulted in the re-stratification of Syrian society along class lines, and its clear attempt at muting Syrian secularism.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

Part II
Hafez al-Asad's Era and the Conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood: Muting of Secularism in Syria?

Chapter 4

Conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood

Introduction

Although the conflict between the Ba'athist regime of Hafez al-Asad and the Muslim Brotherhood ended in the defeat of Islamism in Syria, and although the Muslim Brothers were never again part of Syria's largest political organizations, the Islamic rebellion that took place in the 1970s and early 1980s in the secularly-oriented Syrian nation was the earliest, the largest and the richest experiment with Islamic rebellion in the Arab world. And even though it was defeated, neither the Muslim Brothers in Egypt nor the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) in Algeria were able to confront their respective regimes with the same intensity and for as long as the Syrian Islamic Front did. Today, the Muslim Brotherhood, also known as Syria's Islamic Front, is one of the few opposition groups in Syria who, despite a major setback in 1982, continue to play an important role in opposing the current Syrian political and social establishment.

The paradoxical rebellion of the 1970s and early 1980s and its consequences are the subject of Part II of this work. The main contention of this part is that while the rise of Islamic political activism in Syria during Hafez al-Asad's era was very much contingent on the Ba'ath regime's socio-economic and political policies, its fall was due to the coercive and compromising strategy of the same regime in dealing with the immediate and long term threats to its rule. In order to examine the regime's strategy and its enduring impact on Syria's Islamic movement (chapter 5), we must first describe the battles that erupted between the regime and the Muslim Brothers as a result of the latter's open challenge, and discuss the alternative approaches for unpacking the reasons behind the transformation of the Syrian Islamic movement from a democratic political participant to an Islamist militant activist opposition (chapter 4).

When al-Asad rose to power, it was ostensibly to moderate the ardent socialist transformation and secularization of Syria under Salah Jadid, to rebuild the regime's alliances with the urban bourgeoisie, to end Syria's isolation from the rest of the Arab World, to end the country's adventurist foreign policy, and to strengthen the military.¹⁴⁰

Al-Asad's rise to power in November 1970 was the outcome of a bloodless coup d'état called the Corrective Movement (*al-haraka al-tashihiya*). In the two years prior to the coup, the Ba'ath had witnessed a duality of power which tore Ba'athists between Salah Jadid, who controlled the party, and Hafez al-Asad, who controlled the army. Jadid's attempts to oust Hafez al-Asad as defense minister during the Ba'ath's Tenth

¹⁴⁰ Proposed by Hafez al-Asad at the Fourth Regional Congress in 1968.

Extraordinary National Congress had failed. Al-Asad retaliated the next day by occupying the offices of the party and the popular organizations, and by rounding up Jadid's supporters. Jadid himself was also arrested, and would spend the rest of his life in prison, only to be released shortly before his death in 1993.¹⁴¹

On the 12th of March 1971, Hafez al-Asad was elected President of Syria by a popular referendum. In keeping with his Corrective Movement, al-Asad proposed a policy of national unity based on reducing the scale of the country's social transformation, selective economic liberalization to ensure reconciliation with the Damascene urban bourgeoisie, and the creation of a broader political front that would include non-Ba'thist, leftist-organized groups that were still under the leadership of the Ba'th. The Ba'th itself was to broaden its popular base through recruitment from the masses, something that the radical Ba'thists had refused for reasons of ideology. Al-Asad's aim consisted of "two interconnected core objectives: domestic consolidation and war mobilization."¹⁴²

Immediately upon assuming power, the new President went into action. He undertook to reverse the secular and socialist achievements of the neo-Ba'th, and he implemented a number of political measures. To expand the regime's social base and its ruling coalition, al-Asad initiated a retreat from the Ba'th system of single-party rule by creating the National Progressive Front, a political corporatist grouping of willing leftist parties under the umbrella of the Ba'th. He also appointed a new People's Council that incorporated a broader spectrum of social actors.

Asad also initiated a controlled economic liberalization of the Syrian system. Measures undertaken included removing limits on the size of private enterprises, dropping import restrictions on a number of goods, cutting back public sector control of foreign trade, and promising the private sector further future concessions. All of these measures required the acquiescence of the hitherto-hostile urban bourgeoisie and Damascene merchants, many of who were part of Syria's 'religious class.'¹⁴³

Perhaps most importantly for this work, while the Ba'th understanding of power in the 1960s was revolutionary and secular, al-Asad's Corrective Movement shifted the tone slightly. Indeed, although al-Asad avoided the subject of religion in general, claiming to serve as the President of all Syrians rather than in the name of one sect or of one religious group,¹⁴⁴ nonetheless, he most certainly downplayed the secular and atheist Ba'thist agenda, as well as muting the neo-Ba'th's class warfare ideology. Moreover, al-Asad almost immediately began portraying himself as a privately pious President who respected Syria's '*ulama*' and religiosity. This public show of piety was all the more accentuated following the regime's conflict with Syria's Muslim Brothers. Hinnebusch explains that "election to local councils in which lists led by the '*ulama*,' notables, and even *Ikhwan* sympathizers were allowed to sweep the cities - all were designed to appease the participatory demands of urban society and accommodate it to Ba'th rule."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Tabitha Petran, *Syria*, pp. 239-249.

¹⁴² Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World," p. 248.

¹⁴³ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 161.

¹⁴⁴ Van Dam, *The struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 94.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Notwithstanding their outward orientation, these changes did not truly open up the system to opposition, nor did they compromise in any way the Ba'ṯh party's control over the state and society. Quite the contrary, the Corrective Movement reinforced Ba'ṯh rule, and even more importantly, the President's control over a majority of the political forces. Indeed, in the 'permanent' Constitution promulgated in 1973, an expanded Ba'ṯh retained its role as the enforcer of executive policies, while al-Asad had control of the party, the bureaucracy and the Presidency's coercive power edifices. New popular organizations were added to the long list of corporatist institutions that were created during President Nasser's rule over Syria and pre-Asad Ba'ṯh rule. In short, through his expansion of the Ba'ṯh social base, al-Asad created a formidable system that can best be described as a "presidential monarchy."¹⁴⁶

On an ideological level, not only was the state of emergency kept in place under Hafez al-Asad, but as we have seen, it was soon after he took power that the Ba'ṯh experienced its ideological crisis, although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact phase during which Ba'ṯhism began to lose its ideological purpose. Indeed, while the regime was re-organizing in a more hierarchical and centralized manner, membership was indiscriminately inflated, and the party was simultaneously becoming a mere tool of mobilization and control.¹⁴⁷ Taken together, these developments made the Ba'ṯh more susceptible to charges of oppression and sectarianism.

The new Ba'ṯh regime had to face serious challenges to its rule during its first 12 years in power, the most important of which came from the Syrian Muslim Brothers, whose military faction, the Fighting Vanguard, was very determined to topple the allegedly "heretical" and corrupt regime.

There were four main visible reasons that accounted for the Fighting Vanguard's ignition of violent strikes against the regime and anyone who was seen as being connected to it. The first was the tangible shift of power into the hands of a minority group. When ruled by a Syrian, the state had always had a Sunni Damascene Commander-in-Chief – thus the ascension to supreme power of the 'Alawi Hafez al-Asad signalled the end of the old bourgeoisie's and the religious class' reign of the country. A second reason for the explosion of violence was what later came to be known as the "constitutional crisis." The third factor igniting Islamist activism was the Syrian regime's 1976 intervention in Lebanon, in support of the majority Christian Maronite side in the Lebanese civil war. This reinforced the Muslim Brothers' belief that the regime was determined to take power from the region's Sunni majority. The fourth and less often mentioned reason for the Fighting Vanguard's increase in militancy was the torture and death of Marwan Hadid in prison on the night of June 30th, 1976. It was on the morrow of Hadid's death that the conflict became much more violent, an escalation that ultimately led to what became known as the "Hama crisis" or "the Hama massacre."

¹⁴⁶ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 67.

¹⁴⁷ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernization and the limits of Change*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 12.

Theoretical Explanations for the Rise in Islamic and Islamist militancy

The approaches explaining the rise of Islamic movements and Islamic militancy in Syria tend to focus on three loosely clustered schools: “the sectarian school,” which I consider part of the political culture school, “the socio-economic school,” and “the social movement theory school.” According to the first paradigm, as it applies to the Syrian case, the ethno-sectarian divide of Syrian society in its kinship culture and political linkages is at the roots of the use of violence to address new challenges and circumstances. Thus we see Nikolaos Van Dam pointing to sectarian and cultural tensions between Syria’s different ruling groups as the principal explanatory variable.

The second school focuses on the impact of socio-economic grievances in alienating and transforming religious Muslims into Islamist activists. Their demographic origin and profile, their rural roots, their educational level, and their economic context, are often cited; in brief their socio-economic grievances are examined and shown to be explicit factors, when not addressed by the state, in the shift towards militancy. Advocates of this explanation include R. A. Hinnebusch and H. Batatu, who more particularly point to the traditional urban elite’s grievances arising from their economic losses as the most important factor.

The final paradigm is the social movement theory school, which attempts to answer questions such as: why does militancy occur at a certain point in time and not earlier or later? And, what is it that makes a group shift from peaceful to violent forms of contention? The social movement theory approach has not yet been directly applied to the Syrian case, though is clearly relevant because of its focus on explaining the mechanisms behind the shift from peaceful opposition to violent opposition.

A review of these three theoretical explanations is crucial to our study of Islamic revivalism in Syria. To do so, this examination is undertaken in two steps. The first examines the conflict that erupted between Syria’s Islamist movement and the Ba’thist regime. The second step unpacks the determinants of the different theoretical explanations presented earlier.

The Open Challenge with Emphasis on the Secular Element

In order to explain Islamic revivalism in Syrian society and the re-emergence of Islamist groups in the country after over 20 years of absence, one has to re-examine the past relationship between the Syrian state and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the ways in which the hard-core secular Ba’thist regime dealt with the Islamic militant opposition from the Ba’th’s rise in 1963 to the seeming demise of the Islamist movement in Syria at the beginning of the 1980s.

As stated in the introductory chapter to this work, this re-examination will provide a historical background to demonstrate the roots of today’s Islamic revivalism in Syria, it will also help illustrate how the Syrian Ba’thist regime is currently deploying, in the face of recent yet similar existential threats (i.e. the economic crisis and the new regional reality), comparable domestic socio-political manipulations in order to contain religious

discontent from brimming over into militancy, eradicate the militant religious opposition, and limit popular restlessness while still maintaining the unity of the regime coalition.

The following section of this chapter provides a history of the Ba'ath regime's conflict with 'the religious class,' focusing mainly on the state's clash with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Fighting Vanguard, a clash that culminated in the critical February 1982 Hama massacre.

Secularism

Although the different schools analyzed later in this chapter mention secularism as an active contributor to the conflict, they do not assign it a key role. Indeed, whether in Van Dam's writing or in Batatu's and Hinneusch's – as we will see in the following section – underlined is the fear of the secular thrust of the Ba'ath party on the one hand, and the 'Alawis' use of secularism to attain power on the other. This said, secularism certainly played a major role in igniting the conflict between the Syrian state and the Syrian Islamic movement. It also had a hand in bringing it to an end.

For the religious class in Syria, secularism is first and foremost a derivative of Western colonialism and an imposed product imported from the West in order to restrict Muslim practices and law within the confines of the private sphere. Shaykh Hasan Habanaka wrote his book *Sira' Ma' al-Malahida Hata al-'Azm* (Clash with the Atheists to the Bones) as a response to Syrian secularists, most important of which was Sadeq al-Azm.¹⁴⁸ In his reference to the Islamists' position on secularism in Syria, Rached Ghannouchi writes: "The discourse of the Muslim Brothers at the time concentrated essentially on the condemnation of Arab nationalism, because it was secular. They blamed secularism for the loss of Palestine, for political, moral and economic corruption."¹⁴⁹ For the majority of Syrians however, including pious Sunni Muslims, there was no contradiction between the secular ideas of the Ba'ath and religion.¹⁵⁰ During the conflict, the role of Islam in the state was always in dispute, and the secular played an important role in defining the borders of the conflict. Hence, while discussing the conflict, the underlying secular aspect of the struggle will be examined in particular detail.

The Conflict

What Hafez al-Asad was facing in the 1970s and early 1980s is very similar to what his son Bashar al-Asad is currently facing. Hafez al-Asad was a new president

¹⁴⁸ 'Abd al-Rahman Habanaka al-Midani, *Sira' Ma' al-Malahida Hata al-'Azm*, Damascus, 1974.

¹⁴⁹ Rached al-Ghannouchi's experience in Syria. Quoted by Francois Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam*, New York and London: I.B. Taurus, 2003, p. 34.

¹⁵⁰ See Raymond E. Hinnebusch, "Political Recruitment and Socialization in Syria: The Case of the Revolutionary Youth Federation," p. 153.

confronting domestic opposition and regional unrest. In order to stay in power, he had to sustain and create new alliances, and balance domestic and regional agendas.

In 1982, Olson wrote that “[t]he al-Asad regime, whether justifiable or not, began to be characterized by its opponents as a sectarian regime...this charge against the Asad regime after 1975 weakened the regime’s ability to use Ba’thist ideology as a legitimizing instrument for its main basis of power and, in fact after 1975 it became increasingly dependent on Alawite regional and family connections to maintain its hold on national power.”¹⁵¹ Undeniably, whether for religious, political or economic reasons, political Islam offered the triangle of traditional notables, merchants, and ‘*ulama*’ an ideology that not only truly reflected their values, but that also had the capacity to unite them with a big segment of the urban masses against their antagonists in the Ba’th.¹⁵²

As explained in the last chapter, the beginning of the ‘Islamist problem’ became visible as early as February of 1964, with what is known in Syria as “the Uprising of Hama.” From early February 1964, the country witnessed constant tension between the Ba’th and the Muslim Brothers along with a number of Hamawi *Imams* who saw it as their religious duty to criticize and preach against the new Ba’th regime. It all started with Marwan Hadid leading a protest of students against the regime at the ‘Uthman al-Hawrani highschool, one of the biggest highschools in the city. Before long, the protest became a city-wide uprising which lasted for 29 days and embraced elements from across the political spectrum including the Nasserites and the Communists with the Muslim Brothers at the forefront. Violent riots and demonstrations broke out. In the Sultan Mosque in Hama, dozens of protestors, believed to be members of Hadid’s Vanguard, were killed as the army resorted to shelling the building to quell the disturbance.¹⁵³

In their speeches, the demonstrators were angry with what they perceived as rule by a minority “atheist” regime. Zaki al-Arsuzi’s articles, in which he re-stressed that the golden age of the Arabs was the *Jahiliya* period (the pre-Islamic era), had vehemently angered the Muslim Brothers.¹⁵⁴ The overlap of class and ethnic cleavage, coupled with the shifting hold on power, merely underlined the regime’s “atheist” thrust.

The uprising can be seen as the point of demarcation of the radicalization of the Islamic movement, and the crystallization of the new state’s repression rationale. Although the political environment of repression was not initiated by the Ba’th regime, but had been in place since the Union with Egypt years, the arrival of the Ba’th to power was the breaking point. On its part, the new regime could not afford an emboldened Muslim Brotherhood. The uprising was crushed swiftly and a number of Muslim Brothers ended up in prison.

In the 1970s, the Brotherhood’s opposition grew even more vociferous for two main reasons: on the one hand, the Ba’th lost the fig leaf of its Sunni façade (behind which they had manoeuvred since 1963) when Hafez al-Asad, an ‘Alawi Muslim, challenged Syria’s tradition of having a Sunni Muslim as Syria’s commander-in-chief by

¹⁵¹ Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, p. 121.

¹⁵² Hinnebusch, “The Islamic Movement in Syria,” p. 140.

¹⁵³ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama’at al-islamiya*, p. 268.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* See also Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, pp. 88-89.

becoming President of the Syrian Arab Republic.¹⁵⁵ On the other hand, the draft constitution that was adopted by the People's Council at the end of January 1973 omitted all references to Islam other than the mention that all religious practices shall be protected by the state. Furthermore, the first section of Article One of the draft constitution declared that the Syrian Arab Republic shall be a democratic, popular and socialist state. The opposition in general, including the Islamic movement, was also incensed by a provision designating the Ba'th as the leading party of the nation, clearly indicating the Ba'th's ambition to shift from an instrument of class revolution and social levelling to a machinery of power in the service of the *raison-d'état* and consolidation of power. The indignation of the opposition was even stronger given the earlier expectation that al-Asad would dismantle the Ba'th in his attempt to conciliate and win support from the urban elite.

Viewing the draft constitution as the product of an atheist and a secular minority that had become the ruling elite, Sa'id Hawwa collected signatures from religious scholars objecting to the spirit of the Constitution.¹⁵⁶ Syrian '*ulama*', including the untouchable Shaykh Habanka, along with the Muslim Brothers, staged a series of riots in February 1973 in the cities of Hama and Aleppo in which the Nasserites and the Socialists under Hawrani tactically participated. Militants, said to be led by Marwan Hadid, Sa'id Hawwa, and the Hama base of the Muslim Brotherhood, attacked a number of government centers, and a few bars and cafes. Clashes with the troops resulted in the killing and wounding of a number of demonstrators. Sa'id Hawwa and his followers were arrested.¹⁵⁷

Still, as a result of these mass protests, the draft constitution was amended to include a provision asserting that the president of Syria must be a Muslim. In article three, in addition to declaring Islamic jurisprudence a main source for legislation, section one read: "The religion of the President of the Republic has to be Islam,"¹⁵⁸ which statement Siba'i (the Muslims Brother's first superintendent) had in fact proposed in 1950 as a way to add an Islamic blessing to the secular constitution. Nonetheless, article 83 of the draft constitution about eligibility remained as follows: "A candidate for the presidency must be an Arab Syrian, enjoying his civil and political rights, and be over 40 years of age," without mention of religion, the draft was approved in a popular referendum held in mid-March 1973 for formal promulgation. Al-Asad's compromise, coupled with the government's robust security measures, was not as effective as had been hoped since sporadic demonstrations continued throughout April 1973.

As mentioned in the last chapter, Marwan Hadid, who had disappeared from the Syrian scene in the early 1970s, wrote an open letter calling for the abolition of both al-

¹⁵⁵ As stated in Chapter 2: The 'Alawis, or Nusayris, were considered an extreme sect of the Shi'a; they were considered infidels by Sunnis in general and, under the Ottomans, were heavily taxed. For a brief history of Ottoman Syria and Syria's heterogeneous population, see Moshe Ma'oz, "Society and State in Modern Syria", pp. 29-92.

¹⁵⁶ Talhami, "Islam, Arab Nationalism, and the military in Syria," p. 124.

¹⁵⁷ Sa'id Hawwa would be released five years later in January 1978. Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 267.

¹⁵⁸ See <http://www.damascus-online.com/history/documents/constitution.htm>

ʿAttar’s (Damascus-based, although from a distance) and Abu Ghudda’s factions (Aleppo-based) of the Muslim Brotherhood. He accused them of allying themselves with anyone willing to work with them, even atheists and secularists, and of becoming mere *tabligh* and *Daʿwa* groups, and demanded that true Muslims and Islamic groups wage war against the “heretical” Syrian regime. As a result of these attacks, the main leadership decided formally to dismiss Marwan Hadid and others related to his group, such as ʿAdnan ʿUqlah, from the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵⁹

In 1975, a new *shura* council was elected under the leadership of ʿAdnan Saʿed al-Din. Despite having the approval of the International Brotherhood, neither al-ʿAttar (who had moved to Aachen in Germany), nor Hadid accepted the new group. As a result and to distinguish itself from the new Brothers, Hadid’s group called itself “The Fighting Vanguard of the Party of God” (*al-Taliʿa al-Muqatila li-Hizb-illah*).¹⁶⁰

Marwan Hadid was arrested in Syria on the 30th of June 1975. Following his death in prison in 1976, the leadership role was transferred to ʿAbd al-Satar al-Zaʿim (also from Hama). It was on the 8th of February 1976 that the first anti-government operation was undertaken by the Fighting Vanguard. Lieutenant Muhammad Ghaza, the head of the military intelligence branch in Hama, was assassinated.¹⁶¹ This operation would be declared “the first bullet for the sake of God, opening the gate to organized *jihad*.”¹⁶²

In July 1976, al-Asad faced another challenge when he intervened in the Lebanese civil war siding with the predominately Maronite Christian forces rather than with the predominately Muslim Lebanese National Movement and its Palestinian allies. In the eyes of many in Syria, al-Asad had crossed the line. His intervention against the Palestinians, and Lebanese left was perceived as clearly demonstrating a widening gap between the slogans of the Baʿth and the regime’s practices. In fact, the state made little effort to explain the decision to intervene against Arabism to the regular Syrians. As for Sunni Syrians, some were mystified by the decision, while others viewed the intervention as clear proof of the regime’s bias in favour of other minorities, such as the Maronite Christians, at the expense of Sunnis.¹⁶³ Relations between the regime and Syria’s main professional syndicates (*al-naqabat al-mihaniya*) began also to sour. These professional syndicates, namely doctors, lawyers, pharmacists and engineers, enjoyed a substantial degree of autonomy in contradistinction to the labour unions, and were outspoken in their condemnation of the intervention in Lebanon. Attempts by Baʿthist cadres to win leadership positions within those syndicates in the following years were in vain. By 1978, “Islamist sympathies had spread in some syndicates, especially in the engineers.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jamaʿat al-islamiya*, p. 273.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹⁶³ See Hinnebusch, “the Islamic Movement in Syria,” p. 162; Itamar Rabinovich, “The Islamic Wave,” *Washington Quarterly* (Autumn 1979), pp. 139-123.

¹⁶⁴ Salloukh, “Organizing Politics in the Arab World,” pp. 276-277. See also Seurat, *L’Eat de barbarie*, p. 76. In 1978, only three Baʿthist candidates were elected in the Damascus Engineers syndicate, one in the Pharmacists’ and none in the Doctors.

The Lebanon intervention on the side of the predominately Christian Maronite forces was perceived as an 'anti-Islamic' and 'infidel' act, among other things. It angered the Fighting Vanguard *mujahedin*,¹⁶⁵ the majority of whom had close ties with and had trained under the Palestinian Fateh in Jordan.¹⁶⁶ The group claimed credit for a series of attacks on officers and party functionaries - most of them 'Alawis - and government and military installations. They organized, with the help of the professional syndicates (mainly the engineers), strikes in bazaars - the locus of rich Sunni traders in many parts of Syria - and centered their attacks on urban centers such as Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and the coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus.¹⁶⁷ Following this, Hafez al-Asad addressed the nation on the 12th of April 1976, where he said:

Every person can recall when we were students, we used to say: religion is for God, and the homeland for all...the Muslim and the Christian in this country both believe that the relationship between citizens is first and foremost the relationship of the homeland and Arabism...the Muslim in this country takes an interest in the Arab citizen in Lebanon whether he is Christian or Muslim...Christianity and Islam issued from our land. This is not a burden for us or a problem for us; it is a source of pride for all. These values emerged from our countries and our land...we must be a nation worthy of these values, worthy of Christianity and Islam.¹⁶⁸

But al-Asad's address failed to quell the Islamists' furor. In addition, other professional syndicates started gravitating towards the opposition. For example, in reaction to the death of two lawyers in prison, members of the lawyers' syndicate founded the Committee for Human Rights, which published accounts of human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime and demanded political reforms.¹⁶⁹

Meanwhile, the Fighting Vanguard continued their attacks on the regime. In February 1977, the Rector of the University of Damascus, Dr. Muhammad al-Fadel, was among the Islamists' victims, and on the 18th of March 1978, Dr. Ibrahim Na'ama, the doyen of Syrian dentists and the vice-president of the Syrio-Soviet Friendship Association, was assassinated.¹⁷⁰

By the late 1970s, the skirmishes between the Muslim Brotherhood and the state were escalating. The Fighting Vanguard declared the Ba'th party an "atheist, sectarian and corrupt party that should be abolished."¹⁷¹ As translated by Van Dam from the

¹⁶⁵ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 71.

¹⁶⁶ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 272; Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," p. 19.

¹⁶⁷ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria*, p. 170.

¹⁶⁹ Seurat, *L'Etat de barabrie*, p. 76.

¹⁷⁰ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 276. See also Seale, *Asad of Syria: the Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 317.

¹⁷¹ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 90.

clandestine newspaper *al-Nadhir*, this *jihadist* group explained its work and motives focusing on the “atheist” and “sectarian” (non-Sunni) aspects of the government:

Three years ago, to be exact on 8 February 1976, the first bullet was fired for the sake of Allah, thereby opening the gate for the organized Jihad, which has now started to produce positive results. This first bullet, however, was the result of long and persistent suffering from oppression and terror...The ordeal reached its climax, however, when oppression became concentrated against the Muslims and against the Islamic religion in particular: mosques were destroyed; religious scholars were arrested; educational programmes were banned; Islamic law schools were closed; atheist and disintegrative information and instruction were published; sectarian party domination increased steadily...the riches of the nation were plundered by way of corruption, embezzlement, illegal trade, doubtful transactions, and the unlawful enrichment of a handful of people at the cost of the overwhelming majority. Syria's modern history has never before witnessed such despotism and intellectual and administrative immorality as that which it witnesses today in the shadow of the regime of Hafez Asad and his reckless gang. It is necessary, therefore, that the dead be resurrected from the sleep of non-being, that ambition and honour be activated, and that it be loudly acclaimed: ‘Allah is great; on to the jihad’: *Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked, because they have been wronged, God has power to grant them victory...*The *Mujahidun* are young people who believe in Allah as their Lord, in Islam as their religion, and in our master Muhammad...They sacrifice themselves to liberate their religion and their nation from tyranny, infidelity, injustice and aggression; ...and to make the magnanimous *Shari‘ah* the compassionate [Islamic] law for all peoples, and for the Syrian people in particular.¹⁷²

As explained in chapter 3, ideologically, the Fighting Vanguard had a radical Salafi discourse,¹⁷³ and relied on the writings of Sayyid Qutb,¹⁷⁴ especially his book *Ma‘alem fi al-Tariq*, and the writings of Sa‘id Hawwa and Marwan Hadid rather than al-Siba‘i's books or those of Hasan al-Hadibi, the second superintendent general of the Muslim Brethren.¹⁷⁵

The writings of the Syrian ideologues were undeniably no less militant than those of Sayyid Qutb's. In fact, Marwan Hadid dismissed Syrian Sufism in all its aspects, and believed in the radical *Sahwa* (Awakening) of the Muslims, which necessitated an

¹⁷² Quoted by Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 90.

¹⁷³ See footnote 124, p. 74.

¹⁷⁴ Intellectual leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

¹⁷⁵ See Sayyid Qutb, *Ma‘alem fi al-Tariq*, Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, n.d; Hawwa, *Fi Afaq al-Ta‘lim*, pp. 167-171; idem, *Hadhihi Tajribati was Hadhihi Shahadati*; idem, *Jund Allah*. See also Itzhak Weismann, “Sa‘id Hawwa and Islamic Revivalism in Ba‘thist Syria,” *Studia Islamica*, No. 85. (1997), p. 152. See also Itzhak Weismann, “Sa‘id Hawwa: The Making of a Radical Muslim Thinker in Modern Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 29 (October 1993), pp. 607-611. On the creation of radical thought within Islam, see also Meir Hatina, “Restoring a Lost Identity: Models of Education in Modern Islamic Thought,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33,2, 2006.

obligatory reinforcement of Islamic law. He ordered a militant opposition at all costs. As for Hawwa, who at least from a theoretical point of view considered the path of preaching as a preferable one to the path of war, he was more careful in defining the conditions under which jihad became a must and a duty: First, it was imperative that Syrian society was properly educated in the precepts of Islam. Meir Hatina explains that, in Hawwa's view, "the Sufi path of intensive prayer, fasting and discipline is important in an era in which materialism and hedonism are dominant, for it constitutes a necessary preparatory stage to the act of jihad. Such training must purify the Muslim soul of arrogance and block any possibility of the penetration of the winds of heresy and corruption. The training stage ends only when the readiness to die becomes the member's most desired ambition—the dividing line between those who truly aspire to jihad and those who seek to avoid it. As the hadith states: 'The faith of he who died and did not fight or express willingness to die [for Allah] is tantamount to one who dies as a hypocrite.'"¹⁷⁶ Secondly, according to Hawwa, the successes of the Jihad had to be evaluated. Finally, it was important to determine whether or not the Muslim regime to be fought had truly abandoned Islam.¹⁷⁷

Notwithstanding the aforesaid conditions, Hawwa's formulations, especially his concept of *ridda* (conversion), were no less radical than those of Qutb's. In fact, while Qutb delineated a polar world system of Islam and disbelief (*Jahiliyya*), Hawwa added an important distinction between the *mushrikun* (nonbelievers) themselves. According to Hawwa, within the nonbelievers, jihad should be waged first against the *Murtaddun* (those who have abandoned Islam) before the rest of the *mushrikun*. These include the heterodox sects such as the Isma'ilis, the Baha'is, the Qadiyanis, and undoubtedly the 'Alawis (who, according to Salafi dogma, were not considered Muslims as explained earlier), in addition to all the man-made ideologies and heretical parties that oppose Islam openly such as the communists, the heretical nationalists and those who preach the separation of religion and state. Once declared *murtadd*, jihad as armed struggle is unavoidable against a regime, although – as explained above – the jihadists have to be well prepared first whether in terms of Islamic education or gear.¹⁷⁸ It is important to note here that, "[f]or the *mujahidun*, who had neither the time nor the ability to follow his learned formulations; there was no real difference between him and Hadid."¹⁷⁹ Therefore, on the ground, the Syrian Islamists' struggle against the regime soon relied on individual assassinations and explosives.

On the regional level, the Asad regime was the focus of attacks by a number of surrounding regimes such as the Jordanian, and the Egyptian regimes.¹⁸⁰ According to Olson, "this development also seems to have been encouraged by Israel, to facilitate the

¹⁷⁶ Meir Hatina, "Restoring a Lost Identity: Models of Education in Modern Islamic Thought," p. 189.

¹⁷⁷ See Weisman, "Sa'id Hawwa."

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136, p. 151, and p. 154; see also Hawwa, *Jund Allah*, pp. 8-11 and pp. 380-386.

¹⁷⁹ Weismann, "Sa'id Hawwa," p. 154.

¹⁸⁰ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, pp. 280-281.

negotiations for disengagement [in the 1973 war with Israel].”¹⁸¹ Radio Cairo initiated a number of attacks following the 1973 disengagement between Egypt and Israel, and due to very strained relations between al-Asad and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, these attacks insinuated that the Ba’th regime under al-Asad was a sectarian ‘Alawi regime. By September 1978, Sadat had signed the Camp David peace agreements with Israel, which served to further damage relations with Hafez al-Asad.¹⁸² These attacks took a turn to the worse where one of the accusations made by Sadat in 1978 was that the Syrian regime was “firstly Alawi, secondly Bathist and thirdly Syrian,” and that President Asad “had the intention of setting up an Alawi state.”¹⁸³ In 1979, Sadat added:

I was prepared to talk on behalf of the Golan. But no. Let these dirty Alawis speak for it. These people who have lost all meaning of life. By God, let them face their people in Syria and let them solve it...we all know who the Alawis are in the eyes of the Syrian people.¹⁸⁴

In a conversation between King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and Sadat, both leaders agreed that “Hafiz al-Asad is Alawi and Ba’thist, and one is more evil than the other.”¹⁸⁵ Oslon explains that:

While one has to interpret these remarks in light of al-Sadat’s and Faysal’s desire that Syria join in the step-by-step diplomacy [with Israel], the comments are also an indication of the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian leaders’ condescending attitude toward the Alawites...But as we have seen in the previous chapters it was not through the exploitation of sectarianism that the Alawites gained and maintained power.¹⁸⁶

In Syria, and although the traditional urban city of Aleppo was the primary target of violence, the fighting spread to Hama, Homs, and Dayr al-Zawr, where Ba’th Party and military installations were randomly attacked with nobody in the public really sure who was behind the incidents. Many of the assassinations targeted military personnel and government civil servants, but, as stated earlier, others targeted doctors and university professors, most of whom were ‘Alawis. Patrick Seale argues that this specific targeting of ‘Alawis suggested that “the assassinations had targeted the community and were deliberately setting out to sharpen sectarian differences, and in this they were successful.”¹⁸⁷ The civilian victims were some of the brightest professional men in Syria;

¹⁸¹ Oslon, *The Ba’th and Syria*, p. 121.

¹⁸² See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 303-315.

¹⁸³ Quoted by Olson, *The B’ath and Syria*, p. 122; Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p.93.

¹⁸⁴ Olson, *The B’ath and Syria*, p. 122.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.122-123.

¹⁸⁷ Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: the Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 317.

other than the rector of Damascus University, Dr. Muhammad al-Fadel, and the doyen of Syrian dentists, Dr. Ibrahim Na'ama, one of the victims was the public prosecutor 'Adil Mini of the Supreme State Security Court, killed in April 1979.¹⁸⁸

The conflict escalated even further in the summer of 1979; on the 16th of June 1979, an incident at the Aleppo Artillery School marked a turning point in Syria's relationship with the Islamist movements. A captain in the Syrian military called Ibrahim al-Yusuf summoned the school cadets to an urgent meeting. Once in the dining hall, the Sunni cadets were asked to leave; the remaining cadets were killed using machine guns by a group of assassins, which 'Adnan Dabbagh, the minister of the interior at the time, accused of being a terrorist gang from the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁸⁹

Given that *al-Nadhir* published attacks against the regime amounting to incitement, accusing the Muslim Brotherhood of these attacks was not a far-fetched conclusion. But this did represent the first time that the government openly accused the Muslim Brotherhood and vowed to liquidate it describing it as an "agent organization."¹⁹⁰ Patrick Seale reports that thirty-two young men were killed outright in the Aleppo Artillery School massacre, according to Radio Damascus and the Ba'th newspaper, while another fifty-four were wounded. Other reports said the death toll was as high as eighty-three. Seale states that the regime considered it to be a declaration of war.¹⁹¹

On the 15th of July, a soldier from the "special forces" based in Barza near Latakia assassinated 13 'Alawi officers before turning the gun on himself.¹⁹² Less than a couple of months later, Asad's own doctor, the neurologist Colonel Muhammad Shahada Khalil, also an 'Alawite, was killed in August 1979.¹⁹³

The leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood denied any knowledge or involvement in the Aleppo incident, and reminded everyone that Captain Ibrahim al-Yusuf was a Ba'thist. Yet the Fighting Vanguard issued a statement in June 1979, using this time the name "The Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brothers," declaring: "As to you Sunni intelligence officers, our fight was never with you, you embraced death while your 'Alawi masters led the battles from behind the loudspeakers."¹⁹⁴

Fifteen Muslim Brothers already in prison, 11 of whom were Iraqis and 4 arrested for participating in a Muslim Brothers' Congress in Amman, were accused of killings and were executed on the 27th of June 1979.¹⁹⁵ At the time, "Syria's major syndicates

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 8. See also Seurat, *L'Etat de barbarie*, p. 66. Seurat explains that 282 of the 300 overall cadets were 'Alawi. Yusuf will take refuge in Turkey.

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria, 1962-1982," *Orient*, 24 (1983), p. 589.

¹⁹¹ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 316.

¹⁹² Seurat, *L'Etat de barbarie*, p. 66.

¹⁹³ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 317.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 280.

¹⁹⁵ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 8.

organized extraordinary congresses and called for an end to censorship, torture and executions, the release of all political prisoners, and called for an end to the suspension of martial law imposed since 1963.”¹⁹⁶

In dealing with this situation, Asad attempted some sort of conciliation and diffusion, but only obliquely; he portrayed himself as a pious Muslim, endorsed a few prominent ‘*ulama*’ and launched a selective economic liberalization, which intended to revitalize the private sector.¹⁹⁷ He also began to diversify those in official posts by letting a higher number of Sunnis into the national command of the Ba’th party as well as the cabinet. He then conducted a limited political liberalization, introduced anti-corruption reforms and released a few Muslim Brethren prisoners.¹⁹⁸ But the image of the regime as secular, corrupt and sectarian, could not be overcome; the concessions were viewed as too little too late, and generally failed to achieve their goals.

On the 30th of June 1979, one week after the minister of interior commented on the Aleppo Artillery School attack and two weeks following its occurrence, President Hafez al-Asad spoke for the first time in public about the incident. According to Van Dam, his address aimed “to counter the sectarian propaganda and the unrest surrounding the Aleppo massacre, and to widen support for the Ba’th regime’s campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood”:

The concept of ‘homeland’ loses its meaning if its citizens are not equal. This equality is an integral part of Islam. We are leading the country in the name of the Arab Ba’th Socialist Party and as President of the Republic, not in the name of a religion or of a religious community, despite the fact that Islam is the religion of the majority. Ba’thists and those who believe in their homeland all believe in the principles of freedom, unity and socialism... Those who consider religion to be a matter of ritual and neglect its essence cause it to become an obstacle to progress. Since the start of the Corrective Movement [of November 1970], we have always affirmed that religion means love, work and achievement. What matters is the presence of moral values and ethics. We have always worked to strengthen religious values in the hearts of the citizens ... But now we are facing a conspiracy against our country, and a criminal act which was not committed by an individual which we can forgive, but by a political organization called the Muslim Brotherhood ... This gang ... considers a third of the people to be non-Muslims [i.e. heterodox Muslims such as the Alawis, Druzes, and Isma‘ilis; and the Christians]. Its members want to monopolize Islam for themselves, despite the fact that no party has the right to monopolize Islam or any other religion ... Assassination attempts cannot overthrow this regime and we will not permit sectarian acts ... The Arab Ba’th Socialist Party is a nationalist socialist party that does not differentiate between religions. As a faithful Muslim, I encourage everyone to have faith and to fight rigidity and

¹⁹⁶ See Seurat, *L’Etat de barbarie*, pp. 67-68; Salloukh, *Organizing Politics in the Arab World*, p. 277.

¹⁹⁷ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 96.

¹⁹⁸ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 323-332.

fanaticism ... If Syria had not always been above sectarianism, it would not now exist.¹⁹⁹

Still, things only escalated more dangerously. In November 1979, militants entered a *mukhabarat* office and shot 14 of its staff members and security officers, to which the state responded by arresting Aleppo's Grand Imam Shaykh Zein al-Din Khayrallah, brother of the head of the Militant Aleppo branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The arrest prompted mass demonstrations in the city and, two days later, a shooting spree that ended in the deaths of dozens, eighteen of them from the 'Alawite sect. A few days later, another assassination squad penetrated a school where Ba'ithi cadres had gathered to prepare for an upcoming regional congress; here the death toll was 40.²⁰⁰ Eventually, even Soviet personnel and property were targeted.²⁰¹

By 1980, it is believed that the Islamists in Syria numbered around 30,000 members composed of the vanguard of 'Adnan 'Uqla, al-'Attar's division, a number of Salafi activists, Sufis from the *Jama'at al-Huda* of Aleppo led by Abu al-Nasr Bayanuni, and a number of independent fighters trained by Fateh.²⁰²

Despite the regime's release in February 1980 of around 500 cadres from the Muslim Brotherhood, who were detained since February and April 1979, a nationwide strike was staged at the end of March by Syria's professional syndicates and associations. The Muslim Brothers who initiated the strike felt strong enough to disturb Syria's everyday life and to incite paralyzing civil disturbances. The disturbances occurred in Aleppo, Hama, Hums and to a lesser extent Damascus, and unified two opposing groups: the Islamist militants led by 'Adnan 'Uqla's Vanguard and jointly with 'Isam al-'Attar, and the "Democratic National Bloc" formed of the Communists, the Arab Socialist Union (Jamal al-Atasi), the Workers' Party, the Old Ba'ith, and the Arab Socialists of Akram Hawrani.²⁰³ Added to the two parties were a number of merchants protesting price controls and representatives of professional associations including engineers, lawyers and physicians. Each group had its own reasons for joining the disturbances. Manifestos were issued demanding the end of Syria's state of emergency while "[e]xplicit anti-'Alawi overtones ran through the disturbances."²⁰⁴

It is believed that the Democratic National Bloc wanted a peaceful transfer to democratic rule through a general civil strike; however, the Fighting Vanguard maintained that only a civil uprising and disturbances would topple the regime. The

¹⁹⁹ Quoted by Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, pp. 94-95. For more of Hafez al-Asad's speeches regarding the conflict with the Muslim Brothers, see Ahmad Qurna, *Hafez al-Asad: Sane' Tarikh al-Umma wa Bani Majd al-Watan: 1970-1985*, Aleppo: Dar al-Sharq al-'Arabi, 1986, pp. 207-290.

²⁰⁰ Michel Seurat, « La Société syrienne contre son Etat, » *le Monde Diplomatique*, April 1980.

²⁰¹ Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria," p. 598.

²⁰² Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 281.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 284-285.

²⁰⁴ Drysdale, "the Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 8.

Uprising of March opened the door to the state's strategy of "necessary state violence," also labelled "the revolution violence," in order to stop the "reactionary violence."²⁰⁵

The Ba'th party's base in Aleppo had almost entirely collapsed due to major defections that left only seven members to defend the actual edifice of the Party branch. Caught in the pent up fears of collapse, the collapse of the branch threatened to demonstrate the disintegration of the regime. Finally, special commando units and the soldiers from Rif'at's predominately 'Alawi Defence Battalions were dispatched to the two cities of Hama and Aleppo. Massive search operations were carried out and around 5,000 people were arrested; the strikes came to an end and the regime started celebrating its victory over the Islamist organization.²⁰⁶

On the 23rd of March 1980, having realized the wide sympathy felt by the public for the Muslim Brotherhood, fearing more sectarian tensions, and hoping to coopt those who were considering joining his side, Hafez al-Asad declared that, in reality, only a small faction of the Brotherhood was responsible for the organized assassinations. He stated: "I would like to clarify a point on the Muslim brotherhood in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria do not all sympathise with the assassins ... We have absolutely no dissension with these people. On the contrary ... we encourage everyone who works for religion and who upholds religious values ..."²⁰⁷ The regime differentiated between 'reactionary' and 'conservative' members of the Muslim Brotherhood and invited the Muslim Brothers to join the National Progressive Front and become part of the government.

However, Asad only appeared conciliatory. Fearing nationwide chaos, on April 14th 1980, the government dissolved the executive councils of professional associations, dismissed their general congresses, and detained an undetermined number of their leaders, members and human rights activists without trial, with the result that some fled the country.²⁰⁸

On the 26th of June 1980, there was an attempt on the life of Hafez al-Asad. This clearly showed the Muslim Brothers' capability and determination. After this incident, the hard-liners within the government, such as Hafez al-Asad's brother, Rif'at al-Asad, and his predominately 'Alawi Defense Battalions, were given carte-blanche to bring down the opposition. Some 200 of the Muslim Brotherhood's members already in prison were randomly executed in the Palmyra prison.²⁰⁹ The month of June 1980 witnessed the culmination of the state's violence against the Islamists. Troops were sent into Syrian cities to track down, imprison or execute alleged Muslim Brothers.²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 289.

²⁰⁶ Michel Seurat, « La Société syrienne contre son état. »

²⁰⁷ Van Dam, *the Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 96. From Radio Damascus, 23 March 1980.

²⁰⁸ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 8.

²⁰⁹ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 8. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, pp. 84-85.

²¹⁰ Van Dam, *the Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 96.

On the 7th of July 1980, Parliament, under the influence of Asad, made membership in or association with the Muslim Brotherhood a treasonous and capital offence. Law 49 reduced the sentence of anyone who would renounce their membership in the Muslim Brethren in writing to a maximum of 5 years in prison. The law led to a considerable shrinkage of membership in the Brotherhood. In Aleppo, for example, the Fighting Vanguard lost at least 600 of its members. Many were also allowed to flee to Amman and Baghdad.²¹¹

Furthermore, Syria moved troops to its borders with Jordan in an attempt to dissuade Jordan from supporting or giving refuge to Muslim Brothers. Asad's move discouraged Jordan only for a while, however. 'Uqla had one permanent training camp and deputies in Baghdad, and was in direct talks with the Iraqi intelligence services.²¹²

During these events, many split from the main Muslim Brotherhood and joined forces with smaller Islamic groups within Syria, while others fled the country. The leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, namely 'Adnan Sa'ed al-Din, Sa'id Hawwa and 'Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, reorganized and formed (as explained earlier) the Islamic Front of Syria in October-November 1980. Their plan was to form one unified military front and in the process contain 'Adnan 'Uqla and get him out of Aleppo. Thus, the general organization of the Muslim Brothers, the Islamic Vanguard and the Fighting Vanguard decided in December 1980 to re-assemble and unite their military as well as their political bases.²¹³ The Islamic Front allied itself fully with the Iraqi and Jordanian Brothers, and promised to continue fighting until the collapse of the Syrian regime:

...the present regime has reached the stage of no return...it is now impossible for it to undergo a radical revision, we declare that there will be no truce, no laying down of arms, and no negotiation with those who are known for their deceit and for breaking their promises. We shall continue in our course, disregarding dangers and obstacles, until this oppressive regime has fallen and gone forever.²¹⁴

The coalition however imploded when 'Uqla rejected the Muslim Brotherhood's negotiations to become part of the "National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria," which was to be composed of secular dissidents such as the Nasserites, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Iraqi Ba'th, plus a number of independent individuals. 'Uqla accused the Brotherhood's civilian leadership of treason, and of allying themselves with heretics and enemies of Islam. In January 1981, 'Uqla declared the Fighting Vanguard's (Marwan Hadid's battalion) total independence from the Muslim Brotherhood, as he alleged to continue the fight for the sake of God.²¹⁵

From March to September 1981, the armed struggle resumed. A number of car-bombs near and inside military bases and government buildings exploded, leaving behind many civilians and military personnel dead and injured. In retaliation, the government

²¹¹ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, pp. 293-294.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 293.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²¹⁴ Translation in Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, p. 212.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298. It is only in April 1982 following the Hama massacre that the Brotherhood dismissed 'Uqla officially from the coalition movement.

security forces conducted large-scale search operations which, according to eye-witnesses, were very brutal. The operations resulted in the deaths of at least 200 to 300 people and the destruction of entire sections of Aleppo and Hama.²¹⁶ Tight security measures were implemented; the use of motorcycles was banned in some cities (they had been used by the Muslim Brotherhood in hit-and-run attacks), and under the guise of holding a general census, the Ministry of the Interior ordered all citizens fourteen years of age and older to obtain new identity cards.²¹⁷ In addition, a series of political, economic, and social measures, which I will discuss in the following chapter, were aimed at improving the regime's image and mobilizing popular support.

Nevertheless, the brutality of the searches and the measures taken by the security forces had aroused popular resentment in general, not only among Sunnis, but also 'Alawis, Christians and other minorities who had witnessed the government's response first-hand.²¹⁸

In January 1982, 'Uqla arrived in Hama anticipating the beginning of the war against the regime, and on the 2nd of February, 1982, the war actually broke out.²¹⁹ From the city mosques, the Muslim Brothers urged the people of Hama to join in the fight against the regime. Meanwhile, several hundred men from the Islamic Front attacked police and Ba'th headquarters in the city of Hama. They also ambushed government forces searching for dissidents in the narrow alleyways.²²⁰ By the second day, the rebellion was spreading. Thousands took to the streets.²²¹ The city seemed under the Mujahedin's control from the 2nd until the 12th of February.

The Syrian government was concerned that regional powers such as the Gulf states, Jordan, Iraq or even Israel might intervene on the side of the revolt, especially given the fact that 'Adnan Sa'ed al-Din was in Saudi Arabia, and Abu Ghudda was somewhere in the Arab Gulf. Iraq had already involved itself by broadcasting on the 8th of February a rebel plea by Front leaders Muhammad Abu Nasr al-Bayanuni, Sa'id Hawwa, and 'Adnan Sa'ed al-Din, calling for a civil uprising against the Asad regime. The plea included a *fatwa* by the Nation's *ulama'* to overthrow the regime, and demanded that Damascenes close their stores, universities, schools, and all public establishments.²²² Yet these pleas failed to provoke any real reactions in the other cities, not even within the Sunni areas.²²³

²¹⁶ Thomas Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria: 1961-1982," *Orient*, 1983, pp. 598-599.

²¹⁷ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 326-332; Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, p. 110.

²¹⁸ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 100.

²¹⁹ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 299.

²²⁰ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, pp. 298-301; Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria," p. 604; Matthew S. Gordon, *Hafez al-Assad*, New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989, p.16.

²²¹ Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria," p. 604.

²²² See Gordon, *Hafez al-Assad*, p.18; and Mayer, *the Islamic Opposition in Syria*, p. 605.

In its campaign against the Islamists, the government had declared that the US and other neighbouring powers had a hand in the large scale rebellion. The Ba'ath regime in fact asserted to the Syrian public that the Western powers and their "reactionary" Arab allies - namely Iraq and Jordan - were behind the Islamists' scheme. At the time, Syria was fighting against the Israelis in Lebanon, and declared the attacks as part of a wider "Zionist and imperialist strategy"²²⁴ to weaken Syria from within.²²⁵

In response, Rif'at's Defense Companies besieged the city of Hama. Helicopter gunships and armoured units were used to shell the city from a distance. Then several thousand Syrian troops and Special Forces supported by armour and artillery moved into the city and crushed the insurgents during two weeks of bloodshed.²²⁶ When the fighting was over, many thousands lay dead, many of whom were not part of the Islamic movement, and this included an estimated 1,000 soldiers.²²⁷ In addition, large sections of Hama's old city were left entirely destroyed. The army as a whole remained loyal to the regime. Hinnebusch writes: "they did not, with few exceptions, split or unravel along sectarian lines, even under the pressures of of near sectarian civil war."²²⁸

It is believed that the regime knew about the Hama uprising beforehand and had prepared for the confrontation.²²⁹ Either way, the Hama battle showed that whether out of fear²³⁰ or simply lack of support: 1) the majority of Syrians would not mobilize in support of the Islamic Front, despite their overall sympathy for their cause and understanding of their grievances; 2) the regime had sufficient control over the security services.

²²³ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 301; Mayer, "the Islamic Opposition in Syria," p. 605; Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 101.

²²⁴ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 280.

²²⁵ See Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria," pp. 604-605; Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 296; See also interview with Asad in the *Observer*, 7 March 1982. Although Israel approved Syria's intervention in Lebanon in 1976 under the indirect, US-brokered "Red Line agreement," starting April 1981 Israel actively worked against the Syrian presence in Lebanon by backing Bashir Jemayyel and the Lebanese Phalangists, who have turned against the Syrians. For more on the 1981 crisis, see Khalidi, *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking during the 1982 War*, Columbia University Press, 1986; Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985; and Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 278-289.

²²⁶ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 9; Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria," p. 604. See also Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 332-338.

²²⁷ Estimates of the number of dead ran as low as several hundreds to as high as 30,000. For the official Syrian version, see *al-Thawra*, 3 March 1982. For the Muslim Brotherhood version, see *Al-Liwa'*, 31 March 1982. *The Observer*, 9 May 1982 mentioned around 10,000 dead.

²²⁸ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 101.

²²⁹ Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 300.

²³⁰ Mayer writes that "fear of retaliation and, perhaps, inadequate countrywide planning on the part of the Islamic Front, are not adequate explanations for the Sunni community's failure to join the revolutionaries." He explains that the Ba'athi elite - composed of both minorities and Sunnis - and liberal-minded Syrians were not attracted to the idea of an Iranian style Islamic revolution. See Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria," p. 606.

Their defeat forced the Islamists officially to declare an alliance with other secular parties and leaders. This led to the establishment of the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria (*al-Tahaluf al-Watani li-Tahrir Suriya*), which included the Islamic Front, the pro-Iraqi wing of the Baʿth party, and other independent political figures. The new Charter of the Alliance had only one paragraph directly referring to Syria's Islamic nature, which ʿAdnan ʿUqla considered to be a betrayal of the Islamic struggle. Already Syria's Islamic movement was transforming into a neo-fundamentalist movement where a change in political power had to have a bottom-up direction; it was a social change that was needed first. Consequently, the Front dismissed ʿUqla, and accused him of being solely responsible for the Hama tragedy. ʿUqla was replaced by Saʿid Hawwa as the military wing commander.²³¹

The destruction of Hama and the ruthlessness of al-Asad's measures apparently had a chastening effect on Syria's estimated 30,000 Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers.²³² Nonetheless, did Syria truly rid itself of the ideological impact of the Islamic and Islamist movement's influence over Syrian society? One thing is certain; the government's collateral killing of innocent people during this event crystallized Syrian society's discontent with the regime and sparked an increased willingness to integrate the Muslim Brotherhood's conservative vision of the social order.²³³ An understanding of this reality caused the government to modify its strategy in an attempt to re-create a legitimizing formula for itself, so as to replace its deteriorating Baʿthist tenets. The state had, furthermore, to replace the Islamic movement with an effective alternative in order to fill the void left by its intervention. The strategy of control, co-optation and compromise is what I will discuss in the following chapter. However, before doing so, it is important to explore the alternative approaches explicating the causes behind this violent conflict.

Explanations of the Violent Contention: Political and Economic Grievances, Anomie and Social Alienation

The Political Culture School

²³¹ Mayer, "the Islamic Opposition in Syria," pp. 606-608.

²³² Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jamaʿat al-islamiya*, p. 281.

²³³ This will be discussed in the following chapter. See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 320-321.

Perhaps no work better represents the paradigm for ethno-sectarian politics and their kinship culture in Syria than Nikolaos Van Dam's *The Struggle for Power in Syria*. In this influential work, Van Dam verifies a recurring observation, i.e., that those Sunni urbanites, whose prestige, influence and wealth were destroyed by the populist policies of the Ba'th, dismissed the Syrian regime's secularism and socialism as window-dressing for the transfer of power to the minorities and to the rural sector.²³⁴

Hence, in his analysis, Van Dam tests the sectarian variable when examining the conflict between the Muslim Brothers (with their bourgeois urban allies) and the Ba'th minority-led regime in an attempt to verify the contribution of sectarian motivations and kinship cultures to the parties' political behaviour between 1963 and 1996.²³⁵

In his analysis, he notes that when socio-economic differences coincide with sectarian contrasts, they can have a catalyst influence on the take-off of a class struggle. This, for him, explains how the so-called 'historical revolution in the Syrian political elite' of 1963 had caused abrupt consequences for the composition and ideology of the Syrian political elite. Although Van Dam's analysis encompasses a political economy explanation, he contends that even though sectarian, regional, tribal and socio-economic factors are impossible to separate when studying the relationship between urban Sunnis and rural compact religious minorities in Syria, the struggle for political power has been, at least since 1963, directed through sectarian channels and kinship ethos:²³⁶

[F]rom 1942 until 1963, Sunnis, urbanites (primarily Damascenes, with people from the rival city of Aleppo in second place), and people from the well-to-do classes and conservative political parties, had occupied the senior and most powerful positions ... After 8 March 1963, the relation between these groups underwent a radical reversal as is shown by the fact that members of heterodox Islamic communities ... and people from the poor rural areas ... rose strongly and gained relative over-representation in the principal power institutions...²³⁷

Van Dam asserts that, prior to 1963, intra-elite conflict for power occurred without the involvement of the rural and lower urban masses.²³⁸ Following the 1963 Ba'th revolt, however, and by virtue of higher secular education and a focus on the empowerment of the long-forgotten rural periphery, a new and upwardly mobile class of minority men and women emerged.²³⁹ To demonstrate his argument, Van Dam gives a few numbers. He reports that, although during the pre-Ba'th era, urbanites dominated all echelons of power, by contrast, under Salah Jadid's rule between February 1966 and

²³⁴ Alasdair Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," *MERIP Reports* (Nov.-Dec.) 1982, p. 3.

²³⁵ This factional account was endorsed by a number of observers other than Van Dam: Seurat, *L'Etat de barbarie*; Petran, *Syria*; Martin Seymour, "The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 6, 1, (January 1970), pp. 35-47; Safadi, *Hizb al-Ba'th*; Munif Razzaz, *al-tajriba al-murra* (The Bitter Experience), Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1969.

²³⁶ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, pp.13-14.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²³⁹ Federal Research Division, *Syria: a country study*, p. 72.

November 1970, minorities, especially 'Alawis (which represented 23% of the total population at the time), dominated both in the cabinets and in the Ba'th Regional Commands. In addition, the Regional Commands had no representation of people from the major cities of Aleppo and Damascus, leaving them to be led by a rural and minoritarian constituency. Between 1963 and 1978, Van Dam shows that, although the Damascus and Aleppo provinces contained 41% of the population, only 29.7% of government ministers and around 11% of the Regional Commands came from those two urban centers.²⁴⁰

As for the Sunni/non-Sunni divide in the army, Van Dam shows that during the Syrian-Egyptian union, Sunni representation in the army was around 94%, the highest it had ever been. However, once the Ba'th came to power, and even more so between 1966 and 1970, Sunni officers in fact accounted for only 45.1 percent of the Regional Commands, which would not seem such a low number had Van Dam not added that this percentage "... says little about their [the Sunni officers'] actual degree of power in the armed forces. In fact, most of the officers in question, other than their colleagues who originated from compact minorities, were born in different regions."²⁴¹ As we have seen, under the rule of Salah Jadid, and the subsequent dual rule of Jadid and Hafez al-Asad, power struggles among the Ba'thists resulted in a purge of the last top Druze officers, Salim Hatum and Ahmad 'Ubayd, of Isma'ili officers such as Ahmad al-Mir, Ahmad Suwaydani, and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi,²⁴² and of the Hawrani officers and prominent Sunnis such as Amin al-Hafez. As a result of these purges, the remaining Sunni military members, although slightly outnumbering their 'Alawi counterparts, ended up representing weaker army factions, according to Van Dam.

In the period after November 1970 and during the ascent of Asad to power, the number of Sunnis and Syrian urbanites increased again in the regional commands at the expense of the rural and religious minorities; with the percentage of Damascenes increasing to 25% of the civilian Regional Command. Orthodox Christian officers, having been almost always duly represented in the cabinets, but never among the military membership of the Syrian Regional Commands, now found themselves occupying very high positions in the Syrian Armed Forces.²⁴³

Van Dam argues that, under Asad, and despite representing more than 50 percent of the Regional Commands, Sunni military officers continued to lack real power. In his analysis, their weakness was mainly due to their lack of cohesion and solidarity, and because they were often short-circuited by their second-rank 'Alawi commanders; the supremacy within the military remained mostly in the hands of reliable 'Alawi officers.

Van Dam's conclusion is inescapable. He contends that this demonstrated an increase in political and military participation by religious minorities and the rural populace after March 1963, perceived by many as a kind of national emancipation -

²⁴⁰ Van Dam, *Struggle for Power in Syria*, pp. 82-88.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁴² Al-Jundi was a staunch Isma'ili supporter of Jadid and the chief of the national security and general intelligence. He committed suicide in 1970 as Asad's officers besieged his headquarters.

²⁴³ Van Dam, *Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 78.

although relatively reduced in the 1970s - was not considered as such by the traditional mainly Sunni urban elite. Their devastating loss of power and prestige ended up causing a conflict over supremacy between the Sunni-led Brotherhood and the 'Alawi-led Ba'th regime.²⁴⁴

Despite his convincing argument, it is the entanglement of all the class/geographical/ethnic/religious variables that is at one and the same time the strength and weakness of Van Dam's analysis. His focus on the ethno-sectarian character of Syrian politics under the Ba'th is at best incomplete. In addition to his assumption that sectarian groups are unitary actors, he also fails to explain his choice to focus on the factional variable despite his stated recognition of the overlap of other variables such as class and geographical background with sectarian identity.

Van Dam's argument is incomplete in other respects as well. He fails to explain the parallel rise of Islamism in Egypt despite the Egyptian case's considerable variance with the Syrian one, especially when it comes to the ethnic variable. Maybe Alasdair Drysdale's point that "[t]he accuracy of those perceptions is irrelevant: what mattered was that a sufficient number of Syrians believed them. This ... made the sectarian issue an extremely sensitive one"²⁴⁵ can shed some light on Van Dam's choice of explanatory variable when explaining the sudden resurgence of Islamism in Syria.

The Socio-Economic School

A second type of reading, interpreting the roots of the conflict between the Ba'th regime and the Muslim Brothers and the rise of political Islam in Syria through the socio-economic lens, also challenges Van Dam's theory. This reading contends that it is impossible to make sense of modern Syrian political developments without resorting to the class variable. This view is chiefly advanced by a number of prominent exponents of the political economy paradigm, namely Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Hana Batatu.

According to this reading of the origins of the conflict, not all actors within the Islamic movement in Syria at the time were motivated by confessionalism and religion. As indicated by Hinnebusch and Batatu, the conflict was one over wealth. Many agree that, at a crossroads of world trade, it was no accident that the Syrian merchant class played an important role in the politics of the country.²⁴⁶ In fact, the majority of the Muslim Brotherhood's members were tradesmen and craftsmen who had established themselves in the *suqs* such as the 'Asruniya, suq Saruja, and the Midan in Damascus. They were thus independent of the state as long as the latter did not interfere directly in their businesses or hinder free enterprise. In other words, according to this paradigm, the

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 3.

²⁴⁶ Richard T. Antoun, "Ethnicity, Citizenship and Class: Their Changing Meaning," in Antoun, T. Richard and Donald Quataert (eds.), *Syria*, Albany: State University of New York, 1991, p. 1.

Muslim Brotherhood's opposition was partly the result of the notable class's behind-the-scenes hostility towards a regime that has deprived it of wealth, power and prestige.

According to Hinnebusch, under the ancien regime, the state acted as a mere executive committee of the landed commercial ruling class. However, the continuation of the *status quo*, even after the end of the French colonial period, was thought to be unworkable and the subsequent period was expected to witness changes to the behaviour of the ruling class, especially with the exasperation of the lower and rural classes. The Ba'ath offered the best medium through which the middle class and the peasantry could form an alliance against a ruling elite that had clearly aligned itself with landlords and business interests against reform.²⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, once in power, the politics of the new regime showed a clear class bias at the expense of the notables and the *suq* culture, which naturally pitted the urban-based opposition against the new state. Large notables as well as small traders suffered from the Ba'ath's social reforms, "especially the state takeover of foreign trade, restrictions on imports, and a growing state retail network which deprived merchants of business."²⁴⁸

The implications of Hinnebusch's conclusions are clear. The changes in the composition of the social elite, which came about with the rise of the Ba'ath to power, had wide economic implications. The changes threatened and weakened the status of members of the merchant class who, despite being opposed to the rising seemingly minority-based government, failed to re-organize and galvanize support through its traditional ruling notable parties.²⁴⁹

As a result, the urban traditional elite who could no longer play a role in the fast social and political changes became especially upset with the loss of the cities to new arrivals from the surrounding villages. Furthermore, the new arrivals were for the most part from minorities, many of whom (such as the Isma'ilis and the 'Alawis) were perceived as culturally insensitive to the same socio-economic values that the Sunni urbanites held dear. Many feared that "urban culture" -- understood to be a more sophisticated system of values and mores than its rural counterpart -- was disappearing

²⁴⁷ To cite a few works dealing with the crisis of the liberal system in Syria, see: Zakariya Khodr, *Some peculiarities of the Class Construction in the Syrian Society*, Tokyo, Institute of Developing Economics, 1984; Petran, Syria; David Waldner, *State-Building and Late Development: Turkey, Syria, Korea and Taiwan*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999; see also Jacques Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche Orient*, Paris: Gallimard, 1946.

²⁴⁸ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 96; idem, "State and Islamism in Syria," in Abdul Salam Sidahmed and A. Ehteshami, eds., *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1996, pp. 199-214. To learn more about the Politics of the notables and Syria's liberal oligarchy, see: Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon*, London: Oxford University Press, 1946; Philip Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus, 1860-1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; idem, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Nationalism 1920-1936*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

²⁴⁹ See David Waldner, *State Building and Late Development*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

with the erosion of the urban population. Hence the historicity of the city, and its urban residents, in Weulersse's definition of the word urban, were being threatened.²⁵⁰

The Ba'th's statist and populist policies resulted in the merchant elite's loss of power in the village as well. In Hinnebusch's words "[t]he land reform and the efforts of the regime to substitute state and cooperative credit and marketing infrastructures for the old landlord-merchant networks deprived landlords and merchants (who usually also own modest amounts of land) of influence and wealth in the villages."

The Ba'th's populist policies did not stop with its anti-elitist stance; the state's control of foreign trade, its restrictions on imports, a socialist fiscal policy and price regulation, its subsistence peasant policy, all deprived the notable families of their usual sources of often significant wealth. The nationalization of industries, which in a few cases touched artisan workshops, was especially seen as an attack on business and property as a whole.

In addition to upsetting the large notables' business enterprises, the Ba'th's policies upset yet another powerful group composed of the "men of religion." These, Hanna Batatu explains, could not, as a rule, live on the income they derived from religious service. They therefore frequently engaged in petty trade or handicraft.²⁵¹ In fact, although the Ba'th regime's policies did not directly affect the petty tradesmen or the religious class - in the sense that, other than creating agricultural and consumers' cooperatives, the state did not really hinder nor promote their businesses - these traders were dependent on the export-import capabilities of the big traditional merchants.²⁵² With the arrival of the Ba'th to power, those activities were now controlled by large state organizations governed by technocrats, many of whom were of rural origin and certainly hostile to the urban mercantile class while often lacking a basic understanding of trade. Batatu writes "[t]he small-scale traders had clearly been more comfortable with the traditional big merchants who, in addition, were Muslim Sunni like themselves."²⁵³ Indeed, consumer cooperatives were among the main establishments attacked during the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations in the late 1970s in Aleppo and Hama.

Political Islam happened to strategically offer the great traditional notables, the merchants, and the *'ulama'* an ideology that not only truly reflected their values, it also had the capacity to unite them with a big segment of the urban masses against their Ba'th antagonists.²⁵⁴ And so, unlike in Egypt or Iran, the strongest support for the Islamic movement in Syria came from the traditional urban quarters that had lost much of their power and capital during President Nasser's rule in Syria, and later felt politically and, more importantly, economically excluded by the Ba'th. Hinnebusch writes that "[t]he

²⁵⁰ Today's Syrian series such as *Layali al-Salihiya*, *Bab al-Hara* and *Ayam Shamiya* attest to this deeply perceived cultural difference. In those 30-episode series, the urban Sunni quarter had a specific culture that has dissipated sometime in the 1950s.

²⁵¹ Van Dam, *Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 102.

²⁵² Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," pp. 15-16.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 140.

professional middle class frequently joined this coalition: Islamic protests against socialism were invariably linked with merchant and professional strikes. Thus Islam, interpreted to exclude socialism, became a natural vehicle of protest for the victims of the Ba'athist statism."²⁵⁵

According to the socio-economic paradigm, the 1970s witnessed an increase in the appeal of the Islamic movement. This appeal, although not *en masse*, was due to the decision of a number of university students and urban upper middle class professionals to join the Muslim Brethren. This came about because of a number of reasons, the most important of which was that criticism of Ba'athist rule was widening in the 1970s. In fact, despite Asad's cross-sectarian coalitions, the regime's populist policies were already showing signs of failure, and the regime's loss of dynamism and direction was starting to be felt by that time.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, not only did the regime's discipline deteriorate, but corruption was becoming an endemic problem resulting in wider economic and social disparities. This explosive combination of widespread corruption and nepotism, inflation, and a considerable rural exodus, certainly disturbed the social and economic fabric of the principal cities.²⁵⁷

Indeed, the cities were doubling in size due to a significant rural exodus, resulting in a housing crisis, especially in Damascus, where "[i]nflation hurt the state employed middle class while corruption, inequality and the enrichment of the power elite alienated many party members or sympathisers."²⁵⁸ In discussing Syria's economy in the 1970s, Drysdale wrote:

A parasitic new class, which feeds off of the public sector has come into existence. Fortunes have also been made in a booming real estate market, prices in some sections of Damascus rose tenfold between 1974 and 1976...Others have fared less well. For the substantial number of middle and lower level and government public sector employees, salaries have not kept pace with rapid inflation despite large periodic adjustments.²⁵⁹

As a result, political Islam became a popular vehicle of dissent for the educated urban Sunni middle class, who had once been drawn to the old notable parties; the authoritarian nature of the regime had hindered the possibility of other kinds of secular outlets of dissent.²⁶⁰

However, despite inflation and the regime crisis, the recruiting success of the Muslim Brotherhood faced a number of barriers. First of all, Asad's rule was never a purely 'Alawi one, nor was it simply an alliance between minorities and a 'Alawi political elite. It was a cross-class, cross-sectarian coalition. This coalition included rural Sunnis who were not part of the established old elite, and most importantly Damascene

²⁵⁵ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 93-96.

²⁵⁶ Drysdale, "the Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 4.

²⁵⁷ Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," p.19.

²⁵⁸ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, p. 97.

²⁵⁹ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 6.

²⁶⁰ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, p. 97.

Sunnis who were generally liberal-minded; these Sunnis were unreceptive to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and saw it as being in their best interest to support the new regime under Asad. Indeed, prior to and more intensely during Asad's years in power, the Ba'ath was successful in recruiting young Sunnis from the rural areas who endorsed Ba'athist secular ideology. In a study done in 1975, only 19.7% of the Sunni party recruits expected Islam to play a large role in legislation, 44.3% expected it to have some role and 36.1% expected it to have no role.²⁶¹ Secondly, Sunnis from the rural areas were not attracted to the Muslim Brotherhood given the latter's business-oriented and anti-rural migrants bias. In fact, even within the Sunni urban lower strata, only traditional labour was clearly pro-Muslim Brothers. The socio-economic school explains the unattraction of the rural and urban masses to the Brethren's ideas. Simply put, those who depended on the state for work and feared the anti-statist stance of the Muslim Brothers opted to oppose the Muslim Brothers.²⁶²

In fact, when it mattered, only Hama and Aleppo joined in the Islamic revolt, while Damascus remained loyal to the regime. This was mainly due to the Asad regime's policies, which favoured the capital at the expense of the northern states (Aleppo and Hama).²⁶³ Michel Seurat explained that "Rien ne peut plus être entrepris dans le pays sans l'aval de Damas, qui tire tout le profit que l'on imagine de cette situation."²⁶⁴ As traditional sites of textile industries and agrarian bourgeoisie, Hama and Aleppo suffered enormously from the agrarian reforms and compensatory large state factories.²⁶⁵ These two cities would later play the leading role in defining the Syrian regime's conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood, for it was in these cities that the merchants backed the Muslim Brothers and conducted during the March 1980 uprising the longest strike in Syrian history. It was, by contrast, the passivity of the Damascene merchants that broke the movement's dynamism and perhaps even saved the regime, as we will see hereafter.²⁶⁶ Regionalism was hence another explanatory variable in the conflict between the state and the Muslim Brothers. The Neo-Ba'ath ascertained that the Northern cities had lost their long standing prestige and economic power. Aleppo's political weight, enjoyed during Syria's parliamentarian era under the right-wing People's Party, was breathing its last; Amin al-Hafez was indeed the last Aleppine to reach the summit of power. Hama was moreover no longer the "creator of putsches"; it no longer mattered politically as Damascus became the bureaucratic center and the rampart of the regime.²⁶⁷

²⁶¹ Hinnebusch, "Political Recruitment and Socialization in Syria: The Case of the Revolutionary Youth Federation," p. 53.

²⁶² Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, pp. 97-98.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁶⁴ Seurat, *L'Etat de barbarie*, p. 59.

²⁶⁵ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, p. 97.

²⁶⁶ Seurat, *L'Etat de barbarie*, p. 59.

²⁶⁷ Seurat, *L'Etat de barbarie*, p. 59. See also M.H. Van Dusen, "Political Integration and Regionalism in Syria," *The Middle East Journal*, 26, Spring 1972, pp. 123-136.

Hence, the socio-economic school affirms that political and the seemingly ethnic conflictual dynamics were very much linked to the underlying economic factors. Hinnebusch affirms that the conflict was indeed a class struggle despite its sectarian façade.²⁶⁸ He explains that rich notables whose clientele emanated from the old city not only ‘gravitated’ towards the Islamic coalition; they also supplied money in support of the Muslim Brotherhood. In certain instances, Syria’s main private industrial combine, the *Khumasiya*, which was nationalized by the Ba’th in the mid 1960s, was accused of funding the movement on a number of occasions.²⁶⁹

While Van Dam, Hinnebusch, and Batatu explain the reasons behind the emergence of the Islamic opposition on the Syrian scene, they fail to elucidate how a number of Syrian Islamists, emerging from the broader Islamic movement, turned to violence as a radical tactic to express their contention. Nor do they account for their decision to opt for a heightened form of violence rather than other less risky means of collective action. Hence we need to examine the social movement theory in order to elucidate how the violence erupted before moving to our next section.

The Social Movement Theory School

Certain structural imperatives should be examined before trying to explain the reasons behind the shift of the hitherto peaceful Islamic movement towards violent contention. This necessity leads us down a path which only the social movement theory can illuminate, hence the need to apply the social movement approach to the Syrian case in order to understand the mechanisms, level and timing of the violent outbreak.²⁷⁰

Violent conflict, resulting in the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants, arises where actors, in our case Islamists, rationally respond to a context of opportunities and constraints. Violence becomes the appropriate tactic when the political opportunity structure, characterized by repression, is accompanied by three conditions: “(1) state repression creates a political environment of bifurcation and brutality; (2) insurgents create exclusive organizations to shield themselves from repression; and (3) rebels

²⁶⁸ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, “Class and State in Ba’thist Syria,” p. 29.

²⁶⁹ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, p. 96.

²⁷⁰ For important works focusing on the nature of state repression, see Tilly Charles *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1978; Brockett, Charles D, “A Protest-Cycle Resolution of the Repression/Popular-Protest Paradox,” in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, ed. Mark Traugott, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995; Smith, Christian, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; and the institutional strength of the state such as Kriesi, Hanspeter, *New Social Movements in Western Europe*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

promote anti-system frames to motivate collective action to overthrow agents of repression ... where the regime is framed as fundamentally corrupt through anti-system frames, these radical, encapsulated organizations become further radicalized through a growing belief in total war.”²⁷¹ In fact, political exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand, and harsh regime responses challenging the basis of the leadership of the Brothers on the other, resulting in this community-linked group being denied any organizational space and independence, likely provided credibility to those in the movement who maintained that the state used indiscriminate reactive force to bring down the opposition.²⁷²

The collective Action theory tells us that violent contention, whether Islamist or not, is a result of tactical considerations informed by the realities of repressive contexts and the shrinking pool of other alternatives. The Ba’th’s crackdown on all political parties, including the Muslim Brothers, prompted a calculated response on the part of Islamist proponents of violence from within the established non-violent overall movement. Indeed the religious class was no longer permitted to play any role in the socio-economic and political environments and changes that took place given the Ba’th ardent secularism at the time, added to its will to control the political scene in both its formal institutions and informal mechanisms. The Muslim Brothers, along with the religious class and, by alliance, the bourgeoisie, were denied any access to both formal and informal influence over public policy through state institutions. They were unequivocally marginalized and locked out of an environment they historically considered theirs. Here, it is important to pinpoint the very central role played by ideological framing, in this case the use of religion as a primordial and indigenous element in turning the repressed opposition and the legions of disaffected recruits into a violent movement.²⁷³

In the Syrian case, violence coincided with two important shifts within the Syrian political structure: on the one hand, an ‘Alawi officer becoming president pronounced the end of the urban Sunni ideological as well as institutional rule to many within the political scene; on the other hand, the regime who created in 1972 the National Progressive Front, which included a number of leftist parties, excluded the Muslim Brothers from the state coalition. This kind of exclusion, in continuation of political de-liberalization initiated in 1963, and in addition to the arrival to the apex of power of a non-Sunni officer, forced the Muslim Brethren to choose between moving immediately in order to regain their formal access to power, or later at the risk of losing all their institutional and ideological power for good.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Introduction,” in Wiktorowicz, Quintan (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A social movement Theory Approach*, in Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 21.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ For the impact of state terrorism on Islamic movements, see also Francois Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003.

²⁷⁴ However, because in the Syrian case, this grieving class was not large enough to recruit a large pool of members, the revolution from below failed to achieve its aims of toppling down the government. The state furthermore, although authoritarian, was accessible to the remaining social groups, hence posing a serious challenge to the formation of a large effective opposition. In addition, despite the reactive nature of

Yet the Muslim Brotherhood movement did not succeed in mobilizing the youth or the griened in politics for at least a couple of significant reasons mentioned in the previous section: First, the majority of the Syrian masses had an interest in the continuation of the new order; if anything, the state still represented popular dissent at this point, warranting an end to the oppressive status quo in which the bourgeoisie and the religious class ruled the Syrian nation earlier, and prevented upward mobility for the majority of Syrians. Secondly, the state's penetration of society was already very effective.

With this background on the main schools examining the reasons behind the rise of the conflict between the regime and the Muslim Brothers-led opposition, it is, in my view, the socio-economic school that explicates best the relationship between the Syrian regime and the Islamic opposition. The paradigm's explanatory variables are best suited to illuminate not only the reasons behind the emergence of Islamism in the 1970s, but also the noticeable resurgence of Islamism in Syria today after some twenty years of absence. The socio-economic school in fact engenders the sectarian, regional, and tribal aspects of the struggle which are impossible to separate from the socio-economic factors when studying the relationship between urban Sunnis and rural compact religious minorities in Syria. The socio-economic paradigm also encompasses the variables that the social movement theory school addresses, namely the role of repression and loss of status, in creating militant opposition. Today, it has the potential to explain the new attraction of the urban masses – who once felt indifferent to the Muslim Brothers' cause – to Islamism in Syria.²⁷⁵

As stated earlier, in the 1970s, Islam happened to strategically offer an alliance of great traditional notables, merchants, and '*ulama*' in an ideology that advocated an advantageous status quo, reflected their cultural values, and had the capacity to unite them with a big segment of the urban masses against their Ba'th antagonists. Whereas their project failed due to the elitist project that the alliance offered, Islam was reclaimed by the Ba'th regime in order to ensure the control of the masses. The regime did so through a policy of economic accommodation and socio-political compromise with the remaining Damascene bourgeoisie and a number of accommodating '*ulama*,' as will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

repression that the state deployed to quell the Islamist movement, mass mobilization was not possible given the sectarian, geographical and economic limit on the numbers of recruits at the time of the rebellion. For a comprehensive work incorporating the study of Islamic activism into social movement theory, although the Syrian case not included, see Wiktorowicz, Quintan (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A social movement Theory Approach*, in Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004.

²⁷⁵ See chapter 8 of this dissertation.

Chapter 5

Resurgence of Neo-fundamentalism and Decline of political Islam as a model for change (1982-2000)

Introduction

While the credibility of the Syrian Islamic Front was weakened by its perceived anti-rural and anti-minoritarian discourse and its foreign connections, the Ba'th had enough of an indigenous national character and a broad base of support thanks to its secular discourse, and populist and socialist policies to deprive political Islam of its nationalist *raison d'être* and a significant recruitment pool, allowing the Ba'th to maintain its control over the political scene.

Nevertheless, although the Hama events described in the previous chapter had a deterring effect over anyone who opposed the regime, the massacre and the realization that the regime was willing to do anything to remain in power have eroded the regime's popularity. They had the effect of legitimizing the Muslim Brothers' accusations against the Ba'th regime and ignited a grassroot-driven revivalism of religious sensibility. Indeed, the 1980s were not an easy time for Hafez al-Asad and the Ba'th regime. The memory of the 1976 intervention in Lebanon and the bloody conflict with the Syrian Islamic Front still haunted the command. Domestically, Syrians were indifferent about Syria's growing regional and international role, or that Israel decided unilaterally to evacuate Lebanon on the 14th of January 1985 while the Syrians stayed.

Realizing this irony, Asad's authoritarian regime had to make a number of changes in order to quell the remnants of revolutionary Islam, to co-opt the opposition, and pre-empt future Islamic mobilization without having to resort to any sort of political liberalization, let alone democratization, on the one hand, and to re-create a legitimizing formula for itself, so as to replace its deteriorating Ba'thist dogma, on the other hand. For this, the regime undertook a two-fold plan of action, which would end up changing the Ba'th regime and its social policies as much as it did Syria's Islamic movement.²⁷⁶ First, the state moved to crush the immediate opposition in an open confrontation, as was shown in the last chapter; secondly, it undertook to establish tighter state-society relations encompassing cooptation of the religious class and an Islamization from above.

This second part of the Ba'th plan was mainly due to the government's realization that despite the Hama massacre and all the government's various attempts to uproot the threat posed by political Islam, the traditional quarters' autonomous economic base and pervasive religious sensibility had proven very resistant to state penetration. The new approach aimed at blurring the borders between state and society, in an attempt to transform the conflict from one between 'a corrupt and authoritarian clic and Sunni Islam' to one between 'official moderate Islam and a revolutionary de-stabilizing and

²⁷⁶ As we will see in the last part of this work.

radical Islam.’ However, for this strategy to work, it had to include: intensifying patronage and bureaucratic clientelistic relations; reinforcing of corporatist institutions; and most importantly for the topic of this work, manipulating religious symbols while at the same time abandoning women’s emancipation programs, in an attempt to control potential agents and the sites and targets of mobilization.

More explicitly the new strategy meant: 1) a further disregard for the secular principles of the Ba’th ideology; 2) the creation of new alliances and institutions to broaden the regime’s social base of support beyond its traditional supporters, and to control possible targets of Islamist outreach; 3) a relaxation of Syria’s populist authoritarian drive; 4) and finally the creation by the state of an Islam, dubbed moderate and rightful, deployed to replace and oppose the one advanced by the Muslim Brethren and its allies, in an attempt to shift the conflict from one with the corrupt ‘Alawi sectarian rule to one between ‘moderate good Muslims’ and ‘radical terrorist Muslims.’ These manipulations ended up, I will argue, establishing a new dynamic of state-society relations in which state-society interactions were equally affected and mutually transforming.

Before we discuss the more sophisticated strategy of co-optation and the political and socio-economic manipulations of the state, a review of the regime’s strategic deployment of direct force and bold repression is first offered.

The Regime’s Counter-Offensive

In the early 1980s, fearing foreign intervention and loss of autonomy (let alone power), Hafez al-Asad saw it best to deal with the militant opposition with an iron fist to quell the immediate threat. This was possible given that Asad had created a regime that presided over a strong, centralized, regulatory government and hence provided the Ba’th with significant power.

As discussed in the last chapter, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hafez al-Asad did not hesitate, both prior to and following the attempt to end his life, and his realization of the determination and capabilities of the Islamic Front, to openly use coercive power on the domestic front. His regime crushed the uprising: firstly, during the violent Aleppo strikes in March 1980, and the second time during the Hama uprising in February 1982. Both times, the regime’s new generation of leaders, namely Rif’at al-Asad, Hafez al-Asad’s brother, and his Defense Battalions, was in favour of ceding nothing to the Islamic threat. As a result of his promise to solve once and for all the Islamic problem in Syria, the regime dispatched up to 12,000 troops and cordoned the cities off. Both incidents culminated in up to 5,000 detentions.²⁷⁷ In Hama, the fighting ended with the destruction of large parts of the old city, and the massacre of thousands, many of whom were not related to the fight. One man who witnessed the Hama fighting recounted to me in a personal interview:

We were in the house with our parents. We could hear the shooting outside, as a teenager, I could not understand the exact nature of the events taking place, I

²⁷⁷ Mayer, “The Islamic Opposition in Syria,” p. 598.

remember being very afraid, and I could see the same kind of fear on my parents' faces, which terrified me. There was a knock on the door, and men were shouting for us to open the door. We knew they were going to destroy the door if we did not open it, we had nothing to fear, we are Christian. My dad opened the door, they looked at us, three armed men, asked us if anyone else was in the house. My dad said no. They told us that the men in the house have to leave with them, my dad in vain kept trying to explain that we were Christian and had nothing to do with what was going on. He even pointed to an icon on the wall. He asked where we were going; they did not listen or answer, just kept ordering us to follow them in a machine-like way. Outside, there were more of us, a lot of men, just standing there, being told to follow the soldiers. We were all moving towards the city square, my dad told us to follow him when he made his move. We were too many. At one corner just before the square, my dad shifted to the right into a small alleyway that we knew well. My brother and I followed him. No one noticed. And that's how we escaped probable death. All was being decided by soldiers, scared ones who did not want to even verify who we were and whether we were involved or not.²⁷⁸

As stated hitherto, although the regime was not toppled, this sort of behaviour had the effect of legitimizing the Muslim Brothers' accusations against the regime and crystallized the Syrians' new awareness of the indiscriminately violent nature of their political command - something which the Syrian Islamists and other dissidents have stated and which has since backed their dissenting movement and ignited a grassroots-driven revivalism of religious sensibility.²⁷⁹

This said, discussion and analysis focused on the gravity of the Hama events overshadowed, in scholarship, the Syrian regime's use of a number of other repressive measures against anyone who supported the dissenting Sunni establishment. In fact, in September 1979, around 500 primary and secondary teachers suspected of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in their classes, in addition to dozens of university professors, were dismissed from the educational system.²⁸⁰ Others, according to *al-Nadhir*, were physically eliminated.²⁸¹

Even the National Progressive Front was affected by the regime's iron fist as a result of a communiqué the Front published on 26 September 1979. The communiqué, which circulated throughout all of Syria, was composed of 37 points indicting the domestic situation in all its aspects. This included a discussion of the wave of corruption that invaded the country, the inefficiency of the bureaucratic apparatus, the economic crisis, and the absence of individual freedoms, the injustice of the justice system and the lack of a democratic political life. As explained by Michel Seurat, nothing was left out by the National Front who demanded the punishment of offenders and a reinforcement of vital institutions such as the People's Assembly and the Ministry Council. As a result of

²⁷⁸ For more stories and pictures on the Hama massacre, see <http://sorea.jeeran.com> (although inactive since 12 June 2007).

²⁷⁹ This Islamic revivalism will be discussed further later on in the present chapter.

²⁸⁰ Seurat, *L'Etat de Barbarie*, pp. 78-79.

²⁸¹ Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, pp. 112-113.

the communiqué, 52 functionaries were arrested. Michel Seurat wrote: “C’était un événement politique d’une portée considérable...Tous ces événements ont contribué à entretenir une étrange atmosphère de ‘fin de règne’ dans les milieux politiques de la capitale ... on se comporte comme si le régime devait être renversé le lendemain. »²⁸²

As a result, and despite the state’s initial proposition to widen the circle of power by an expansion of the National Progressive Front to include other political parties, the Ba’th party opted in December 1979 during its Extraordinary Seventh Regional Congress (which lasted until the 6th of January 1980) for “continuity” rather than expansion of the National Progressive Front. Furthermore, Rif’at al-Asad, the Commander of the Defence Companies and the leader of the Ba’th Party’s hardliners, vowed his readiness to do all that is needed in order to restore peace.²⁸³ It was in fact less than six months later that Rifat’s assertions began to take effect. As explained earlier, the long days of summer 1979 were anything but uneventful. Often, the Syrian *Mukhabarat* ventured in the smaller alleyways of Syria’s northern cities accompanied by an impressive military armada, and had to face a number of armed attacks in the three major cities, including Damascus. The audacity of the militant Muslim Brothers led to a number of successful assassinations culminating in the death of Asad’s personal physician, Colonel Khalil Shahada in August 1979.

In November 1979, and after a group attacked an office of the *Mukhabarat* killing fourteen of its members, the government felt justified in arresting the shaykh of the Grand Mosque, Zeyn al-Din Khayrallah, whose brother was none other than Husni Abo, the military Commander of the Muslim Brothers in the Aleppo region who had just recently been executed.²⁸⁴ Later, following the attempt on Asad’s life in July 1980, the regime took even fewer chances. They did not hesitate to arrest anyone suspected of belonging to the Muslim Brethren, drafting bill 49 making belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood a capital offence. The morning following the attempt on Asad’s life, his brother Rif’at and about 80 of his followers randomly executed alleged Muslim Brothers and other Shadhili shaykhs at the Palmyra prison.²⁸⁵

Still, more state control was needed. Having failed to co-opt the professional syndicates in the 1970s, and in view of the fact that they enjoyed more independence than the rest of Syria’s popular organizations who had come to experience the direct control of the state, the government felt it imperative to put its hands on the last independent civil society organization in Syria. In a final show of force, the Professional Executive Councils were dissolved on 14th of April 1980, despite the Muslim Brotherhood’s negotiations with the Asad regime and the regime’s promise to leave them intact. These autonomous professional syndicates did in fact pose a significant challenge to the Asad regime in the late 1970s. In their support of the general defiance in Aleppo and Hama, they had crossed the line according to the regime. Fearing nationwide chaos because of the syndicates’ led general defiance, on April 14th 1980, the government dissolved the

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁸³ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 327.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁸⁵ Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, pp. 84-85.

Executive Councils of Professional Associations and dismissed their General Congresses, which had pressured for political reforms and reported on the regime's human rights abuses.²⁸⁶ The regime also detained a still undetermined number of the associations' leaders and executed a few without trial, while some fled the country.²⁸⁷ Human rights activists from within the lawyers' syndicate were also detained without trial, the closed in-camera trials were conducted with no one in the public sure of who was being detained and for how long. That marked the end of Syria's last vestiges of autonomous civil society under the Ba'ath.

In the early 1980s, the regime also undertook a mass purging of religious associations, mosques and *shari'a* schools, eliminating these as breeding grounds of activism. Furthermore, a number of prominent Sufi *zawiya* shaykhs were found dead between 1980 and 1983 according to a number of people who witnessed the events first-hand.²⁸⁸ In a final showdown, the regime subjected all remaining religious institutions to state control thus depriving the Brotherhood of its main sites of outreach. "Massive repression deadened political life."²⁸⁹

Control, Cooptation and Compromise: Blurring of Borders between the State and Society and the Muting of Secularism

Despite the Hama massacre and all the serious attempts to uproot the threat posed by political Islam, still, as mentioned earlier, the traditional quarters' autonomous economic base and pervasive religious sensibility proved very resistant to state penetration.²⁹⁰ Beyond the abundance of their religious rhetoric, the Muslim Brotherhood opened up the Syrian scene to a new political lexicon which, despite the initial lack of a sufficient aggrieved constituency for mobilization, finally pressured the state to revisit its domestic stance towards Islam and the bourgeois class more than once - even though without real concession of power.

Even so, to do so, the Asad regime's strategy did not stop at crushing the Islamist movement and forcing its members underground. In its ambition to control the public arena, very aware of the nuance between the different Islamic actors and their bourgeois allies, the state had to replace the Muslim Brotherhood's movement with an effective alternative in order to close the void left by the regime's intervention.²⁹¹ The state had

²⁸⁶ Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World," p. 276.

²⁸⁷ Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and its Troubles," p. 8.

²⁸⁸ Personal Interviews, Damascus April 2008.

²⁸⁹ Hinnebusch, "Syria," pp. 230-231.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁹¹ On Islamization from below, see Anabelle Böttcher, "Islamic Teaching Among Sunni Women in Syria," in Bowen and Early, eds., *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, 2002; idem, *Official Sunni and Shi'i Islam in Syria* San Domenico: European University Institute, 2002; idem, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad* Freiburg im Breisgau: Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, 1998; see also Joshua Landis, "Islamic

also to extend its economic favours to a larger base in an attempt to control possible sites and targets of outreach.²⁹² Both objectives required a shift from a 'statizing' or 'etatist' component of populist corporatism to some form of a 'privatist' component of populist corporatism.²⁹³

This simply meant a partial opening of the state's institutional arenas to those private interests among the needed allies of the regime's coalition (economic factor), in an aim to inoculate the targets of the opposition against the latter's message (corporatist factor), and also to initiate a political broadening of the regime's coalition to include the 'religious class.'²⁹⁴ The latter point meant that there was a need for "Muslim politics," explained by Piscatori and Eickelman as imagining politics in a way to compete and contest "... over both the interpretation of symbols and the control of institutions, both formal and informal, that produce and sustain them"²⁹⁵ (the institutional and ideological factors).

In other words, and without conceding real power, Asad's need to co-opt the Islamic threat into its business-linked dimension meant a number of changes (mentioned in the introduction of this chapter): 1) a further disregard for the "atheist" and secular principles of the Ba'th ideology; 2) the creation of new alliances and institutions to broaden the regime's social base of support beyond its traditional supporters and to control possible targets of Islamist outreach; 3) a relaxation of Syria's populist authoritarian drive; 4) and finally the creation by the state of an Islam, dubbed moderate and rightful, deployed to replace and oppose the one advanced by the Muslim Brethren and its allies in an attempt to shift the conflict from one with the corrupt 'Alawi sectarian rule to one between 'moderate good Muslims' and 'radical terrorist Muslims.' To achieve the four above-mentioned goals, the regime's deployment of a number of measures is examined hereinafter.

Education in Syria: Undoing Secularism?", in Eleanor Doumato and Gregory Starrett, eds., *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East*, Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner Press, 2007, pp. 177-196.

²⁹² Sadowski analysed the use of patronage to co-opt elites and create a loyalty network in Yahya Sadowski, "Bathist Ethics and the Spirit of state Capitalism: Patronage in Contemporary Syria," in Peter J. Chelkowski and Robert Pranger eds., *Ideology and Power in the Middle East* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), pp. 160-184. Similarly, Heydemann explained how the co-optation of the social masses ensured the Ba'th's consolidation of power, see Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.

²⁹³ Guillermo O'Donnell, "Corporatism and the Question of the State," in James M. Malloy, ed., *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p. 64.

²⁹⁴ These factors will be discussed in further detail in the following section.

²⁹⁵ Dale F., Eickelman, and James P., Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 5.

Tightening of State-Society Relations and Creation of New Alliances

The confrontation of the state with the Islamists was aided greatly by changes in the class construction at the level of civil society. By the late 1970s, the number of the bourgeoisie class had declined from 6.7% to 1.3% of the population, either because of the state's initial corporatist policies stripping the class of its wealth, or due to its exiting the country. The salaried middle class and the state-dependent smallholding peasantry, however, expanded significantly during that same period increasing from 42.4% in 1960 to 57.5% in 1970. This allowed the Asad regime to create an autonomous "Bonapartist state" capable of "balancing above Syria's fluidized classes and largely invulnerable to countervailing class power."²⁹⁶

In its capability of assuming a position above the classes, the state felt it could recommence its shift from an instrument of class revolution and social levelling to a machinery of power in the service of *raison-d'état* and consolidation of power. To do so, and in order to inoculate future possible targets, the corporatist configuration in the organization of state-society relations was to be tightened. Nationalism was also to be sharpened through the indoctrination of the masses, via the creation of youth brigades collectively called "The Revolutionary Youth Federation" (*ittihad shabibat al-thawra*) whose main purpose was to 'defend the revolution' and act as a special recruiting superstructure auxiliary to the party. In addition to the youth federation, the general federation of the peasants (*al-Ittihad al-'amm lil-falahin*), women, traders, artisans, and students were all re-organized and their organizations re-structured and directly linked to the Ba'ath Party.²⁹⁷ Basel Salloukh's very eloquent sentence summarizes the Syrian regime's goals: "The aims of attempts at organizing state-society relations, populist-corporatist or otherwise, then, is to blur, if not eliminate, "the horizon of options" available to opposition groups, and ensure in the words of Adam Przeworski, "the absence of preferable [or more accurately, viable] alternatives" to existing ruling regimes."²⁹⁸

Hence the 1963 configuration of organizations coordinating the workers, the peasants, the youths, the students, the artisans, and the women (in addition of course to all public sector employees) which was initially meant to indoctrinate, include and empower, was now employed to demobilize the masses.²⁹⁹ Yet, while this radical populist pact mobilized a large popular base against the old classes, and ensured that a large majority of the Syrian popular masses were dependent on the state, the

²⁹⁶ Hinnebusch, "Syria," p. 226.

²⁹⁷ Mahmud Sadeq, *Hiwar Hawla Suriya*, London: Dar 'Uqadh, 1993, pp. 111-112.

²⁹⁸ Salloukh, "Organizing Politics in the Arab World," p. 48. Also Adam Przewoski, "Some Problems in the Study of the Transition towards Democracy," in Guillermo O'Donnel, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead., eds., *Transition from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 52.

²⁹⁹ Sadeq, *Hiwar Hawla Suria*, p. 112.

professionals and the professional associations remained very much autonomous from the regime despite attempts between 1972 and 1975 by Hafez al-Asad to reorganize them. Salloukh explains that “[w]ith the advent of the Asad regime, a number of measures were taken to reorganize the professional syndicates, and to bring them under greater state control. The regime replaced the old system – whereby different syndicates representing the same profession were established in different provinces – with a more centralized one. The new system allowed for only one central syndicate, based in Damascus. It gathered all respective professionals from a particular profession in a national level General Congress (*al-mu’tamar al-’am*). The syndicates would have branches throughout Syria’s provinces, each presided over by an Executive Committee.”³⁰⁰

Thus, despite Asad’s commitment to their centralization, Syria’s professional syndicates retained some autonomy compared to other organizations. This was partly due to the organizational history of Syria’s professional syndicates prior to Asad’s arrival to power. Although also secular in their outlook, these syndicates, symbols of the old ‘urban’ and modern nature of the cities, namely the Doctors, the Pharmacists, the Engineers, the Teachers and the Dentists, remained administratively decentralized during the Nasser and the pre-Asad Ba’th eras. Given the socio-economic background of their members, they always represented the interests of the urban middle classes and were indifferent if not unsympathetic to the then new parties’ populist agendas.

The Ba’th regime’s attempts to have its own members democratically penetrate these professional organizations were to no avail. In fact, only the Teachers’ syndicate was finally infiltrated in 1964 and eventually linked to a shadow institution, the Regional Education Bureau (*maktab al-tarbiya al-qutri*), and in 1969, the Teachers’ syndicate was altered from a professional organization to a popular one, thus ensuring its allegiance to the party in power. In 1978, in Damascus, over a total of 15 elected Ba’thists won three seats within the Engineering union, one in the Pharmacists’ union, and none in Medicine. In Homs, only one Ba’th candidate was elected. In Hama and Aleppo, no Ba’thists participated in the elections to start with.³⁰¹

Therefore, before co-optation could be feasible, the syndicates’ autonomy had to be put to an end.³⁰² To accomplish this, it seemed that the then organization of the syndicates had to be altered drastically. Hence, and in a swift show of force, these were dismantled to the ground and then “corporatized under the direct supervision of the Ba’th Party Professional Syndicates’ Regional Bureau (*Maktab al-Naqabat al-Mihaniya al-Qutri*).”³⁰³ Very soon thereafter, the National Progressive Front, which initially included

³⁰⁰ Salloukh, “Organizing Politics in the Arab World,” p. 276.

³⁰¹ Salloukh, *Organizing Politics in the Arab World*, pp. 244-246; See also Jabbour, *Al-Fikr al-Siyasi al-Mu’aser fi Suriya*, pp. 119-126.

³⁰² For more on the regime’s dismantling of the Syrian civil society of the early 1960s and the creation of a “*mujtama’ mudad*” (an opposing society), see Sadeq, *Hiwar Hawla Suriya*, pp. 83-90 and pp. 111-112.

³⁰³ Salloukh, “Organizing Politics in the Arab World,” p. 278.

seven parties, was expanded to include the leaders of the popular and professional organizations.³⁰⁴

In addition to being in control of the professional organizations, the regime was directly also in control of a good percentage of the working population. In fact, by the mid-1980s, almost 40% of the Syrian population worked for the regime. The personal entourages of the regime's leaders and chief allies reached astonishing numbers by the late 1970s. The figures ranged from about 12,000 personal guards for the president; down to 60 for each general and even 4 for such personalities as Faysal Dayub, dean of the dentistry school, and As'ad 'Ali, a literature professor at the Damascus University and a crucial Ba'thist flatterer.³⁰⁵ Often, residential streets in the richer quarters of the capital, such as Abu Rumaneh and al-Malki, were virtually occupied by these guards who patrolled the streets and made it their business to oversee all activities. All of these were officials of the state and depended on the regime's existence as much as the regime depended on them.³⁰⁶ In another extreme example, in a small town called al-Hifa in the Latakia district whose total adult male resident members was about 1900, around 550 men occupied the positions of intelligence officers and Ba'thist informants. This meant that as much as one out of four men worked - not only within the Ba'thist political bureau - but, more importantly, as part of its security apparatus. Mahmud Sadeq explains that "those working at the service of the [Ba'thist] apparatus are an essential instrument at the service of the "opposing civil society,"³⁰⁷ they occupy the lowest level of its pyramid, they form important political and social part of its broad basis and are hence a main connection between society and the [Ba'thist] leadership..."³⁰⁸ Sadeq concludes that these men and women have become the bases of the political middle class, and have forgotten that they once were at the heart of an active civil as well as political society.³⁰⁹

That said, the continuing threat of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite Hafez al-Asad's command of all levels of institutional power - the army, the party and the state, in addition to the armada of corporatist organizations - meant that the regime had to do more than simply tame the independent professional organizations. All possible opposition was to be monitored and restrained. To do so, the theatrics to allure the religious class by a muting of secularism was to play a crucial part.

³⁰⁴ Hafez al-Asad often addressed this issue of political democratization by stating that "anyone who wanted despotism would not have created a structure organizing peasants, women, youth, students, professionals, and expanding the trade unions." See Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria," in Rex Brynen et al. (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Comparative Experiences*, Vol. 2, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 224.

³⁰⁵ Seurat, *L'Etat de barbarie*, p. 87.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ See footnote 223.

³⁰⁸ Sadeq, *Hiwar hawla Suriya*, p. 112.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Manufacturing Consent through the Religious and the Portrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood as an Enemy of Moderate Islam

Other than creating a broader social base of support, the regime's strategy in dealing with the Islamic threat combined a set of tactics including the re-appropriation of religious institutions and messages, the building of new Islamic institutions, a muting of Ba'athist secularism, the mechanical inclusion of the 'Alawi sect under the rubric of Islam, and the conversion of the conflict from one pitting the regime against the religious class, to one setting the moderate Muslims against radical Islamists. The regime now purportedly sat on the sidelines and appeared no longer to play a role in the conflict, as we will see hereinafter.

As explained in the earlier chapters of this work, the main political expression of the *suqs* (bazaars) and the urban quarters, where religious institutions and the commercial economy had been hurt by the Ba'ath, was still made possible via Syria's traditional Islamic movement. The religious class had retained, through its use of religious institutions such as the mosques and the *zawiyas*, enough autonomy to pose a significant threat to the regime.

One of the first moves to socio-politically blur the lines between the regime and these traditional powerful institutions was through a change in the relationship of the state with Islam in the social sphere. In other words, on the one hand, the regime strategically moved away from open and aggressive secularism and "atheism", undertaking to quiet down its secular components. On the other hand, Asad undertook to modernize religious institutions in order to ensure a better grip over the community and blur the lines separating the state from the religious society.

Throughout the 1970s, Zaki al-Arsuzi's books that were critical of religion's role in politics were taken off the shelves, and self-declared atheist writers were asked to respect the sensibilities of Muslim believers, at least for a while. Hinnebusch explains: "Manifestly muting the secularism of his predecessors, he [Asad] tried to portray himself as a pious Muslim, reintroduced abolished religious formulas into public ceremonies, and cultivated the *ulama'* with honours and higher salaries."³¹⁰ In a symbolic letter published in the Ba'ath newspaper, the leader of the Ba'ath party in Hama ended his account of the incidents of February 1982 by affirming the Ba'ath's loyalty to Asad and to God. Lisa Wedeen writes that "[t]he avowedly secular regime, in the face of the Muslim Brotherhood's challenge, found that it too had to pay lip service to God. God, in turn, sided with the Ba'ath."³¹¹ God's alliance with the Ba'ath meant a further de-emphasis on Syria's secular ethic. This served the regime's purpose of re-creating a legitimizing formula for itself which did not alienate the religious masses.

Indeed, the Asad regime undertook rather forcefully the production of a new Islam, loyal to the regime, dubbed "moderate" and meant to shift the conflict from one between "dissidents from Syria's Sunni establishment and the regime" to one between "moderate Muslims and radical terrorist Muslims". To do so, and from the beginning of

³¹⁰ Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria," p. 161.

³¹¹ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 47.

its rule, the Asad regime began the active sponsorship and institutionalization of alternative Islamic groups willing to play the political game alongside the regime. The most prominent of these groups is the *Naqshbandi Kuftariyya* Sufi order that has expanded dramatically in the 1970s.³¹²

In return, the chosen Sufi shaykhs acted as religious intermediaries and ensured that religious expression, teaching, and practice were channelled through state-monitored institutions.³¹³ By co-opting Sufi shaykhs such as Ahmad Kuftaro, the regime started its own Islamic revivalism, one meant to compromise with Syria's religious masses, although without resorting to political liberalization. Meant to naturally engulf Syria given the regime's sponsorship, it was to fill the gap left by the regime's intervention in the social fabric.³¹⁴

In order to accomplish this, and throughout the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s, the government constructed around 8,000 new mosques, established around two dozen institutes of Islamic higher education, and developed a variety of some 600 quasi-official religious institutions in all Syrian governorates and cities to replace those that had been used by the Muslim Brotherhood for recruitment. Shaykh Kuftaro's headquarters, Abu al-Nur mosque, was inaugurated in 1971. Within Abu al-Nur trust, *Ma'had al-Da'wa wa al-Irshad*, an Islamic reformist secondary school was founded in 1982 at the height of the Islamist uprising. Moreover, Abu al-Nur foundation has become part of a network of universities in the Muslim World such as in Libya, Pakistan and Sudan. One of the most prominent institutions that Asad created was the 'Asad Institute for Memorizing the Quran'; it had 120 branches in most Syrian cities and governorates, initially headed by the then State Mufti Ahmad Kaftaru and the minister of *al-Awqaf* (religious endowments).³¹⁵ The institute was staffed by government-appointed preachers and several *shari'a* professors from the universities of Damascus and Aleppo. Naturally, they were strictly controlled by the authorities and overseen by the Ministry of *al-Awqaf* "to prevent radical infiltrations."³¹⁶ Other institutes such as the Faculty of Islamic Mission, the Lebanese Open Faculty of Islamic Studies, the Islamic University of Pakistan, and the

³¹² The Naqshbandi Kuftariya order and the rest of Syria's Sufi Sunni orders, and their ideology and outreach methods will be examined in Part III of this dissertation. It is important to note here that Sufi orders are tightly knit networks due to the pyramidal structure of their chains of command.

³¹³ See Böttcher, *Official Sunni and Shi'i Islam in Syria*, pp. 4-5.

³¹⁴ Furthermore, the Damascus regime felt it important to face the rising religious influence from the Gulf region. It was in 1962 that the Muslim World League was created in Mecca to "wahabize" Islam worldwide and to counter the influence of secular nationalistic movements in the Arab world, especially that of Naser. One of the purposes of 911 was according to Gilles Kepel, to mobilize the support of Muslims and to arouse emotional sympathy. As a result Syria has had a significant interest in creating Islamic alternatives to elsewhere in the Arab World. It has done so by creating around 600 Islamic institutes mainly in Damascus and Aleppo, where both Syrian and foreign students come to study. These institutes are mainly Sufi oriented. The process of creation of an alternative to the radical Salafi trend is still operational today, as will be shown hereinafter.

³¹⁵ *Al-Hayat*, 18 June 2005.

³¹⁶ Moubayed, *The Islamic Revival in Syria* [Online].

Sudanese Faculty of the Pillars of Faith were allowed to open their doors in Syria throughout the 1970s and 1980s.³¹⁷

In the early 1980s, religious scholars, part of Syria's ministry of *Awqaf*, were allowed to publish an Islamic newspaper, *Nahj al-Islam* (the trail of Islam), meant to counter the effects of *al-Nadhir*, the clandestine newspaper published by the Muslim Brothers. *Nahj al-Islam* was launched under the auspices of Asad and the *Mufti*, shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro.

The media was also marshalled in support of this sort of Islamic revivalism. A Quran recital show aired every day on the national channel at 4 pm during which preachers read passages from the Quran. Children who were awaiting the beginning of their afternoon cartoons often caught a glimpse of this strategically scheduled program. Popular Quranic shows also aired on a weekly basis, the most prominent of which was Shaykh Sa'id al-Buti's program. This was the high point of the Islamic *détente* with the Syrian regime and lasted throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Shaykh al-Buti indeed played a vital role in the 1980s and 1990s in bridging the gap between the Sunni community and the regime. Al-Buti, who as a preacher, a *mufti*, a teacher, and a spiritual mentor who continues to this day to attract the *imaginaire* of millions of young Muslims all over the Islamic world, was "excommunicated" by a Syrian Salafi Islamist from abroad.³¹⁸ Of Kurdish origin, he started his academic career in 1961 as an assistant at the newly founded *Shari'a* Faculty of Damascus University. After completing his doctorate at al-Azhar in Cairo in 1965, he became a lecturer in comparative Islamic jurisprudence and religious studies at Damascus University, and then a professor of comparative law and Islamic doctrine at the Department of Islamic Law and its Schools (*al-fiqh al-islami wa madhahibihi*).³¹⁹

Al-Buti is most known for being 'the Muslim television preacher' in Syria. At a time when the regime was concerned following the Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceaucescu's execution – because of the similarities between the two presidents -- they asked al-Buti to form a political party, but nothing came of it. Al-Buti's role was to represent the majority of Sunnis and what he calls 'the middle path Islam' in Syria, "finding its place between the current realities of a secular state and an ideal Islamic society."³²⁰

Shaykh al-Buti appears in all the media—as the weekly Qur'an and Hadith exegete on television, frequently as preacher on the radio and as the author of several dozen books and polemical publications in book shops. In his Friday

³¹⁷ See Böttcher, *Official Sunni and Shi'i Islam in Syria*, p. 9. See also Leif Stenberg, "Naqshbandiyya in Damascus: Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society," in Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia*, Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1999, pp. 101-116

³¹⁸ Al-Tartusi, although he was criticized by other Salafi preacher such as Shaykh Salman al-'Awda.

³¹⁹ Andreas Christmann, "Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: a portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sai'd Ramadan al-Buti," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1998, p. 152. The Syrian Shaykhs' provision of a middle path, their promotion of secular political ideas in their lectures and da'wa is thoroughly discussed in Part III of this dissertation.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

sermons in the Jami' Mawlana al-Rifa'i Mosque and his lectures held twice a week at the Jami' Tinjiz Mosque, al-Buti addresses hundreds of people each time, many of them standing in the mosque courtyard following his speech over the loudspeakers. Professor at the University of Damascus, al-Buti has a considerable formative influence on future generations of teachers who will teach religion and Shari'a in state primary and secondary schools.³²¹

During Al-Buti's program, which is still broadcast every Wednesday at 7pm, al-Buti advises Syrian Muslims on current issues and popularizes Islamic knowledge while complying with the ideals of the secular political setting. Al-Buti epitomizes the neo-fundamentalist movement as Olivier Roy defines it in his writings as he stresses the apolitical and ethical nature of Islam.³²² Christmann indirectly alludes to this when discussing his memoirs. She writes:

According to al-Buti's memoirs, his father was a most pious man, who unlike most of his contemporaries, already as an undergraduate did not see Islam as a source of emotionless casuistry but as a way to inner perfection—through unremitting Qur'an recitation (*tilawa*), night prayers (*fahajjud*), hundredfold repetitions of *dhikr* and *wird* formulas (invocations of Allah), through unremitting communion with Allah (*munajah*), discipline (*war'*) and asceticism (*zuhd*).³²³

During the 1970s, al-Buti opposed the attacks on government and Ba'th party officials, and the assassinations of prominent 'Alawis by Muslim Brothers and members of smaller Islamic groups. After the gunning-down of 83 'Alawi cadets at the Artillery Academy at Aleppo³²⁴ in June 1979, Shaykh al-Buti condemned the killing on television as illegitimate — at the request of the Ministry of Information.³²⁵ In 1982, at the climax of violent upheavals, he gave a speech on the occasion of the new hijra century under the auspices of President Hafez al-Asad. His agreeing to intervene as an Islamic 'alim and legitimator of the Syrian regime at a much needed moment made al-Buti a public figure and a high ranking religious figure. It was Shaykh al-Buti who thanked the 'hidden hand' of President Hafez al-Asad when a few years later, censorship on Islamic publications, and religious broadcasting and the prohibition against wearing the hijab in state institutions were removed. Al-Buti became perceived as a close friend of Asad, and later on, he accepted his offer to become a regular lecturer on Syrian television.³²⁶

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² See al-Buti, *al-Ta'aruf 'ala al-Dhat Huwa al-Tariq ila al-Islam*, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, n.d. Apoliticalism and a focus on the moral reform of the individual within Syria's current Revivalist Order is discussed in Chapter 7 of this study.

³²³ Christmann, "Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: a portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sai'd Ramadan al-Buti," p. 149.

³²⁴ Described as the Aleppo massacre in previous chapters.

³²⁵ Christmann, "Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: a portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sai'd Ramadan al-Buti," p. 153.

A number of al-Buti's major works are dedicated to attacking the radical *salafiyya* positions of the "reform" movement.³²⁷ Al-Buti calls on the classical apparatus of textual analysis and criticism in order to correct the *salafiyya* movement in its 'hasty eliminating of all that had slipped into the Islamic Tradition'. Although al-Buti does not condemn all Salafi adherents, he is harsh in his criticism of the classical *salafiyya* and certain young modernists as they tend to classify other *mujtahid* as *kafir* (unbelievers) despite their superficial understanding of *usul al-Fiqh*.³²⁸

In addition to allowing figures such as al-Buti their organizational and *da'wa* space, the Syrian regime also introduced tremendous changes to the relationship between Sufi orders and the state, in which the latter appeared to be fading in importance through an intensification of religiosity and public displays of individual signs of piety, such as mass mosque attendance and veiling. Why, one might ask, did the Sufi communities agree to conform? The destructive and vindictive power of the state might be one unlikely explanation. Another reason for the willingness of the Sufi communities to comply with government interference was their own fear – despite their firm strength in Syria – of the rising star of Salafi Islam, considered foreign to *bilad al-Sham*. But also, as a compromise with the shaykhs for their alliance with the regime, the state has muted its secularist discourse and allowed the public expression of Islamic symbols and traditions such as the veil and going to the mosque for prayer. This kind of compromise has certainly deepened as the memory of Hama has faded. Never before the early 1990s could it have been imagined that so many people would show up for Friday prayer, so much so that parked cars would block entire alleyways around mosques in Damascus and without the security services being suspicious of the activity taking place inside. Furthermore, cooperative shaykhs have received favours from the state ranging from facilitating their documentation when needed and giving them permits to collect private donations, to donating state land to build a new religious building or mosque.³²⁹

These alliances struck four birds with one stone: first, they secured a larger social base of support which included urban and Damascene Sunnis; secondly, they ensured

³²⁶ *Ibid.* In one of his lectures entitled "Tawdhif al-Din fi al-Sira' al-Siyasi" (The employment of religion in the struggle for power), delivered in March 2000, al-Buti criticizes the politicization of the Islamic *da'wa* in search of the control of the state. He says the following:

غير أن هذا يتجلى عندما يتاح للإسلام أن يبسط سلطانه وينفذ أحكامه، أما في مرحلة الدعوة إليه واتخاذ السبل إلى فهمه والافتتاح به بين يدي تطبيق نظامه على المجتمعات الإسلامية، وهي المرحلة التي يتحرك فيها الإسلاميون أو الجماعات الإسلامية، فإن الضمانة الأولى لنجاح هذا السعي إنما تتمثل في السمو بأعمال الدعوة الإسلامية عن المنعرجات السياسية الكامنة في الطريق، وفي التعالي عن الطموحات السياسية المتمثلة في السعي إلى القبض على أزمة الحكم.... وهذا مالم يفتن به إلى اليوم كثير من المسلمين مع الأسف!... ومن ثم فإن مصطلح الدعوة الإسلامية في أنشطتهم إنما يعني النهوض بالتحركات السياسية الرامية إلى بلوغ كراسي الحكم، وهذا ما أعنيه بتسييس الإسلام، ولعل التعبير الأدق: تسييس الدعوة الإسلامية.

For a further discussion, see chapter 7.

³²⁷ Christmann, "Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: a portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sai' d Ramadan al-Buti," pp. 155-156.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157. See chapter 7 of this work.

³²⁹ Pinto, "Dangerous Liaisons," p. 7.

long term political control over the messages of the shaykhs, and hence the *zawiyas* and mosques' clientele; they created an environment of mutual suspicion and tacit division between the religious shaykh and the businessman given that both are co-opted by the state; and finally they helped blur the borders between the state and society.

Yet this kind of alliance has created Islamized spaces that are usually devoid of true organizational structures, sort of micro-societies that become very difficult to contain and control if infiltrated by radical elements. These alternative centers of power could be used in the future as institutional outlets outside the regime's control (see Part III of this work).

The 1990s witnessed the peak of the regime's co-optation and compromises with the religious community. A reconciliation attempt was undertaken when a number of members from the Islamic Front, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood, in prison since the late 1970s, were released. Others, such as 'Abdul Fatah Abu Ghudda (died in 1997), and one of the Bayanuni brothers, Abu Fateh, were allowed to return from forced exile in effect since 1982.³³⁰ Talhami explains that "[i]mmediately following his [Abu Fateh] return, it became clear that he was part of a move to create a Communist intellectual- Islamist front against the Asad government. Surprisingly, the administration cracked down on the Communist party, re-arresting its leader, Riyadh al-Turk, but not on the Islamic leaders. According to some analysts, al-Bayanuni's return was a calculated move by the regime in order to deepen divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood resulting from this tactical shift favoring reconciliation with Syria's leftists and communists. The Muslim Brotherhood, it seems, is still incapable of mounting an exclusive campaign against the government."³³¹

In another experiment at accommodation, in the early 1990s, the regime conceded that *al-ta'addudiya al-Siyasiya* (political pluralism) should be reinforced. As a result, the regime experimented with a shy expansion of the political system to include "safety-valves." Hence, in the 1990 parliamentary elections, Syrians witnessed the opening of those elections to independent candidates representing business people, religious leaders, and professionals. A number of prominent clerics and religious figures won a few seats in the National Assembly, but these were not opponents of the regime. This opening, notes Hinnebusch, "signified the legitimization of interests outside the regime's original coalition and the government's desire to incorporate the more complex social coalition it is putting together."³³² This is claimed by some to have been a relaxation of state control over society. It is important to see it as well as a cooptation tactic, since no independent opposition is allowed in parliament to this day and limits on free speech are still in active mode. In fact, this sort of *ta'addudiya* (pluralism) and the new array of corporatist associations linked the Ba'th even closer to the society it aimed at controlling by putting around 60% of the population under the Party's direct control and zone of influence, but also by giving these a tangible measure of social power and access to the regime. These plebeian constituencies were, under Hafez al-Asad, a major obstacle to mass recruitment by the Muslim Brothers as they had a stake in the status quo.

³³⁰ He was allowed to return to Aleppo from Saudi Arabia and resume his religious activities.

³³¹ Talhami, "Syria: Islam, Arab Nationalism and the Military in Syria," p. 125.

³³² Hinnebusch, "Syria," p. 225.

Last but not least, in its attempts to keep the Sunni religious community under control, the Asad regime tried bringing 'Alawis closer to the Islamic mainstream through the strengthening of ties that historically linked the 'Alawis to the Shi'i sect. Hundreds of *Hawzas* and *Husseiniyats* were erected, financed and supervised by Iran³³³ through the Iranian embassy, and thousands of Iranian clerics were allowed into Syria as teachers and guides to the 'Alawi community. Although the 'Alawi teachings did not seem to convince the pious Sunnis that the 'Alawis belonged to Islam, it did at least serve one main purpose: the creation of a Shi'i axis stretching from Lebanon to the Pakistani border. This axis had the potential, in the long term, to consolidate the regime's power domestically and maintain its superiority over any resurgent form of Islamist activity.³³⁴

Reaching a Modus Vivendi with the Bourgeoisie: Economically Rewarding Patronage Networks and Reinvigoration of the Private Sector.

The regime did not stop at re-creating loyal popular and professional associations, improving its image with the religious class and re-manufacturing Islam to fit its own agenda. It also aspired at reaching an economic *modus vivendi* with the Syrian bourgeoisie given the latter's traditional rapport with the religious class and the fact that it had maintained its economic power notwithstanding the regime's economic policies.

Economically, the 1970s were a period of sustained economic growth, and by the late 1970s, the public sector had become the core of the economy allowing the state a reasonable amount of independence from the bourgeoisie. Yet, as Hinnebusch explains, the public sector had still failed to become an engine of capital accumulation powerful enough to uphold the state's many commitments. And the public investment efficiency worsened throughout the 1970s. Thus, although the 1970s were a period of economic boom, public sector surpluses were to finance only 54% of the ambitious 4th 5-year-plan (1976-1980).³³⁵ Added to this economic shortfall, religious and traditional merchant family's solidarities had survived both the regime's populist mobilization, and its tight social control, and continued their support of the Muslim Brothers' actions against the political apparatus. A relaxation of Syria's populist authoritarianism and a selective reinvigoration of the private sector were due.

³³³ Iran has the biggest Shi'i population in the Muslim World.

³³⁴ Regionally, it allowed Asad to re-negotiate Syria's role and her relations to neighboring Gulf States, but this is outside the scope of this study.

³³⁵ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, 3, (August 1995), pp. 305-310. See also idem, "Syria: the Politics of Economic Liberalization," *Third World Quarterly* 18, 2, (1997), pp. 249-265; and Steven Heydemann, "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilization in Syria" in Henri J. Barkey, ed. *The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East* New York: St Martin's Press, 1992, pp. 11-39.

Henceforth, in addition to the regime's deployment of corporatist programs securing the support of the rural masses and the salaried middle class, the 1980s economic recession³³⁶ meant that patronage networks binding businessmen and the ever increasing number of small merchants to the Asad regime were more than ever needed to tame the opposition once and for all.

Hence, in terms of programs meant to maintain the support of the rural and salaried classes: a sort of precocious Keysianism was deployed. In 1980, the fifth five year plan allocated 30 percent of all investments to rural services; government employees were given pay raises ranging from 10 to 75 percent; there was a tightening of the system of price controls; more land was distributed to peasants; food and medical subsidies were increased, and grants to university students were increased to \$150 per capita, a sum equivalent to all revenues earned from oil exports that year.³³⁷ Rural programs such as the Tabaqa Dam, improvement of farm technology and the extension of electricity and credit facilities to the rural areas, all undertaken by the state, proved to be not only economically sound, but politically sound as well. The support of the rural masses was evidently crucial against the Muslim Brotherhood. That achieved, the Asad regime was also very much concerned with the steady discontent of the Sunni middle classes and the old bourgeoisie who had lost their power to the new emerging classes. As stated in the previous two chapters of this work, these groups' main political expression was the Islamic movement, which they supported faithfully. The regime's austerity measures introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s meant that state investment was not going to redress the economic crisis Syria was heading into.

Therefore, to tame the potential Islamic opposition, the Ba'ath had to retreat in its protracted class war with the bourgeoisie. To do so, it embarked on a two-fold action plan: the creation of a *détente* via the formation of clientelistic business alliances with the Sunni Damascene elite,³³⁸ and the integration of Syria's Sufi shaykhs into this clientelistic network of the state. It was during the 8th Regional Congress of the Syrian Ba'ath that the first part of the plan took shape in the form of a shy and selective economic liberalization. State controls over the economy were relaxed under the state's watchful eye and within the lack of any political liberalization.³³⁹ The lack of political liberalization meant that patronage networks, bribery, fraud and other related illegal informal practices, tolerated by Syrians and former Syrian governments, became even more extensive and unreserved under the Asad regime. Sadowski explains that "[e]xtensive abuse of patronage helped the Muslim Brotherhood to build a following,

³³⁶ Important to say here that, while products such as sugar and rice were efficiently subsidized by the state, powerful Ba'athist members would buy large amounts of these low-priced goods and sell them at much higher prices in the free market of Lebanon. Of course, access to Lebanese market and getting these products across the Syrian-Lebanese border was sanctioned by the Ba'athist military lords that governed these borders. Meanwhile, the middle class and the impoverished in Syria often struggled to have access to vital products due to the resulting shortages in the Syrian market – otherwise more than self-sufficient. This also applied to medication and medical supplies. As a result, subsidized products were often in shortage.

³³⁷ Waldner, *State Building and Late Development*, p. 121.

³³⁸ See Volker Perthes, *Political economy of Syria under Asad*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1995.

³³⁹ Yahya M. Sadowski, "Cadres, Guns, and Money: The Eight Regional Congress of the Syrian Ba'ath," *MERIP Reports*, 134 (Jul.-Aug., 1985).

lending credibility to its charge that national resources were being squandered to benefit a privileged “‘Alawi” minority.”³⁴⁰ Interestingly, the attempts in the mid 1970s to quell some of the patronage abuses and corruption were reversed in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the Muslim Brotherhood escalated its attacks on the regime.³⁴¹ Eradicating the parasitic regime insiders might have shaken the regime’s political base. Instead, a “state bourgeoisie” took form through the creation of state contracts offered to anyone willing to enter the military-mercantile nexus of power. As a result, “the former antagonism between the state and the private bourgeoisie gradually declined.”³⁴²

The 1980s proved to be a challenge financially. An overinflated bureaucracy too large for the country’s economic base, corruption, a drop in Arab aid and petro-money, added to a growing population, led to a combination of economic stagflation and a shrinking economy. As a result, the populist Ba’th that had once pledged to liquidate old societal ideas by encouraging developmental programs far removed from the values of a “backward bourgeois society”³⁴³ could no longer uphold its populist statist ideology. Law 186 was approved in 1986 providing financial facilities, and tax and border exemptions to touristic projects. That same year, legislative decree number 10 allowed the creation of private companies to help the government deal with the agricultural crisis. In 1991, a new investment decree, Law 10 was drafted making it easier to privately invest in Syria in nearly all sectors of the Syrian economy and offering a number of fiscal incentives to private companies and new entrepreneurs, the most important of them being Law 20, which reduced business taxes and removed provisions that penalized business profit.³⁴⁴ International brands jumped at the opportunity and Adidas, Benetton, and Naf Naf (to cite only a few) opened their first shops in the bigger cities of Syria. Companies like Nestle and Bel Cheese followed a couple years later. In Asad’s final palpable economic measure in April 2000, the Economic Security Court (*Mahkamat al-Amn al-Iqtisadiya*), responsible for looking into economic crimes against the people, was substantially diluted.

³⁴⁰ Sadowski, “Cadres, Guns, and Money: The Eight Regional Congress of the Syrian Ba’th,” p. 7.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² Hinnebusch, “Syria,” p. 233.

³⁴³ See *Barnamaj Itihad Shabab al-Thawra* (Program of the Union of the Revolution’s Youth), Damascus, 1985; See also Hinnebusch, “The Political Economy of Political Liberalization in Syria,” pp. 112-113.

³⁴⁴ *Al-Iktisad Wal-Aamal*, pp. 18-19, 30-44. Law 10 opened the way to economic infitah by allowing private investments regardless of nationality to undertake projects in all fields on the condition that the project’s fixed assets are higher than 25 million Syrian Liras (which would have equaled then 200,000 US dollars). Law 10’s most important decrees exempted all imports related to the functioning of businesses from trade taxes and tariffs. Companies in which the state contribute over 25 % are exempt of income and property taxes for the first 7 years. Companies not benefiting from the state contribution are exempt of income and property taxes for the first 5 years. 2 additional years of exemption are allowed in certain conditions. Law 10 allowed investors to open up accounts with the Syrian commercial bank in foreign capital.

In fact, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a regime striding resolutely away from economic populism and closer towards further economic liberalization.³⁴⁵ As a result, 1598 projects were approved up to October 2000, with a total working capital of over 327 billion Syrian liras [USD equals 50 Syrian liras].³⁴⁶ A few individuals profited as a result of the *modus vivendi* between the state and an embourgeois new elite (*al-tabaqa al-jadida*), and the amalgamation between a number of 'Alawi military and bureaucratic elite and the Sunni mainly Damascene old bourgeoisie; such as, tycoon Mustafa al-'Aidi, Sa'eb al-Nahas, the Seif brothers, the Talas, the Shihabis, the Makhlufts, the Khaddams, all of them families and businessmen of 'Alawi and Sunni origins whose businesses, and the businesses of their children, profited substantially from their partnership with the state. Nonetheless, Hinnebusch explains, "The regime's dual public-private sector strategy protected its populist constituency -- cooperatized peasants, public sector-workers -- from bourgeois encroachment thereby limiting the possibilities of surplus extraction by private capital. But it also co-opted others who benefited from trade liberalization, state contracts, or work abroad. The state was able to avoid any decisive choice between statism and private capitalism."³⁴⁷

That said, although the Hafez al-Asad regime succeeded in balancing its populist and liberalizing agendas, it has certainly initiated the creation of a complex bourgeois class composed of an old "revitalized bourgeoisie" and an "embourgeois elite," whose growth is inevitable unless there is a reversal of the liberalization measures taken by the state.³⁴⁸ This is important because, as explained hitherto and shown in the Muslim Brothers' program, free enterprise and Syria's Islamic sector are closely intertwined in the Syrian context. Furthermore, the re-initiation of an economic elite engenders a contradiction inherent to Populist Authoritarian regimes. It arises from the regime's need to control the rising socio-economic group while ensuring its co-optation. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, the targeted liberalization initiated by the Hafez regime could no longer satisfy the growing economic aspirations of the state elite. This will be further discussed in the following chapter.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁵ The need to accommodate the business religious class arose from a number of economic challenges including the unsuccess of the state's Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) measures, balance of payments difficulties, and the collapse of Syria's patron, the Soviet Union. Perthes explains that the solutions adopted by the regime in the 1980s to address the economic crisis, which included austerity for the workers and the salaried middle class, private sector revival accompanied with some export promotion, but not privatization, served the interests of the state elites and their private sector partners. Volker Perthes, *Political economy of Syria under Asad*; idem, "The Bourgeoisie and the Ba'th," *Middle East Report* 21, 170 (May-June 1991), pp. 31-37.; idem, "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; See also Eberhard Kienle, ed., *Contemporary Syria: Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace*, London: British Academic Press, 1994.

³⁴⁶ *Al-Iktisad Wal-Aamal*, p. 30.

³⁴⁷ Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria," pp. 311-314

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ The changing neo-liberal market driven policy and the growing influence of the Islamic sector will be further discussed in Part III of this dissertation.

The Tacit Gender Pact

An important aspect of the state-Islamist relations under the Hafez al-Asad regime revolved around the changing status and state policies towards women in civil society. In this section I will contend that the Syrian government used women's rights as a way of accommodating the traditional classes' vision of the societal order. Although the Ba'athist regime did not actively reinforce patriarchal religious principles, as shown to this point, they did appeal to the religious sensibilities and economic interests of Syria's traditional bourgeoisie and the religious class. In the early 1980s, it became clear to most Syrians that the secularizing policy of the Ba'ath, affecting mainly the lives of women, was no longer on the regime's to-do list.

States in the Middle East often decide to concede on gender issues in order to appease and co-opt a dissenting 'religious class.' In order to explain these state policies, Kandiyoti writes: "Islamist tendencies and movements enter this equation in ways specific to each context, which does not invite easy generalizations. A conclusion that does seem permissible however is that when they do become a factor, tighter control over women and restrictions of their rights constitute the lowest common denominator of their policies."³⁵⁰

It is with Kandiyoti's conclusion in mind that I discuss, in this section, the evolution of gender relations in Syria from the 1970s to the 1990s.³⁵¹ It is a subject that has been very much ignored by students of contemporary Syria, despite the fact that it ties in with both the economic factor and the cooptation of the religious class by the regime. In order to demonstrate the interweaving of these issues, namely the economic, the gender and the Islamic, I answer the question of how the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's conflict with the state had a clear bearing on gender relations under the Asad regime, having reversely impacted Syria's move towards secularizing its Family Law, which in return reinforced the resurging Islamic ethos and religious sensibilities.

As stated above, in an attempt to co-opt the religious and business classes, the Syrian government had to give in to at least part of the traditional class's demands. Indeed, not only was secularism muted, but both the enforcement of a secular statutory code and the institutional empowerment of Syrian women were clearly put on a halt in the 1980s, while previous liberalizing gender trends that had reached a peak during the 1970s were evidently reversed on the ground after the 1980s. As a matter of fact, major amendments were made to the Syrian Law of Personal Status in 1975 through the drafting of Law 34, which replaced Law 59 of 1953. At the peak of emancipatory policies, Law 34 undertook major changes that were secularizing in nature -- in the sense that the rules concerning family no longer relied on religion -- particularly relating to

³⁵⁰ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam and the State," *Middle East Report*, 173, Gender and Politics (November-December), 1991, pp. 9-14.

³⁵¹ The same trends apply to the period under Bashar al-Asad. The role of women *shaykhas* in Syria's Islamic revivalism is discussed in chapters 7 and 8 of this dissertation.

areas of polygamy, dowry, maintenance, custody of children, and guardianship, while its drafters promised more secularization to come.³⁵² Nevertheless, further amendments to Syria's penal, naturalization, and the personal status codes, all of which treated women as legal dependents, were since mysteriously dropped by the regime.³⁵³

The reality of such a halt was crystallized in women's economic status, which since the 1980s has reflected their worsening condition and the restriction of their activities to the government-controlled public economic sector. In fact, although the overall numbers show an increase in women's participation in the labour force, these numbers hide an important reality: while the government controlled public sector kept on witnessing a growing presence of women even after the 1980s, the revitalized private sector – meant to appease the urban traders' class – did not. In other words, the relatively non-government-controlled private sector mirrored clearly the prevailing gender bias of Syrian society.

A very brief look at the variation in numbers of women participation between the private and public sectors from 1981 onwards reveals the rift between state and society represented in the private sector on the one hand, and the state's decision to allow the business/religious class its independent patriarchal space, on the other. As a result, the state has remained largely egalitarian in its recruiting policies, while the private sector has demonstrated significantly sharper signs of patriarchy, which might partly explain the government's tendency to recruit such a large number of female workers.

To illustrate my argument, I briefly look at female labour statistics from the 1970s to 1995.³⁵⁴ In the 1970s, the percentage of women working in industry in the public and private sectors increased from 13.4% in 1971 to 23.0% in 1981. However, it decreased drastically during the 1980s and 1990s to reach 9.8% in 1995 - a lower percentage even than that of 1970. The same was true in the services sector. The percentage of women working in this sector in 1970 was 18.7. By 1981, it had reached 47.2 %. However, in 1995, the number of women employed in the services sector had decreased to 30.2%.³⁵⁵ It was also observed that, from 1970 to 1981, the number of unpaid family workers who were women decreased significantly. More women were employed in 1981 than in 1970 and more women were employers themselves in 1981 than in 1970. However, from 1981 to 1995, it appears that the proportion of wage-earning employees has decreased for women, while more women became unpaid family workers and a smaller percentage of women had become employers than in 1971.³⁵⁶

If one looks exclusively at the government-controlled public sector, the picture is drastically different. The number of women working in the public sector kept on

³⁵² Daraj and Barut, *Al-ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama'at al-islamiya*, p. 268.

³⁵³ Rabo, "Gender, state and civil society," p. 170.

³⁵⁴ I mainly use the ESCWA's 1995 study on "women and men in Syria" because it is one of the few relatively reliable studies that I found to include Syrian labor statistics from the 1970s to 1995.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78. It is important to note that the same patterns, although much less pronounced, were registered in the case of men, except that the number of men being employers has increased from 1981 to 1995, unlike that of women. This is partly due to the economic crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and men's switch to the re-energized private sector.

increasing between 1970 and 1995. In 1981, around 30% of active public sector workers were women. By 1995, around 40% of these were women, while the number of men working in the public sector decreased by 5%. In contrast, the number of women working in the private sector decreased by around 10 percentage points from 1981 to 1995.³⁵⁷ This is at a time when the private sector was increasing in size in Syria and its contribution to Syria's GDP was higher than that of the public sector (the percentage was 70/30). In the year 2006, out of 1,355,763 workers in the public sector, 340,054 were females, which accounts for around 25%. In the private sector, out of 3,485,631, only 288,710 (8%) were women workers.³⁵⁸

These numbers reveal three main trends: first, from the 1980s onwards, the participation of women in the economy receded in many areas, although overall it was rather more positive due to an inflated public sector. Secondly, whatever progress has been made in the areas of education and overall employment, it did not have a strong impact on perceptions about gender relations and roles. Finally they reveal an interesting dichotomy between the private sector and the public sector when it comes to the gender aspect. The public sector controlled by the state has remained relatively favourable to women,³⁵⁹ while the private sector, revitalized by the state in the early 1980s in order to accommodate certain elite interests, has not been especially favourable to them.

As the numbers show, the public sector has become a symbol of the differences between the private and public spheres in Syria; one controlled by a "freer" male society allowed to dominate and define its own economic scene, the other by the state. Leaving aside the state's intervention, the private sector is a better reflection of inherent gender bias in Syrian society. Moreover, the revitalization of the private sector was achieved at the expense and economic emancipation of Syrian women and it became part of the gender pact between the regime and the co-opted bourgeoisie. Deniz Kandiyoti explains this tendency to compromise on gender issues by arguing that whenever the state gives in and negotiates with Islamist and Islamic groups or just the religious tendencies of certain movements, women become another negotiating tool, a card in the hand that any state or leader can play in order to tip the scale from one side to the other.³⁶⁰ In this context, gender relations become increasingly politicized.

On the social level, in order to alleviate the anger of the religious class in Syria, the state not only muted Ba'athist secularism; it also opted to drop its feminist agenda at the institutional and legal levels. Thus, in a clear departure from the Ba'ath Party's secularism, under which religion and official politics were kept strictly divided, Hafez al-Asad opened a few of his speeches in the early 1980s with religious phrases such as '*Allah Akbar*' and quoted versus from the Quran to justify his arguments.³⁶¹ Moreover, shortly after his 1982 decree forbidding the wearing of headscarves, al-Asad revoked his

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁵⁸ Syria's Labour Force Survey, 2006. Available at: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/gems/eeo/download/syria.pdf> (last visited 10 July 2008).

³⁶⁰ See Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, p.151.

³⁶¹ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 96.

initial stance and affirmed less than a year later in one of his rare presidential addresses that: "In Syria, dress is a matter of private and personal choice...customs and traditions cannot be overcome by violence."³⁶²

This speech, in which the dress acted as a symbolic socio-political element, followed an incident where young women from the youth organization, supported by the ruling Baʿthist Syrian state, had attacked women by forcibly removing their veils from their heads, in a Damascene bazaar. The regime now strategically pursued the partnership of 'moderates' within the 'religious class', and gave in to the binary opposition of private and public spheres that the Baʿth had fought fiercely against prior to its conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then, a number of Islamic organizations, which will be discussed in Part III of this dissertation, have had a very important role to play and have impacted Syrian society to a great extent.³⁶³

In co-opting these groups, Hafez al-Asad's regime had publicly given up the state role in mediating women's rights. For their cooperation, shaykhs and *shaykhas* (female shaykhs) received favours from the state ranging from facilitating their papers when needed to donating a state land and building a new order (*zawiya*) or mosque.³⁶⁴ In return for their support, the state muted its secularist discourse, and tolerated the public expression of Islamic symbols and traditions such as the veil, irregular hours during the fasting hours of Ramadan, and mass praying in mosques. It is important to say here that, beyond impacting the trajectory of women rights in Syria, the resulting Islamized micro-societies have also developed a gendered aspect to them as they focus heavily on women to transmit social behaviour and conventions.³⁶⁵ That's where the role of *shaykhas* and sisters comes into play.³⁶⁶

Co-optation also meant that the policy of secularization was no longer possible. This was increasingly so in light of the growing membership and importance of the Islamized spaces and the pervasion of their message. As stated earlier, secularists' efforts to put forward a secular personal status law, to ban polygamy, and give equal inheritance to men and women, were proven in vain.³⁶⁷ In fact, a legislative amendment that was

³⁶² Oral sources; quoted in Annika Rabo, "Gender, State and Civil Society," Hann, Chris and Elizabeth Dunn, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 170. In 1982, the regime had issued a decree prohibiting the wearing of headscarves anywhere in the educational system.³⁶² In one conversation I had with a school director whose school received in the early 1980s clear orders to forbid veiling in her school, she admitted being shocked and confused by the speech.

³⁶³ These groups are not simple instruments of state domination as we will see in Part III of this work. They are mainly Sufi groups more interested in a past prestige and they have a social agenda more focused on every individual's way of life than politics. They aim at the creation of an Islamic society through the moral reform of every man and woman rather than through the power of the state, and are involved in a process of re-islamization from below through social action.

³⁶⁴ Paulo Pinto, "Dangerous Liaisons: Sufism and the state in Syria," in Jakelc S. and J. Varsoke (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: from Syria to Slovakia*, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 14, 2003, p. 7.

³⁶⁵ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, pp. 151-152.

³⁶⁶ The role of *shaykhas* will be discussed in the last part of this dissertation.

³⁶⁷ Rabo, "Gender, State and Civil Society," p. 170.

expected as late as June 2009 to further secularize the Personal Status Law in Syria was considered a new de-secularizing move and a blow to demands for identical rights between men and women in Syria. According to critics, it contravened the concept of citizenship stated in the Syrian Constitution: The draft consolidated the rule of Islamic courts and other religious courts over all matters related to marriage, divorce and inheritance. It maintained Islamic clauses that have been under attack by secular lobbyists in the country since 1958. For instance, the draft continued to allow polygamy for men, and the marriage of children under the age of 18. It legislated that women are to require their husbands' permission before being able to travel outside the country (which is a new clause), and made women's work linked to their husbands' approval after divorce in the case the couple's children were kept by the mother. The draft ignored the recommendations of the civil rights experts and committees. In fact, even moderate interpretations of Islamic laws endorsed by a number of Syrian shaykhs were dismissed.³⁶⁸ Although, the draft has not yet been approved by the President or the

³⁶⁸ For instance, in his Islamic *Tajdeed* (Renewal) program, Shaykh Muhammad Habash asserts the right of the woman to state the conditions of her marriage in her marriage contract. He rejects the marriage of children under the age of 18, and states that women have the right to divorce their husbands with or without his approval. More specifically, the *Tajdeed* program states the following (pp. 18-20):

نؤمن بحق الفتاة في اختيار شريكها وننكر إجبار البكر على الزواج تحت أي ذريعة، ونؤمن بحقها في الخطوبة والتعرف على من تراه أهلاً لمشاركتها في الحياة، وذلك عبر اللقاء والحديث والكلام، مع التأكيد على رفض الخلوة الشرعية قبل القول المعروف وهو العقد.

ونرى أن الخطوبة فترة حقيقية لكي يعرف كل من الخاطبين صاحبه، بما في ذلك النظر إلى ما يعجبه منها على اختلاف بين الفقهاء نختار منه مذهب الإمام أحمد ليسره وواقعته، وهو وسط بين رأي الجمهور وبين رأي ابن حزم.

ونطالب بحق المرأة في الخلع على الرجل ولو بدون رضاه، إذا ردت له المهر، ولا نرى له حقاً في مراجعتها في عدة الخلع.

ونرى أن الطلاق حق الرجل مرتين وحق الشرع في الثالثة، فيملك في الطلقتين الرجعة ولا يملكها في الثالثة، ولا يجوز هدم الحياة الزوجية بأقل مما بنيت به من الإرادة الصحيحة والصيغة بلفظ الطلاق دون سواء، والإشهاد عليه، كما في نص الآية: وأشهدوا ذوي عدل منكم

ونرى أن لا يقع الطلاق إلا في المحكمة احتياطاً وحماية لحق الزوجين، ومن حق الفقهاء أن يضعوا الضوابط الملزمة لهذه الغاية.

نؤمن أن النبي الكريم لم يعدد على زوجته أم أولاده، واحترم مشاعرها حتى ماتت رغم أنها كانت قد بلغت الخامسة والستين وهي أكبر منه بخمسة عشر عاماً فضرب المثل الأعلى في الوفاء للزوجة شريكة العمر، وكان يشترك الشرط إياه على من يخطب بناته من الأصهار كما في حال أبي العاص وعثمان وعلي، ولم تقبل بنات رسول الله دخول ضرائر عليهن.

وننكر أن يكون التعدد تلبية لسعار الرجل، فالرجل والمرأة في هذا سواء، وعلى الزوج أن يعف ويكف ويرضى بقسمة الله، ولا ننكر التعدد إذا كانت تدعو له حاجة ماسة، ومعيار ذلك رضى المرأة الأولى.

Parliament, the fact that it was drafted as such was a clear sign that the long awaited secular family law was not on the regime's agenda. The Syrian regime's co-optation measures have since the early 1980s trapped the regime in a well-known trend followed by other Middle Eastern regimes that fosters religious institutions and social Islamic revivalism in search for legitimacy.³⁶⁹

Furthermore, following the Hama episode of February 1982, many people from different backgrounds started questioning the legitimacy of the Ba'athist state. Despite the terror that the Muslim Brotherhood stirred in Syria, the state-conducted Hama massacre has acquired a symbolic significance to a great number of Syrians from different political, ethnic and religious backgrounds.³⁷⁰ Van Dam noted that the regime's propaganda and its campaign to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood were seen as "so crude and strident that it antagonized rather than won over the larger part of the devout population." He added "The Muslim Brotherhood not unjustifiably claimed that the regime's propaganda against them only helped to strengthen their position."³⁷¹ Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood acts of terror had not erupted in a vacuum. They were an extremist expression of the society's discontent with the new government. As stated in the previous chapters, on the one hand, many social inequalities had been created, similar to those that the 'Corrective Movement' of Asad was supposed to correct. Corruption in the Ba'ath party had started to appear on the surface; a few military officers and government servants had acquired vast wealth and were careerists and profiteers rather than 'correctivists.' On the other hand, many abuses of power and ill-gotten gains by Asad's associates, many of whom were 'Alawis, were left unpunished.

Accordingly, fueled by the Brothers' discourse concerning their socio-economic disadvantages and grievances, and the tangible impact of Syria's economic recession in the late 1970s, lower middle class Sunni urbanites started sympathizing with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. This explains the sudden resurgence *en masse* of the veil in the country in the early 1980s.³⁷² Furthermore, in empathy towards the innocent bystanders who were killed in Hama, and as a symbol of silent dissidence, a great number of women in Syria – many of whom had chosen to take the veil off less than 50 years earlier-- decided as representatives of their groups' identity, to wear the *hijab* in the streets, offices, schools and universities.³⁷³ In this context, women as representatives of their group became embroiled in the struggle over religious identity and the legitimacy of

For a brief overview of the draft, see Syria Briefing, IWPR Report, 12 June 2009; *Gulf News*, 23 June 2009. For more on Muhammad Habash's movement, see chapter 7 of this work.

³⁶⁹ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 153.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³⁷¹ Van Dam, *the Struggle for Power in Syria*, pp. 95-96.

³⁷² Private communication with a number of Syrian experts who had witnessed and written about the topic.

³⁷³ Rabo, "Gender, State and Civil Society," pp. 169-170.

the regime. In order to salvage the threatened Islamic identity, women's behaviour, their dress and appearance had to reflect certain interpretations of religious texts and mores.³⁷⁴

The veil became, not a symbol of lack of choice as it was proclaimed less than fifty years earlier, but rather a distinguishing mark of the anti-Ba'thist Sunni woman.³⁷⁵ Both Asad and the audience understood that the veil was no longer just a religious garment, but a political statement as well; one of the signs of a suppressed civil society.³⁷⁶

Nevertheless, political motivation and anti-Ba'thist feelings, having probably been the initial motivation of some women, were no longer the only reason an increasing number of Syrian women started wearing the *hijab* as this was becoming a wide regional phenomenon in the 1980s. In fact, Hafez al-Asad's address helped identify a vacuum in which women were left to define and wrestle their civic rights on their own. On the one hand, the regime was gradually moving away from its secular stance. On the other hand, the incidents ensuing in the Hama massacre had dealt a severe blow to society in Syria, which had increased the attraction of compensatory and conservative normative ideologies. Therefore, with the reversal of previous policies that promoted secular feminism and economic and social advancement for women, and the general decline of secular and leftist activism, the younger generation began to turn towards religious alternatives.

The combination of these circumstances made it increasingly difficult for some women to adopt a secular liberal behaviour. In other words, even so women were encouraged by the state to take on a wider array of roles; having access to education and governmental positions, however, the state had not fully instituted a haven for them that could protect these women economically, politically and more importantly, socially. In other words, there were no real empowering alternatives. Consequently, educated or not, economically independent or not, many women in Syria saw no alternative to the patriarchal society's norms. The conflict between the regime and the Muslim Brothers demonstrated the persistence of the patriarchal order in a polarized political environment.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the conflict, women's relationship with the state became a matter mediated through family and sectarian ties. Labour statistics in the private sector show that many women chose/had to re-prioritize their subordinate familial roles. Syrian women's national duty meant that they were to return to the "home" in order to oppose the Ba'thist nationalist agenda, whether it served them or not. Had Asad told the Syrian public that dress – as a symbol – was not a personal matter in Syria; women might not have tended to re-become representatives of their sects and families.

The consequences of the conflict and the state's need to accommodate certain religious tendencies in order to maintain its grip over power have reversed what appeared to be the steady expansion of women's rights. Today, although women in Syria are active in most areas of life, their influence is not equally reflected in society. The confrontation between the state and the Islamic movement forced a majority of women to become symbols of social dissent and counter-symbols of the Ba'thist state, pitting individual

³⁷⁴ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 154.

³⁷⁵ For more on the topic, see Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*.

³⁷⁶ This was clear in Asad's speech concerning the veil (mentioned above).

rights against collective values. The regime's attempts to contain the political crisis and appease the 'religious class' required a tacit compromise on women's rights. The regime's strategy to mute secularism and co-opt the religious in Syria enunciated an official return towards the reinstitution and re-legitimization of the separation between private/public spheres where a woman had to confine herself to a more 'intimate and reserved context' and where religious leaders once more assumed authority over public morality. Since the Hama crisis, the mix of repression and co-optation of the religious class, partly through gender bargains, has stabilized the civic order; yet the Syrian regime has since not enacted reforms to secularize the Personal Status Law, arguing that its secular feminist agenda has been set aside in interests of 'social convention'.

The Regional Factor

It was demonstrated hitherto that the dramatic economic and social changes that occurred due to the Baʿthist revolution and under the regime of Hafez al-Asad led to the rise in the late 1970s of Islamist militant activity in Syria. It will become clear in later chapters that the regime's policy of co-optation and compromise with the business and religious classes, albeit put down the violence, promoted the Islamic revival that Syria is witnessing today.

This section delineates the contours of another regime policy that has promoted Islamic and Islamist revivalism in Syria (as will be shown in Part III of this work).³⁷⁷ The Syrian regime's regional policy and Syria's strategic relations with its neighbouring Islamists is hence the subject of the following section.

States typically sponsor groups as their proxies for ideological, domestic, strategic and leverage reasons.³⁷⁸ Throughout its history, the Baʿth regime, certainly under Hafez al-Asad and even more so since the early 1990s, has sought to expand its regional support network in order to extend its pan-Arab ideology, to strengthen and legitimize its power domestically, to influence its neighbours, and more importantly to oust Israeli and American influence in the region. Ironically, Asad's efforts to build support regionally found a receptive audience with Islamist movements in surrounding states.

But why would a regime, claimant to the Baʿthi secular mantle, support groups that are existentially anti-Baʿth? Although this is not officially part of the regime's policy of co-optating the religious in Syria, it does fall within these lines in the long-run as Islamic groups continue to tighten their grip over Syrian society. Indeed, it is rather due to Hafez al-Asad's use of realpolitik in order to play a major role in the region.

In fact, Syrian existential fears of the Israeli neighbour, deepened by the 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, and the ensuing need to weaken Tel Aviv, drove Syria to seek strategic parity with Israel. To do so, and given its lack of any credible Arab military option to balance against Israeli power, not to mention being surrounded by hostile regimes in Jordan and Iraq, Syria chose in the 1980s to fortify its alliance with Iran and acted as an intermediary between the Islamic Republic and the Arab states. Syria also created a much-needed patron-client relationship with the Soviet Union.

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria's regional worries increased significantly. Bereft in the 1990s of its patron and in its pursuit of strategic

³⁷⁷ It will be argued that the Syrian regime's foreign policy meant to strategically control Islamist groups in the region, will have a domestic aspect to it. This section serves as a basis for understanding the resurgence of Islamist militancy in the early 2000. Thus, Syria's foreign policy will be further examined in chapter 6 of this dissertation.

³⁷⁸ See Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

parity with Israel, and her hopes for the latter dashed with the subsequent rise of American supremacy, Syria indeed needed to pursue politics by other means.³⁷⁹

Henceforth, on account of a convergence of interests, and despite their different ideologies and the ensuing risks, Hafez al-Asad's realist vision resulted in a number of complex, controversial and yet powerful patron-client relationships that went beyond traditional support for a number of organizations in the region, such as the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). Indeed, seeking to re-order Syria's geopolitical environment, and in an attempt to counterbalance Israel's steady expanded front, the 1990s witnessed the Damascus regime moving closer towards becoming a patron of Palestinian Muslim Brothers and other Islamist movements operating in the region. Since then, Syria's foreign policy has meant, in total autonomy from its domestic setting, the surprising significant use of Islamist organizations such as Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Palestine, as regional allies.

Still, regionally, neither Jordan nor Egypt sanctioned such an important role for Islamic groups as part of their foreign policy. As a result, although very different in their ideologies than the one endorsed by the Syrian Ba'ath,³⁸⁰ Hamas and the PIJ were allowed permanent bases and offices in Syria. The information office of Hamas and the headquarters of the PIJ were established in Damascus. While Syria asserts these groups are legitimate armed resistance groups, and not terrorist organizations, and that their Syrian headquarters are merely civilian offices, Israel and the United States claim they ensure and coordinate a mechanism through which Palestinian Islamists are trained, given logistical assistance, and funded by the Syrians.³⁸¹

The Islamic Jihad, a smaller ally to Hamas, was formed in the 1980s as a guerilla organization with no overt political ideology. It claims to receive its orders in general from a secret council which is in continuous contact with the leadership in Damascus whose head, Dr. Fathi Shakaki, was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It is led now by Ramadan 'Abdullah Shallah, a Gaza-born, 43 year old academic who previously taught as an adjunct professor at the University of South Florida. He was chosen leader in 1995 after Fathi al-Shakaki was widely believed to be assassinated by Israeli agents.

³⁷⁹ Syria had signed on the 8th of October 1980 a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union.

³⁸⁰ For instance, the PIJ's ideology is stated as the following: "Our clear and strategic goal is the mobilization of the Muslim public on our occupied soil and its direction towards a war of jihad against the thieving Zionist entity. The armed struggle is the only way to defeat the Jewish entity on the soil of Palestine." See *Yediot Ahronot*, 18 Novembre 1994.

³⁸¹ See the Israeli military intelligence report at: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA> "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism (Based on Interrogations of Arrested Palestinian Terrorists and Captured Palestinian Authority Documents)," Document number TR6-548-02, Israel Defense Forces, Military Intelligence, September 2002.

Hamas, which was allowed to open a new office in March 2000 in Damascus, was created during the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987 by Palestinian Muslim Brothers.³⁸² It is alleged that in 2002, some 10% of its budget came from Iran via Syria and Hizbullah.³⁸³ The Israeli Mossad claims Iranian funds are transferred to the Palestinian territories through the PIJ and Hamas, and via the Syrian banking system.³⁸⁴ More than providing an operational base, interrogation of Hamas and PIJ activists captured by the Israeli intelligence has allegedly revealed that Syria also provides training camps to the activists and detailed professional instructions regarding explosive charge preparations.³⁸⁵

Asad's efforts to expand Syria's regional front so to avoid diplomatic marginalization has also included Lebanon. Since its independence from the French occupation, Lebanon has been perceived by Damascus as Syria's political and security backyard, hence organically and inescapably affecting the Syrian political environment. It is with this in mind that Syria has intervened repeatedly in the domestic political affairs of its western neighbour. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Asad's struggle for Lebanon translated into a convergence of interests between Damascus and the Lebanese Shi'i resistance movement. Having befriended their leader Imam Musa al-Sadr in the early 1970s and allied his regime with Iran in 1979, the Shi'i Islamic movement decidedly moved to Asad's side first through the mainstream Shi'i movement AMAL,³⁸⁶ and then also under the more religiously-inspired Hizbullah.

Although Hafez al-Asad was supposedly wary of an Islamist group getting out of Syria's control in nearby Lebanon in the early 1980s, having struggled with his own Islamist groups domestically, his pragmatic vision meant that his regime was to make use of every asset it had.³⁸⁷ The Ba'th regime's patron-client relationship with Amal has served 3 purposes: 1) Amal had passively backed Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 1976; 2) the relationship allowed Asad to cement his ties with Iran where Seale writes that "[Asad's] needs for proxies to harass Israel coincided with Iran's eagerness to export its revolutionary message"³⁸⁸; 3) and it provided the Syrian regime in its struggle with Israel in 1982-1983 with an important player given the movement's opposition to Israel.³⁸⁹ For instance, the Amal militia proved to be a powerful ally as it fought

³⁸² Katzman, *Terrorism, Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors* (Report for Congress), The Library Congress, 2002, p. 35.

³⁸³ Katzman, *Terrorism, Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors* (Report for Congress), p. 11.

³⁸⁴ See <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/The+Iranian+Threat/Support+of+terror/Iran>

³⁸⁵ Katzman, *Terrorism*, p. 45.

³⁸⁶ The AMAL movement was established in 1975 by Imam Musa al-Sadr. In Arabic the name means hope, but it is also the acronym for *Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya* (Lebanese Resistance Detachments). Patrick Seale notes that the Lebanese Shi'a in the South had welcomed Israel's invasion of Lebanon in the hope that the Israelis would deliver them from "the high-handed Palestinians, but... Israel's attempt to impose Maronite rule drove the Shi'a into outright opposition." See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 396.

³⁸⁷ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 396.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 396-397.

alongside other Syrian proxies such as Walid Jumlat's Druze forces for control of West Beirut against Israel in August-September 1983. The mainstream Shi'i movement had also successfully seized control over West Beirut in February 1984.³⁹⁰

The regime also made special use of his relations with the other Lebanese Shi'i resistance movement, Hizbullah (the Party of God). Founded in the mid-1980s, Hizbullah is not the creation of Syria but rather of Iran and has considered the 1978-1980 Iranian Islamic Revolution as an inspiration to action.³⁹¹ As'ad Abu Khalil explains that Hizbullah "emerged as a result of the convergence of Lebanese Shiite interests with Iranian foreign policy orientations."³⁹² Although wary of the movement in the 1980s, soon and with the closing doors of the Cold War, Hizbullah became Syria's most important surrogate and proxy in Lebanese territory.³⁹³ Indeed, the patron-client relationship that emerged was mutually purposeful. While Hizbullah needed Syria for cover, Syria used Hizbullah to pose as an important regional player, one that should not be dismissed so easily and whose interests and grievances were to be addressed. After all, with Syrian support, Hizbullah became the only non-Palestinian movement still willing in the 1990s to continue armed struggle against Israel from the Lebanese South on the basis that Lebanese territory remained occupied by Israel. Syria was often accused of allowing Iran to operate training camps in the Bekaa Valley when Syrian forces were present in Lebanon.³⁹⁴ It is in fact through Hizbullah that Israel claims Syria transfers equipment and quality weapons sent by Iran to the Palestinian and Lebanese territories. Of course - as stated above - to do so, Syria has had to develop a very close relationship with Iran, a major sponsor and political patron of Islamist groups in the region and has a lot of influence over them.

Thus, Syria's patron-client relations with the Shi'i movement serve a number of purposes: 1) they are deployed as a general mechanism of influence in Lebanon and help keep other parties functioning in Lebanon in line; 2) they are deployed as a pressure instrument against Israel in its balance of terror tactics; 3) these tactics provide a legitimacy card domestically and regionally, since the Islamist movement's fight against Israel is popularly supported by the Arab peoples in the region; 4) and they are used as a mechanism for controlling the Wahhabi web of influence in Syria (led by Saudi Arabia).³⁹⁵

Similarly, Syria deployed patron-client relationships and alliances with the Sunni Islamist resistance groups in order to extend its vision, one which avows to be rooted in nationalism and Arabism and transcends regionality and territoriality. This vision has earned her the title of the Bastion of Arabism and made her appear the region's populist

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 414-415 and p. 468.

³⁹¹ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 34 and p. 36.

³⁹² As'ad Abu Khalil, "Ideology and practice of Hizballah in Lebanon: Islamization of Leninist organizational principles," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1 July 1991, p. 391.

³⁹³ Norton, *Hezbollah*, p. 35.

³⁹⁴ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 396.

³⁹⁵ Points 1 and 2 from Norton, *Hezbollah*, p. 35.

power *par excellence*.³⁹⁶ Such alliances not only help polish the Syrian regime's pan-Arab and pan-Islamic resistance credentials, they also demonstrate to regional foes that they are not alone in the region, that Israel's policies toward the Palestinians cannot be isolated from the region as a whole, and that Syria will defend her interests.

Furthermore, Syria's use of those alliances served one other purpose crucial to a regime that relies on its foreign policy for survival and influence: they allowed the regime to keep a tight control over Arab Islamist activity at home. Indeed, in using and harbouring regional Islamists, the Syrian regime succeeded in weakening Syria's regional competitors on the one hand, and in keeping these organizations under supervision and control within Syria on the other hand. These trends, still being furthered by the Ba'thi regime under Bashar al-Asad, will be examined in the following Part (III) of this work.

However, it is in this field that the seeds of trouble were sown. Syria's use of Islamist groups has allowed certain groups to become stronger, making the country's need to exploit while still control the empowered groups even more problematic given Syria's domestic Islamic revivalism and the covert sectarian tension that underlies its socio-political foundations. Furthermore, a number of Syrian experts claim that many in Syria oppose the regime's support of the Lebanese Shi'i movement and its alliance with Iran at the expense of its good relations with the Lebanese Sunni constituency and its leaders, and accuse the regime of supporting the Shi'i group for sectarian reasons rather than nationalistic ones.³⁹⁷ This feeling, if harnessed by Islamic counter-elites, can help pave the way for radical Sunni collective action against the regime.³⁹⁸

The possibility that the regime's foreign policy in the regional proximity is conducive to an Islamist revivalism in Syria will be further examined in Part III of this work.

Conclusion of Part II

This Part (II) surveyed the reasons behind the decline of political Islam and Islamism as a model for change in Syria. It explicated the Asad regime's policies in containing and co-opting the Syrian Islamic bourgeoisie and underlined the results of these policies, namely the muting of secular elements within the regime, the sponsorship of an Islam considered "moderate" and essentially pro-regime, the shaping of a socio-economic order strides away from the populist Ba'thist doctrine in order to co-opt Syria's religious class, and the use of regional Islamist groups in order to assert Syria's Arabist and nationalist stance while influencing regional realities. At the level of civil society, the

³⁹⁶ Syria's direct involvement with those Islamist groups is defended by Syrians on the basis that the movements Damascus hosts and consolidates are legitimate resistance movements against Israeli occupation.

³⁹⁷ Interviews conducted during the months of March and April 2008.

³⁹⁸ See <http://almaqdes.com/c?i=98>. See also <http://www.alsunah.net> (13/08/2008)

changing status of women reflected these changes expanding the social and political profile of the Islamist trend in Syria.

On their part, domestically, Islamic groups wishing to survive Asad's iron fist have since transformed from political actors to social groups interested in a socially-oriented bottom-up kind of change. In response to the critically needed Islamic compromise, the Syrian regime has had meanwhile to silence its "atheist" and secularist members, hence compromising its own ideological base and legitimacy. Furthermore, in its control and co-optation measures, the Ba'th has reinvigorated both Syria's Islamic environment and a Damascene bourgeois class that are certain to outgrow the government's ability to control them. Indeed the regime has been developing a *modus vivendi* with the mistrusted bourgeoisie and the religious class. Nonetheless, the regime's balancing act between the different social forces, successful in the 1980s, has become more tenuous in the 1990s and, as we will see, increasingly so under Bashar al-Asad's government.

In fact, the Syrian regime's strategy of shifting the conflict from one between the Muslim Brothers and a corrupt sectarian ruling clic to one between 'moderate good Muslims' and 'radical terrorist Muslims' has been fraught with paradoxes and dangers. The regime's muting of Syria's secular elements while controlling and co-opting its Islamic groups has resulted in the creation of a large Syrian Islamic sector growing powerful enough to encroach on all aspects of Syrian life, including the political. The old alliance between the elite in its older and newer forms and the religious class is re-emerging, again at the expense of supporting socially and economically marginalised groups. Syria's foreign policy, which includes relying on and supporting Islamic groups operating in the region, is adding to the regime's troubles as Syrian society is further Islamizing. Hence, far from dying, the Islamic movement in Syria was actually reinforced in the 1980s; its form, however, changed for the most part from that of an illegal Islamic/Islamist movement to a regime-tolerated and co-opted apolitical, neo-fundamentalist movement focusing on the reform of every individual. This new brew has resulted in a significant change to the nature of both state and the society in Syria.

The regime certainly achieved complete co-optation by disregarding the "atheist" and secular principles of the Ba'th ideology; the creation of new alliances with the religious and business classes and Islamic institutions to broaden the regime's social base of support beyond its traditional supporters and to control possible targets of Islamist outreach; a relaxation of Syria's populist authoritarian drive and a reinvigoration of the private economic sector; and finally the creation of an Islam, dubbed moderate and rightful, deployed to replace the one advanced by the Muslim Brethren.

In retrospect, the unintended consequences of these state policies was the eventual assertion of Islam, and the rise of Islamist activism concomitant with the demise of the old Ba'thist, secular order in Syria. In an attempt to understand the consequences of Hafez al-Asad's choices in controlling the Syrian doemstic scene, the following Part (Part III) explores the implications of his strategies underlying his son's policies and alignment choices.

Part III

Bashar's Era: Islamic and Islamist Revivalism?

Chapter 6

Bashar Following in his Father's Footsteps: the Promotion of Moderate Islam in the name of de-radicalization

Introduction

The preceding chapters in this dissertation delineated the Islamic contours of the domestic context that Bashar al-Asad's regime inherited in July 2000. In so doing, they illustrated the ways in which an avowedly hard-core, secular Ba'athist regime dealt with the Islamic militant opposition from its rise in 1963 to its seeming demise at the beginning of the 1980s. It was demonstrated that PA survival strategies, which were meant to consolidate regime control of the political arena, in fact paved the way for the emergence of a new "reformed" and "moderate" Islamic movement as a remarkably significant player on the Syrian domestic scene.³⁹⁹

Part III of this dissertation examines the period since Bashar al-Asad's rise to power. It inspects the development of state-Islamic and state-Islamist relations and their impacts on Syrian society by focusing upon the following questions: How has the Islamic movement evolved under the current regime in Syria? In what ways have President Bashar al-Asad's policies as regards to Syria's Islamic revivalism differed from/been similar to those of his father? To what extent has the Bashar regime been able to successfully co-opt the Islamic and Islamist movements, and what does this demonstrate in terms of the larger analytical question driving this dissertation, i.e., what are the roots of Islamist activism in a secular authoritarian state and how has such activism evolved?

In order to answer these questions, the elements of both continuity and change in the Syrian state's relationship with an increasingly autonomous and powerful Islamic movement are examined. I suggest that the new President seems to be facing similar economic, social and geo-political challenges as those faced by his predecessor in the early stages of his regime, namely an economic crisis exacerbated by strong demographic growth, Islamist militant activity at the domestic level, and a new geopolitical reality as a

³⁹⁹ As shown in previous chapters, this socially engineered reinforcement and empowerment from above of Syria's Islamic movement included a vital transformation in *form*; the Syrian regime not only promoted a strategically quiescent, although still large and powerful, parallel Islamic sector, the Islamic sector also transformed from a largely anti-Ba'athist regime Islamic/Islamist movement to a semi-autonomous, pro-regime, apolitical fundamentalist movement focusing on the reform of the Syrian individual. Furthermore, as part of its re-organization of the Syrian Islamic scene, the regime felt sufficiently secure domestically to use regional Islamist militants to influence Syria's transforming geopolitical environment without the fear of this policy encouraging militancy inside of the country. Important to add here that regional policy successes have no doubt added to the stability of the regime.

result of war in the region. But an important *difference* in the situation facing Bashar's regime is that his response options are narrowing. This constraint is the result of the previous regime's economic, social and regional policies discussed in the previous chapter. These survival policies have led to an ongoing re-configuration of state-society relations that are no longer entirely under the current regime's control.

The new Political Command thus stands at a critical juncture, which, I argue, is the natural outcome of the built-in structural limitations of the Populist Authoritarian (PA) regime created by the Ba'ath in 1963.⁴⁰⁰ Ultimately, the regime's survival strategies, while successful in postponing larger structural adjustments under Hafez al-Asad's command, are no longer sufficient to tame the opposition or to secure the loyalty of strategic sectors. This is because economic development without political liberalization is "bound to deepen civil society, and continuing social mobilization in this context will generate stronger, more autonomous social forces that cannot readily be controlled except through greater political liberalization."⁴⁰¹

More specifically, the argument is as follows: Hafez al-Asad's regime succeeded in maintaining its control over the mobilized Islamic groups, but this is no longer the case under Bashar. The change is due to a number of intertwined reasons: in the non-democratic setting of Syrian politics, the social engineering from above that is aimed at inhibiting the emergence of a viable anti-regime political alternative and thus at consolidating regime control, has constrained the set of options available to the regime. On one hand, the Islamic sector that was allowed to develop and recruit members under Hafez al-Asad has today become a significant organizational force that, thanks to its outreach methods,⁴⁰² is growing increasingly independent of the regime's bandwagon. On the other hand, the bourgeois class that Hafez al-Asad co-opted through selective economic liberalization has also grown to become an important force, and is pushing for further economic decompression.

However, an increased liberalization of the economy, while it would satisfy the powerful capitalist and *arriviste* elements linked to the regime, would not only result in a widening of the gap between the impoverished masses and the elite, but would also mean that the regime could no longer maintain its populist and social welfare orientation and would thus no longer be seen as being allied with the middle and lower working classes. Thus, a combination of state withdrawal from the economy, increased socio-economic grievances in society as a result of rising social inequality, and a vibrant Islamist sector has altered the strategic choices of the leadership in Damascus.

It is at this juncture that the link between the economic and the Islamic factors is located: no longer subsidized, and feeling abandoned by the state, the impoverished class no longer relies on the regime's social policies for support. Its members are therefore in the process of shifting their attention and allegiance towards the only sector allowed to

⁴⁰⁰ Populist Authoritarian regimes do not remain popular or representative of popular interests; they suffer from built-in contradictions between their attempts to mobilize yet control popular participation, and the rise of a new bourgeoisie whose vested interest lies in economic liberalization. See Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*.

⁴⁰¹ See Hinnebusch "Calculated Decompression as a Substitute for Democratization: Syria."

⁴⁰² These will be examined in chapter 7 of this work.

prosper under the previous regime, the Islamic sector. This is especially so given the Islamic groups proficient welfare contributions (the extent of which will be discussed in chapter 7).

A critical examination of the regime's social, economic and regional policies will serve to validate the above arguments, and is presented in the first chapter of Part III. Chapter 6 will thus survey the ongoing de-secularization of the Syrian social system and the regime's renewed alliance with the Islamic sector, as well as the regime's economic policies, particularly the abandonment of the remaining Ba'thist populist reforms and the encouragement of private enterprise. Also surveyed are the regime's regional policies, which have focused on deepening patron-client relations with Islamist groups in neighbouring countries, a step believed to be aimed at maintaining Syria's political standing and influence in the region.⁴⁰³

This tripartite examination will help to illustrate both how and why the current regime is failing in its efforts at maintaining control over Syria's active groups. It will become clear that the deepening alliance with Syria's Islamic (let alone Islamist) sector has become very risky, both to the regime and to Syria's overall social harmony. As will be shown in the last part of chapter 6 and in subsequent chapters, these social, economic and regional survival strategies once used by the elder Asad (described in Part II of this dissertation) are no longer able to control Syria's increasingly autonomous Islamic civil society, nor to prevent the resurgence of underground Islamist activity in the country, thereby failing to promote the regime's continued domination.

It is with this tension in mind that the following discussion focuses on the current Syrian regime's recipe (social, economic and regional) for dealing with the domestic and the regional situations, which, I infer, is deemed to fail if not accompanied by political liberalization.

Islamization from Above: How is Today's Ba'thist Regime Further Empowering Syria's Islamic Sector?

This section will discuss the social, economic and foreign policy measures deployed by the current regime in order to bolster its legitimacy in the eyes of the now powerful and increasingly independent Islamic sector, as well as to maintain the coalitions it inherited from the previous regime. In so doing, the section serves to illustrate the growing strength of the Islamic sector in light of the limits of these survival strategies within the current political exigencies.

The State Response to a Growing Islamic Sector

⁴⁰³ A dubious region where Iraq - now deemed to be a friendly neighbour after the collapse of the competing Ba'th regime - is no longer capable of providing Syria with the military weight and strategic depth it needs to sustain its military strategic balance with her foes in the region (regional policy).

Once he acceded to power in July 2000, the new President Bashar al-Asad appeared to be remaining loyal to the secular core of the Baʿthist creed.⁴⁰⁴ When asked about Syria's Islamic question, Bashar repeated the same sort of speech that his father might have given a few years earlier. For instance, in one of his earliest interviews after becoming President, Bashar al-Asad commented to a German journalist on the possibility of having an Islamic party within the confines of the National Progressive Front.⁴⁰⁵ He explained that the umbrella of stability must not be damaged, and that existing religious and ethnic structures should not be attacked, as this would be too explosive for Syria. The Syrian President added that he feared developments like those that took place in Algeria in 1991 would occur in Syria. He said that "[a]t that time, the [Algerian] government misjudged the people, and the Islamists threatened to assume power. To this day, the Algerians are paying the price for this miscalculation." When the journalist asked Asad how he proposed to prevent such an eventuality in Syria, or in his words, to prevent "the formation of religious parties that are democratically elected, but then act undemocratically," Asad argued that one cannot apply Western standards to developments in the Middle East: "In Germany, you may have a religious Christian party, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), but it has effectively assimilated itself into the fabric of the country. In return, your history prevents you from having any large nationalist parties. Our experience has shown us that the situation in Syria became stable because the entire society is secular. We must preserve that."⁴⁰⁶

However, Bashar al-Asad was clearly concerned about the political and oppositional potential of the Syrian Islamists. Therefore, while expressing his loyalty to secularism, Bashar al-Asad also recognized the importance of continuing his father's policy of promoting moderate Islam in order to impede the advance of Islamist militancy.⁴⁰⁷ Aware of the Islamic sector's growing influence and autonomy domestically, the secular regime chose to increasingly flirt with that sector. In the course of this flirtation, Bashar declared his regime to be a patron of moderate Islam,⁴⁰⁸ and also undertook a number of concrete measures that signaled a new era of significant compromise between the regime and Syria's Islamic movement, thereby further

⁴⁰⁴ The rise of Bashar al-Asad to power was not a surprising to Syrians. Following the death of his brother, Bashar was quite clearly being groomed to take on his father's position, and within six weeks of his father's death, Bashar was elected in a referendum with 97.3 percent of the votes.

⁴⁰⁵ *Der Spiegel*, 9 July 2001.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ Addressed during Bashar al-Asad's inaugural speech and the 10th Baʿth Conference in June 2005. See *Teshreen*, 6 June 2005; *Al-Hayat*, 19 June 2005. A number of Syrian observers agree that Baʿthist ideology no longer guides the regime's moves. See also David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005; and Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2005.

⁴⁰⁸ Moubayed, "The Islamic Revival in Syria," *Mideast Monitor* 1, 3 (September-October 2006) at http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0609/0609_4.htm (Last viewed 3 May 2009)

integrating the country's Islamic element into the wider society.⁴⁰⁹ Moubayed writes that, "[w]hile the Islamic revival in Syria is fueled by societal conditions and perceptions, it has been championed by Assad [Bashar al-Asad] as a means of defusing radical Islamist opposition to the state and bolstering popular support for his regime in the face of mounting Western hostility and defiance by secular opposition groups."⁴¹⁰ But, as stated above, this aim of "defusion" is inherently flawed. The following sections examine in turn the current regime's social, economic and regional policies "championing" Islamic revivalism, and the risks and failures that these policies are in the process of yielding.

Islamization from Above and the Regime's Social Policies

From the beginning of Bashar al-Asad's rule, it was clear that the new regime felt a need to bolster its Islamic legitimacy and to further accommodate Syria's increasingly powerful Islamic movement into the country's nascent civil society.⁴¹¹ Therefore, the new President immediately made a number of decisions and brought forward several bills that reinforced his regime's alliance with Syria's Islamic movement.

In one of his first moves, the President promulgated a bill allowing those in political exile to return safely to Syria, including opposition figures who were prominent members of Syria's Islamic movement living abroad. Thus in September 2001, Bashar al-Asad allowed the return of Abu Fateh al-Bayanuni, the brother of the Muslim Brotherhood leader 'Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, and released long-serving prisoners accused of belonging to the Islamist movement. The Ba'th regime also released about 700 Muslim Brotherhood political prisoners a year into Bashar's presidency, among them senior Islamic leaders such as Khalid al-Shami, who was one of the leaders of the Islamic rebellion and had been in prison since 1982. Another 112 were released in December of 2004.

Another early measure taken by Bashar al-Asad was to repeal his father's 1982 decree prohibiting the wearing of headscarves by girls in any part of the educational

⁴⁰⁹ In his inaugural speech, beyond Bashar al-Asad's promise of allegiance to his father's legacy and continuity of his policies, he also stressed the importance of domestic development, technical modernization and integration within the world, all previously neglected by his father in favour of maintaining steady foreign policy. He pledged to reform the education and administrative systems and to encourage the evolution of civil society in Syria. In his speech, he stressed the importance of 'democratic thinking' and 'the principle of accepting the opinion of the other.' Accordingly, despite relying on a few advisors from his father's circle, Bashar made some very significant changes in the course of consolidating his power. Ultimately, a new generational guard took over at almost all levels of government. In the same vein, in July 2003, Bashar al-Asad issued a decree separating the party and state; appointments to government offices would henceforth be based solely on merit rather than party affiliation. See *Syria Times*, 18 July 2000; Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernization and the limits of Change*, pp. 9-10.

⁴¹⁰ Moubayed, "The Islamic Revival in Syria," [Online]. See also *The New York Times*, 6 April 2006.

⁴¹¹ As stated hitherto, this necessity was the result of Hafez al-Asad's co-optation measures in dealing with the non-militant Islamic opposition in the 1970s and early 1980s, measures that subsequently led to the re-creation of a powerful Islamic class, albeit one that lacked access to political power.

system in Syria.⁴¹² This move was seen as symbolically significant, in spite of the fact that the decree had not been enforced since Hafez al-Asad's speech in 1982 that dress was a personal matter.⁴¹³

The following two tables show the strength and vigorous influence (table 2) of the Islamic sector in Syria's cities, as compared to the relatively stagnant influence of equivalent secular institutions.

⁴¹² Zisser, "Syria, the Ba'th Regime and the Islamic Movement: Stepping on a New Path?" p. 43; idem, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007, p. 93.

⁴¹³ See Chapter 5 of this work.

Table 1

Syria	Islamic Organizations (including Charitable)	Islamic Schools and Islamic Institutes	Active Mosques	Secular Cultural Institutes ⁴¹⁴	Theatres (secular)
Total	584 (290)	976	Over 9,000	79	5
Members	72,751 Families	Women: 72,000 (active)		several thousand	several thousand
Outcome	842 Million Syrian Liras distributed		416,000 lessons/week		27 performances

* Table based on numbers provided by *al-Hayat*, 18 June 2005 and the Syrian Ministry of *Awqaf*, studies and statistics 31-12- 2007 and 31-12-2008.

Table 2

Governorates	Number of Mosques		Under Construction	Permits In Process	Not Constructed with Permits
	Formal	Informal			
Damascus	371	122	11	17	7
Damascus suburbs	182	591	95	15	18
Aleppo	450	1280	36	7	2
Lataquieh	85	195	3	6	---
Tartus	8	109	10	2	2
Homs	150	421	---	---	---
Hama	91	670	23	15	---
Idlib	74	960	34	114	---
Dayr al-Zur	27	1225	30	25	20
Al-Raqqah	19	435	23	6	5
Hasaka-	53	850	10	5	4
Quneitra	---	73	7	4	2
Dar'a	61	230	42	25	20
Total	1569	7162	324	241	80

*Table From Ministry of *Awqaf*, 31-12-2007

Another indication that Damascus was placating an increasingly influential Islamic sector was evident in the military as well. For instance, the year 2003 saw Asad lift a long-standing ban on prayer in military barracks. At the Ba'ath Party Conference of

⁴¹⁴ Secular Institutes such as the Goethe cultural center, and the Adham Isma'il Arts center.

June 2005, the Syrian regime declared that it would be a grave mistake not to give Islamists a platform to express their views given that frustration only leads to fundamentalism, this from a regime that claimed to champion moderate Islamic revival.⁴¹⁵ In 2007, the military academy invited religious authorities to lecture cadets for the first time. Bashar also closed down the notorious Mezza political prison, which had become a symbol of the regime's repression and was strongly feared by political dissidents. Indeed, within the first years of Bashar's rule, the number of detainees fell to between 300 and 1,000, which was a large drop compared to the some 4,000 political prisoners held by Syria in 1993.⁴¹⁶

In February 2004, the Syrian state organized Syria's first "religious" conference in 40 years. The conference was entitled *Tajdeed al-Khitab al-Dini* (Renewal of the Religious Message.) Even more striking was the regime's reaction to the Danish cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Muhammad in early 2006. While in Egypt and Jordan it was the Muslim Brotherhood that spearheaded the protests, Syria's protests were organized by the regime, which also authorized Islamic activists to mobilize the dormant masses.⁴¹⁷

That same year, the regime issued a decree expanding Syria's official Islamic institutions by endorsing the creation of a *Shari'a* faculty at the University of Aleppo. This was in addition to the existing *Shari'a* faculty at the University of Damascus, whose enrolment numbers about 7,600 students, half of whom are women, and that graduates around 600 students a year.⁴¹⁸ A high ranking official argued that the opening of such institutions helps to fill an important need given the increasing number of applicants wanting to study Islamic Law in Syria, whether from Syria or from abroad. He also claimed that such a move would serve to promote a moderate Islam, because of the lack of extremism in these academic environments.⁴¹⁹ Another high-ranking official assured me that the Syrian *Tajdeed* (Renewal) Movement is indeed led by "mindful shaykhs who are constantly communicating with the State", and other "moderate" 'ulama' within the Syrian Ministry of Awqaf. Accordingly, these religious scholars are constantly working to counter the radical [Islamic] regional and global elements, and to ensure that moderate as well as modern interpretations of Islam are made available to the public.⁴²⁰

Other significant moves made by the government included allowing the public to enter mosques outside prayer times for the first time since the early 1980s, and allowing Syrians to organize public festivals and to post religious banners in the streets in celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, something which had not been permitted in the country for decades.⁴²¹ For someone who has not visited the country for

⁴¹⁵ Zisser, "Syria, the Ba'th Regime and the Islamic Movement: Stepping on a New Path?" pp. 61-62.

⁴¹⁶ Joshua Landis, "The Syrian Opposition," *Washington Quarterly* 30, 1 (Winter 2006-2007), p. 47.

⁴¹⁷ *Times of London*, January 31, 2006; *Gulf News*, February 11, 2006.

⁴¹⁸ Syrian Ministry of Awqaf, 31 December 2007.

⁴¹⁹ *As-Safir*, 06 April 2006.

⁴²⁰ Personal Interview, Damascus, March 2008. Methods of outreach used by these Shaykhs are discussed in chapter 7 of this dissertation. .

⁴²¹ Moubayed, "Islamic Revival in Syria," [Online]. See also *The New York Times*, 6 April 2006.

a few years, the dispersion of religious banners on the streets of Damascus is almost a surreal experience given the once implicit prohibition of such religious manifestations.

Despite stopping short of politically accommodating⁴²² Syria's Islamic society, the regime did decide to incorporate some 'safety-valves' into the political system by allowing an increased number of prominent Islamic figures to compete for seats in the Syrian National Assembly. This was possibly due to the fact that the regime was extremely apprehensive of an American-orchestrated rapprochement with Saudi Arabia regionally, and possibly also including Israel and France internationally, to pressure Syria in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination in February 2005. According to a number of Syrian observers, the regional setting is even forcing Bashar to seriously entertain the idea of extending political participation to a new actor within the confines of the traditionally leftist National Progressive Front, that is, to a Syrian Islamic party.⁴²³ According to Sami Moubayed, such an action was also supported by elements within the new regime – particularly Shaykh Muhammad Habbash, the preacher Muhammad Kamil al-Husayni, and the new Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun – who insisted that the new accommodation of the Islamic element should be followed to its natural end, meaning that religiously-based political parties should be legalized.⁴²⁴ The rationale advanced is that the new regime's promotion of moderate Islam within the confines of the Syrian political system is important to diffuse and thus to defuse Islamism.

The significance of such a move would be enormous, since it would end Syria's separation of religion from the state, one of the central tenets of Ba'athist ideology. Practically speaking, it would also necessitate a change in Syria's electoral laws that forbid the formation of religiously-based and of ethnically-based parties. And though the project was ultimately dismissed at the time, the mere fact that it was seriously considered indicates the degree to which the regime wants to demonstrate their openness to expanding political participation to new actors.⁴²⁵

Furthermore, the idea that only "moderate" religious ideas were tolerated by the regime was somewhat shattered in 2009. In August 2009, a statement issued by the regime outraged Syrian secularists and a number of these were asked to respect the new Syrian sensitivities. The statement expressed that the regime does not hold a "negative view" of the Islamic group under Shaykh al-Bani⁴²⁶ despite the fact that the group promotes the creation of an Islamic state in Syria, and is considered by many as one of the most radical Islamic groups functioning in the country. The statement caused a number of Ba'athi members to declare that the Ba'ath is no longer a Party that uphold

⁴²² Meaning the inclusion of a political Islamic party within the National Progressive Front.

⁴²³ Interviews with high ranking government officials, Damascus March-April 2008.

⁴²⁴ Discussions during the 10th Ba'ath Conference, June 2005. See also *Teshreen*, 6 June 2005; *Al-Hayat*, 19 June 2005; Moubayed, "Islamic Revival in Syria," [Online].

⁴²⁵ As was noted earlier, certain religious figures have been allowed to stand for parliamentary elections, and have even been successful at winning several seats since the early 1990s; but they were not standing as part of an Islamic party, or even as independent Islamic figures.

⁴²⁶ See chapter 7 for more on Shaykh al-Bani.

secularism, and should be re-named “the Islamic Ba’th.Party.”⁴²⁷ This last proclamation was of course not a reaction to the regime’s recognition of al-Bani, rather it was a reaction to all of the measures (examined above) undertaken by the Bashar regime to compromise with and accomodate Syria’s rising Islamic movement.

Islamization from Above and Economic liberalization (Infatih)

The economic choices made by the current regime, which are a significant factor in understanding its declining legitimacy amongst the populace (see hereinafter and chapter 8), are largely the result of the previous regime’s economic policies during the 1980s and 1990s.

As discussed hitherto, it became clear by the end of the 1990s that Hafez al-Asad’s regime could no longer contain the contradictions inherent to the Populist Authoritarian political model, particularly the growing economic aspirations of the state elite. This is because the Populist Authoritarian regime’s co-optation measures and the limited nature of the liberalization process deployed were contradictory and hence unsustainable in the longer run. Hinnebusch explains:

The investment environment was arguably not liberalised enough to attract sustained productive investment. Significant constraints remained built into the political system...Private sector industrial growth took the form of a further proliferation of small enterprises owing to fear of government regulation, populist labour law and the absence of financial markets to finance expansion.⁴²⁸

Therefore, the previous regime’s targeted liberalization, while successful in postponing larger structural adjustments, is no longer sufficient to secure the loyalty of strategic sectors such as the business and the religious classes. Furthermore, rapid depletion in oil reserves, a low rate of economic expansion since the mid-1990s, coupled with significant demographic growth and soaring unemployment, meant that the regime was facing a number of new economic challenges.⁴²⁹

Faced with these challenges, the regime of Bashar al-Asad chose to deploy further liberalizing measures. This was based on the idea that the private sector has become “a second engine of growth.”⁴³⁰ Not to mention that global economic trends are similarly exerting pressure for economic opening worldwide.

Yet, while the relaxation of the economy initiated by his father was neo-mercantilist, in the sense that it was designed to help state power formation and

⁴²⁷ See Ba’thist website All for Syria at: <http://all4syria.info/content/view/16751/96/> (Last visited 12 November, 2009).

⁴²⁸ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 135. See also pp. 136-137.

⁴²⁹ These economic challenges are examined hereinafter.

⁴³⁰ Hinnebusch, “Syria,” in Bryn Rex, Bahgat Koraby, and Paul Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Comparative Experiences*, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 233.

accumulation of wealth rather than to encourage the growth of private capital,⁴³¹ Bashar's new economic formula includes a significant decompression towards private capitalism. Leverett explains "... the president wants to build up a real private sector, able to create jobs, before proceeding with large-scale privatizations..."⁴³² Clearly this belief that there was a need for a new economic formula is the result of genuine "new thinking."⁴³³

Bashar's new thinking was underlined when he, upon assuming power in 2000, chose to place a higher importance upon dealing with growing economic pressures rather than the struggle with Israel. Indeed, while asserting his loyalty to Ba'thism, Bashar al-Asad's inaugural address in July 2000⁴³⁴ emphasized the importance of a number of concepts not usually acknowledged in Ba'thist parlance, most notably free enterprise and Syrian integration into the global economy.⁴³⁵ According to the young President:

...it has become necessary to move in steady, though gradual, steps, towards performing economic changes through the modernization of laws, the erosion of bureaucratic obstacles standing in the way of internal and external investment flow, the recruitment of both private and public capital, and the activation of the private sector and granting it better opportunities to work ... We have also to put into place a wise economic policy that bridges gaps between sources and expenditure, between export and the rehabilitation of the private and public economic sectors, to face the increasing dangers resulting from the challenges of globalization. In this way our economy may well assume a respectable place in regional and international economic blocs.⁴³⁶

With this speech, Bashar was clearly deviating from the original populist project, by incorporating a more liberal understanding of politics, by avoiding any mention of Ba'thist ideological cornerstones such as state interventionism, economic justice and social welfare, and by drawing near to the common and contract law tradition of the Anglo-Saxon world.⁴³⁷

⁴³¹ See chapter 5 of this study. See also Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria," pp. 311-314. See also Perthes, "The Bourgeoisie and the Ba'th," pp. 31-37.

⁴³² Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, p. 71.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, p.30. Indeed, Hafez al-Asad's economic policies had two major goals: To undercut the potential opposition of the Sunni bourgeoisie and the Syrian Islamists, and to utilize strategic rents and Arab Guld aid to confront the Israeli state.

⁴³⁴ See the Arab Gateway website at <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm> (Last viewed 12 April 2009).

⁴³⁵ Addressed during Bashar al-Asad's inaugural speech and during the 10th Ba'th Conference in June 2005. See *Teshreen*, 6 June 2005; *Al-Hayat*, 19 June 2005. A number of Syrian observers agree that Ba'thist ideology no longer guides the regime's moves. See also David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005; and Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2005.

⁴³⁶ <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm>

⁴³⁷ See also Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, pp. 69-70. Here, one has to recognize the importance of economic liberalism in the production of a vision of society. See: Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam*, (translated by George Holoch) New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

As a result of this intended move away from étatisme towards a market economy, fiscal, monetary, and trade ‘reforms’ in line with the IMF recommendations were initiated. Measures towards structural changes (such as trade liberalization, tax policy reforms, interest rates liberalization) to create new “sources of growth” were undertaken with the main driver being private investment both domestic and foreign.⁴³⁸ Investment Law 10 was amended twice, once in 2000 through decree seven and a second time in 2003. These revisions were aimed at modernizing the Syrian legislative and financial systems in the economic sphere, as well as to relax importation laws, which resulted in the opening of private banks and insurance companies starting in 2004, and a project to open up a Stock Exchange market in the very near future.⁴³⁹ In general, credits to the private sector rose from around 7% in 2002, to some 46% in 2005.⁴⁴⁰

A commercial sort of *infatih* (opening) was also introduced in 2000, and a number of bilateral free-trade accords were concluded in an attempt to create a free trade zone within the Arab world. The Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA), under the tutelage of the Arab League, came into effect in January 2005, and led to customs duties being eliminated between Syria and all other members of GAFTA,⁴⁴¹ thus marking the end of Syria’s Ba’thist protectionist measures for its domestic market and infant-industries. In 2004-2005, the last remaining boycotts based on the Arab League Black List of companies dealing with Israel were lifted in Syria. As a result, Coca Cola and Pepsi were allowed into the Syrian market.⁴⁴² And in January 2007, Syria’s free trade agreement with yet another neighbouring country, Turkey, came into force.

In terms of its older populist reforms, the government launched a number of agrarian measures that can be described as counter-reforms. Between December 2000 and

It will be argued later on that this new turn towards a market economy contributed to the increasing popularity of the Islamist movement in Syria. While the role of ideology and regional factors played a key role, changes in the country’s social and economic landscape led to the expansion of an Islamic economic sector and contributed to the appeal of the Islamist opposition.

⁴³⁸ International Monetary Fund, “Staff Report for the 2006 Article IV Consultation,” Prepared by the Staff Representatives for the 2006 Consultation with the Syrian Arab Republic, July 13, 2006. IMF Country Report No. 06/294, p. 38. Available at: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2006/cr06294.pdf>

⁴³⁹ The Syrian Stock Exchange actually started trading on March 10, 2009. See news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7934644.stm and www.syria-bourse.com. For a view of the economic challenges facing Syria, as well as of economic needs from a Syrian perspective, see Nabil Sikkar (the executive director of the Syrian Bureau for development and investment), *al-Islah al-Iqtisadi fi Suriya*, al-Rayes Books: Damascus, 2000; *idem*, “Hatmiyat al-Islah al-Iqtisadi fi Suriya,” (the inevitability of economic reform in Syria) *Al-Iktissad Wal-Aamal*, 247, (July 2000), pp. 28-32; see also *Al-Iktissad Wal-Aamal*, special issue about investment in Syria (November 2000).

⁴⁴⁰ International Monetary Fund, “Staff Report for the 2006 Article IV Consultation,” p. 10.

⁴⁴¹ The other GAFTA member states are: Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Morocco, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, Kuwait, Tunis, Libya, Sudan and Yemen.

⁴⁴² Leïla Vigual, « La “nouvelle consommation” et les transformations des paysages urbains à la lumière de l’ouverture économique: l’exemple de Damas, » *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 115-116, Décembre 2006, pp. 23-25.

January 2005, the Ba‘thist government under Bashar al-Asad promulgated a number of political decrees with the aim of privatizing state farms in Syria. Mariam Ababsa explains that “[t]he principal decree, decision number 83, promulgated on December 16, 2000, allocates land in shares of 3 ha for irrigated land and 8 ha for non-irrigated land. Decision 83 called for land to be distributed by order of priority, to landholders expropriated in the agrarian reforms of 1958, 1963 and 1966, to farm workers and to employees of the General Administration of the Euphrates Basin (GADEB). In January 2005, 12,500 beneficiaries received 38,500 ha. Half of them were former landowners or beneficiaries of the earlier land reforms, a third were sharecroppers with leaseholds and a fifth were workers and GADEB employees.” This marks the end of the socialist Ba‘thist ideology, adds Ababsa, since “[t]he primary beneficiaries of the reform process are not the traditional rural constituents of the Ba‘th party, but a re-emergent class of latifundists tied to the central state and to traditional power structures.”⁴⁴³

In terms of other ‘counter-reforms’, the Syrian government had been subsidizing products from sugar to electricity to transportation by up to 40% since 1963. However, almost all goods subsidies, other than staples like bread, were canceled in the last five years of the Bashar regime. One report explains that “Diesel subsidies alone have cost between USD 1 billion and USD 1.5 billion annually over the last five years. According to Dr. Nabil Sukkar...the government has managed to postpone this difficult decision for some time, but can no longer afford to do so and likely will continue along the path it has already begun to embark on.”⁴⁴⁴ Furthermore, the prices of gasoline and cement were raised in January, 2006 by 23 and 55 percent, respectively.⁴⁴⁵

Currently, a program called “Start Your Project” teaches young entrepreneurs how to start their own business, and ultimately to transform their ideas into full-fledged enterprises. Once the program was approved, accords were signed between the government and the private and public banks to fund the trainees’ projects and provide the necessary capital for their start-up companies.⁴⁴⁶

In addition, the Ba‘th regime, once very much against anything Islamic, gave permits to four Islamic Banks in 2006. These are the Syrian National Islamic Bank, Bank al-Sham, the Baraka Bank of Syria and the Nur Islamic Bank.⁴⁴⁷ Their capital is allowed to reach one hundred million American dollars, three times larger than the capitalization permitted to the other non-Islamic private banks.⁴⁴⁸ Commenting on the inauguration of Bank al-Sham, the Grand Mufti of Syria, Badr al-Din Hasun, asserted that studies show that 47% of Syrians dealing with the banking system prefer dealing with Islamic

⁴⁴³ Myriam Ababsa, «Contre-réforme agraire et conflits fonciers en Jazîra syrienne (2000-2005)», *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, N°115-116 - *La Syrie au quotidien. Cultures et pratiques du changement*, décembre 2006, p. 211.

⁴⁴⁴ See the Syria-Report, 23 June 2008. Available at: <http://www.syria-report.com/article.asp?id=2897&rub=24>

⁴⁴⁵ International Monetary Fund, “Staff Report for the 2006 Article IV Consultation,” p. 11.

⁴⁴⁶ *Sana news*. See <http://www.sana.sy/ara/7/2008/07/25/185541.htm>

⁴⁴⁷ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 28 August 2007.

⁴⁴⁸ *As-Safir*, 06 April 2006; *Al-Watan*, 27 August 2007.

institutions, “especially in light of Syria’s move towards a market economy.”⁴⁴⁹ [Author’s translation]

In retrospect, the amendment of Investment Law No. 10 in 2003 was the cornerstone of the government's turn toward the private sector. Indeed, due to this relaxation of economic controls and the accompanying increase in domestic investment and private sector growth, the four years following the amendment witnessed an expansion of the Syrian economy at an average rate of seven to eight percent per annum.⁴⁵⁰

But this encouragement of the private sector has created other sources of worry for the regime (this will be one of the main topics discussed in chapter 8 of this dissertation). First, it is causing the sharp re-stratification of Syrian society along class lines, and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Indeed, the economic growth that paralleled Syria’s *infitah* policies has not been beneficial to the poor in Syria. If one looks at the period between 1997 and 2004, despite economic growth, inequality in Syria has in fact risen by 11%.⁴⁵¹ Furthermore, the fact that Syria’s foreign trade has remained static, and about two-thirds of Syria’s exports were oil-related, has disproportionately benefited the upper classes.⁴⁵² Secondly, the market-oriented measures are causing the regime to abandon the populist reformist policies that had once gained it the support of the middle and lower classes.

The last few years have also witnessed the emergence of businessmen who have become members of the People’s Assembly and ultimately powerful opposition activists, such as Ihsan Sanqar, Muhammad Hamsho, Riyad Seyf, and Ma’mum al-Humsi. Unlike the Sunni merchant class (mainly Damascus), which was under the patronage of the Hafez al-Asad regime, these businessmen are growing independent of the government’s “special arrangements.” In their demands for modernization, they are calling for the creation of a system based on free, liberalized markets.⁴⁵³ And the mere fact that they are able to make these demands shows the degree to which economic liberalization has become an indispensable engine of growth for the regime, albeit an engine that is testing its ability to balance Syria’s various social groups, from the increasingly marginalized to the newly emerging business elite.

Certainly the economic liberalization deployed by the Bashar regime and discussed above does not in itself explain Islamist revivalism, whether in Syria or elsewhere. Nonetheless, accompanied by a significant demographic expansion such as the

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁰ See <http://www.fedcommsyr.org/economy.html>

⁴⁵¹ Heba al-Laithy, *Poverty in Syria*, UNDP Report (June 2005), p. 9 and p. 12. See also Ziesser, *Commanding Syria*, pp. 111-118; the CIA World factbook (Last accessed 16 September 2008); Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics Reports available at: <http://www.cbssyr.org> [Arabic]; UNICEF and the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, *al-Maseh al-'Unqudi Muta'aded al-Mu'ashirat*, Damascus 2006, available at: http://www.cbssyr.org/people%20statistics/Final_Report_Syria_ARB.pdf; *United Nations Development Programme Syria*, at <http://www.undp.org.sy/>

⁴⁵² Al-Laithy, *Poverty in Syria*, p.9. Although this is not documented --just yet--, oil revenues are said to be monopolized by the few in the country, rather than re-distributed.

⁴⁵³ Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 83 and p. 92.

one recently seen in Syria (see Table 4 in chapter 8), along with an accelerated rural exodus, the influx of some 1.5 million Iraqi refugees into Syria,⁴⁵⁴ rising unemployment which in certain regions reaches 25 percent and causes some 10 percent of the population to be in significant poverty, the loss of Syrian revenue from Lebanon in the aftermath of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanese territory,⁴⁵⁵ and a collapse in the Syrian welfare system as the state moves away from statism and toward more privatization, there is a clear opportunity for Syria's Islamic and Islamist movements to harvest the fruits of the misery tree. This is especially probable since the impoverished in Syria are slowly being abandoned by the state and are, for lack of any other viable ideological and institutional alternative, turning their eyes towards the rising parallel Islamic sector, which ironically is the only alternative that was permitted to prosper under the Ba'th regime.⁴⁵⁶

In other words, economic liberalization within the reality of the economic crisis, which the country has been witnessing since the late 1990s, is providing Syria's Islamic movement with an important platform for mobilization, something that they did not have 30 years earlier given that the majority of the Syrian populace had thrown their support behind the populist programs of the Ba'th. Today, in view of the anti-populist reforms of the regime and the lack of any other populist alternative, the Islamic movement possesses a significant window of opportunity.⁴⁵⁷ Therefore, notwithstanding the regime's attempts to control and contain Syria's Islamic sector, it is evident that the outcome of the regime's so-called *infitah* and co-optation measures deployed since the Hafez regime are resulting in the creation of a number of grievances.⁴⁵⁸

Islamization from Above and the Regime's Foreign Policy

While domestic social and economic factors continued to partially determine Bashar al-Asad's policy of carefully cultivating an Islamic profile in domestic affairs,

⁴⁵⁴ See Ashraf al-Khalidi, Sophia Hoffmann and Victor Tanner, *Project on Internal Displacement Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot*, The Brookings Institution: University of Bern, An Occasional Paper, June 2007.

⁴⁵⁵ See Gambill, "Syria after Lebanon: Hooked on Lebanon"; see "Syria, President Bush, and Drugs – the Administration's Next Iraqgate," Subcommittee Staff Report, House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Crime and Criminal Justice, Oct. 28, 1992; see also Ziad K. Abdelnour, "The Revival of Lebanon's Drug Trade," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, June 2001.

⁴⁵⁶ The impact of the relationship between economic liberalization and economic crisis on Syrian society will be further discussed in chapter (7) of this work. See UNDP, *Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004*, New York: UNDP, 2005; Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, pp. 111-118. See also Nabil Marzuq, *al-faqr wa al-batala fi suriya* (Poverty and Unemployment in Syria), Damascus: Arab Centre for Strategic Studies, 2004.

⁴⁵⁷ As we will see in chapters 6 and 7, this is especially so because having espoused a free market ideology in the 1970s and 1980s, the Islamic sector is re-adapting its ideology, incorporating populist elements within its agenda and therefore appealing to those who were once opposed to the movement a few years earlier, namely the lower classes and the rural constituency.

⁴⁵⁸ These will be further examined in chapter 8 of this dissertation.

another key factor for the state's Islamization policy from above has been the rise of jihadist and Islamist extremism in the region, which have threatened Syria's position as a hard-line regional power as a result of their ability to wield the new transnational "weapon" of Islamism. And yet in spite of this regional challenge, I argue in this section that continuing Hafez al-Asad's pragmatic foreign policy of engaging with Islamist groups so as to use/manipulate them for Syria's own purposes is increasingly risky. This is due to several factors: 1) Syria's Islamic sector has grown too powerful, with a large membership that could radicalize and potentially work with regional Islamists (as explained above); 2) The gap between the rich and the poor is widening and thus increasing the appeal of the more radical populist Islamists for the poor (as explained in the last section); 3) The rise of a plethora of unchecked and uncontrolled Islamist militant groups due to the war in which have the potential to spill into the Syrian hinterland and thus destabilize the domestic scene; and 4) Bashar al-Asad does not have his father's deserved reputation as a strong and decisive leader who is both willing and able to do whatever it takes to maintain his regime's monopoly on power.⁴⁵⁹

This last point was confirmed to me by a number of Syrian observers and high ranking officials, who claim that were Hafez al-Asad's elder son Basel in power today, things would certainly be different on the Syrian domestic scene. One retired high ranking official asserted that if Basel al-Asad was the President, "the opposition, including that of 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Syria's former vice president, and Syria's Islamic Front would not have appeared and remerged on the Syrian domestic scene. The latest terrorist incidents since Bashar's rise to power would have most probably not occurred... There is no significant political system in Syria we can blame for our troubles, [rather] the role of personality and the way that personality interacts with national and foreign issues are vital to consider."⁴⁶⁰

As will be shown hereinafter, the admixture of these elements risks not only accelerating Syria's Islamic revivalism, but also risks encouraging a more militant Islamist revivalism, as well as a radicalization of those who, feeling abandoned by the regime's counter-populist reforms, are already being attracted to the now-populist Islamic

⁴⁵⁹ One of the earliest pressures faced by the current regime goes back to the morrow of the death of Basel al-Asad, the oldest son of Hafez al-Asad on a morning in January 1994. The death of Basel revived the general hopes of the opposition and presented a significant window for Islamists to re-emerge. Eyal Zisser noted that: "Bashar was not his father's first choice." (Ziesser, 2003) In fact, for years, Basel was being prepared for rule. He was known to be his father's son. They shared, according to many of those who knew and worked with him, the same leadership traits, including vision and strength. Basel, outgoing, assertive and charming, was feared as much as he was loved by those who knew him. He had the "killer instinct" and hence was naturally Hafez al-Asad's choice for leadership of Syria. Steven Cook wrote, "Basil's death in an early morning car crash in January 1994 was a great shock to Syrians, who continue to mourn him as they wait anxiously for Asad's new successor to emerge. Many Syrians told me of their grave concern for the future of Syria after Basil's death and speak of the president's former heir apparent with an odd reverence." (Cook, 1996) Basel's death put an end to his father's preferred succession plan, although not to his determination to have his heir rule Syria. Hafez al-Asad allegedly worried that the opposition might imagine an ailing president losing his grip over power with the death of his heir. This might explain Asad's determination to appear still and strong at his son's funeral less than a few days later. The message sent was "everything is still under control, no need to rejoice." This said, Bashar was not his father's first choice for leader.

⁴⁶⁰ Private communication, Damascus, April 2008.

ideology. Although it is true that these individuals usually tend to follow a reformist spiritual path, the important point is that they represent a pool of potential recruits, and moreover that whether or not they are actually recruited depends upon how efficient Islamists are in their ideational framing methods. Effectively therefore, the success or failure of their recruitment rests with a sector that the government has relatively little control over.⁴⁶¹

The following section discusses the foreign policy undertaken by the current regime, namely its use and empowerment of regional Islamist groups. This discussion also addresses the consequences of these policies given the domestic and regional contexts, as well as in terms of the larger argument, thereby linking the regime's current foreign policy to the revivalism of an Islamic sector and an Islamist sector which, it is argued, are growing increasingly powerful while remaining outside the regime's scope of control.

It was hoped by a number of observers, especially in the West, that Bashar al-Asad would be a different President than his father as regards Syria's foreign policy. Bashar al-Asad's youth when he assumed the presidency, his intelligence, as well as his presumed open-mindedness and dynamism resulting from his life trajectory (he had studied, lived, and met his wife Asma while in London, and his conversations seemed to reflect an understanding of the "Western" way of life and thought), were anticipated as being important influences over him as President. Bashar was expected to break with the *ancien* regime's policies by stepping away from the championing of Arab Nationalism and "anti-Westernism," and by initiating a rapprochement with the powers of the West.⁴⁶²

However, very soon after his ascension to power, Bashar began to demonstrate that he had a very different plan in mind, since his policies proved to be in line with those of his father, and indeed were at times even more hard-line according to critics of the regime, especially when it came to Syria's foreign policy. This was particularly evident in his approach to the Palestinian question and to the American war in Iraq.⁴⁶³ And while the Bashar regime's policy orientations may have been opaque to Western observers, they were arguably quite understandable in light of his knowledge of the regional and international context. After all, as Volker Perthes puts it: "Syria's leaders may not always act wisely, but they have rational and legitimate security concerns."⁴⁶⁴

Thus Bashar's regime continued to follow his father's realist foreign policy while maneuvering between the Syrian domestic constraints, as well as the intricacies of the inter-Arab and the Syrian-Western realities. Within the first year of Bashar's rule, two

⁴⁶¹The link between Islamic apolitical groups and militant groups will be discussed at the end of this section.

⁴⁶² See Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," *Meria*, 7, 2, June 2003. Available at: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue2/jv7n2a4.html> (Last viewed 14 October 2008).

⁴⁶³ The information on Syria's links to regional Islamist groups is necessarily fragmented given the lack of corroborating sources. Thus what is important to take away from this litany of alleged facts is the general trend of Syria's involvement in the region.

⁴⁶⁴ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 6.

crises broke out. The first was the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000, resulting in renewed Syrian backing for Islamists both within Syria and in the Palestinian territories, as well as renewed skirmishes between Hizbullah and Israel. The second crisis was the war on terror declared by the United States in the wake of the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington on September 11, 2001. Concerning the first event, Eyal Zisser wrote:

The outbreak of the intifada caught Damascus completely by surprise, and it may be assumed that the Syrians did not initiate the renewed Hizbullah activities against Israel that occurred in early October 2000. At most they had been informed of no more than the organization's general intentions, an expression of the new balance of power created between Damascus and the organization following the death of Hafiz al-Asad. Nevertheless, from the moment the intifada broke out, Bashar tried to exploit the new realities emerging in the region to promote his personal status as well as Syria's standing as a regional power. These new regional realities provided a golden opportunity for him to establish his personal and political status as the head of the Arab rejectionist camp, or at least as the head of a camp whose opposition to Israel was staunch and uncompromising. The mood of the public on the streets of Damascus as well as in the other Arab capitals substantially contributed to Bashar's increasingly tough policy. He wanted to create the image of being close to the heart of the Arab man-on-the-street and willing to do his bidding.⁴⁶⁵

The Syrian support for the Palestinian Intifada and the skirmishes between Hizbullah and Israel initiated an escalation between Syria and Israel that might very well have triggered a direct confrontation.⁴⁶⁶ The Israelis and the American administration accused Syria of supporting the Palestinians and Hizbullah, and threatened that such Syrian activity could lead to a regional war. Indeed, an Israeli military intelligence report alleged that Syria was putting the Lebanese territory at the disposal of the Palestinian Islamic resistance (by allowing arms to be provided to the resistance, as well as by allowing money transfers and training to take place), and was also enabling Hizbullah to pressure Israel along the Israeli-Lebanese border, in support of the Intifada.⁴⁶⁷ The Israeli security services also alleged that its interrogations of senior operational activists had determined that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) commanders in the Hebron area were in contact with senior PIJ activists in Damascus such as Akram al-Ajuri, and that these activists were helping to direct operations in the Palestinian territories, and were also transferring money for the fight against Israel through the Syrian national banking system.⁴⁶⁸ Another

⁴⁶⁵ Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," at: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue2/jv7n2a4.html> (Last viewed 14 October 2008).

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism (Based on Interrogations of Arrested Palestinian Terrorists and Captured Palestinian Authority Documents)," Document number TR6-548-02, Israel Defense Forces, Military Intelligence, September 2002. Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA> (Last viewed 16 November 2008).

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

allegation was that in the second half of 2001, of the more than 20 Hamas activists arrested by Israel, almost all had been trained in Syria, and were receiving operational instructions from and in Syria. The activists, originally students of Arab universities, were allegedly contacted by the Hamas Headquarters in Damascus and were sent for training in Syria and in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. At these training camps, the students received instruction on the use of arms, explosive charges and explosive belts, as well as in intelligence activities.⁴⁶⁹

As for the second crisis that broke out in the first year of Bashar's rule, the 9-11 terrorist attacks produced a new regional and international reality that culminated in the American-led interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Syria immediately denounced the 9-11 attacks, and recognized the American right to self-defense. The regime even allowed American FBI agents to enter Syrian territory in search of al-Qaeda activists who could be hiding in Syria.⁴⁷⁰ In fact, Syria had firmly sided against al-Qaeda activities in the region before the US-led interventions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and had stressed to Iraq during the dying days of Saddam Hussein's regime that Syria had a strong interest in the stability of its neighbouring state.⁴⁷¹ Indeed, these expressions of common cause with Hussein's Iraq to some degree marked an effort by Bashar to turn over a new leaf in Syrian-Iraqi relations.⁴⁷²

Syria's relatively pro-American stance took a beating however in the summer of 2002, when reports emerged that Syria, in defiance of UN imposed sanctions on Iraq, had turned a blind eye to the smuggling of weapons from Eastern Europe into Iraq via Syria, which involved Firas Talas, son of former Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Talas and Rami Makhoul, a cousin of Bashar al-Asad and a well-known businessman in Damascus.⁴⁷³ In 2002, Jordanian and American intelligence reported that Islamist fighters who are linked to al-Zarqawi's Jund al-Sham organization were operating out of Syria. The fighters were believed to receive both funding and training in the country.⁴⁷⁴ Then in late 2002, it was reported that the Syrians had allowed the Iraqi Ba'ath to hide some of its weapons in Syria and had even assisted in the transfer of Iraqi weapons to Hizbullah.⁴⁷⁵ In April 2003, the US administration accused the Syrians of transferring dual-use items to

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁰ Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," [Online].

⁴⁷¹ *Syrian TV*, 22 May 2002

⁴⁷² It should be noted that Syrian efforts to improve relations with Iraq began in 1997, under Hafez al-Asad. These relations had been strained since the rise of Saddam Hussein to power in 1979 because of personal and ideological antagonisms between the Syrian Ba'athi regime and its Iraqi counterpart, and because of Syria's support for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War.

⁴⁷³ For more on Rami Makhoul from the US Treasury point of view, see <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp834.htm> (Last visited 31 October 2009)

⁴⁷⁴ Alon Ben-David, "Jordanian Indictment Reveals Operations of Jund al-Sham Terror Network," *Janes Intelligence Review*, 16 June 2003.

⁴⁷⁵ Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, p. 16. See also Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Department of Defense Quarterly Report on Stability and Security in Iraq: The Warning Indicators," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Washington, D.C., (22 December 2006).

the Iraqi resistance and of smuggling night vision goggles into Iraqi territory.⁴⁷⁶ Syria was also accused of turning a blind eye to Pan-Arab and Islamist volunteer fighters crossing the Syrian border into Iraq.⁴⁷⁷ In 2004, the US Treasury enlisted the Commercial Bank of Syria as a rogue financial institution, and accused it of backing “terrorist” activities in Iraq.⁴⁷⁸

As a result of both the international pressure on Syria and voices within the Syrian regime, increased measures were implemented to hinder the infiltration of fighters into and out of the country. However, this restriction of the fighters’ movements across the border resulted in the eruption of a number of spill-over Islamist incidents within Syria as early as 2004, this despite the regime’s efforts to quash any such internal disturbances. These incidents will be discussed hereinafter.

Syria’s role as a transit corridor for jihadists heading to Iraq was supposed to have served two purposes for the Syrian regime: it was thought that it would provide something of an outlet for Syrian jihadists, and also allow Syrian intelligence to monitor the flow of fighters and collect information on them, as well as recruit Islamist collaborators. These goals were to some degree achieved, as can be seen by the example of an alleged collaborator with the Syrian regime who was recruited during this period, Mahmud Gul al-Aghasi, known internationally as Abu al-Qa’qa’. Al-Qa’qa’ has been known to mobilize and recruit jihadists in Syria to be sent to Iraq.⁴⁷⁹ Some claim that his radical profile was deliberately developed with the help of the Syrian regime, especially following the 2003 decision to allow radical Islamists to infiltrate Iraq from Syria.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁶ See *As-safir*, 15 April 2006; See also Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, pp. 16-17; Barbara Slavin, “U.S. Warns Syria; Next Step Uncertain,” *USA Today*, September 17, 2003; Gary Gambill, “Syria Rearms Iraq,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 4, 9 (Septembre 2002); and Hans Greimel, “Foreign Fighters Remain Threat in Iraq,” *Associated Press*, April 15, 2003; Zisser, “Syria and the War on Terror,” at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue2/jv7n2a4.html> (Last viewed 15 October 2008). Syria’s defiance in 2002-2003 of the UN and U.S.-imposed sanctions on Iraq, particularly by allowing the transfer of “foreign fighters” across its border into the Iraqi neighbour in the early days of the war was met with increasing international rhetorical pressure on the regime to modify its economic and political system. The pressure culminated in the American enactment of the Syria Accountability Act in November-December 2003. Additional economic sanctions on Syria were issued by the Bush administration in May 2004. See Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁷⁷ See last footnote. Syria has since repeatedly denied the accusations that it is deliberately allowing weapons and militants into Iraq, on the basis that Syria’s border with Iraq is vast. They point to the similar American inability to control the flow of refugees from Mexico into the United States. In other words, Syria is willing, although not capable, of stopping all infiltrations from its territory into Iraq. On where the Jihadists came from, see Joseph Felner and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qaida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, New York, 2007. Available at: <http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec07.pdf>

⁴⁷⁸ US Treasury, “Treasury Designates Commercial Bank of Syria as Financial Institution of Primary Money Laundering Concern,” May 11, 2004, at <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/js1538.htm>

⁴⁷⁹ *Al-Ahram*, 8 June 2006; *Al-Arabiya*, 5 June 2006.

⁴⁸⁰ Syrian officials insist that the decision was reversed in 2004, if it ever existed. It is argued that Syria’s border with Iraq is so large that it is almost impossible to fully control. For available data on foreign Jihadists in Iraq, see <http://www.pjsage.com/products.htm>; and <http://www.ctc.usma.edu>

Many radicals were drawn to his militantly aggressive sermons in the al-Shahrur mosque in Aleppo. He boldly declared himself as an anti-American preacher, and publicly helped organize the infiltration of Jihadists from Syria into Iraq, which led many observers to think that he was operating with the support of the authorities. It is not yet clear if the showdown that occurred between Abu al-Qa'qa's groups and the Syrian security forces on April 12th, 2006 was staged to end suspicions that the shaykh was collaborating with the regime, or whether it simply reflected the fact that collaborators can turn against the regime whenever they wish to end their alliance. Abu al-Qa'qa' died on the 28th of September 2008, reportedly at the hands of an opposing *Takfiri* Jihadist. But his Jihadist vision is still promoted by the Syrian Association *Ghuraba' al-Sham*, and the group risks one day turning its attentions upon the internal front (Syria).⁴⁸¹

As for Syria's relations with Hizbullah, despite Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005 following the still-unsolved assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri,⁴⁸² a withdrawal that led to a decline in direct Syrian control over the Shi'i movement, the Syrian intelligence apparatus nonetheless remains in the underground of the neighbouring state.⁴⁸³ It is claimed by Israeli sources that, more so than his father, Bashar al-Asad has increasingly supported the resistance movement: "[t]he Bashar Assad regime not only allows Hizbullah to carry out terrorist attacks from Lebanese territory, as one of the expressions of its support for the Intifada, but also provides direct aid to the Hizbullah, a step from which Assad Sr. refrained."⁴⁸⁴ For instance, the Bashar regime has been blamed for Hizbullah's use of anti-aircraft guns, as well as for their use of mortar and rocket barrages targeting Israeli outposts in the disputed Shebaa Farms, a 15-square mile strip of mountainside running along Lebanon's southeast border with the Golan Heights. Blandford notes that Syria's use of its influence in Lebanon "[o]n three occasions since December 2002 ... has [allowed Syria to] exact revenge, although not always claiming responsibility, upon Israeli troops on the border for assassinations of its personnel presumably ordered by Israel."⁴⁸⁵ Hizbullah meanwhile justifies its military actions as legitimate defense of Lebanese sovereignty, and as resistance to Israeli occupation and repeated incursions into Lebanese territory and airspace.

⁴⁸¹ See: *al-Arabiya TV*, 02 July 2006; *al-Arabiya net*, 04 July 2006; *Al-Hayat*, 30 September 2008. What is so interesting about Abu al-Qa'qa's case is that in the last year before his death, he became the head of Aleppo's Shari'a faculty. His appearance had changed drastically, but his message had remained quite Jihadist in nature, although he encouraged *Jihad* only with the external enemy in the occupied territories such as Iraq and Palestine, which is in agreement with the Syrian regime's message, despite the two parties' ideational differences.

⁴⁸² This sparked a further downward spiral in Syria's relations with the Western powers, and ended in Washington's withdrawal of its ambassador from Damascus. Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, p. 17.

⁴⁸³ See Gary C. Gambill, "Syria after Lebanon: Hooked on Lebanon," *Middle East Quarterly*, (Fall 2005); Sami G. Hajjar, "Hizballah: Terrorism, National Liberation, or Menace?" *Strategic Studies Institute*, US Army War College, August 2002.

⁴⁸⁴ Israeli Defense Forces, "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism," [Online].

⁴⁸⁵ Nicholas Blandford, "Hizballah and Syria's 'Lebanese Card,'" *Merip reports*, Sept 14, 2004. Available at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero091404.html> (Last viewed 20 September 2008).

Whether these Hizbullah measures were directly sanctioned by Bashar or not, he has certainly stepped up certain kinds of assistance that mark a strengthening of the relationship between the resistance group and Syria. On Syrian TV, Hizbullah's leader Hasan Nasrallah started appearing more frequently, and was represented as being a close friend of Bashar. Some observers claimed that Bashar often drew upon the shaykh's rhetoric and strategizing to counter regional and international pressures. On the domestic front, Bashar's ties with Nasrallah have allowed him to demonstrate loyalty to the Palestinian-Arab cause, which is important since his anti-Western stance can help to further legitimize his rule. Whether or not the relationship between Hizbullah and Syria has developed beyond that of client-patron to that of equal players since Syria's forced withdrawal from Lebanon remains to be seen.

Syria's relations with Iran have also become increasingly close under Bashar's presidency. This is the result of a number of events, most important of which is the increasing chill in Syria's relations with its Arab neighbours. Since the 2002 war on Iraq, the Syrian administration has often expressed its disenchantment with the pro-American Arab states, mainly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Egypt. Bashar al-Asad has also repeatedly confirmed his alliance with the Islamic state. For instance, in one of his most recent interviews on the subject, Bashar al-Asad reiterated that "the strategic relations between Iran and Syria are based on shared principles and interests affirming that as long as their ideologies intersect on foreign policies, they would remain allies."⁴⁸⁶ He stated that Iran's support for Syria's opposition to the Zionist regime is of great importance. He also reconfirmed Tehran's and Damascus' shared stance in support of the Islamic resistance in Lebanon and Palestine: "The achievements of the resistance over the past decade and its victory over the Israeli regime are the result of Tehran-Damascus strategic relations," al-Assad noted."⁴⁸⁷

Syria's relations with Hizbullah and Iran are important to this dissertation for one main reason: at the domestic level, these relations with the Shi'i Islamic Republic have resulted in an otherwise unlikely and, for many Syrians, unwelcome spur to Shi'ism in Syria. It is alleged by a number of Sunni shaykhs and observers that the government is actually promoting the conversion of Syrians to Shi'ism in an attempt to shift the demographic balance in favour of the Shi'i, since the regime is itself overwhelmingly composed of Shi'i (of the 'Alawi sect).⁴⁸⁸ Despite the denial of a number of Sunni members of the Syrian regime, including the Member of Parliament and Sunni Shaykh Muhammad Habash, the belief that Shi'ism is growing in Syria is strengthened by the fact that today Syria hosts around 500 Shi'i *hawzas* and *husseiniyat* which are erected, financed and supervised by the Iranian embassy, and accommodate thousands of Iranian

⁴⁸⁶ *Press TV*, "No effort can distance Syria from Iran," 18th September 2008. Available at: <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=69800§ionid=351020101>

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ See Hamida Hamid, "A Study on Conversion to Shiism in Syria," *Elaph*, Jan. 7, 2007; "Religious Leaders Reject the Dissemination of Iranian Shiism in Syria," at <http://www.aljaml.com/node/9168> (last viewed 5 November 2008); See also http://www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.htm1.

clerics.⁴⁸⁹ In addition, the Syrian *Ahl al-Bayt* Shi'i Society will soon inaugurate an Islamic bank, which would be the fifth in Syria, as well as a television channel and an Islamic financial institution to promote multilateral relations among Islamic countries. Regarding the activities of the *Ahl al-Bayt* society, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader 'Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni said in an interview that:

The real problem is not that a number of people have become Shia, but that Shiism has been disseminated and caused problems within Syrian society. When people convert from being Sunni to Shia, it provokes Sunni scholars and individuals and creates problems within the fabric of the Syrian society. I know that significant divisions have occurred in some villages due to the dissemination of Shiism. Many reports have declared unlimited Iranian support to Shiism in Syria. There is an attempt to establish cultural centers for disseminating Shiism in Syria in different governorates and cities that have never known this before.

Al-Bayanuni then elaborated on the reasons behind the spread of Shi'ism in Syria:

There is a religious doctrinal reason and a political one. The wave of Iranian progress in Syria hasn't been limited to Shiism. There is cultural, charitable and even military Iranian activity. Iranian influence in Syria is not only doctrinal, but also political, social and military. Husseinis are being built for the Shia minority in Aleppo, Idlib and the new Shia villages in Jaser Ashour and others. On the radio in Damascus, the call to prayer is broadcast at times from the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab or Sayyeda Ruqayah according to the Shia method; that is, they add 'come to the good deed' after saying 'come to prayer and come to success.' This wasn't the case before in Syria.⁴⁹⁰

It is claimed that the *Ahl al-Bayt* Society in Damascus is directly linked to the Iranian embassy in the Syrian capital, and is not subject to the supervision of Syrian authorities. In the National Salvation Front's⁴⁹¹ statement following their June 2008 annual meeting, there was a warning to Syrians of further Iranian activity, "[w]hat made things worse is the Iranian incursion that is spending money in the country without any supervision in order to increase the tension and threaten the national harmony."⁴⁹²

In a discussion with a secular 'Alawi journalist, this latter asserted that even the otherwise secular 'Alawi community has started feeling the impact of society's Shi'a oriented Islamization. "Whether this is due to a general emulating of the Sunni piety movement, or to an Iranian Shi'i intervention in Syria, it is unclear," adding that, "a number of 'Alawi women have started to wear headscarves, in a clear diversion from

⁴⁸⁹ Hamida Hamid, "A Study on Conversion to Shiism in Syria," *Elaph*, Jan. 7, 2007

⁴⁹⁰ *Asharq al-Awsat*, 16 July 2008.

⁴⁹¹ The National Salvation Front is an opposition group composed mainly of the Muslim Brothers, and the now-exiled ex-vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam, although this alliance ceased to exist in June 2009. For more on this alliance, see chapters 6 and 7.

⁴⁹² The National Salvation Front at www.free-syria.com, 02 July 2008.

ʿAlawi norms. Men have also been going to the Friday prayer and signing up their names for economic reasons and miscellaneous social benefits in nearby Shiʿi mosques.”⁴⁹³

Thus it is clear that Syria under Bashar has continued to openly endorse both the Lebanese Shiʿi party and Iran, this in spite of the regime’s awareness of increasing Sunni-Shiʿi sensitivities in the country. ʿImad Mughniya, Hizbullah’s head of external operations who was allegedly involved in the attack on the American military base in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war, as well as for the bombing of the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, was made welcome in Syria, and often resided in the country until his mysterious assassination on February 12th, 2008.⁴⁹⁴ Indeed, while the United States has sought to contain Hizbullah by providing military and law enforcement assistance to the government of Lebanon, Syria continues to allow Iran to resupply the Shiʿi group with weapons through the Damascus airport. Syria has also allowed visiting Iranian officials to meet with Palestinian organizations based in Syria.⁴⁹⁵

As for al-Qaeda, Syria does not have any direct relations with the organization and seems to view it as a threat rather than as a useful ally. Indeed, the pro al-Qaeda group Fatah al-Islam (FAI) has the potential to become a threat to Syrian political stability. The FAI is an Islamist group that gained support with the poor residents of the Palestinian refugee camp of Naher al-Bared, near Tripoli in Lebanon. The group was accused by the Syrian government of staging the so-called “Damascus bombing” in September 2008 that caused the death of 17 Syrians and the injury of dozens more.⁴⁹⁶ The organization and its leader Shaker al-ʿAbsi have been under intense pressure by the Lebanese government since March 2008. ʿAbsi, who was born in a refugee camp near Jericho, had joined Yaser Arafat’s Fatah movement as a teenager, but then associated himself with the international Jihadi movement by joining Abu Musʿab al-Zarqawi. Along with al-Zarqawi, he was sentenced to death in absentia by the Jordanian authorities for the 2002 murder of US diplomat Laurence Foley in Amman. In his description of ʿAbsi, Michael Radu writes:

The organization [the Fatah movement] sent him to study medicine, but he dropped out in favor of becoming a pilot, receiving training in Libya and later serving as an instructor in South Yemen. Later he participated in combat, on the winning Sandinista side in Nicaragua and on the losing Libyan side in that country’s conflict with Chad. Disappointed with Arafat’s corruption, he joined dissident, pro-Syrian factions and moved to Damascus, where he discovered religion and became a fervent believer. Afterward he became associated with Al Zarqawi’s group in Iraq and Jordan ... This, then, is a case of a rebel in search of

⁴⁹³ Private communication, January 2009.

⁴⁹⁴ Zisser, “Syrian and the War in Iraq,” see: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue2/jv7n2a4.html>

⁴⁹⁵ Kenneth Katzman, *Terrorism, Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors*, Report for Congress: The Library of Congress, 2002, p. 35.

⁴⁹⁶ Naser Qandeel in “Ma wara’ al-Khabar,” *Al-Jazeera*, 30 September 2008. This incident and its relation to Fatah al-Islam will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter 6.

a global ideological and strategic anchor to articulate and justify his fight for a particular cause. Associating with Al Qaeda satisfied both needs.⁴⁹⁷

In addition to being a supporter of al-Qaeda, Radu alleges that 'Absi and his Fatah al-Islam organization have links with the Syrian regime. He claims that "[t]he fact that Fatah al-Islam is seen as both an al-Qaeda spin-off and a Syrian tool should not be confusing, not in light of the organization's pattern of tactically piggybacking other causes."⁴⁹⁸ Although Radu's analysis has received considerable attention, it remains unproven and rather improbable.

In the same improbable vein, reports and observers insist that the militant Islamist incidents that the Syrian state blames on Salafi groups (such as Jund al-sham) were in fact staged by the regime in order to create the impression that Syria was being threatened by militant Islamists, as a way of justifying its regional policy toward such groups.⁴⁹⁹ Most prominent among these observers is the Lebanese administration led by Sa'ed al-Hariri and *Tayar al-Mustaqbal* (The Future Movement),⁵⁰⁰ as well as the Syrian opposition abroad (at least according to Israeli and American intelligence reports). This opposition, which includes prominent Lebanese Sunni Muslim clerics such as Shaykh Bilal al-Baroudi, goes so far as to claim that Fatah al-Islam is the "fabrication" of the Syrian *Mukhabarat*.⁵⁰¹ They maintain that their case is strengthened by the fact that Shukri al-'Absi – who was first captured in Syria in November 2002 for illegal Islamist activity – was let go by Syrian intelligence less than three years after his capture in June 2005, while far less militant dissidents such as Michel Kilo and 'Aref Balila remain in prison.⁵⁰² Adding to this view is that on the 15th of November 2008, al-Mustaqbal newspaper reported that captured members of Fatah al-Islam, who are largely Syrian Palestinians, confessed that the group is controlled by the Syrian *Mukhabarat*. Ahmad Merhi, one of the principal sources for the story, explained that the head of the Syrian Intelligence Counter Terrorism Bureau, Brigadier General Jawdat al-Hasan, knew about the role that the Syrian *Mukhabarat* played in the formation and in the subsequent actions of Fatah al-Islam.⁵⁰³

Other observers speculate that the so-called 'Islamist' incidents are the result of an entirely different kind of feud, one that pits hardliners within the regime against the regime's new guard.⁵⁰⁴ These observers point to the mysterious assassinations of

⁴⁹⁷ Michael Radu, "Al-Qaeda Confusion: How to Think about Jihad," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 2007, p. 4. Available at: <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200707.radu.alqaedajihad.html>

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.* For more on Syria's relation with the FAI, see the next section of this chapter.

⁴⁹⁹ See *al-Jazeera*, 30 September 2008; 12 October 2008 and 13 October 2008; *LBC*, 12 October 2008.

⁵⁰⁰ Lebanese authorities' statement concerning the explosions in 'Ayn 'Alaq in Lebanon; see *al-Mustaqbal* TV, 12 March 2007.

⁵⁰¹ See *LBC* and *al-Jazeera*, 12 October 2008; *Al-Jazeera*, 30 September 2008.

⁵⁰² See www.ahrarsuria.com, 12 November 2008; Reuters, 17 October 2008.

⁵⁰³ Although knowing about the task does not necessarily imply complicity. *Al-Mustaqbal*, 15 November 2008.

Hizbullah's top military strategist 'Imad Mughniyeh, and of one of Syria's top military officers who was also an advisor to President Bashar al-Asad, and claim that these incidents are the result of the new guard's decision to initiate a *détente* with Israel and the United States, with these gestures representing a peace offering at the expense of Syria's alliance with Hizbullah and with Iran. Bashar al-Asad's declaration on the 22nd of December 2008, that direct peace negotiations with Israel are Syria's next diplomatic priority is likely to be seen as further vindication of this view by the observers.

Yet when I asked a number of Syrian officials about the state's alleged links with Fatah al-Islam, they denied having any relationship with the group. A high-ranking security official explained that the United States has become such a committed enemy of Syria that they have brought together a coalition of Sunni Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, in order to fight Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon with false accusations. This official added that not only do Saudi nationals constitute 30 percent of the members of Fatah al-Islam, but around 1,000 Saudis were rounded up in Syria's al-Yarmuk refugee camp on suspicion of belonging to al-Qaeda and funding Sunni radical movements such as al-Zarqawi's Jund al-Sham and Fatah al-Islam.⁵⁰⁵

The same denial of any relationship between the Syrian regime and al-Qaeda sympathizers has been repeatedly stated in the Syrian media by official government spokesmen.⁵⁰⁶ They assert that groups such as Jund al-sham and Fatah al-Islam are a threat to Syria since they can empower the radical Wahabi neo-fundamentalist element in the country and in the region, as well as other Islamist groups. The official spokesmen point to the most recent Damascus bombing – which as was shown earlier, is blamed on Fatah al-Islam by Syrian Intelligence – as proof of the dangers of such empowerment.⁵⁰⁷

Still another group of observers insist that the rise in jihadist activity in this seemingly stable country could be the result of so-called blowback, in which jihadists who were once allowed to stay in the country⁵⁰⁸ and enter Iraq through Syria in order to fight the United States are turning upon Syria now that the Iraq infiltration routes shut down.⁵⁰⁹ No matter which of the four above mentioned scenarios is closer to the truth, it is evident at this point that the FAI is now at loggerheads with Damascus.

In terms of its policy of supporting Shi'i and Sunni Islamist groups regionally – be it Hizbullah, the PIJ or Hamas – or its role as a transit corridor and thus a supporter of jihadists headed to Iraq and to Lebanon, the Syrian regime's moves, although seemingly at odds with its pan-Arab stance and ideology, in fact help to polish its pan-Arab resistance credentials. This is because to the Arab public, the message being sent by the

⁵⁰⁴ Maher al-Asad is Bashar's younger brother. He is alleged to be one of the most prominent behind-the-scenes *de facto* rulers of Syria according to a number of Syrian observers whom I interviewed.

⁵⁰⁵ See also *Al-Jazeera* 2 June 2006; *al-Hayat*, 3 June 2006; *al-Akhbar*, 7 November 2008; *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 July 2007.

⁵⁰⁶ See for example *Tishrin*, 3 June 2006; *Syrian TV*, 6 November 2008.

⁵⁰⁷ Private Communication, March 2008.

⁵⁰⁸ See Alon Ben-David, "Jordanian Indictment reveals operations of Jund al-Sham Terror Network."

⁵⁰⁹ *Time*, 27 September 2008; Moubayed, "The Islamic Revival in Syria," [Online].

regime is quite clear: Israel's policies toward the Palestinians cannot be considered in isolation from the regional context. Furthermore, the Syrian regime's moves remain in line with its customary prioritization of its foreign policy over its domestic policy. The moves thus demonstrate to regional and international foes that they must take Damascus into account in their decision-making as regards the Middle East.

However, this regional empowerment of Islamists is happening at the expense of Syria's secularism and indeed of its domestic stability in the longer run, particularly because domestic Shi'i and Sunni neo-fundamentalist groups have been greatly revitalized with the blessing of the regime.⁵¹⁰ What emerges therefore is that for both domestic and regional reasons, Syria is being increasingly Islamized, particularly since the ascension of Bashar al-Asad to the presidency, and moreover that this Islamization is beyond the scope of control of the current regime. This latter point will be examined in greater detail in the following section of chapter 6, and more explicitly in chapter 7 of this dissertation.

The Resulting Underground Activity

One of the most interesting domestic political developments in recent years is the decline in the Syrian state's hegemonic control over its domestic scene, particularly since hegemonic control of the domestic arena has long been the hallmark of Syria's "strong state." While Bashar al-Asad has been able to cultivate the loyalty of many Islamic shaykhs and Islamists, he has not been as successful as his father at muting militant Islamist activity on the domestic level. That this should be the case is due to the regime's domestic Islamization policies and economic liberalization discussed hitherto, as well as its use of Islamists as a mechanism of influence regionally.

The concrete result of this situation is that there have been a number of attacks during Bashar's presidency, which seem to herald the possible revival of militant Islamism in Syria, thereby shattering the Islamist quietude that had lasted for some 22 years in the country. There are many examples of this: In April 2004, Syrians witnessed what was later labeled the Mezzeh Attack, launched by an "al-Qaeda linked group" composed of Islamists returning from Iraq, on an empty UN building at the heart of Damascus.⁵¹¹ Then in early 2005, one man was arrested and another was killed as both were accused of planning an attack in Damascus on behalf of Jund al-Sham, an al-Qaeda inspired Jihadist organization reportedly linked to al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Mus'ab al-Suri.⁵¹² In July 2005, a group of gunmen were apprehended after a shooting created panic among picnickers on Mount Qasyun.⁵¹³ In June 2006, the people of Damascus awoke at dawn to the sound of heavy gunfire in the heart of the capital as security forces clashed

⁵¹⁰ This will be discussed in detail in chapter 7.

⁵¹¹ *Al-Ba'th newspaper*, 11 April 2004; SANA, 11 April 2004.

⁵¹² *Al-Ba'th newspaper*, 4 July 2004. For more on Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, see chapter 7 of this dissertation.

⁵¹³ SANA, 6 July 2005; *Al-Hayat*, 10 July 2005.

with 10 masked gunmen ostensibly preparing to stage an attack on Umayyad Square in downtown Damascus. The clash resulted in the death of two Syrian security personnel and four militants, while the remaining militants were captured.⁵¹⁴ In September 2006, an attempted attack by armed men on the American embassy in Damascus was thwarted.

In July 2008, a protest by prisoners at the Sednaya political prison – a facility that holds approximately 4,000 political prisoners, most of whom are said to be Islamists and Muslim Brothers – was quelled.⁵¹⁵ The Sednaya incident saw hundreds of political detainees injured, and dozens of Islamic prisoners killed.⁵¹⁶ According to the Syrian Islamic Front, the incident was very much reminiscent of the bloody massacres committed by the Syrian authorities against political prisoners in 1982.⁵¹⁷ Accounts published by the Syrian Human Rights Committee mentioned that the Sednaya massacre started on the morning of July 4th, 2008, after a number of military officers allegedly provoked the Islamic inmates by profaning the Quran.⁵¹⁸ Moreover only a few months earlier, in April 2008, the same prison reportedly witnessed another violent confrontation during which several detainees were killed.⁵¹⁹ The Syrian regime responded by blaming those prisoners who were serving sentences for terrorist activities, saying that they initiated the clashes with the prison's guards during an inspection.⁵²⁰

The National Salvation Front reacted to the Sednaya confrontations by issuing a statement calling on Arab and International Human Rights organizations to establish an independent investigation committee:

... in order to probe the authorities' exactions in Sednaya prison where almost four thousand political detainees are held and to submit the investigation conclusions to the International Criminal Court. It is time for the ruling regime in Syria to pay for its crimes in this prison, as in all other investigation departments where torture and mistreatment are causing the death of many prisoners and detainees ... the world should no longer ignore the desperate call of the political detainees in Syria's prisons. The disobedience action that happened in Sednaya today is only the first episode in the comprehensive disobedience movement that the Syrian population is today preparing for the regime's criminal policies are no longer bearable. And if Syria's

⁵¹⁴ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 8-14 June 2006.

⁵¹⁵ SANA, 6 July 2008; *Al-Arabiya news channel*, 6 July 2008.

⁵¹⁶ Al-marsad al-suri li-huquq al-insan (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights), 5 July 2008. Available at: <http://www.syriahr.com>

⁵¹⁷ [Http://www.free-syria.com](http://www.free-syria.com), 07-07-2008. Available at: <http://www.free-syria.com/en/print.php?articleid=29516>

⁵¹⁸ SHRC report, 5 July 2008, available at: <http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d4/3624.aspx>; See also SHRC report, 5 July 2009, available at: <http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d2/3962.aspx>

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁰ *Kuwait Times Daily*, 05-07-2008; *Haaretz*, 05-07-2008; SANA news agency, 06-07-2008; see also Reuters at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUKL0659890120080706>

political detainees were today once and again ignored, then this would reveal how left alone the Syrian population is in its struggle against tyranny and injustice.⁵²¹

The Kurdish Coordination Committee, an umbrella group of Kurdish opposition parties in Syria, said the prisoners were only demanding better living conditions, while the regime insisted that “[s]everal prisoners convicted of extremism and terror crimes created chaos ... The issue required the interference of anti-riot units to restore calm” the Syrian state news agency said.⁵²²

The Sednaya incident was not the last Islamist-related incident in Syria. On the 27th of September 2008, a car⁵²³ exploded along the Damascus International Airport road near the area’s intelligence headquarters and the important Shi’i shrine *al-Sayida Zeynab* killing 17 civilians and wounding dozens more. And this death toll could have been much worse had the attack happened on a school day, when hundreds of students would have been in class at a nearby school.⁵²⁴ According to the Syrian *Mukhabarat*, the so-called “Damascus bombing” was carried out by a suicidal *takfiri* jihadist who entered the country from Lebanon.⁵²⁵ The details of the incident describe the car heading towards one of the security branches where it hits the branch security barrier. At this point, the security guards believed the hit was a mere accident. A few seconds passed before the bomb exploded killing 17 people. The attack was characterized as the biggest attack in Syria since the Hama massacre some 16 years earlier, because of the high number of civilian deaths and the large amount of explosives used.⁵²⁶ Importantly given this chapter’s focus, the attack was subsequently blamed on the Salafis of the Lebanon-based Islamist organization Fatah al-Islam, in an investigative report aired on Syrian TV.⁵²⁷ As well, some observers have claimed that the attack took the life of Syrian Intelligence Officer George Ibrahim al-Gharbi, who was known for fighting Islamist movements in Syria.

These many examples of Islamist violence show a clear weakening in the regime’s control over the Syrian domestic sphere, an impression that is added to by reports in *al-Akhbar* newspaper that 10 other terrorist attacks were thwarted by the Syrian security forces. A few days later, in an allegedly related incident, the Yarmuk Palestinian

⁵²¹ <http://www.free-syria.com>, 07-07-2008. Available at: <http://www.free-syria.com/en/print.php?articleid=29516>

⁵²² SANA, 06-07-2008

⁵²³ Packed with 200 kilograms of explosives.

⁵²⁴ *Syrian TV*, 29-03-2008; *SANA new agency*, 30-03-2008; *Syria-news* at http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=83046

⁵²⁵ Syria’s role as a transit corridor for Jihadists headed to Iraq will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

⁵²⁶ *Al-Jazeera*, 30 March 2008; *al-Hayat* 30 March 2008; *ASP*, 29 March 2008.

⁵²⁷ The organization Fatah al-Islam will be discussed further hereinafter. *Syrian TV*, 6 November 2007; *Al-Akhbar*, 7 November 2008. More details on Fatah al-Islam are to be found in the next section of this chapter.

camp witnessed clashes between the Syrian security forces and an armed group.⁵²⁸ Concurrently, these many examples also show that Syria's Islamist underground movement is growing in strength and in boldness.

Conclusion

Hafez al-Asad's strategy of co-optation and compromise with the Syrian bourgeoisie and with the bourgeois-backed religious class has weakened the Ba'th's secular and étatist hold on power. It has created a bourgeois class that is agitating for more economic liberalization and a growing neo-fundamentalist Islamic movement, both of which are crowding out the regime's originally populist policies. It is this situation that confronted Bashar al-Asad upon assuming the presidency in June 2000.

The preceding analysis has shown how in order to consolidate his power, Bashar's new government sought to reinforce the regime's alliances with society's powerful groups, namely the Islamic sector and Syria's entrepreneurial class. It has also shown how this reinforcement was effected by continuing along the path of economic liberalization and co-optation initiated by the Hafez regime, thereby moving even further away from the Ba'th's populist-socialist roots and closer to an economic *infitah*. As we have seen, the impetus for this policy was the inherent set of contradictions within the PA political model, particularly the aim of balancing populist policies with authoritarian control. The net effect is that the remnants of Ba'thi statism are dissolving, leaving the current regime with an eroding base of social support and a corrupt elite – albeit one that is allied with the regime – that is greedy for further selective economic liberalization, along with a continuation of the regime's protection from domestic competition in the marketplace.

Another act of regime compromise, one that was motivated by an effort to be inclusive of the increasingly religious Sunni street and elite, saw Bashar begin to more openly champion moderate Islam, thereby raising expectations that the era of a Ba'thist monopoly on power was drawing to a close. Indeed, as a result of Hafez al-Asad's de-secularization strategy that was at least partly aimed at preventing the regime from being accused of sectarian and "atheist" politics, secular ideologies could no longer eclipse Islam as a primary source of ideological outreach in Syria. Thus while the country's elite remained secular during the 1980s and 1990s, Syria's Islamic movement was allowed to Islamize Syria's Muslim masses from below. Today, new generations of Syrians no longer tend to perceive secularism in the same "positive" light that the older generations did, hence Bashar's belief that his regime needed to begin advocating the cause of moderate Islam.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁸ *Al-Akhbar*, 13 Octobre 2008.

⁵²⁹ For more on Syria's civil society in general, see Sylvia Chiffolleau, «La Syrie au quotidien : cultures et pratiques du changement Présentation», *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, N°115-116 - *La Syrie au quotidien. Cultures et pratiques du changement*, décembre 2006. Available Online, see: <http://remmm.revues.org/document3008.html> (Last viewed 16 October 2008).

Importantly however, while Hafez al-Asad's regime managed to successfully co-opt Islamic groups, the current regime's socio-economic policies and maneuvers, while aiming to continue the co-optation of the religious and bourgeois classes, are increasingly empowering the country's Islamic movement. This revivalist context gives such groups the opportunity to transform themselves from communal welfare organizations into political actors again aiming at political participation.

The preceding chapter suggested that the link between Syria's Islamic revivalism and the possibility of political outreach falls within the reality of the rising impoverished class. The argument is as follows: the economic liberalization policies are widening the gap between the rich and the poor in Syria; since the regime is deliberately promoting these policies, it is concurrently being forced to relinquish its populist policies that once ensured the Ba'th a significant and efficient base of social support amongst the lower classes, one that allowed it to triumph in its struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the poor have a sense of being abandoned by the regime, and also a sense of being welcomed by the only socio-political alternative that was allowed to grow under the Ba'th regime: the Islamic sector. It is this dynamic that is driving Syria's Islamic revivalism. (This will be further discussed in chapter 8)

Moreover, the war in Iraq has added another ingredient to the mix. This is because regional Islamist groups that had been co-opted by the Syrian regime as a mechanism of influence in the region have shown that they can turn against the "atheist" regime once the war in Iraq is over. Given the increasing Islamization of Syria on one hand and the economic crisis that many Syrians are facing as a result of the regime's turn towards market economy on the other, such groups are finding fertile grounds amongst the general populace for efficient mobilization and recruitment of members.

Ultimately, the increasing empowerment of neo-fundamentalist groups within Syria and of Islamists at a regional level will have a two-fold effect: it will give rise to a significant challenge to the regime's political stability. It will also stir up trouble in Syria's ideologically, religiously and ethnically diverse society, since fears of having a regime that is either influenced or led by Islamic figures could very well result in political tension and factionalism within the country. This situation is compounded by the war in Iraq, as well as by the regime's decision to continue using Jihadists as a mechanism of influence in the neighbouring country and in the region more generally, both of which have facilitated the re-emergence of Islamist militancy in Syria.

The following chapter provides a typology and a description of the emerging Islamic and Islamist groups, while also examining their ideological, communal and political outreach methods within the current Syrian context. The robustness of these groups, their Islamic legitimacy, and the effectiveness of their growth outside the scope of the regime's control are especially addressed, all within the larger framework of this dissertation's main concern with how Islamic revivalism is permeating Syria from below and thus escaping the regime's control.

Chapter 7

Revivalism and re-emergence of political Islam as a model for change: Syria's Islamic and Islamist sectors

Introduction

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I argued that the regime's survival policies in the last phase of Hafez al-Asad's rule, and more so in light of Bashar al-Asad's new rule, ultimately led to the formation and strengthening of a myriad of fundamentalist groups that today are actively Islamizing Syrian society. As discussed in chapter 6, Syria also started to see the re-emergence of Islamist militant activity in 2004, something that would have been almost unthinkable less than five years earlier. The militant Salafi character of the Islamist activity is especially striking given that the majority of Syrian Sunnis are orthodox Sufis, and seems to signal that an embryonic radical Salafi trend is developing in Syria, one that is reminiscent of Marwan Hadid's Fighting Vanguard.⁵³⁰

The recent emergence of this militant phenomenon raises a variety of analytical questions. These include, what groups and individuals make up today's Syrian Islamic movement? Is this movement different from the one that challenged the Ba'th in the 1960s and 1970s? If yes, in what ways? What are the reasons behind the Islamic sector's success in expanding its membership? What sort(s) of outreach (ideological, political, economic) is the Islamic sector deploying, and how successful are both Islamic and Islamist movements in recruiting followers given the authoritarian context of Syrian politics? Is Syria's Islamic sector linked in any way to the country's re-emerging militant Islamists? In other words, what if any is the relationship between the Islamic and the Islamist sectors, and how are they intertwined into the Syrian political scene?

Engaging with these questions will help fathom this dissertation's kernel theoretical and empirical concerns, which are: Is Syria witnessing the re-birth of Islamism and the fall of its Ba'thist secularism? How is this Islamization possible in the aftermath of the Hama incident in 1982, and within the authoritarian context of Syrian politics?

The intention of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive account of the Islamic parties' dogma or their interpretation of Islamic precepts; rather it is to highlight the groups that make up Syria's Islamic movement, and to unpack the movement's overall discourse and methods of outreach in order to explain the reasons behind their

⁵³⁰ See chapters 3 and 4 of this study.

increasing membership and rising influence (beyond the role played by the actions of the state discussed in previous chapters).

In contrast to analyses that have routinely grouped all of Syria's Islamic groups together and portrayed the country's Islamic sector as homogeneous, I contend here that today's Syrian Islamic sector is different from the one that challenged the Ba'th in the 1960s and 1970s. I also contend that it is different from the one that emerged in the aftermath of the Hama crisis. This difference is not simply that it is more robust and effective, but that it is also no longer just a simple client to the patron-regime, and is in fact, generally speaking, moving towards becoming an equal ally or partner to the Ba'athi Command. Importantly, although the majority of the different Islamic groups are still co-opted and accommodating to the regime, nonetheless some are already circumventing state control mechanisms due to their informal nature and outreach methods, while others are ultimately anti-regime.

In keeping with arguments made throughout this work, one conclusion will be re-affirmed: Syria's Islamic movement was empowered from above, and then later invigorated from below by the failure of the country's populist authoritarian political model. This reinvigoration gathered speed due to liberalizing policies that produced a gradual re-emergence of Syria's private sector, as well as a debate over identity among many Syrians.⁵³¹

A typology and a discussion of the nature, robustness, and popular legitimacy of the most important groups that make up Syria's Islamic and Islamist sectors, as well as a delineation of their ideological discourse and recruiting techniques, will be presented. In this typology, I divide the groups into two subgroups: 1) Fundamentalist groups co-opted by the Damascus regime, and; 2) Groups opposing the Damascus regime. As stated hitherto, it will become clear that, whether they are in alliance with the Syrian government or not, Islamic groups are in general growing increasingly autonomous from a regime that is losing its populist orientation and its initial social base of support.

Fundamentalist Groups Co-opted by the Damascus Regime and Islamization from Below

Playing the Apolitical Game

Syria is witnessing an Islamic revivalism that is evident in the emergence of a plethora of apolitical Islamic organizations, charitable associations, as well as Islamic bookstores, institutes and forums that are supposedly effectively functioning under the

⁵³¹ This will be examined in chapter 8. See Yahya Sadowski, "The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria," in Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002, pp. 137-154; and Yasseen Haj Saleh, "Political Reform and the Reconfiguration of National Identity in Syria," *Arab Reform Brief*, June 14, 2006.

support and with the patronage of the Syrian political elite (see tables 1 and 2 in chapter 6).⁵³²

However, although still limited to Damascus and the larger cities, what is most interesting about the present Islamic movement in Syria is that it is *different* in many ways from the one, embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Baʿth regime faced from the 1960s to the early 1980s. An examination of these differences can explain the success of the groups in their movement-building efforts within the supposedly secular context of Baʿthi politics.

For instance, the Muslim Brothers had failed in the 1970s to recruit the masses whose imagination was captured by the populist Baʿthi and other leftist movements. The main difficulty was that Syria's Islamic movement was defending the traditional political order and the morality of the economic status quo in which its members had established their powerful alliances. Meanwhile, the leftist Baʿth regime was replacing these urban groups, promising the end of parochialism and social mobility.

Today, not only has the Baʿth regime abandoned most of its populist policies, but Islamic groups are in their majority no longer part of the traditional political Islamic network that once challenged the leftist political transformations. These orders, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, chose to survive within the existing political establishment. Inherently quietist and elitist in nature, likely as a result of their Sufi roots, they have opted for political quietism by focusing on a discreet and gradual kind of Islamic revivalism at the communal level. Co-opted and empowered by the state in the 1980s, the majority do not aim to share political power with the state (or at least have not until today). In pursuing their particular brand of Islamic revivalism, they have achieved a status and strength that is greater than that achieved either by the Muslim Brothers before

⁵³² What is important to say at this point is that while the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has attracted much of the attention from scholars, this is due to its previous militant activity and violent conflict with the state. Indeed, other Islamic Sufi organizations, pietistic in nature rather than politically oriented, have since the Hama incidents of 1982 had a very important role to play and have since, and increasingly so today, impacted Syrian society and the state. In other words, the political activity of the Muslim Brethren had overshadowed the apolitical activity of the other Sufi groups, such as the Naqshbandiyya, the Shadhiliyya and the Rifāʿiyya among others, and eclipsed their social role in society. This is all the more important given that, since the Hama massacre in 1982 and the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood, the main actor of Syria's Islamic movement since the early 20th century, Syria has witnessed the resurgence en masse of these less known Islamic populist groups that have successfully re-emerged as powerful apolitical Sufi brotherhoods, some more reformist than others and similar in organization and views to their pre-modern era counterparts. To name a few of the works expanding scholarship on Syria's apolitical Islamic organizations and their leaders' dogma: Annabelle Böttcher, "Islamic Teaching Among Sunni Women in Syria," in Bowen and Early, ed., *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, 2002; Idem, *Official Sunni and Shi'i Islam in Syria*, San Domenic: European University Institute, 2002; Andreas Christmann, "'The Form is Permanent, but the Content Moves': The Qur'anic Text and its Interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrour's *Al-Kitab wa l-Quran*," *Die Welt des Islam*, 43, 2003: 143-172; idem, "73 Proofs of Dilettantism: The Construction of Norm and Deviancy in the Responses to 'al-Kitab wa'l-Qur'an: Qira'a Mu'asira' by Mohamad Shahrour," *Die Welt des Islam*, 45, 2005: 20-73; Leif, Stenberg, "Naqshbandiyya in Damascus: Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society," in Elisabeth Özdalga, ed., *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia - Change and Continuity*, Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1999, pp. 101-116; idem, "Young, Male and Sufi Muslim in the City of Damascus," in Jørgen Bæck Simonsen, ed., *Youth and Youth Culture in the Contemporary Middle East*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005, pp. 68-91.

them, or by their secular counterparts during the same period. Indeed, as one Sufi apprentice put it, “1982 was a blessing in disguise [for Syria’s orders and religious life].”

As stated hitherto, this very important move away from political outreach and towards ideological communal outreach was produced under the direct supervision of the regime. Its success is mainly due to two main reasons: First, it attests to the regime’s efficient measures to extract itself from the problematical equation. In this deployment, the regime transformed the confrontation, from one between Islam and a political actor that was widely seen as secular, corrupt and minoritarian, to one between “moderate Islam”⁵³³ and “radical Islam”. And secondly, it crystallizes the Islamic groups’ effective reading of, and tactical response to, the shifting, non-political opportunity structures within Syria.

The flexibility and innovation displayed by the groups is perhaps unsurprising when we consider their previously successful transformation in the face of modernity and its changing political environment. More specifically, we can point to their adaptation to the pressures from the rising Salafi movement arriving in Syria from Egypt and the Gulf area, which saw them switch to promoting a pietist, orthodox version of Sufism in the early 20th century.⁵³⁴ This version of Sufism was particularly upheld and promoted by Shaykhs such as Amin Kuftaro (father of the Kuftariya movement in Syria), ‘Abd al-Karim al-Rifa’i, and the late Mufti of Syria, Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro. Indeed, Ahmad Kuftaro was notable for his downplaying of Sufism’s mystical aspects in favour of a more orthodox interpretation, based at least partly on a view that the Islamic world is needlessly divided into a Sufi mystic camp and a rigid Sunni camp.⁵³⁵ This interpretation turned out to be more acceptable to a majority of the educated Sunni populace in Syria.

Similarly, in order to survive the changing political reality and recognizing the end of the “politics of the notables,” a majority of these Sufi orders, unlike the greater part of the Muslim Brothers, chose quietism. In so doing, they accommodated the new political elite and its revolution from above.

⁵³³ As shaped by political realities inside of Syria.

⁵³⁴ Given that Sunni Syrians are, in the majority, Sufis, and given that the division between Salafi and Sufi currents in Islam is less clear-cut than it appears on the surface, at least in Syria, it is important to understand Sufism in this case as simply meaning historical traditionalism. In fact, populist Sufi orders of the early 20th century, to which the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also belongs, had accepted the Salafi interpretations and adopted its modernizing outlooks, promoting the advance of an overt modernist Islam. It is modernist in the sense that it is shedding the mystical and ritualistic aspect that had developed in the previous centuries, in an attempt to meet the changing demands of modernity.

⁵³⁵ Kuftaro explains: “الإسلام كل لا يتجزأ، فهو علم القرآن والحكمة والتزكية” [Islam is indivisible, it is the science of the Quran, the science of Wisdom and the science of Purification] See <http://www.kuftaro.org>. See also Muti’ al-Hafez and Abaza, Nizar, *Tarikh Ulama Dimashq*, 3 Volumes, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1991. To examine the complexity of the Salafi-Sufi relations and continuity in Syria, see Itzhak Weisman, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus*, Leiden: Brill, 2000; idem, “The Politics of Popular Religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim brothers in 20th-Century Hamah,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, 2005: 37-58.

General Discourse: Apolitical?

Thus with their firm grounding in orthodoxy and apoliticalism, Syria's modern revivalist orders and groups have sought to create a renewed Islamic society by focusing upon change at the individual level rather than macro political reforms. This has meant that the co-opted Islamic groups and their shaykhs have been advancing a social agenda aimed at moral reform of individuals and groups at the sub-community level rather than the re-organization of society by wielding the powers of the state.⁵³⁶ Practically speaking, this means that members of these micro-communities are asked to re-invent themselves as part of the new sub-community, through an emphasis on the "formation of the Spiritual Muslim" (*al-Islam wa Bina' al-Insan al-Rabbani*), an emphasis which underlines Olivier Roy's argument that these modern groups have turned fundamentalist and neo-fundamentalist rather than Islamist.

This focus on the ethical rather than the social or the politico-economic is proving effective in terms of popularizing their Islamic discourse within Syria. One of the main reasons for this effectiveness is that the discourse communicated is creating a moral synthesis that bridges the gap between a number of overlapping socio-economic and sub-national cleavages. For instance, out of ten "Intellectual Principles" outlined by the late Mufti Kuftaro as a guide to Syria's Muslims, three stress the importance of co-existence both between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between the different Muslim sects. In the same vein, Shaykh al-Buti, the current Mufti Badr al-Din Ahmad Hasun and the Syrian Minister of *Awqaf*, Muhammad 'Abd al-Satar, all have lectured on the common morals shared by all religious discourses.⁵³⁷ In a country where politics have meant trouble and division, focusing on the ethical *da'wa* in religion instead of on political discourse is certainly understandable, especially within the authoritarian context of Syrian politics, it is more importantly also amenable to the public.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁶ See for instance al-Buti, *al-Ta'aruf 'ala al-Dhat Huwa al-Tariq ila al-Islam*, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, n.d. See also Muhammad 'Abd al-Satar, "Al-Tajdid fi al-Fikr al-Islami," delivered on 7 March, 2009. Available at <http://www.syrianawqaf.org>.

⁵³⁷ Kuftaro explains, "كل الأئمة المجتهدين كانوا يقولون إذا صح الحديث فهو مذهبي" "إذا كانت السنة إتباع رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم فكلنا شيعية" See "Mabadi' Fikriya," at <http://www.kuftaro.org>. See also lecture given by the current Mufti of Syria, Shaykh Ahmad Badr al-Din Hasun, "Suriya: Madrasat al-'Aysh al-Mushtarak," given in Homs on 22 July 2009. Recording available at: http://www.drhassoun.com/news/news_details.php?news_id=750. See also a lecture delivered at the Asad Library in Damascus by Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd al-Satar, "Al-'Alaqa al-Insaniya fi al-Islam." Available at <http://www.Syrianawqaf.org>.

⁵³⁸ In one of his lectures entitled "Tawdhif al-Din fi al-Sira' al-Siyasi" (The employment of religion in the struggle for power), delivered in March 2000, al-Buti criticizes the politicization of the Islamic *da'wa* in search of the control of the state. He says the following:

غير أن هذا يتجلى عندما يتاح للإسلام أن يبسط سلطانه وينفذ أحكامه، أما في مرحلة الدعوة إليه واتخاذ السبل إلى فهمه والاقتناع به بين يدي تطبيق نظامه على المجتمعات الإسلامية، وهي المرحلة التي يتحرك فيها الإسلاميون أو الجماعات الإسلامية، فإن الضمانة الأولى لنجاح هذا السعي إنما تتمثل في السمو بأعمال الدعوة الإسلامية عن المنعرجات السياسية الكامنة في الطريق، وفي التعالي عن الطموحات السياسية المتمثلة في السعي إلى القبض على أزمة الحكم.... وهذا ما لم يقتنع به إلى اليوم كثير من المسلمين مع الأسف!... ومن ثم فإن مصطلح الدعوة الإسلامية في أنشطتهم إنما يعني النهوض بالتحركات السياسية الرامية إلى بلوغ كراسي الحكم، وهذا ما أعنيه بتسييس الإسلام، ولعل التعبير الأدق: تسييس الدعوة الإسلامية.

However, it is important to note that the religious discourse propagated is not entirely devoid of the political. Keeping in mind the Islamic groups' ongoing need to ensure that they are accommodated by the regime, their messages do tend to promote a vision that endorses the actions of the Syrian regime and the separation of the state from religion.⁵³⁹ Indeed, the ostensibly orthodox discourse that these modern social movements advance masks a truly innovative element within that discourse as it imbues popular religion in Syria with certain political assumptions that could very well be read as promoting secularism. Thus we see them affirming the importance within the Islamic historical tradition of working with *de facto* national states, in order to achieve that which serves the [secular] nation's interests while also helping to spread *da'wa* and Islam.⁵⁴⁰ The locus of the mosque for instance is imbued with such a politicized meaning. It is often described as a symbol of unity and the elective ties of affinity, not only between the individual and the *umma*, but more significantly between the *umma* and the rulers of the country whose political stability is stressed and celebrated as a requirement for the rebirth of Islamic civilization.

Furthermore, Syria's official shaykhs are very reluctant to condemn rulers as *kuffar* despite what they perceive as their misguided or deplorable actions and their neglect of *Shari'a*; thus they emphasize virtues such as *sabr* (patience), *hikma* (wisdom), pacifism, non-violent resistance, gradual change, and "true beliefs rather than militant actions."⁵⁴¹ While doing so, one main concern is at work: that it is of utmost importance not to repeat the mistakes of the past during which "a minority of radicals took over Syria's Islamic movement", and that doctrinal education must be the first priority before any form of change is undertaken.⁵⁴² Indeed, the need for "the correct education first" has

⁵³⁹ Muhammad Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi'al-Irhab*, Damascus: al-Ahali, 2008, pp. 140-141. See also section discussing Kuftaro's order next.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i's opinion concerning political and militant action against the regime:
 "لقد كان يفد بين الحين والآخر على الشيخ بعض شباب الحركات الإسلامية وقد ثارت ثائرتهم ضد حزب ما أو جهة ما فتراهم يحدثون الشيخ في حماسة و ثورة عارمة عن ضرورة تأييده لهم في موقفهم , و الشيخ يستمع لهم في إنصات و هدوء , فإذا ما فرغوا التفت إليهم قائلاً : يا أبنائي أليس من الواجب علينا قبل القيام بما تريدون أن نوحّد شمل الجماعات الإسلامية ليكون ولاؤهم واحداً ؟
 أليس من الواجب الإعداد المتقن لما تقومون به و أخذ الدروس و العبر من التجارب التي مر بها غيركم فكان ما كان ؟
 و الله الذي لا إله إلا هو لو أنني أجد الوقت مناسباً لحملت السلاح على عجزي و كبر سني و مشيت أمامكم فاتحين أولاً بيت المقدس الذي يحمل جميع المسلمين القادرين إثم التخاذل عنه ,
 يا أبنائي احذروا من أعداء الإسلام الذين يعدونكم بالمناصرة و يحرضونكم على القيام في وجه السلطة ليتم القضاء عليكم و على فكرتكم ."

و لكنه رحمه الله تعالى كان يلجأ دائماً إلى تقويم بعض الأخطاء و الانحرافات عند الدولة و قوانينها و تشريعاتها بالعمل الهادئ الذي يصل من خلاله إلى ما يريد من دون صخب و لا ضجيج , إذ يحرك النواب الصادقين الذين أيدهم فيحملهم مسؤولية إصلاح هذه الأخطاء , وقد كان لهؤلاء النواب الأثر الكبير في عودة كثير من الأمور إلى مجاريها"

See also Muhammad Habbash's definition of the Islamic *Futuh* in his *Tajdeed* (Renewal) program available at: www.tajdeed.org. Habbash states that current times necessitate that political action is to be led by a [secular] national state, and war by a modern professional army. Habbash's program is discussed hereinafter.

been endorsed by a number of prominent *'ulama'* such as the late and current Muftis of Syria.⁵⁴³ Therefore, in their resolve to avoid radicalization, shaykhs condemn the idea of jihad as mere violent struggle (*Qital*), and more particularly as a violent struggle against the ruler or as a violent means to change the balance of power within the domestic socio-political order.⁵⁴⁴ Muhammad Shahrur writes, "All Arab regimes, no matter their kind, are wiser than the people they govern..."⁵⁴⁵ These shaykhs forcefully argue that Salafi *Takfiri* Islamists are a by-product of today's crisis of religious education. According to their critique, true Muslims following true Islam (*Risalat al-Islam al-Haqqa*) not only *adapt* to changing circumstances, they are the leaders of progress and know how to remain true Muslims while accepting change.⁵⁴⁶

Furthermore, in the Syrian *ulama'*'s main teachings and throughout their lectures, they challenge anyone who assumes that he or she knows the whole truth, accusing them of forgetting that their idiosyncratic interpretations of the religious texts are no more than hypotheses. They also criticize anyone who coerces other people to follow them in the belief that it is possible to eradicate the different Islamic *madhhabs* (schools) and their disagreements, and unite all Muslims in one single stroke.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴² Personal Interview, Damascus 10 April, 2008; Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi' al-Irhab*, p. 139.

⁵⁴³ This is part of Kuftaro's own "Intellectual Principles." The first and fourth principles stress the importance of knowing the Quran in order to create a true Islamic community. The first principle states:

"المسلمون الأول بكتاب واحد ومعلم واحد فتحو نصف العالم القديم" see: <http://www.kuftaro.org>.

Interestingly, doctrinal education has been encouraged by others too who were, however, anti-regime such as: the Muslim Brotherhood's ideologue Sa'id Hawwa, Sayyid Qutb, Fathi Yakan, and even Abu Mus'ab al-Suri. The latter asserts that the lack of doctrinal training was a major reason for the defeat of the Fighting Vanguard and the Muslim Brothers in the early 1980s and he concludes that the need for establishing an environment of conflict against the status quo and the ideological setting is hence a necessity. See Hawwa, *Fi Afaq al-Ta'lim*, pp. 65–72; idem, *Al-Madkhal ila Da'wat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, Amman: Dar al-Arqam, n.d., pp. 308–309; Fathi Yakan, *Kayfa Nad'u ila al-Islam?* (The Way to Preach Islam), Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, 1977; idem, *Al-Isti'ab fi Hayat al-Da'wa wa al-Da'iya* (Awareness in the life of the Da'wa and the Da'iya), Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, 1997, pp. 9–15, 62–70; For extracts of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's *Da'wat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* (extracts), see: [Http://www.muslm.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-159953.html](http://www.muslm.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-159953.html) (last accessed 10 November 2008).

⁵⁴⁴ See for example the work of Sa'id al-Buti, *Jihad in Islam: how we understand it and how we apply it*, Damascus: n.d. See Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi' al-Irhab*, especially pp. 55–141. See also a number of lectures given to the public at the Ummayyad Mosque and at the Abu al-Nur foundation, for instance Ahmad Kuftaro, "Tawdih li-Ma'ani al-Jihad," (16 April, 2004); "al-Islam wa al-Salam" (12 September 2003); "al-Islam wa al-Irhab" (15 August 2003). Available at <http://www.kuftaro.org>

⁵⁴⁵ Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi' al-Irhab*, pp. 138–139.

⁵⁴⁶ Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi' al-Irhab*, pp. 25–26; see also al-Buti, *al-La Madhhabiya: Akhtar Bid'a Tuhadid al-Shari'a al-Islamiya* Damascus: Furat, n.d.

⁵⁴⁷ Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi' al-Irhab*, p.21, and pp. 239–241. Also, observation based on weekly lessons delivered by prominent Shaykhs such as Abd al-Fatah al-Buzum, Usama al-Rifa'i, and Tawfiq Ramadan, under the tutelage of the ministry of Awqaf at the Umayyad mosque, addressing *Fiqh*, *Hadith* and *Usul al-Fiqh* and *al-'Ibadat*.

Threaded throughout the shaykhs pronouncements is an emphasis on the ethical component in life and politics. It is claimed that in order to achieve a true Islamic society right down to its political core, every individual must first follow an Islamic way of life. It is only after all or at least the majority of individuals in a society have chosen Islam and declared their obedience to its rules and principles that an Islamic society based on the contract of obedience to Allah (*'ubudiyyat Allah*) can coherently emerge. In the attempt to move toward such a society, attributes such as *takabbur* (arrogance) and *tama'* (greed) are regularly vilified. The piety of individuals and adherence to daily religious rituals such as observing the five prayers, attending mosque and partaking in other weekly lessons and *Zikr* sessions are put forward as social as well as religious acts, and are claimed to be at the heart of the Islamic state.⁵⁴⁸

In order to understand the Islamic sector's growing membership within its proper context, the most important groups are surveyed in the following section, with a brief outline of their dogmas.

The Most Influential Groups in Syria's Islamic Revivalism

There are a number of Islamic orders and groups that are very influential within Syria's Islamic revivalism movement:⁵⁴⁹ The Kuftariya Naqshbandiya order which include the groups of Salah Kuftaro, and Wafa' Kuftaro;⁵⁵⁰ The originally secretive Munira al-Qubaysi's "sisters," which was officially recognized by the state in May 2006; The late 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i's group also known as the Zayd movement;⁵⁵¹ 'Abd al-Hadi al-Bani's *Jama'a*; Sa'id al-Buti's followers;⁵⁵² and last but not least, Huda

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁹ Personal interviews in Damascus, April 2008. It is believed that there are at least 20 active Islamic groups in Syria at the time of this writing. Due to the overall similarities in their discourses encompassing but a few specific theological nuances, only some of these will be examined hereinafter.

⁵⁵⁰ The most prominent order in Syria is the Naqshbandiya. Other prominent orders are the Shadhiliya, and the Rifa'iya. The Naqshbandiya order includes the teachings of the late Amin Kuftaro, the late Ahmad Kuftaro, the late Amin Shaykho, Salah Kuftaro, and Wafa' Kuftaro. See Leif Stenberg, "Young, Male and Sufi Muslims in the City of Damascus," pp. 68-91. The Shadhiliya order includes the teachings of Shaykhs 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri, Shukri al-Luhafi, Shaykh Saleh al-Hamawee, and Muhammad Hisham al-Burhani. Their *Zikr* sessions are held at the Nuriya Mosque, al-Sadat Mosque, and al-Tawba Mosque in Damascus. The Rifa'iya order includes the teaching of Ahmad al-Habbal at the Mosque of Badr al-Din in Damascus.

⁵⁵¹ 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i's *da'wa* team includes Shaykhs such as Sariya al-Rifa'i, Usama al-Rifa'i, Na'im Iriksusa and Nadhir al-Maktabi - among others.

⁵⁵² See chapter 5 of this dissertation. See Christmann, "Ascetic Passivity in Times of Extreme Activism: the Theme of Seclusion in a Biography by al-Buti," in Philip S. Alexander et al. eds., *Studia Semitica: the Journal of Semitic Studies Jubilee Volume*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 279-303. See also, Fred de Jong, "Les confréries mystiques musulmanes au Machreq arabe," in Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein (eds.), *Les Ordres mystiques dans l'Islam: Cheminements et situation actuelle* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 1986).

Habash⁵⁵³ and Muhammad Habash's *Tajdeed* (Renewal) group.⁵⁵⁴ Of course, since their agendas and social teachings are not counter-hegemonic, legitimize the regime, and represent a significant challenge to the revolutionary Jihadist and Islamist doctrine advanced by the Syrian Muslim Brothers, the state has made sure that these groups' shaykhs are able to reach the public through the construction of over 976 institutes that permeate the whole country, but especially the urban parts of Syria, such as Damascus, Homs, Dayr al-Zur, Dar'a and Suweyda, and Lattaquieh.⁵⁵⁵ (See Table 3)

Table 3

Governorate	Number of al-Asad Islamic Institutes
Damascus and suburbs	414
Homs	60
Hama	51
Aleppo	3
Lattaquieh	43
Tartus	6
Al-Raqqa	11
Dayr al-Zur	71
Al-Hasaka	16
Dar'a and Suweyda	81
Quneitra	14
Idleb	70
Total	840

* From the Syrian *Awqaf* Ministry, based on a survey published on 31 December 2007.

In addition to the regime's empowering strategy, the groups' own outreach methods are vital in connecting with the public. Thus, an evaluation of the outreach methods of these Islamic groups will help to explain the success and growing autonomy of the revivalist movement in present-day Syria. Before doing so however, a brief

⁵⁵³ See Hilary Kalmbach, "Social and Religious Change in Damascus: One Case of Female Religious Authority," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35, 2008: 37-57.

⁵⁵⁴ Dr. Habash has published 31 books in Arabic. For an introductory article with Dr. Habash discussing his revivalist movement, see *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 3 February 2006. For Western works, see Paul L. Heck, "Religious Renewal in Syria: the Case of Muhammad al-Habash," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 15, 2004: 185-207; idem, "Muhammad al-Habach et le dialogue interreligieux," in Baudouin Dupret (ed.), *La Syrie au Présent*, Paris: Sinbad / Actes Sud, 2007.

⁵⁵⁵ Surveys and Statistics from Syrian Ministry of Awqaf, issued on 31 December 2007. See also *al-Hayatt* newspaper, 3 May 2006. There are at least 976 official Islamic schools in Syria, at least 80 of these are for girls in Damascus alone serving more than 75,000 women and girls, and about half are affiliated with the same *shaykha*, Munira al-Qubaysi.

overview of the various groups that constitute Syria's most significant Islamic players is in order.

Probably the most prominent group in Syria is the Naqshbandiya Kuftariya.⁵⁵⁶ Originally led by Shaykh Amin Kuftaro, the Kuftariya is a branch of the prominent Syrian Naqshbandi Sufi order. Like other orders that chose political quietism in order to survive the Ba'th era, the Kuftariya preaches a version of Islam that focuses on renewal and is centered on individual morality, tradition rather than textualism, and on the transformation of society through the individual.⁵⁵⁷ Leif Stenberg writes: "The idea of cleansing the heart is...considered important because it constitutes a base from which a new Muslim can be created – the heart being the center of "religion" within the body."⁵⁵⁸ The group, which is composed of around 10,000 first-hand members who are regular attendees of the al-Nur Mosque in the Rukn al-Din district, *al-Thanawiya al-Shar'iya* for girls, and the mixed Faculty of Islamic *Da'wa*, all in Damascus, also stresses the importance of inter-faith dialogue and acceptance, including ecumenism and a *de facto* separation of religion and the state.⁵⁵⁹

The late Ahmad Kuftaro and his daughter Wafa' Kuftaro have issued a large number of female teaching permits, and it is claimed that most of the female teachers working in Damascus and its suburbs are products of their *jama'a*. The families of these women, and especially their husbands, are also very much involved in the group's activities, and are encouraged to maintain close relations with both welfare organizations and with Syria's businessmen. The contacts and relationships of the husbands assist the women in distributing much needed help to poorer families in need. The group has also built a strong alliance with the state through the late leading Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro, whose whole family, including his son Salah Kuftaro, has profited a great deal from the regime's patronage, including the acquisition of land in the Damascene suburbs.⁵⁶⁰

The Zayd group originally led by the late Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i has a program entitled *Nahwa Da'wa 'Alamiya* (Towards a Global *Da'wa*), and is considered

⁵⁵⁶ In this dissertation, only the Naqshbandiya order is examined since it has impacted the majority of Syria's most influential shaykhs.

⁵⁵⁷ See <http://www.kuftaro.org>; Paulo Pinto, "Dangerous Liaisons: Sufism and the state in Syria," in Jakelie S. and J. Varsoke (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: From Syria to Slovakia*, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 14, 2003, p. 7.

⁵⁵⁸ Stenberg, "Young, Male and Sufi Muslims in the City of Damascus," p. 73.

⁵⁵⁹ Although on this point, Kuftaro understands secularism to be *'Imaniya*, not *'Almaniya*. He perceives the word as stemming from *'Ilm* (science). *'Ilm*, he asserts is entirely in line with Islam's teachings, since *talab al-'Ilm* (the right to one's education) is an obligation (*Farida*) on all Muslims and hence it is an intrinsic part of the Muslim culture: "إن العلمانية التي تعتمد العلم التجريبي، هي حلقة صغيرة من حلقات الإسلام." George Tarabishi, one of Syria's main secular academics and intellectuals, explains that secularism in Arabic comes from the word *'Almana*, i.e., to make part of this world, (this assertion is not shared by all secular academics in Syria) which is in opposition to *Rahbana* (to become part of the spiritual). One wonders whether Kuftaro can reconcile Muslim ideology with secularism according to this understanding of secularism.

⁵⁶⁰ Private Communication, October 2008.

to be leading the largest charitable network within the revivalist movement in the country. Its most prominent leading members including Shaykhs Na'im Īriksusa, Nadhir Maktabi, Sariya and Usama al-Rifa'i lecture at the Ansari Mosque in Damascus. Their *da'wa*-oriented teachings downplay Sufism's traditional practices in favour of renewal (*Tajdid*) of Islam, without however dismissing the virtues of the Sufi way. The group advances that "the present is not a time of *turuq*, but of science,"

(الحاضر ليس وقت طرق إنما هو وقت العلم). Knowledge of *Tawhid* (the principles of the oneness of God) and *Fiqh* is promoted as a vital learning for Muslims, yet emphasis is placed on the reality of moral change, and the need to re-interpret (*ta'wil*) parts of the Islamic texts in the aim to serve new times and contexts. For this, questions addressing the universality and particularity of interpretations are raised. If renewal is done correctly, the Rifa'i *da'wa* program envisions a *nahda Islamiya Shamila* (an all-encompassing Islamic revival).⁵⁶¹

Shaykh Muhammad Habash is another religious scholar advocating *Tajdid*. He is perhaps the boldest of all Sunni clerics, given his manifest attempts at bridging the supposed gap between classical Muslim thought and modernity. Considered by Syrians to be the heir of Ahmad Kuftaro, Habash's mission has been since the late 1980s to lead a campaign of Islamic renewal, while also learning what the West has to offer in terms of intellectual, scientific and ethical insights.⁵⁶² This mission has been effected in his capacities as director of the Center of Islamic Studies in Damascus and as a teacher in the prominent Abu al-Nur Foundation, as well as in his position as a member of the *Majlis al-Sha'b* (parliament) since 2003. Unlike al-Buti (see Part II of this dissertation), he has deliberately shed the conservative leanings of Syria's religious education. Indeed, one of his paramount statements in his *Risalat al-Tajdeed* (Mission of Renewal) is: "We believe that to every nation its laws and methods, and that to every generation its time and place."⁵⁶³ [translation mine]

(نؤمن بأن لكل أمة شرعة ومنهاجاً وكذلك لكل جيل وزمان ومكان.)

One of Habash's most interesting intellectual contributions is his counter-Salafi teaching as regards outward obligations of the faith,⁵⁶⁴ and his clear rejection of the

⁵⁶¹ See Zayd movement website at <http://www.sadazaid.com>

⁵⁶² See his article in *Al-Thawra* (29 May 2009) in which he asserts "the Earth is round and keeps on turning, there is no West and East":

فالأرض كروية، وهي تدور باستمرار

⁵⁶³ From Dr. Habbash's *Risalat al-Tajdeed*, p. 7. Available at al-Tajdeed website: http://altajdeed.org/web/index.php?option=com_remository&Itemid=40&func=fileinfo&id=215 (Last visited 23 December 2009)

⁵⁶⁴ For instance, concerning the *Hijab* of women, Habash asserts that veiling is a matter on which no consensus has been reached amongst the religious 'ulama; he also explains that ultimately it is a matter to be decided by the woman herself since she alone is impacted by it. In his Renewal program, Habash explains (pp. 21-22):

الحجاب أدب من آداب الإسلام، وهو يحقق فوائد عظيمة للمرأة منها تحقيق عفافها والحيلولة دون أن تكون متعة رخيصة لأهل الخلاعة والمجون، ومنها أنه يحقق المساواة بين النساء بأيسر ما يكون فالمحجبات أقل تمايزاً وأكثر تشابهاً.

monopolizing Wahabi Salafi claim over salvation and authenticity. Habash's 31 books and dozens of articles are all based upon one main premise: there is more than one path to God and salvation, and Islam recognizes and confirms the validity of all of these paths. His teachings stress that no one has a monopoly over *akhlaqiyat* (morals), *Fiqh* or *al-haqiqa* (truth), and that all religions are effective avenues to prosperity in this world and salvation in the next, a claim that ultimately aims to strip Islamist leaders of their religious power and influence. In his inter-religious debates and discussions with secularists, Habash argues that as much as 80 percent of the general populace – and of Muslims more specifically – are conservative, 20 percent are reformists, and less than 1 percent are extremists.⁵⁶⁵ Habbash's vision of Jihad brooks room for a new interpretation and understanding of many of the so-called *futuhat*, or Islamic conquests. He rejects the

-
- ولكن مع التأكيد على منزلة الحجاب فيجب الإشارة إلى الأمور الآتية:
- إن الشريعة لم تحسم شكل الحجاب على كل مسلمة بل ظل الحجاب محل اجتهاد وتأويل وقد جمعنا في كتاب المرأة بين الشريعة والحياة طائفة كبيرة من أقوال الأئمة في جواز صيغ متعددة من الحجاب فيها على الأمة تيسير ورحمة، وفيها رفع الحرج والمشقة.
 - إن نصوص الفقهاء متضاربة في رفع الحرج عن نساء كثير في عورة الشعر المسترسل وما يبدو عند المهنة وهذه المسائل متروكة في الواقع للمرأة المسلمة تقدر منها ما يتصل بواقعها وحالتها إذ هي دون سواها المسؤولة عن تحقيق العفاف الاجتماعي في الأمة.
 - وأما المنديل الذي يستتر كل الوجه فليس صورة حضارية مقبولة، وهو ليس الصورة المحببة للمرأة المسلمة، ونعتقد أنه يجب العمل توجيهاً وفكرياً ضد هذا الشكل المتعصب من الحجاب لأنه يكرس صورة شديدة القسوة على المرأة المسلمة لا تتناسب أبداً مع العصر الحاضر.
 - لا شك أننا ندين نزع الحجاب بالقوة كما ندين فرضه بالقوة، ولكن يحق للدولة أن تتدخل لفرض قانون الحشمة وهو قانون يمنع المرأة من التبرج تبرجاً فاضحاً، ويحدد ذلك خبراء المؤسسة التشريعية الذين عهد إليهم بمقاومة الفحشاء.
 - إنه ليس من شأن الحجاب تقبيح المرأة أو الإساءة إلى جمالها، فالله خلق الأنثى جميلة ومن حقها أن تظهر كذلك، بدون تبرج أو تهتك، والحجاب نفسه حين يتولاه خبراء أزياء مؤمنون يكون أداة جمال وعفاف وليس أداة تشويه وإساءة.

Concerning the appropriate punishment for adultery, which a large number of Salafis believe to be stoning or flagellation, Habbash explains:

ونطالب بفرض العقاب على الزانيات والزناة بما يردعهم، وبما ينسجم مع القوانين الوطنية، وليس العقاب بالضرورة الجلد، بل يمكن اختيار السجن أو التغريم على ما تختاره المؤسسة التشريعية، وهو مطلب تشاركنا فيه النظم الحديثة اليوم والشرفاء في العالم أجمع.

أما الرجم فنعتقد أنه يتنافى مع منطق الإسلام في العقوبة، بل وفي الإحسان في القتل الذي أمرت به الشريعة، وننكر أن يكون في كتاب الله أية في الرجم، والأحاديث لا تثبت به قرآن، ولا يصح أن تراق به الدماء، وأما خبر الغامدية وماعز فنرده أو نتأوله على أنه كان قبل إحكام الآيات، ولعله من شرائع ما قبل الإسلام.

For more quotes from Habash's program, see chapter 5 of this dissertation, section on gender relations.

⁵⁶⁵ See for instance, Muhammad Habash, "al-I'tiraf bi al-Akhar Mas'ala Siyasiya Aydan," in Adeeb Khoury ed., *Ishkaliyat al-I'tiraf bi al-Akhar*, Damascus, 2007, pp. 141-145; *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 3 February 2006; see also his TV appearance on the *BBC World News*, "the Qatar Debates," 7 June 2009.

rightfulness of the traditional definition of Jihad as a fight to preach Islam, and believes that today's Jihad is one that ought to be organized by the state and its regular army.⁵⁶⁶

Habash's election to the Syrian parliament in the 2003 elections, aside from attesting to the regime's overall approval of his work, undoubtedly indicates the success of his calls for renewal in most religious matters on the Syrian national scene. Paul Heck notes that "Islam, as he [Shaykh Habash] represents it, is not a force to be subdued but a partner in building human society."⁵⁶⁷ Indeed, Habash goes the furthest in endorsing a vision of society that accepts the secular – which is reminiscent of the Mu'tazila doctrine⁵⁶⁸ – in his interpretation of a larger Islamic picture.

Another group in the Islamic movement, and arguably one of the most peculiar, is the Sufi group under the tutelage of 'Abd al-Hadi al-Bani, who has built a mosque for his *jama'a* in the Muhajerin district, called the Kinani mosque. The gate of the mosque has four guards, apparently so as to ensure that only those who belong to the group can enter. It is alleged that once inside the mosque, no talking or praying is allowed unless Shaykh al-Bani is there to authorize it. Importantly, his disciples are not to participate in any other Shaykh's sessions, nor indeed in the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, so that their souls remain pure.⁵⁶⁹ Unfortunately, despite the fact that al-Bani's teachings have a Naqshbandi basis, there is not much known about what sort of Islamic discourse he advances. What is known at this point is that the group aims to establish "an Islamic *Umma*, rather than an Arab one."⁵⁷⁰ Al-Bani's group also takes a stand against woman's mixing with men, and her work outside the confines of her homes. He also prohibits his

⁵⁶⁶ An interesting article to read is his "Qira'a li-al-mashru' al-Siyasi li al-Rasul al-Akram" (a reading of the political program of the Prophet) in al-Thawra, 06 March 2009. Also, Habbash explains in his Renewal Program (p. 25):

نطالب بمراجعة أحكام الجهاد، وننكر أن يكون الجهاد هو القتال لإدخال الناس في الإسلام، بل هو الإعداد لما استطعنا من القوة لنرهب به عدو الله، وهو تنظيم الجيوش المدربة النظامية والجيوش الشعبية بإشراف من الدولة لحماية الأمة وللدفاع عن الأرض والعرض.

ونؤمن بأن الجهاد القائم اليوم هو جهاد الدفع، أما جهاد الطلب فقد كان في الماضي لتمكين الدعاة من تقديم رسالتهم بحرية وهو غير مبرر اليوم، بعد توفر وسائل الإعلام في كل مكان في الأرض.

ونؤكد أن الحروب التي وقعت خلال التاريخ الإسلامي ليست كلها فتحاً يؤجر فيه المحاربون بل كان كثير منهابغي وعدوان واقتتال على السلطة وهي حقائق ينبغي دراستها بمنطق المؤرخين دون أي قداسة دينية على المحاربين فيها مصيبين أو مخطئين.

⁵⁶⁷ In the late 1980s, supported by the Abu al-Nur Foundation, Habash became the first director of the Center of Islamic Studies in Damascus, which works for religious renewal via publications, lectures and conferences. In his election to parliament, Habash received the highest number of votes after the government-sponsored Ba'th candidates, and was subsequently chosen by his fellow parliamentarians to represent them in the six-member office of parliament.

⁵⁶⁸ Doctrine that sought to ground Islamic creedal system in reason and logic.

⁵⁶⁹ Private Communication, Damascus April 2008.

⁵⁷⁰ See Ba'thist website All for Syria at: <http://all4syria.info/content/view/16751/96/> (Last visited 12 November, 2009).

followers from watching television⁵⁷¹. What is certain is that Syrian intelligence keeps a close eye on the activity of the Kinani mosque and of its regular members.

Female Shaykhas

In Syria, the revivalist movement is not only led by male shaykhs, but also by *shaykhas* (female religious leaders). While most discussions of the role of women in Islamic movements focus on their status within the context of state policy or Muslim patriarchal society, few analyze the significant role of women in the upper ranks of the leadership within the Islamic community itself. Syria offers us a different perspective in our understanding of the truly diverse role of women and Islamic activism. Indeed, it is not possible to explain the success and growing autonomy of the revivalist movement and of its most important constituent groups in Syria without reference to the role of women in this process. Not only have women been more successful in bridging the public-private spheres, a conceptual divide that often limits male shaykhs' access to women. But also, as a result of socio-economic stress and the increasing participation of women in public life – this despite continuing traditions of patriarchy – the status of women has been a key issue in the mobilization ability of Islamic groups and ideological 'framing'.⁵⁷²

The above could explain why Syria's current Grand Mufti, Shaykh Ahmad Hasun, declared on the 10th of June, 2008 that women *shaykhas* are being prepared to become *Muftis*, and hence will be able to issue Islamic religious opinions and rulings, a role that has generally been monopolized by men in the Islamic World.⁵⁷³ It seems that Ahmad Hasun would like to see these female *muftis* take on official positions in Syria, in order to promulgate what he characterizes as the 'correct Islam' to women, thereby giving them a greater role in state-controlled religious institutions. However, some secularists argue that the goal of this project is manifestly not to empower female scholars, but to increase the visibility of conservative women, to spread a formal Islamic practice, and to better Islamize the family unit. Irrespective of which of these two views is correct, there is no doubt that female religious education has been a successful method for forging and sustaining ties with potential recruits, and thus promoting Islamic revivalism in secular Syria.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷¹ A number of Ba'athists were outraged by a notice issued by the regime on the 23rd of August 2009, stating that the Ba'ath does not hold a "negative view" of al-Bani's group despite the group's aim at creating an Islamic Syrian state. A number of Ba'athi members went as far as saying that the Ba'ath is no longer a Party that uphold secularism, and should be re-named "the Islamic Ba'ath Party."

⁵⁷² Wickham explains the act of framing as "the creation of motives for movement participation." See Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, p. 120.

⁵⁷³ *Al-Arabiya net*, 10 June 2008.

⁵⁷⁴ See Annabelle Böttcher, "Islamic Teaching among Sunni Women in Syria," in Bowen, Lee Domma, and Evelyn A. Early eds., *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 290.

The entry *en masse* of Syrian women into the Islamic movement testifies to the important role that they play in the process of Islamizing society. In fact, the number of girls attending *shaykhas'* lessons has increased to such an extent that many observers believe that there are now more girls receiving an Islamic education than boys – one reliable estimate is that there are more than 75,000 women attending these schools. Similarly, though it is unclear how many of the country's 700 Islamic schools are for girls, most observers believe that schools for girls outnumber those for boys.⁵⁷⁵

In addition to Wafa' Kuftaro mentioned earlier, a prominent example of a *Shaykha* is Munira al-Qubaysi, who was also once a disciple of the late shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro. Although Qubaysi was imprisoned a few times in the early 1960s, she has become Syria's most prominent *Shaykha* in the last four decades. This might be due to the fact that Munira al-Qubaysi has never been perceived as a clear *'alemat al-sulta* (the state's female religious scholars), but rather has retained a low public profile, while still being allowed to continue her work. Indeed, her group is not clearly pro or anti-regime, and its main focus appears to be first and foremost the revivalism of Islamic piety in Syria. In so doing, Qubaysi and her followers have preached an apolitical Islam to young women focusing on *fiqh* and *tafseer* and *akhlaq*, while seemingly attempting to recruit those who were most socially "liberal".⁵⁷⁶ One woman explained to me that the more defiant she was in Munira Qubaysi's class (in a liberal direction), the more the *Shaykha* praised her and presented her as an example of the outwardly lost, and yet inwardly pious soul who would eventually come to understand God's calling and adhere to the group.⁵⁷⁷

Recognized by the regime only in 2003, the Qubaysiyat sisters who had been semi-openly working as religious preachers and teachers since the early 1960s are now a fully recognized and hailed group. At least half of the 75,000 women taking religious lessons in Syria are followers of Qubaysi.

The Qubaysi's sisters meet in their private homes, some of which are better known than others, such as the Farah house. They began doing this in the aftermath of the Hama massacre. Interestingly, their recruitment of affluent and influential followers has allowed the sisters to successfully lobby the government under Bashar for licenses to teach in schools such as the 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab school, the al-Basha'ir school in Mezzeh, the Dawhat al-Majd school in the Malki district, and in the new private schools that were established by the new regime under Bashar.⁵⁷⁸ Qubaysi's group is now led by two women, Su'ad Bakdunes, who is the director of the Dar al-Na'im school in al-Rawda area, and Haifa' Quweidar, the director of 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab school in the Mezzeh District.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁵ See *Al-Hayat*, 3 May 2006; See also *The New York Times*, 29 August 2006.

⁵⁷⁶ Private communication with a group of Qubaysiat women, December 2007.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁸ Moubayed, "Islamic Revival in Syria," [Online].

⁵⁷⁹ Private Communication, April 2008.

Ideological commitments and Material Incentives

I have stressed both the state survival strategies to control Syria's Islamic movement and ensure its apoliticalism, and the Islamic groups' responses to the shifting political environment in order to explain the dynamic Islamic and Islamist resurgence in Syria. Yet no explanation can be complete without an examination of the movement's outreach methods: the material and psychological incentives, as well as the constitutive role that ideological framing has played in the flourishing process from below.

Indeed, a powerful recruiting method used by the Islamic movement consists of ideological framing. This sort of cultural outreach has allowed the different Islamic groups to strategically and successfully popularize their message, and thus to promote Islamic revivalism. In Syria, ideological framing consists of elevating the religious and moral consciousness of society, and of stimulating or "renewing" a much needed social repertoire of "ethical" habits and behavior. The goal is to achieve an organically "stronger" (homogenous) and "healthier" (religious and God fearing) society. The rationale is that the socio-economic difficulties faced by Syrians are entrenched in the ethical (or lack of it), and hence are problems that can be overcome. While certain groups, such as the Kuftariya and the Tajdeed movements, tend to advance essentialist 'moral' and 'spiritual' arguments, other groups, such as al-Zayd movement and al-Bani group, focus on the specificity of the 'Islamic' aspect of their *da'wa*. In general, these groups have efficiently used the organizational and institutional space that the state has provided them with. To demonstrate this point, Wickham explains that early on in Egypt, "[t]he dissemination of the Islamist *da'wa* through print and audio technologies at the micro-level was intricately related to the institutional developments at the macro-level."⁵⁸⁰ The 1990s represented a phase in Syria that is comparable to that of the 1970s in Egypt, during which this new sort of cultural production was accelerated, resulting in the creation of a network of independent Islamic channels that sought to promote a new Islamic ethos, and fine-tune Syria's Islamic revival.

Since then, increasingly efficient outreach methods have been employed, including regular appearances by the most prominent religious authorities on Syrian television and radio, though admittedly still not to the same extent as by their Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts.⁵⁸¹ Advertised lectures and lessons at mosques and Islamic institutes are used as a means of disseminating their ideas. Other ideological methods of outreach include Friday sermons and prayers, books, pamphlets, and CDs distributed at mosques and in local neighbourhoods' mushrooming Islamic bookstores – the most famous of which is al-Salam Baramka bookstore – and via very well organized Islamic websites.⁵⁸²

⁵⁸⁰ Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, p. 134.

⁵⁸¹ One prominent name is Shaykh Marwan Shaykhu, a senior officer in the Ministry of *Awqaf*. Marwan Shaykhu gives sermons every Friday on the radio and weekly *fatawa*. He also presents religious programs on Syrian national television, as well as daily *iftar* speeches during Ramadan.

⁵⁸² Websites that are remarkably better developed than that of any other secular institution in Syria. For instance, see www.Taghrib.org; www.sheikhrajab.org; www.kuftaro.org; www.drhassoun.com; www.zuhayli.net; www.bouti.com; www.syrianawkkaf.org.

The content of the community outreach tends to focus upon a variety of fairly typical themes that resonate with the public. Thus they refer to the Quran and the Hadith, relating stories from the life of the Prophet and his companions, and alternating between commanding good and prohibiting evil. More particularly, they refer to such *Shari'a* precepts as the duties of young Muslims, the fundamental methods of *ijtihad* according to Islamic Law, moderation in Islam, the dialectic of compassion and tolerance, and the Islamic right to ideological difference, to cite a few. Books written by Mustafa al-Siba'i, the Muslim Brothers' first Superintendent, Muhammad Ratib al-Nabulsi, Muhammad Sa'id al-Buti, the late Ahmad Kuftaro, Ahmad Badr al-Din Hasun, Muhammad Habash, and Syria's minister of *Awqaf*, Muhammad 'Abd al-Satar, among others, inundate bookstores shelves, giving the strong impression that Syria is a totally Sunni country.⁵⁸³ Pamphlets distributed in mosques and magazines underline that the duty of every Muslim to promote the "right Islam" begins with a change from within rendered as a *fard 'ayn* (religious obligation incumbent upon the individual in Islam).

At the same time, secular publishing houses in Syria such as *al-Tali'a* (New Vanguard) house, *al-Hiwar*, and *al-Ahali*, which were very popular in the 1970s and 1980s, are today seeing their sales decline: "New Vanguard is facing growing financial problems and last year [2007] published a mere 10 titles, of which only one was an economic text. It's a far cry from the early 1990s when the publishing house was releasing upwards of 40 titles a year and was one of the country's largest book publishers."⁵⁸⁴

The larger issue hinted at in this decline is that notwithstanding the rise of religiosity worldwide and in the Arab world more specifically, the regime's empowerment of Syria's Islamic sector has come about at the expense of the country's secular public space. Turning again to Syria's publishing sector, while mainstream (secular) publishers are facing financial hardship, publishers of religious texts (whether Muslim or Christian) are finding a highly receptive audience, allowing them to expand their distribution networks and thus to attract more readers, concretely leading to a doubling in sales over the last few years: "It's an economic fact that religious books are at the heart of publishing in Syria," said 'Adan Salem, owner of Syria's largest religious publishing house *al-Fikr* (The Thought), which has branches in a number of Arab countries including Algeria, Yemen, Egypt and the Gulf States.⁵⁸⁵ "Ninety percent of books we publish are religious, but they are moderate in their views," Salem stressed. Hussein 'Odat, owner of *Alahali* (People) publishing house and also a political commentator, said that religious publishing houses had a considerable commercial

⁵⁸³ See for instance, Mustafa al-Siba'i, *Asdaq al-Itijahat al-Fikriya fi al-sharq al-Arabi* (The Sincerest Intellectual Directions in the Arab East), Damascus: Dar al-Waraq, 1998; idem, *Islamuna* (Our Islam), Damascus: Dar al-Waraq, 2001; Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, *Kalimat fi Munasabat* (Words on Occasions), Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2002; Muhammad Umar al-Haji, *'Alamiyat al-Da'wa ila Allah ta'ala* (The Global Call to Allah), Damascus: Dar al-Maktabi, 2007; al-Sadeq al-Nayhum, *Islam Did al-Islam* (Islam versus Islam), London: Riyad al-Rayes Books, 1994; Muhammad Ratib al-Nabusli, *Muqawimat al-Taklif*, Damascus: Dar al-Maktabi, 2005.

⁵⁸⁴ *Syria Today*, October 2008.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

advantage over their mainstream rivals, because they are supported by religious institutions. “The religious text publishers are funded from institutions which order advance copies of books and agree to distribute them in a way that small secular authors and publishers cannot hope to match,” he said. “There has been a definite increase in religious books published over the last decade.”⁵⁸⁶

At the 2008 Damascus International Book Fair – which for the last 24 years has been Syria’s literary event par excellence, featuring international authors and many of Syria’s own most daring writers – Syrian secular intellectuals became suspicious of religiously-motivated interference from the Ministry of *Awqaf*. These intellectuals claimed that books with overt sexual content were removed from the shelves, something that has been denied by the organizers of the Fair. In an investigation into the incident, *Syria Today* added that: “The Fair, held at the Assad National Library from August 1 to 15 and featuring 35,000 titles from 400 publishing houses from 23 foreign and Arab countries, also highlighted the growing trend among Syrian readers for religious texts. This growth in religious publications is having a profound impact on the industry, with Islamic publishing houses pushing aside their one-time large mainstream publishing rivals to dominate the sector.”⁵⁸⁷ What is made clear in this reporting is how the country’s Islamic sector is growing at the expense of the country’s secular public space.

In *Nahj al-Islam*, the ministry of *Awqaf*’s official Islamic magazine, where the words of Bashar al-Asad often appear on the first page, followed by a *hadith* or a Quranic *sura* on the second, the tone is certainly one of *Da’wa*. The magazine routinely addresses the regime’s concerns as regards issues such as the meaning of respect and tolerance for the rights of others, the importance of education, and even the virtues of the president. Still, the magazine hides in its folds the realities of Islamic revivalism in Syria, and hints at the manner in which such revivalism will likely influence Syria in the face of new domestic and international challenges. For instance, influenced by their belief in the need to harness the energy of the country’s young people, the journal recently dedicated a whole section to issues faced by young Syrians, ranging from intellectual challenges, law, the economy, space science, the social sciences, sex and gender issues and other moral and behavioural dilemmas. All of these diverse topics were addressed through references to the Quran, the *hadith* and the Sunna. The journal emphasized the need for Islamic knowledge and Islamic integration within the socio-political structure, in order to wage a successful struggle against macro and micro-level ills.⁵⁸⁸

Another form of ideological outreach that deserves highlighting is also one of the most efficient and effective: direct personal contact with the *da’iya*’s network. In an interview conducted in Damascus, an Islamic *da’iya* noted that “the individual and his family is what matters to us, the question of control over the state is an irrelevant question; the state is an extension and a reflection of the family and on that basis, one needs not worry about the state, we are not in a hurry. Our goal is to defend Islam and the

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁸ See for example *Nahj al-Islam*, December 2007; idem, March 2008; idem, May 2009; idem, July 2009.

Shari'a, the state's role is to allow us to do so."⁵⁸⁹ The Shaykhs with whom I spoke asserted that Islam is a *hala* (a state of mind) which needs to be grounded in every Muslim mind and heart. A Muslim *da'ia* should concentrate his or her effort on teaching monotheism (*tawhid*) and purifying the heart from doubts, sins and distractions, so that the heart becomes the nucleus of the correct Islamic way of life. It is only when a person commits themselves to complete obedience to God that they will be able to cultivate the seeds of righteous politics and justice. "A direct relationship with the shaykh is essential for this transformation of the heart to happen."⁵⁹⁰

Beyond ideological framing, the groups' activities include social welfare advantages: Islamic reconciliation services that help to solve family issues by offering interpretations of Islamic law, the distribution of clothing and food during religious holidays, and coverage of medical expenses when needed. The organizations also invite many youth to private educational lectures. Indeed, whether as a result of the provision of charitable or social services through direct or indirect contact, it is clear that the financial factor has played one of the most central roles in helping to ideologically mobilize the masses. Of course, the shaykhs and *shaykhas* often use the prayer groups to teach the value of humility and patience. But more tangibly, the groups have become a strong support within a stable Islamic framework, one that provides confidence and a feeling of security upon which members can freely rely, while also retaining their dignity when in need of financial aid.

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Ultimately then, the method that has attracted the most recruits to Syria's Islamic movement is the provision of social aid and charity.⁵⁹¹ Indeed, the Islamic movement has proven to be, since the mid-1990s, an increasingly efficient institution in providing social welfare services to the increasing numbers (see chapter 8) of the needy and the impoverished in urban as well as in rural communities. In 2005, out of 584 registered charitable organizations operating from within poor neighbourhoods and local mosques, 290 are Islamic, and it is estimated that some 80 percent of the 100 charitable organizations in Damascus are Sunni Islamic. By early 2000, it is claimed that 72,000

⁵⁸⁹ Personal Interview, Damascus, March 2008.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹¹ This was claimed by a number of Syrian intellectuals. In an attempt to verify this claim, I asked 45 members of Islamic networks to rank their reasons for adhering to the Islamic network of which they are a part. Four choices were given: 1) Spiritual/religious betterment; 2) Family tradition; 3) Social obligation; 4) The social services the network provides. Out of the 20 members who agreed to answer, 13 stated that the network's social services were the most important reason they initially joined.

Syrian families received help from charitable Islamic associations. In 2003 alone, 842 million Syrian Liras⁵⁹² were distributed to these families.⁵⁹³

For this, often a group develops its own saving association based on *Zakat* money, *sadaqa jariya* (recurring charity) and other contributions from the public, and acts as a formal and an informal credit system. As mentioned above, the money is used to build mosques, students' housing units, to sponsor the students of Islamic Studies, pay for marriages, build medical clinics and cover vital medical expenses. It helps in the provision of aid for orphans, and the supplying of additional allowances and identity cards to the handicapped in case of their arrest or harassment. The collected money is also distributed cyclically and in turns to the registered members of the group, in a parallel financial sector that operates outside the government's watchful eye. Adherents to the Abu al-Nur foundation, explains Stenberg, "can obtain an education, find employment, purchase a house or car, and get married ... Abu Nur provides the option of social mobility."⁵⁹⁴

Beyond reaching out to the impoverished in Syria, these Islamic groups have, since the mid-1990s, succeeded in attracting an influential and affluent constituency, mainly the traditional Syrian business class, which has in turn given them an increased capacity to provide food and medical assistance to the poor in less well-off neighbourhoods, such as the al-Qanawat neighbourhood. What then are the motivations to actively participate for the middle to upper middle classes, since presumably they do not require the same sorts of financial aid? One answer is that the traditional merchants forming a significant part of the upper class was never truly pro-regime and has always been a natural ally to Islamic associations (see chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation). But when I put the question to this group of participants, especially the girls attending the Islamic meetings, they all answered that it was also very prestigious to be part of certain prayer groups. One girl noted that "they [shaykhs and shaykhas] are actively recruiting the wealthy and the influential. They are preparing the best women and men to lead the nation." When I asked how she could tell that these women and men come from the "best" families, the consistent answer was that usually their last names are well known as belonging to influential families. And indeed, the participants of certain meetings are often a veritable who's who of the Damascene elite. They arrive in their fancy cars, sometimes with a chauffeur. It is a prestigious and powerful network to join precisely because of certain meetings alleged exclusivity: in certain sub-groups, membership is supposedly not open to all, it is a privilege for one has to be invited to join. Young middle and upper class girls are especially attracted to the exclusivity that underlies these groups, and tend to compete over whom within a particular group of friends was asked to join first.

This trend of attracting influential women is certainly new in Syria. In the mid-20th century and until very recently, influential Syrian women tended to join the secular movement rather than the Islamic one. This new tendency testifies to the success of the new Islamic leaders in framing their ideology to attract this kind of constituency. Having

⁵⁹² As of the writing of this dissertation, 1 US Dollar is equal to 47 Syrian Liras.

⁵⁹³ *Al-Hayat*, 18 June 2005.

⁵⁹⁴ Stenberg, "Young, Male and Sufi Muslims in the city of Damascus," pp. 84-85.

said this, it also testifies to the intersection of two other important factors: 1) that the secular movement – epitomized by the Ba’th – has failed to meet Syrian women’s psychological and socio-economic needs; and more importantly, 2) that socially speaking, the Islamic movement has no competitor. The Syrian Islamic society is the only ideological group that has been allowed to prosper under the secular Ba’th.⁵⁹⁵

Dispersed and Informal Aspect of the Islamic Network

Part of the success of Syria’s Islamic network in recruiting members and dispersing its branches across Syria is due to its operation in seemingly non-political settings, settings that allow them to keep the state at relative arm’s length, as well as to attract the Syrian masses. However it is important not to overlook the network’s success in its cultivation of an informal, flexibly organized, personalized nature, in parallel to its official public face. In fact, more than their public services, the institutions governed by the new Islamic groups such as mosques, Islamic *nadwat* (Quranic study groups), and Islamic *Jam’at* (gatherings), rely on personal relationships, careful word of mouth invitations, and a nexus of informal associational networks embedded in personal interactions and social relationships. It is the personal, with its ability to engender a foundation of trust –and sometimes of social pressure once part of the group-- that provides these associations with their power.

For instance, according to a large number of my pious interviewees, *shaykhas* – although not the shaykhs—feel comfortable enough to disregard the conceptual lines between the private and public spheres, by sometimes recruiting women in the streets. One woman told me, “Only women are allowed to cross these lines [between the private and the public spheres] because of the assumed non-violent aspect of their message.” Maya was approached by a *shaykha* in her neighborhood. The *shaykha* insisted that Maya attends a few lectures that the *shaykha* gives in her house, which was also located in the same neighborhood. Maya first refused, but the *shaykha* insisted, and a few coincidental meetings later, Maya finally felt pressured enough to attend, “I thought I would not lose anything by going.” Many lessons later, Maya was still not on board to become part of the group. The *shaykha* expressed to her that only her older sister –who is also a *shaykha*—will succeed to convince “my [Maya] confused soul of the value of veiling and committing to the group.” Maya was finally recruited. Maya also told me about one of her friends who kept refusing to officially join the group. The friend was hassled by the *shaykha*’s older apprentices who often “wandered” in the neighbourhood. She was banned from attending lectures and was treated badly –for not eventually conforming. “They can make a girl’s life somehow difficult, they can be cruel whether with their stares or their words. She doesn’t care, but she surely lost a few friends on the way.” When I asked whether Maya continued to see her friend, she said that the group’s

⁵⁹⁵ Although it is important to add here that a detailed study regarding what percentage of the elite are members of these groups has yet to be conducted.

pressure is certainly there, so she sees her mostly indoors in order to avoid being reprimanded.⁵⁹⁶

In a conversation with a number of the regular members of a prayer group, Ola and Suzanne explained that had the group not held sessions all over the city, and at different hours, they would not have been able to attend. Ola's work involves her going from one corner of the city to the other, which means regular hours are impossible to have. She also added that the only reason she trusts her prayer teams is because her best friend told her about the group, and assured her that, unlike other prayer groups, only trusted members are accepted. "It took a couple of months before I was approved... This one [the group] was not penetrated by the snooping regime informants... We are not discussing politics at all. I just don't want to feel watched because I pray and attend lessons a few times a week. With terrorism, you never know when being pious becomes a problem. I don't want my children to be harassed because their mother is committed to learning more about her religion."

Hussam explained to me that he enjoys going to the nearby mosque every Friday, but that it is the informal *jam'at* (gatherings) held at the house of one of the shaykhs he enjoys the most, "These visits are friendly, include one on one discussions, and the hours are very flexible. He is often home, and receives us whenever we have time in-between prayers." When I asked about the choice of shaykh, his answer was that the shaykh's house is next to his, and the man is very moderate in his interpretations of the Islamic texts. He treats Hussam as a friend.

Within this "liberated" space, the *Nadwat* and *Jam'at* help Islamic leaders construct micro-mobilization contexts and macro-collective identities and shared meaning, connecting members to potential recruits and *da'wa* activists. The existence of this sort of intentionally submerged movement building, in parallel to the registered and formal institutional building, is something about which the Syrian government is well aware. After all, some 7,000 mosques are considered "uncontrolled" by the Ministry of Awqaf (see Table 2 in chapter 6). Therefore, even though these Islamic groups are registered with the government, they are increasingly present and closely identified with the local character of the neighbourhood in which they operate, and as a result they often gain an informal advantage and their interventions often hamper the individuals' lives, whether they agree to join or not. Another example of this is the fact that the network's shaykhs can be reached in their homes for consultations.

The net effect of these informal activities is that the movement has re-created its local ties with communities, thereby enhancing its capacity to protect its interests through its ability to potentially mobilize the masses. As such, the activities of these organizations are reminiscent of the early 20th century social welfare *jam'iyat* that gave birth to the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s. Awareness of this resonates in the words of one of my interviewees [who works for the Syrian military intelligence]: "We know that they can decide to act at any moment, but there is nothing we can do at this point, suffice it to say that they are here as much as we are here."⁵⁹⁷ This brings us to our next section.

⁵⁹⁶ When I asked her why it is she was telling me all of this, given her dedication to the group, she explained that, because I was not veiled myself, she felt encouraged to criticize their [the shaykhs'] ways. She would not have had this conversation had I been a practicing Muslim myself.

⁵⁹⁷ Personal Interview conducted in Damascus, 8 April 2008. On the study of Islamic activism as part of the overall Social Movement Theory, aside from Wickham's *Islamic Activism*, see Diane Singerman,

Beyond the Nation-State: Towards Political Outreach?

Groups co-opted by the regime have ensured a non-violent Islamic movement and have allowed the regime of Hafez al-Asad, as well as that of his son Bashar, to consolidate themselves. As a result of this relationship, their Sufi shaykhs are often perceived to be at the service of the regime, because their leaders' promotions to positions of authority is often perceived as being dependent upon state permission, hence their less than salutary name '*ulama' al-Sulta*' (the state's religious scholars).

Nevertheless, as will be argued hereinafter, these groups have normalized the state as much as the state has promoted their growth. And although the Islamic groups are not at the forefront of opposition politics, as noted earlier, despite their seemingly pro-regime discourse, I argue in this section that thanks to their successful outreach methods, they have grown to enjoy autonomy from the state. If anything, they have clearly succeeded in naturalizing the secular modern Ba'thist state as much as they have the socio-political scene.

Thus although they have been empowered from above, and although they have undeniably compromised with the power in place and indeed have been to a large degree co-opted by the Syrian Ba'th, Islamic groups are not mere instruments of state domination. Rather, they have successfully operated within the space available to them to advance a comprehensive cultural system and a *da'wa*-oriented agenda that ultimately infringes on the secularizing social program of the Ba'th.⁵⁹⁸ In fact, beyond *da'wa*, the non-political space created, notwithstanding its present focus on the Syrian nation, is portrayed as being larger than the geographic nation-state. With no territorial boundaries, it spreads through the Muslim's will to become part of global Islam.⁵⁹⁹ In other words, these groups are not the simple product of Arab authoritarian cooptation measures, as many would likely argue. Rather, they have capitalized on the regime's structurally induced political weaknesses to achieve a commanding position within society, one that most secular social institutions have failed to achieve.

The regime in Syria is, of course, having to deal with these groups' increasing autonomy and increasing popularity. In unraveling the contours of the 'problem,' a high-ranking official flatly stated that the regime is no longer in control of the piety movement: "they are too many, too small, and very private. We cannot, understandably, enter homes and supervise what they are saying and doing. Our way of dealing with this

Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo, Princeton University Press, 1996; Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Parties in Jordan and Yemen*, University of Maryland, 2006; and Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Approach*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004.

⁵⁹⁸ Hatina, "Restoring a Lost Identity," p. 194.

⁵⁹⁹ See for instance, Salah Kuftaro, "Al-Wihda al-Islamiya wa Tahadiyat al-'Asr," *Nahj al-Islam*, 1 May 2009.

new reality is to assert the importance of secularism on the one hand and moderate Islam on the other hand, other than this there is not much we can do at this point.”⁶⁰⁰

The Islamic movement’s relative independence within Syria’s authoritarian setting is hard to miss. One example regarding the Abu al-Nur foundation – which is Syria’s largest religious establishment – deserves consideration. Leif Stenberg writes: “True, the foundation does not stress the need for an absolute Islamic state ... At the same time it does have strong ideas about the importance of Islam in shaping an ideal society and the commitment of each citizen to living an Islamic life.”⁶⁰¹ Beyond the ideological level, Islamized spaces have not only increased in number in Syria; but in the neighbourhoods around larger mosques, shops avoid playing loud music, cafes have stopped serving alcohol, and people no longer eat outside during Ramadan. This reality recalls Sa’id Hawwa, one of the Syrian Muslim Brothers’ and Fighting Vanguard’s main ideologues, who wrote that only Islamized spaces provide the preconditions for Islamic Revivalism. In his books, Hawwa proposed to counter the secular state’s monopolizing control over education and information through: 1) a return to the mosque; 2) the formation of local organizations around the mosque; and 3) the creation of a school or of study circles in every mosque. Taken together, this constitutes “the supportive environment for the emergence of new forces and will organize and guide the whole community back to Islam.”⁶⁰²

In support of this position, there is a demonstrably firm relationship between social Islamic groups – no matter how apolitical they claim to be – and politics. For instance, the Muslim Brothers first emerged in the early 20th century as a social welfare group, and then were transformed into a political party in which militancy was employed as needed. Presently, the lay members of these governmentally co-opted groups can easily shift affiliation and join hands with the opposition neo-fundamentalist and Islamist groups if they feel the state has, or that their groups’ leaders have, abandoned their cause, in a manner similar to those such as ‘Uqla who joined the *Takfiri* militant Fighting Vanguard in order to advance their political agendas. To take this argument one step further, Radu notes that:

... just as Stalinism (and Pol Pot or Mao) was made possible by the mass of usually peaceful and naive believers in the Marxist Utopia, al-Qaeda and its nebula are permanently feeding up from the growing Islamic revivalist movement. To separate the two should be the goal of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, since they are all targets of jihadism. To deny the intimate link between the two is to deny reality. By making artificial distinctions between the two, one only postpones and avoids the real struggle.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰⁰ Private communication, Damascus, April 2008.

⁶⁰¹ Leif Stenberg, “Young, Male and Sufi Muslims in the city of Damascus,” in Jorgen baek Simonsen ed., *Youth and Youth Culture in the Contemporary Middle East*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005, p. 84.

⁶⁰² Weismann, “Sa’id Hawwa and Islamic Revivalism in Ba’thist Syria,” pp. 144-146.

⁶⁰³ Radu, “Al-Qaeda Confusion, » p. 6.

Notwithstanding Radu's rather reductionist and nebulous argument, Olivier Roy articulates a related view, noting that Islamism is not disappearing from the political scene. On the contrary, he claims that it is via neo-fundamentalism that Islamism "is spreading, becoming commonplace, being integrated into politics, leaving its mark on mores and conflicts."⁶⁰⁴

Jillian Schwedler tells us that it is these kinds of "ideological commitments" rather than behavior that expose a group's moderation.⁶⁰⁵ Already, co-opted fundamentalist shaykhs have voiced their disapproval of secular systems in general, and have spoken out against secular thought in Syria. For instance, since the early 1990s, Shaykh Muhammad al-Buti has often discussed the misconceptions of many Syrians about the virtues of secularization that are believed to be at the root of the West's intellectual and industrial revolutions. More recently, he has gone further by arguing that one can clearly recognize the "end of blindness and a de-mystification of European progress." He has been known to assert that there is not a single Muslim left "who would doubt whether Islam had political and social sufficiency, whether Islam was compatible with the sciences or not, because Muslims have put a stop to some of the traditional scholars' retrogressive perception of modern intellect and knowledge. Muslims are now ready to accept Islam as a comprehensive system of worship *and legislation*."⁶⁰⁶ Christmann notes, "At the back of the West's own deep social, moral and spiritual crisis — or moral inferiority — Shaykh al-Buti discerns a new attractiveness of Islam."⁶⁰⁷

Furthermore, the kinds of linkages that have emerged between the regime and the neo-fundamentalist Islamic sector are often tenuous, and if one party no longer deems the alliance to be in its best interests, it will seek other alliances. This was seen when the Damascene merchants defected from their alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, because their economic interests were being accommodated by Hafez al-Asad's government. It appears therefore that these alliances are at their root quite weak, since network members can arbitrarily shift relationships, though such a shift would not of course mean that the accrued benefits of those relationships would be completely removed if the relationships suddenly ended or changed. Paul Pinto explains: "Indeed, protests and public demonstrations done by the shaykhs and their followers against specific state policies do eventually happen...Despite their limited and pragmatic character, these protests remind the state that a general mobilization is always possible if its policies become perceived as a threat to society, or even better, to the religious community as such..."⁶⁰⁸ It is important to note here that the expansive and pyramidal hierarchical structure of Sufi orders, which are similar to the socio-political structure created by Hafez al-Asad himself in his rule of Syria, not only make Sufi leaders reliable partners for the regime (given the leaders' direct control of all the members and resources

⁶⁰⁴ Roy, *the Failure of Political Islam*, p. ix.

⁶⁰⁵ Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*, p. 18.

⁶⁰⁶ Quoted by Christmann, "Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: a portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sai'd Ramadan al-Buti," p. 157.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ Pinto, "Dangerous Liaisons: Sufism and the State in Syria," p. 8.

of the order), but also greatly enhances their ability to practice effective social and political control. This is the case for two reasons: 1) the orders' members have direct access to the leading shaykh at the top of the Sufi pyramid, and 2) each member is directed to blindly follow the commands and teachings of the top leader. Moreover while Hafez al-Asad's pyramidal structure relied on fear and interests, this one has the added advantage of adding a component of religious fear and sacredness. Indeed, one member explained to me that the nature of the relationship between the member and the shaykh is one of "*Ihtiram Kamil wa Ta'a Kamila*" (total respect and total obedience).

Having examined the concrete results of the regime's co-optation measures, as well as the success of the Islamic movement at using the space provided in order to effectively advance its apolitical, ethical and pietist discourse, we now move to the next part of this chapter, which discusses a resurgent and rising opposition movement: Syria's Islamic opposition groups.

Groups opposing the Damascus regime: Opposition pacifism and opposition activism looking for systemic change

While the Islamic groups and formal networks that I have discussed above, including the Naqshbandiya Kuftariya order, the Qubaysiyat, the Zayd group, Shaykh Muhammad Habash's Tajdeed movement, and others, have been open to state co-optation because of their inherent political quietism (and have since 1982 achieved growing influence and autonomy from the state), other Islamic groups have been less willing to work within the confines imposed by the state's policy of political pacification.

These latter groups are part of the political Islamic opposition in Syria, which is also growing and becoming more vocal. It consists of a number of groups who share the conviction that a formal Islamization of political power, whether from above or from below, is an essential element in order to achieve a God-fearing society. Yahya Sadowski explains that, in general, adherents to political Islam "believe that Muslims can fulfill their religious obligations only when public law sanctions and encourages pious behavior. To this end, the majority of these movements work to take control of state power, whether by propaganda, plebiscite, or putsch."⁶⁰⁹

This section of chapter 7 contends that the Syrian Islamic opposition movement is divided into two parts: 1) the pacifist fundamentalists (a category that includes neo-fundamentalists), and 2) the militant Islamists.⁶¹⁰ It is argued that both parts of the Syrian Islamic opposition are also in the process of growing and gaining in influence and strength, and have been since the rise of Bashar al-Asad to power, and particularly since

⁶⁰⁹ Yahya Sadowski, "Political Islam: asking the wrong questions," *Annual Reviews in Political Science*, 2006, 9, p. 219.

⁶¹⁰ As stated in the introductory chapter of this work: An Islamist party leans towards political action through the state. It aims at struggling to change the political regime and then imposing - from above - Islamic values on society. A fundamentalist party may also have counter-hegemonic political aims; yet it is mainly concerned with the restoration of an Islamic ethical model through the re-establishment of Muslim law and customs, and the re-Islamization of each individual with the aim of creating a perfect Muslim society.

the war in Iraq (see chapter 6). This development can be linked to the regime's tacit de-Ba'ithization policy and its economic liberalization measures, whose effects were discussed in the last chapter, and which have created a window of opportunity for political Islam to recruit members and galvanize the masses. Concomitantly, it can also be linked to the groups having successfully seized this opportunity, by putting forward a convincing leadership and message, and by using effective outreach methods.

A discussion of this nascent movement's nature and agenda, as well as its leaders and outreach methods, is important to finish drawing the map of Syria's Islamic resurgence. It also helps to advance our understanding of political Islam and the possibility of Islamist militancy within the Syrian context.

Opposition Neo-Fundamentalist Groups: al-Tayar al-Islami al-Dimuqrati and the Syrian Islamic Front

The following section examines the non-militant face of Syria's political fundamentalists.

The majority of the members of Syria's current Islamic opposition movement were once part of, or linked to, the Syrian Muslim Brothers. After the 1982 Hama massacre and the regime's use of repressive measures against them, the remaining members of the Muslim Brothers have chosen to travel the quietist path of neo-fundamentalism, and thus have shifted their focus towards encouraging a peaceful political revolution from below. These members are mainly traditionalist and Sufi in their outlook, which is different from other countries, where counter-hegemonic fundamentalists have also included Salafi groups such as the *al-Takfir wa al-Hijra* groups and the *I'adat al-Da'wa wa al-Tabligh* groups, which despite their radical outlook claim to have no involvement in politics.⁶¹¹ In general, the Muslim Brothers are competing for doctrinal control of Syrian society with both the state-sanctioned factions, whom they believe to be coopted by the regime, and with the Syrian Islamists, whose Salafi militant outlook they claim is counter-productive to achieving an Islamic state (this will be shown in the groups' specific statements hereinafter).

Ideologically, leaders within this opposition fundamentalist movement believe that the '*ulama*' can bring about Islamic consciousness from below, or what is called 'the consciousness of unification', but only once they have recruited enough supporters willing to religiously follow their teachings. In their understanding, *al-hala al-Islamiya*

⁶¹¹ The *Takfiri* groups agree that contemporary societies are similar to the state of the *Jahili* and *Kafir* (apostate) society in Mecca in the period between the resurgence of the prophetic message and the Prophet's migration to Medina. The members of these societies are hence unbelievers, or at best ignorant of the true meaning of the Islamic message. However this group does not believe it is time just yet to declare Jihad or to initiate the active construction of the Islamic state, as this had not been ordered in Mecca when Muslims were few in numbers and weak. The *Da'wa wa al-Tabligh* groups agree with the *Takfiri* groups that the members of these Islamic societies ignore the meaning of true Islam, yet it is important that there are some who do take it upon themselves to re-enlighten Muslims to the main Islamic precepts, implications, and its various practices without abandoning those societies or isolating themselves from them. For a typology of these groups, see Dia' Rashwan, "al-Juzur al-Fikriya lil-tayar al-salafi wa ta'biratihi al-mukhtalifa" (the intellectual roots of the Salafi movement and its diverse expressions) in Muhammad Salim al-'Awa et al. (ed.) *Al-Irhab, Juzuruhi, Ana'uuhu, Subul 'lajihi*, Cairo: 2005, pp. 92-94.

(the Islamic state) is arguably the most important platform for the transformation and purification of society. And the only safe way to advance this goal within Syria's authoritarian political context is by invitation-only organizing: word-of-mouth gatherings, private meetings and informal lessons. Thus inconspicuous, often unregistered mosques and urban *zawiyas* are developing beyond being simply places for *da'wa* and prayer, to now also being centers of political activity.⁶¹² As such, these centers are viewed as 'liberated zones.' When I asked about the meaning of this expression, my interviewee explained, "It means being liberated from one's own corruption, bitterness and need whether psychological or material." It also means "being liberated from the interference of the corrupt and the cynical."

Although their meetings are secretive, their political message is known to most Syrians since it is similar to the one once advanced by the Syrian Muslim Brothers. These groups call for "democratic rule",⁶¹³ and are very critical of the Syrian regime and its domestic and regional policies. While the regime's domestic policies are said to be corrupt and corrupting, the regime's regional policies are considered anti-Islamic, this despite their pro-Islamic façade, and destructive of Syria's Arab heritage and Islamic pride. Syria's alliance with the Iranian Republic is particularly looked down upon. When I asked whether the regime was concerned about the re-emergence of these national groups (as opposed to multi-national groups), a high ranking officer answered: "aren't we concerned that if one day their leaders tell them to attack, they might? Aren't we worried about a domino effect given our knowledge of their existence and growing influence? Of course we are, but there is no way around it at this point."⁶¹⁴

Within the movement of non-militant political fundamentalists, *al-Tayar al-Islami al-Dimuqrati* (the Islamic Democratic Current) and the Syrian Islamic Front are the only two groups that are overtly anti-regime. No detailed analysis of their membership is currently available. However, Syrian observers with whom I spoke insisted that both groups mainly attract members of the traditional Sunni religious class, small merchants, and traditional artisans still living in old quarters of the cities (see Part I of this work). These members tend to be older in age than the ones joining the multi-national militant Islamist groups. They have maintained a traditional way of life, and they often come from families that were once connected to, or were earnest supporters of, the Muslim Brothers.⁶¹⁵

The Islamic Democratic Current is a new outspoken, self-proclaimed pro-democracy Islamic group functioning within Syria. Although the work of the group is not clearly defined and the movement is often seen as being "unstructured" and "too loose" to attract any significant membership, its leadership issues regular statements in Syrian newspapers which are reminiscent of messages issued by the Syrian Islamic Front from

⁶¹² Private communication.

⁶¹³ The meaning of democracy (the word used by Syrian groups is *dimuqratiya* rather than *Shura*) is dependent on the opposition group as will be shown hereinafter.

⁶¹⁴ Private communication, Damascus April 2008.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Europe.⁶¹⁶ In these statements, the Islamic Democratic Movement alleges that they are not allowed to undertake the outreach that apolitical Islamic groups are able to do. The group claims that it is prevented from giving religious lessons or from delivering sermons in mosques, while other fundamentalist clerics who focus on religious matters instead of on Syrian politics are offered organizational and recruiting space, and are given platforms on state radio and television from which to promote their views.⁶¹⁷ The group complains of the regime's constant harassment of its members. Indeed, known members of the Current, such as Ghassan al-Najar (engineer), Dr Yasser al-'Iti, a poet and an academic from Damascus, and Dr Ahmad Tu'ma, a dentist from Dayr al-Zur, have served prison sentences for speaking out against the current regime's political apparatus, and for contributing to the dissenting movement under the "Damascus Declaration."⁶¹⁸

In a statement published in 2008, the Islamic Democratic Current calls on *abna' al-watan al-wahed min kafat al-adyan wa al-a'raq* [the sons of the nation from all religions and ethnicities]... *ahiba'ana fi al-'aqida wa shuraka'ana fi al-watan* [our friends in faith, and our partners in the homeland], to join in their support of the Islamic Democratic Current, "we promise you citizenship and complete equality in rights and duties in return for your support of us, in distress and in peace...[author's translation]." A number of issues are then briefly mentioned as a front to attack the regime, including the continued Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, the regime's empty claims of resistance and condemnation of the Israeli occupier; and the persistence of Law 49 making membership to the Muslim Brothers a crime punishable by death in Syria. In terms of economic policy, the Current alludes to its populist program by pinpointing to the economic and social letdowns of the state and to Syria's deteriorating living conditions, the message states: "poverty levels have affected as much as one-third of the country's populace, and we are moving from the devastations of a socialist system towards the corruption of a market economy, both systems serving to steal our wealth and our resources. Years have passed, yet illiteracy and ignorance are rising, and children are escaping their schools to provide for their families..." The Current then notes that people are reaching out to the private organizations for aid and support, asserting that a universal social insurance and health care system are the responsibility of the state [*mas'uliyat al-dawla*].⁶¹⁹

The group's political ideas were summarized in a more recent statement published on a number of Syrian Websites. In this statement, the Current expressed its commitment to "democratic rule" and the need for political change, and denounced the current regime's corrupt and authoritarian ways. However, the statement did not stop there. An outward rejection of secularism, whose supporters are described as the enemies of Islam,

⁶¹⁶ These messages will be examined hereinafter. A number of Syrian observers argue that the Islamic Democratic Current is but the internal part of the exiled Syrian Islamic Front.

⁶¹⁷ Private communication. See also Kuluna Shuraka' website at <http://all4syria.info/content/view/140/65/> (12-08-2009)

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.* See also, al-Marfa' at <http://www.almarfaa.net/?p=243>

⁶¹⁹ See al-Marfa' at <http://www.almarfaa.net/?p=243> (7 September 2008)

was also expressed. Secularism is said to be a disguise for the enemies of Islam who are hiding within the regime. The statement reads:

The people have the right to choose their leaders and their representatives ...within a transparent and an honest parliamentary system...the enemies of Islam have shown their teeth, and some of them hide under the bitter disguise of secularism in order to uproot religion from society and life...holding up positions from within the regime in order to attack Islam...all with the knowledge and awareness of those within the Ministry of Endowment [Awqaf], the *ifta'* authorities and the National Assembly, who hold no real power...this minority of people attacks Islam...in the name of modernity, renewal, women's rights and Westernization [author's translation].⁶²⁰

The statement is also addressed to the Syrian Islamic movement in general. Its message to the movement is two-fold. First, it encourages them to continue in their non-militant ways and asserts the Current's dedication to peaceful persuasion. Secondly, the statement attempts to criticize the co-opted leaders of Syria's Islamic movement, and to correct their methods:

To our beloved people and the Islamic Current everywhere, we will continue to call for justice and a return to the right path using dialogue and our persuasive wisdom ...As for you, members of the Islamic Current, you are not a political party, though preaching for democracy and shura (consensus) is part of our call, you are not a welfare organization, although backing welfare associations and civil society is part of our program, and you are not a purpose-specific association meant to serve a narrow purpose. You are the beating heart of this nation, nurtured by the Quran...[author's translation]

In an implicit reference to the Kuftariya and Muhammad Habash's Renewal programs, and more specifically to one of Habash's main principles ("We believe that to every nation its law and method, and that to every generation its time and place"),⁶²¹ the Islamic Democratic Current denounces these shaykhs' "Renewal" agenda for being at the service of those in power rather than Islam. It asserts: "As to you members of the Islamic Current, if asked about your call, say: we call to an all-encompassing Islam, pertinent to all sectors of life, and true to every place and time. The government is part of it, as freedom is part of its obligations. If told, this is part of the political, say, this is Islam as it should be, uncategorized." [author's translation]⁶²²

Having discussed the Syrian Islamic Democratic Current, we now turn our attention to the other more influential anti-regime, neo-fundamentalist group: the Syrian Islamic Front. In fact, examining the changing character of the Syrian Islamic Front, also known as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, will help us to unravel the contours of the growing political Islamic movement in Syria.

⁶²⁰ Statement published on Kuluna Shuraka' website at: <http://all4syria.info/content/view/13055/39/> (23-08-2009)

⁶²¹ See section on Muhammad Habash in previous section of this chapter.

⁶²² See Kuluna Shuraka' at: <http://all4syria.info/content/view/13055/39/> (23 August 2009)

In the aftermath of the February 1982 Hama massacre, the Syrian Islamic Front has gradually started to modify its discourse. It has rejected its militant wing and has again expressed its willingness to work alongside the other secular opposition parties. In so doing, it has proven to be a pragmatic and tactically flexible party, and has also transformed itself from being an Islamist group actively working to topple the Syrian regime from above into a neo-fundamentalist opposition faction committed to a pacifist change from below. Furthermore, the Syrian Islamic Front has continued to reaffirm its willingness to work under the umbrella of a Syrian secular regime, a fact that differentiates it from the Syrian Democratic Current discussed above. Thus the Syrian Islamic Front is currently fully committed to change from below if necessary, or to gradual change from within if allowed to become part of the Syrian Parliament. As a result of this transformation, at present, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is the only Syrian political Islamic party that overtly opposes the regime, doing so from within the pacifist constellation of Syria's opposition groups (the Democratic Islamic Current has not yet called itself a political party).

This shift is in contrast to the Islamist militants, whom we will examine later, and who tend to be committed to armed struggle and radical change from above. The Brotherhood's transformation into a non-militant group is due to a number of factors, most important of which for this dissertation is the annihilation of their militant arm both during and after the Hama massacre.⁶²³ Thus the Syrian Islamic Front survived the 1980s due to the fleeing of its most prominent leaders such as 'Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, 'Issam al-'Attar, and 'Adnan Sa'ad al-Din outside of Syria. These shaykhs are what remains of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and they have, since the group's defeat by the regime, upheld an alliance with Syrian secular and left wing parties such as the Communist Party, the Nasserites, and most recently 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam's provisional Ba'th.⁶²⁴ Despite their rather faint and scattered voice from outside the country, the Syrian Islamic Front is still quite well known to Syrians. One reason for their continued public profile in Syria is the regular appearances by the group's superintendent, Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, on Arab TV channels such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, during which he often argues that the end of the Asad dictatorship is imminent.

According to Sami Moubayed, the seemingly unexpected resurgence of the Syrian Muslim Brothers in the last few years is traceable to Khaddam himself: "although Khaddam, who defected ... after decades of loyalty to the regime, is a public relations liability for the NSF... his personal wealth and close ties to the Saudis and the Hariri family in Lebanon could give the Brotherhood a new lease on life."⁶²⁵ The same idea is expressed by Badran: "The Brotherhood's alliance with Khaddam opened the way for diplomatic breakthroughs, most notably in Lebanon, where Bayanouni's emissaries were warmly received by Druze leader Walid Junblatt and (more discreetly) other undisclosed

⁶²³ Private communication, November 2008.

⁶²⁴ Although this odd alliance named the NSF (the National Salvation Front) was terminated by the Islamic Front in April 2009. Khaddam was Syria's long-time Ba'thist vice-president turned dissident following the unresolved assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in Lebanon.

⁶²⁵ Moubayed, "Islamic Revival in Syria" [Online]. See previous footnote.

members of the ruling March 14 coalition. They also visited Turkey (this time receiving substantial media coverage).⁶²⁶

Although Syrians generally dismiss opposition deployed from outside their territory, the Syrian Islamic Front – whether as part of the secular National Salvation Front or not – is believed by the regime to pose a continuing threat to Syria's political stability. This is because the Front is the most overtly political form of Islamic opposition in Syria, as well as because the long-standing movement can still command a following amongst Syrians despite the regime's many attempts to crush it.⁶²⁷ The fact that the regime still perceives the Syrian Islamic Front to be a threat is shown by the fact that Law 41, which makes it a crime to be a member of the Brotherhood, is still active, notwithstanding a number of requests from within the Syrian National Assembly to abolish it. Another sign that it is still seen as a threat is that the regime has consistently denied the Brotherhood's attempts to regain the right to operate legally in Syria.⁶²⁸

Still, the reappearance of this group as a player in Syrian politics is evident, and can be linked to the admixture of economic and political restrictions inherent to PA regimes, which have created an unstable social context that renders Islamic groups relatively more attractive. At the same time, it can also be linked to the fact that the Ba'ath party has eclipsed any secular alternative over the last 30 years, while also mobilizing the Islamic one. A third factor is that the Syrian Islamic movement was unsuccessful at mobilizing the masses in the 1960s and 1970s because of its elitist orientation (it was initially pro-capitalist rather than populist in nature). But today, the same Islamic movement is demonstrating a much greater flexibility and awareness of the grievances of the masses within its re-invigorated ideology. Thus the movement's ideas have become increasingly attractive just at the moment when the secular Ba'ath regime is stagnating, and indeed has created its own protected Bourgeoisie.

Undeniably, the Secretariat General of the National Salvation Front [NSF, hereinafter also called the Front] has softened its message in order to attract the same constituency that the Ba'ath once galvanized. This clear shift in positions between the regime and the Islamic opposition reinforces the explanation put forward by the French School for understanding the popularity and present dimensions of neo-fundamentalism and Islamism.⁶²⁹ This School argues that in its populist thrust, political Islam has a transnational character that has replaced Communism and the Third Worldism of the 1960s.⁶³⁰ In fact, it is its new form and vision that has given the NSF its renewed strength. Indeed, Hinnebusch has argued that if the Islamic opposition is to have any chance at destabilizing the Ba'ath regime, it would have to mobilize the rural masses, something that the Muslim Brotherhood failed to accomplish in the 1970s and 1980s.

⁶²⁶ Tony Badran, "Divided They Stand," *The Mideast Monitor* (31 Octobre 2006).

⁶²⁷ Although, there is no data that can attest to such a statement, it is believed to be the case by a number of Syrian experts with whom I talked.

⁶²⁸ *Al-Hayat*, 16 January 2001.

⁶²⁹ As discussed in the introductory chapter of this work.

⁶³⁰ See for example Roy, *L'Echec de l'islam politique* (1999); Burgat in *Face to Face with Political Islam* (2002); Kepel's *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam* (2003).

Thus it is clear that today's Syrian Islamic Front is changing. The movement has shifted its focus from the urban Sunni bourgeoisie to the periphery or the rural and socially marginalized groups, something that it had failed to do in the first half of the 20th century. As described by its leaders, this shift has translated into a focus upon the rural masses and the socially marginalized under the new Ba'thist elite, with the ultimate aim of effecting change from below.

The change is increasingly evident in the movement's latest proclamations. For instance, the Front held its annual meeting in Brussels in February 2008, during which the Muslim Brotherhood and 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam discussed the situation in Syria and the Arab region, and considered the possibility of activating the internal Syrian front. According to the final statement published after the meeting:

...the Front put in place a complete plan for the coming stage ... in early 2008 Bachar al-Assad's regime hid its anxiety by escalating its oppressive actions under the state of emergency imposed since 45 years. This is the practical proof of the imminent end of the tyrants. The regime keeps issuing death sentences against its political opponents under the law number 49; it is closing down on peaceful political activism, strengthening its security grip, terrorizing citizens by arresting activists and intellectuals randomly and with no reasons.

Later on, the message moved beyond the standard reiteration of the regime's known disregard for human rights, with the Front's General Secretariat further discussing the deteriorating living conditions in Syria, which have been aggravated by "the dangerous increase of prices that has doubled the suffering of the Syrians to an extent that basic needs have become a far-fetched dream."⁶³¹

Indeed, in an attempt to attract the support of the small peasant holding class – which is being abandoned by the Ba'th regime in its attempts at economic liberalization – the General Secretariat baldly stated that in addition to the international economic crisis, the regime's new economic policies have hurt Syrian farmers by focusing on pleasing a narrow elite:

The bad and hesitant economic policies of the regime have inflicted more daily suffering on the Syrian citizens. The catastrophe is getting worse and affecting the agricultural season which forced thousands of farmers from Jazeera, Deir al-Zour, and Rikka to leave their lands and move to the edges of the cities in other districts. The regime did not present any support for these regions as was the case in the neighboring countries affected by the catastrophe, to make it worse the regime confiscated the crops and made the crisis even harder. The regime has transformed from being the protector of the country to becoming a servant of a narrow corrupted elite that control the national wealth. The regime was not satisfied by stepping on the honor of the majority of its citizens but also

⁶³¹ Statement by the general secretariat of the National Salvation Front in Syria after the meeting on 29-28 June 2008, see <http://www.free-syria.com/en/loadarticle.php?articleid=29423> (Last accessed 15 December 2008).

deprived them of bread with its neglectful policies amid the international price crisis.⁶³²

The Islamic Front under the umbrella of the National Salvation Front has also taken steps to form alliances with the Kurdish community in Syria. With the Kurdish minority becoming an increasingly important social force, especially after the war in Iraq, the Muslim Brothers decided in March 2005 to open up a dialogue and to declare a unified front with the Kurds against the injustices of the Ba'ath.⁶³³ Since the Ba'ath's 1963 rise to power, all regional, ethnic or religious parties, have been banned as illegal. The Ba'ath reasoned that these kinds of political parties fell outside the scope of Arab Nationalism and hurt Syria's unity and sovereignty.⁶³⁴ Ultimately however, the Kurdish elite has positively contributed to the Syrian political scene by mediating between the state and the Kurdish populace.⁶³⁵ Nonetheless, opposition to the Syrian state has never disappeared – the preservation of Kurdish parties, although outside the legal political scene, can be viewed as a clear manifestation of Kurdish cultural and national feeling, and of Kurdish differences with the national Ba'athist order. The Kurdish question has become more visible and the Syrian Kurds more outspoken since the arrival of Bashar to power, particularly since the 2003 American-led intervention in Iraq and the resulting uncertainty regarding the autonomy of Iraqi Kurds.

Since the 2003 invasion, Syrian Kurds have cultivated an increasingly autonomous political space, which has changed from one characterized by “dissimulation” to one characterized by “defiant visibility.”⁶³⁶ Already beginning in 2000, skirmishes between the Kurds and the security forces have taken place in Syrian Kurdish areas, and these have intensified in the last few years. For instance, an incident between the Kurds and the Syrian security forces in Qamishli prompted the following statement by a number of Syrian Kurdish Parties (more specifically, the Kurdish Democratic Front in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria, the Kurdish Coordination Committee and the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria):

To our Kurdish citizens in Syria, to the Syrian public opinion - all national and democratic forces, and to all those who believe in world peace and

⁶³² Brussels, June 2008. See <http://www.free-syria.com/en/loadarticle.php?articleid=27470> (Last accessed 15 December 2008).

⁶³³ A few months later, Bashar al-Asad ended one of his speeches with clear religious invocations.

⁶³⁴ Elizabeth Picard, « Fin des partis en Syrie, » *Revue des Mondes Musulmans de la Méditerranée* 81-82, 1996, p. 223.

⁶³⁵ Although they remained un-recognized as an ethnic national category, the Kurdish elite was co-opted by the state either through the redistribution of funds or through political cooptation. The Kurdish community structures however were maintained intact in order for the co-opted elites to mediate between the state and the Kurdish population.

⁶³⁶ Jordi Tejel Gorgas, “Les Kurdes de Syrie, de la « dissimulation » à la « visibilité » ? » *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 115-116, Décembre 2006, p. 117.

welfare: The Syrian regime has once again targeted the Syrian Kurds, as part of the series of racist and chauvinist policies undertaken against them since the Baath took over power several years ago. The Syrian regime is resorting to more oppression, terrorism and killing against the Syrian Kurds in order to impose its discriminative policies and drive the Kurds to abandon their national rights and cultural identity. On the 20th of March 2008 and during the celebrations of the Niroz day in Qamishli, the regime's ruthless security agents opened fire against Kurdish citizens, who went down the streets to dance and rejoice this cultural occasion. Three young citizens were killed: Mohamed Zaki Ramadan, Mohamed Yehya Khalil and Mohamed Mahmoud Hussein. Several others were severely injured, among which: Riad Chaykhi, Karam Ibrahim al-Youssef, Mohamed Mohyi al-Din Issa and Mohamed Kheir Khalaf. While we strongly condemn the killing of our Kurdish citizens, we hold the Syrian authority responsible for this bloodshed and we declare a national state of mourning. Niroz celebrations will be cancelled this year in all regions inside Syria and abroad as a protest against this heinous crime. We also reassure that despite the threats, the killings and the sacrifices, the Syrian Kurds will never give up on their national rights and will struggle for their freedoms by all pacific and democratic means, for the ruling authority's terrorism will never succeed in discouraging the Kurds in their battle for freedom and justice."⁶³⁷

Realizing the importance of the Kurdish component in the definition of the national political culture, it seems certain that the Kurdish 'vote' (or at least Kurdish support) is being fought over by the regime and the Islamic opposition. Since 1991, the Ba'ath regime has allowed some 15 candidates of Kurdish origin to stand in parliamentary elections. Three of them appeared on the same list presented by Syria's Kurd organizations. These were Kamal Ahmad, President of the Kurdish Democratic Party; Haj Darwish, President of the Progressive Democratic Kurdish Party; and Fu'ad Ekko, representative of the Kurdish Popular Party. The regime's decision to let them stand for elections was meant to both court and co-opt the Kurdish opposition, as well as the Sunni Islamic one.⁶³⁸ As stated earlier in this work, shaykhs such as Ahmad Kuftaro and Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti are of Kurdish origin, and their prominent positions within the state apparatus is meant to demonstrate the regime's interest in both the Kurds and the religious class. Importantly, the political co-optation of the Kurdish elite is supposed to obstruct any rapprochement between the Kurdish forces and the Islamic movement, particularly the Islamic Front.

For their part, the Islamic Front has been adamant in stressing that political change is on its way to engulfing Syria, "[T]he regime has become obsessed with controlling the Syrian people and containing the general state of protest among the

⁶³⁷ [Http://www.free-syria.com/en/loadarticle.php?articleid=27172](http://www.free-syria.com/en/loadarticle.php?articleid=27172) (Last accessed 23 March 2008)

⁶³⁸ Gorgas, "Les Kurdes de Syrie, de la « dissimulation » à la « visibilité » ?" p. 123.

citizens. The last arrest campaign against ... the Islamists and the Kurds, added to the last few years' arrests, have summed up to thousands of arrested citizens. The racist policy against our Kurdish brethren continues and the whole population is now under a political and a security siege. Meanwhile the regime blames its people for its own failure."⁶³⁹ In another statement, the Front elaborated on the assassination of the opposition Kurdish Shaykh Mashuq al-Khaznawi in May 2005. The NSF's statement seemed aimed at linking the Kurdish question to the Iranian presence in Syria as a front to attack the regime:

Every year, the majority of the region's populations, Kurds, Iranians, and Egyptian Arabs joyfully celebrate the Niroz day. Except that this year, the ruthless Syrian regime not only violated our Kurdish brothers' freedoms, denying them the right to celebrate this cultural occasion in different cities like Damascus and Aleppo, but Bashar al-Assad's oppressive security agents also perpetrated a new bloodshed, killing three young Kurd citizens. And while the Iranian community was given the chance to celebrate the Niroz day this year, as it happens every year, next to the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, Kurds are being brutally killed. Why are these Syrian citizens denied the right to rejoice this occasion in their own country, while the Iranian community is given a total free hand in Damascus and its suburbs? This Iranian community that today owns most of Damascus' lands, mosques and shrines ... This same community that undertakes development plans, not to help the Syrians improve their living standards, but to exploit each and every one of them in order to establish a powerful religious Iranian lobby that would sow sectarian discord every time it is offered the chance too. But despite all this, the Syrian security agents would of course not undermine any of the Iranians' religious celebrations, but would on the contrary kill our Kurdish brothers who wanted to passively rejoice the Niroz day. This deadly regime is therefore to be held responsible for our dear citizens' slaughter, for it is constantly violating the Syrians' basic freedoms and liberties.⁶⁴⁰

The above-quoted National Salvation Front statement brings us to the final point, that is, an examination of the NSF's actions in attempting to destabilize the regime by playing on: 1) Sunni sensitivities and their fear of the Shi'i influence in Syria; and 2) Fears among the general Syrian populace about factional politics within the country due to the regime's alliances and Iranian interventions. For instance, in a statement issued following their June 2008 annual meeting, the National Salvation Front endorsed the opposition activity taking place in Syria and warned of further activity affecting the whole population:

What made things worse is the Iranian incursion that is spending money in the country without any supervision in order to increase the tension and threaten the national harmony ... The conspiracy of the regime against our

⁶³⁹ <http://www.free-syria.com/en/print.php?articleid=25890>

⁶⁴⁰ <http://www.free-syria.com/en/loadarticle.php?articleid=27172>

people has reached its peak and the popular tension is expressed in different regions of the nation. The late events in Kamishly, Deir el-Zour, Jisr al-Shaghour and al-Zabadany are only a fraction of what is actually taking place and will spread further until the volcano of popular anger explodes and all the people will participate in making their future and defining their destiny. The arrests that led thousands of our people into prisons in the last months and the torture in the dark dungeons is making new victims to be added to the thousands of missing and arrested people; these measures will not stop the march to freedom and dignity. The regime's policies are still contributing to the destruction of the national unity and spreading sectarianism and racism that present great dangers to the nation. The regime is still undertaking its oppressive and unjust policy in adopting the law number 49 that sentences to death all members of the Muslim Brotherhood and oppresses the Kurdish people who are our brothers in nation and destiny.⁶⁴¹

Although this message appears quite vague as it mentions Iranian interventionism in Syria, Syrian factionalism, the regime's "elitist" economic policies, and its "racist" and "oppressive" nature, the statements are clearly playing on all sorts of fears currently felt by the Syrian masses. The Front, in its inclusive new message, is thus presenting its agenda as a non-"racist," non-"elitist" alternative to that of the regime.

Thanks to the Internet and the communications revolution, Syria's al-Tayar al-Islami al-Dimuqrati (the Islamic Democratic Current), and the Syrian Brotherhood have a platform from which to express their agendas. Indeed, the Brotherhood, which was once willing to accommodate the regime in exchange for a general amnesty and the repeal of Law 49, is no longer interested in that option. Still, the fact remains that despite the fading of the external-internal and the secular-Islamic divides, the opposition of both the Islamic Democratic Current and the Syrian National Front continues to be one of words and statements addressed to a still small audience of Syrians, mainly living overseas. Inside infiltrations, despite the more accommodating agenda, remain the politically dissenting, neo-fundamentalist movement's weakness.

Islamist Militant Groups and the Call to Islamic Resistance

The Syrian opposition movement also includes militant Islamists.⁶⁴² Indeed, the last six years have seen the re-emergence of militant Islam in Syria, as evidenced by the increase in activities that are attributable to the country's militant Islamist groups. This development is mainly due to regional factors. As explained in chapter 6, the war in Iraq

⁶⁴¹ Brussels, 29th of June 2008. General Secretariat of the National Salvation Front in Syria. See <http://www.free-syria.com/en/loadarticle.php?articleid=27470> (last accessed 10 December 2008).

⁶⁴² Here I am following the definition of "Islamism" outlined earlier in this dissertation, which called it the desire to impose religiosity from above, either peacefully or through militant means. There are no pacifist Islamists in Syria at this point in time.

and the Syrian regime's regional policy have greatly contributed to the resurgence of militant Islamists in the country. This situation gives a new urgency to efforts aimed at understanding Syrian Islamists, particularly the nature of their beliefs and the sort of recruiting strategies and mechanisms – if any – that they are deploying.

Briefly, the majority of the members of this sort of Islamist group are much younger in age than their counterparts in the pacifist groups. Thus they did not witness the conflict between the Muslim Brothers and the State during the 1970s and early 1980s, and indeed some with which I spoke were not even aware of the essentials of the conflict. As such, they constitute part of a global “revisionist” and “modernizing” movement rather than the traditionalist movement epitomized by Syria's Muslim Brothers.

The militant Islamists are part of the Salafi movement, and believe that the phase of history presently being experienced by the Islamic world can be compared to the one experienced by the first Muslims during and immediately after their migration from Mecca to Medina, a period in which the political and the social aspects of Islam first meshed together. According to this view, today's Muslim societies and their political leaders have returned to a state of *jahiliya* (ignorance) in regards to Islam. It is therefore not the time for a calm *da'wa* and *tablighi* movement, nor for pacifist political activities; instead, the present situation calls for a militant re-Islamization of the community, to re-establish a society that adheres to the norms that were in place in Medina after the Prophet Mohammad set up the first Muslim polity there.

One way to understand the Islamists' ideology is to compare it to the position of those they vociferously criticize, i.e. the Islamic Fundamentalists. Indeed, the Islamist version of political Islam emerged at least partly in response to the perceived shortcomings of fundamentalism. Because of this, as well as the long-established link between fundamentalism and Islamic schools, Islamist members developed an anti-clerical stance, with their lay movement usually existing outside the body of the '*ulama*'. There are a number of reasons for this.

Islamists insist that the *ulama*'s traditional education has left them ill-equipped to defend Islam against the new ideas that have swept in from the West and pushed aside the political ideal of the Islamic *Khilafa* (Caliphate).⁶⁴³ They also claim that fundamentalists – especially traditionalist fundamentalists – have failed to interpret and portray Islam in a way that would allow it to address the problems of modernity while still maintaining its authentic essence.⁶⁴⁴ This concern is not new, and indeed has been voiced since the early 20th century by Islamic ideologues all over the Muslim world, including Syrian Salafis such as Sa'id al-Jabi and Sa'id Hawwa.⁶⁴⁵ In his explication of the Islamists' intellectual inclinations, Sadowski writes, “Islamists, with their cosmopolitan backgrounds, introduced various tools they had borrowed from the West into their organizational

⁶⁴³ It is important to note here that not all Islamists perceive democracy as a Western ideal. Some view the *Khilafa* system as a democratic organization of rule. See Al Sadek al-Nayhoum, *Islam Didd al- Islam*, London and Beirut: Riad el-Rayyes Books Ltd, 1994, pp. 15-18.

⁶⁴⁴ This fear about the Muslims' intellectual decline is not a new concern. Indeed the concept of 'renewal' through a cleansing return to the purity of Islam's Golden Age has been a recurring theme throughout Islam's 14 centuries of history.

⁶⁴⁵ See chapter 3 of this dissertation.

arsenal ... they drew on anti-modernist philosophies that embodied Western dissatisfaction with the consequences of industrialization and positivism: Spengler, Althusser, and Feyerabend supplied some of their favorite texts.”⁶⁴⁶

Another issue over which Islamists differ with fundamentalists is as regards apolitical understandings of Islam, something that the former firmly reject because they see it as sheer falsification of knowledge flowing from an urge to please the holders of political power. According to Islamists, in opting for political quietism, fundamentalist clerics have not only failed in their efforts at convincing the modern masses of the virtues of religiosity beyond *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) and *ʿIbadat* (practices), but have been co-opted and corrupted by secular authorities, often ending up on the secular regime’s payroll. This results in a fundamental corruption of Islam by them.⁶⁴⁷

To be sure, as was argued in the previous section of this chapter, Syrian neo-fundamentalist shaykhs believe that it is permissible to be part of the governing apparatus – no matter what its ideological orientation – while promoting, and maybe in order to promote, Islamic renewal. Islamists, on the other hand, insist that the *shariʿa* prohibits becoming part of a non-Muslim governing establishment⁶⁴⁸ or to “join the governing apparatus under the pretext of ‘peaceful resistance’ and service to the faith.”⁶⁴⁹ Islamists therefore believe in the necessity of political rupture and change from above when the *Umma* or its leaders are going astray, actions that they call *Hakimiyat Allah* (the Rule of God).⁶⁵⁰

Concretely speaking, Syrian Islamists charge the fundamentalists with being servile to the current holders of political power on their numerous websites (though the accuracy of this claim is suspect).⁶⁵¹ Ideas advanced by prominent Syrian shaykhs such as Muhammad Shahrur, Muhammad Habash, Ahmad Kuftaro, and Saʿid al-Buti that promote peaceful coexistence and inter-civilizational exchange with the West under the

⁶⁴⁶ Sadowski, “Political Islam: asking the wrong questions,” p. 222. However, this “modernizing” outlook that the Islamists claimed is conceived to be a tool deployed to confront the Western colonizers, rather than a normative transformation.

⁶⁴⁷ On the anti-clerical stand, see al-Nayhoum, *Islam Didd al-Islam*, pp. 28-31. In his critique of the *Faqih*’s authority, I categorize Nayhoum as Islamist despite his rejection of the Salafi doctrine. In this sense, not all Islamists are radical Salafis. In their critique of the *Faqih*, certain Islamist intellectuals aim at freeing Muslim societies from the burdens of the past, and advance systems of governance that shift power from the *Fuqaha*’ and the rulers to the peoples. See also Nayhoum, “Al-Muslima Laji’a Siyasiya,” in *al-Naqed*, 61 (July 1993), pp. 12-16.

⁶⁴⁸ Although, there is discord on which regimes are Islamic and which ones are not. For example, there is an Islamist divergence on whether the Jordanian Kingdom is a Muslim establishment or not. This sort of disagreement however, does not include the Syrian regime. For a justification of Syria’s political system, see Muhammad Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabiʿ al-Irhab*, pp. 139-141.

⁶⁴⁹ Al-Suri, “The Call to Global Islamic Resistance,” translated in Lacey, Jim ed., *The Canons of Jihad*, Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2008, p. 169.

⁶⁵⁰ Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabiʿ al-Irhab*, p. 140

⁶⁵¹ I argued earlier that the dissident Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has transformed into a neo-fundamentalist group while still remaining very critical of the Syrian regime.

“pretence” of moderation are emphatically shunned.⁶⁵² Additionally, present-day Syrian militants condemn other Islamic opposition groups for their transition to “pragmatic politics”, their “false” understanding of Islam, their alliance with the secularists and their endorsement of a Western-style political system. Islamists accuse them of being scholars of evil (*‘ulama’ al-Su’*) and denounce them as infidels because of their refusal to indict the regime under which they serve. It should be noted that this position is strongly reminiscent of the manner in which ‘Adnan ‘Uqla’s Fighting Vanguard opposed the leading Muslim Brotherhood’s compromises and alliances with other opposition groups in the 1970s.

Even the mosques of the fundamentalist *‘ulama’*, such as al-Nur Mosque, the Mosque of Badr al-Din, and al-Tawba Mosque in Damascus, where many prominent scholars preach and teach, are considered to be tainted institutions that true Muslims should shun. Such mosques are dubbed *Masajid al-Dirar* (The mosques of Detriment). The worst calamity, at least according to Syrian Islamist Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri, is that considerable segments of Islamic societies have unconsciously become part of the enemy’s apostate culture.⁶⁵³

What is clear from these Islamist positions is that it is not enough to simply be Muslim. Rather, it is imperative to be militant when the Muslim *Umma* is threatened.⁶⁵⁴ In this vein, they ideologically contrast Islam and *kufr* (heresy), and accuse their opponents within the Islamic movement of abandoning one of Islam’s core precepts, namely the compulsory duty of every individual (*fard ‘ayn*) to engage in Jihad,⁶⁵⁵ which they argue is a *fard ‘ayn* rather than a *fard kafa’a* in light of the fight’s defensive nature against the West’s “Third Crusader Campaign.”⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵² See Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi’ al-Irhab*, especially pp. 55-198.

⁶⁵³ Al-Tartusi, *Haza Huwa al-Buti Fa-ihzaruh* (This is al-Buti so Beware of him); Al-Tartusi, *Sifat Masajed al-Dirar al-Lati Yajeb I’tizaliha* (Description of the Mosques of Detriment that are to be Shunned); Abu Qutada, *Hijran Masajed al-Dirar* (Avoidance of the Mosques of Detriment); available at <http://www.tawhed.ws> (Last accessed 20 September 2008).

⁶⁵⁴ قال الشيخ سليمان بن عبدالله بن محمد بن عبد الوهاب رحمه الله في كتابه (الدلائل في حكم موالاة أهل الإشرار): "إعلم رحمك الله أن الإنسان إذا أظهر للمشركين الموافقة على دينهم، خوفاً منهم، ومداواة لهم، ومداينة لدفع شرهم، فإنه كافر مثلهم وإن كان يكره دينهم ويبغضهم، ويحب الإسلام والمسلمين. هذا إذا لم يقع منه إلا ذلك، فكيف إذا كان في دار منعة، واستدعي بهم، ودخل في طاعتهم، وأظهر الموافقة على دينهم الباطل، وأعانهم عليه بالنصرة والمال، ووالاهم وقطع الموالاة بينه وبين المسلمين، وصار من جنود القباب والشرك وأهلها بعد ما كان من جنود الإخلاص والتوحيد وأهله؟! فإن هذا لا يشك مسلم أنه كافر من أشد الناس عداوة لله تعالى ورسوله صلى الله عليه وسلم، ولا يستثنى من ذلك إلا المكره، وهو الذي يستولي عليه المشركون فيقولون له: اكفر، أو أفعل كذا، وإلا فعلنا بك وقتلناك، أو يأخذونه فيعذبونه حتى يوافقهم، فيجوز له الموافقة باللسان مع طمأنينة القلب بالإيمان. وقد أجمع العلماء على أن من تكلم بالكفر هازلاً، أنه يكفر، فكيف بمن أظهر الكفر خوفاً وطمعاً في الدنيا؟!"

See http://e-prism.org/images/Zarqawi_-_Mujahidin_road_map_-_July_04.doc (last accessed 10 September 2008).

⁶⁵⁵ Jihad is considered to have become a *Fard ‘Ayn* rather than a *Fard Kifaya* (if performed by some, then the duty falls from the rest) due to the fact that Muslims are acting in defense. See Islamist websites such as *Minbar Suriya al-Islami*; *Al-Tajdeed Forum*; *Minbar al-Tawhid wal Jihad*; *al-Sunnah Forum*: <http://www.tawhed.ws>; <http://www.almaqdese.com>; <http://www.alsunnah.info>; www.nnuu.com

Doctrinally speaking, the majority of Islamists (although not all) can be categorized as radical Salafis rather than orthodox Sufis. They adhere to a blend of Sayyid Qutb's ideas (politically) and the official teachings of the Wahabi school (socially). In general, they share many of al-Qaeda's core teachings on Islam, and take it upon themselves to spread the ideas of al-Qaeda while recruiting activists. They believe that carrying the Jihad forward will free Islam from the "defeatists" and the "hypocrites" among the Islamic leaders.⁶⁵⁷ As a result, Islam will awaken the masses to its neglected essence. Their most prominent leaders such as Mus'ab al-Suri, who is considered to be al-Qaeda's foremost strategic thinker, have adapted to a life led by the sword. They have also retained firm ties with the leaders of the Global Jihadist group, especially the Afghani and the "Mesopotamian" al-Qaeda, as well as with other Syrian Islamists that had fled the country in the aftermath of Hama.⁶⁵⁸

Islamists have advanced their own methods of outreach in this defensive war against the so-called crusaders or against the fundamentalists, in the form of a multifaceted program linking the internal front to the external one. The program consists, according to al-Suri, of a religious-cultural axis, a political-intellectual axis, and a military axis. He writes that, "without military resistance, the influence of all peaceful work – however important – will be scattered to the winds."⁶⁵⁹ Women are also assigned an important role to fulfill in terms of communal outreach and ideological education. This role is different than that assigned to women *shaykhas* at the heart of Syrian neo-fundamentalist groups (discussed earlier in this chapter), since it is based on the notion

⁶⁵⁶ Al-Suri, "The Call to Global Islamic Resistance," p. 164.

⁶⁵⁷ See al-Zawahiri to *AFP*, 21 August 1997; Also, Qutb, *Ma'alem 'ala al-Tareeq*, p. 71.

⁶⁵⁸ Al-Suri was born and grew up in Aleppo in Syria, and spent four years in the University of Aleppo's Department of Mechanical Engineering. He was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s, and joined the radical militant off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Fighting Vanguard (*al-Tali'a al-Muqatila*) in the early 1980s. In 1980, he allegedly fled Syria and joined the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in exile, allegedly receiving training in Iraq and Jordan. He then moved to France and Spain where he has lived since the mid 1980s. His Syrian network included Islamists such as 'Uthman Abu 'Umar (Abu Qutada) who is today considered to be al-Qaeda's spiritual leader in Europe. Abu Qutada was the chief editor of the *Al-Ansar* magazine, for which al-Suri was editor and a frequent contributor. Al-Suri also knows Riyadh 'Uqla (Abu Nabil), the top representative of the Jordan-based *al-Tali'a al-Muqatila*, and the Syrian businessman Ma'mun Darkanzali, based in the Hamburg district of Uhlenhorst. Darkanzali was indicted by Spain and the United States on charges of being a key al-Qaeda financier in Europe, and of assisting the Hamburg cell. One of al-Suri's principal associates was Muhammad Bahayah (Abu Khalid al-Suri), who was variously described as a 'mid-level' activist, 'courier' and a 'member of Usama Bin Laden's structures in Europe'. He operated mostly out of Turkey, until he fled to Iran and Afghanistan in 1999. Al-Suri is reportedly an al-Qaeda member. What is known is that he has nurtured contacts with at least two jihadists in Denmark, one of whom is Abu Rashid al-Halabi, a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood activist who had obtained permanent residence in Denmark, and who was considered to be a member of Abu Dahdah's Spanish al-Qaeda cell. Nasar was reportedly captured by Pakistani security in Quetta, Pakistan in late October 2005, handed over to American custody and then sent to the notorious Guantanamo Bay detention camp. It is now reported that he has been secretly transferred back to Syria for indefinite detention in the *Fir' Filastin* (Palestine Branch) detention center in Damascus.

⁶⁵⁹ Al-Suri, "The Call to Global Islamic Resistance," pp. 167-168.

that women have an important mission to fulfill only within the private sphere of the family and the home.⁶⁶⁰

Syria's Islamist militant leaders promote their religio-cultural, political and military program and recruit followers through informal lessons in private homes, inconspicuous "prayer rooms", and unregistered "school rooms", most of which are located at the outskirts of the cities and in Syria's growing shanty towns. Mobilization occurs during word-of-mouth gatherings first, and then in one on one private meetings. It takes as much as one year to recruit one member, particularly since the process relies on careful recommendations and family ties.⁶⁶¹

In one of my interviews, with a parent whose son – here called 'H' – had become part of the Syrian Islamist movement and wanted to join the Islamist militancy in Iraq, the father kept telling me about the ideological transformation of his son and his wife. But because I knew that his family was more atheist than religious, I kept pushing in the interview to discover the reason(s) for his son's religious transformation. The father eventually said the following:

I don't know why, after all, H had a secular upbringing and was not a religious man until his mid-20s. No one is veiled in our family, Ramadan is not that big of a deal, and most of us don't even pray...when I asked H, he said that God is not bestowing his *Baraka* (blessing, gift) on him and his family because he was not a true believer...maybe we should have helped him more with his financial troubles...we made him feel isolated and with no backing...he was never a smart student and failed at everything he did, we never thought it would come to this though, especially in Syria. Who would have imagined America invading Iraq and Islamists roaming at every corner as they please...they [Islamists] have resources and money, and are very effective. I imagine H felt he had no other choice, he's always been a proud kid, never wanted to ask us for anything. But it was obvious he needed money.

Although H's father kept blaming himself for his son having joined the militant Islamists, it was clear from his comments that economic marginalization and H's inability to provide for his family played a key role in his eventual decision to join the Islamist movement.

In Syria, Islamists consist of: 1) Dormant members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood residing outside of Syria, many of whom once belonged to the militant wing of the Brethren; 2) Syrian Islamist groups such as Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Liberation Party), and Abu al-Qa'qa's group Ghuraba' al-Sham, and; 3) Syrian and non-Syrian Islamists who operate in the country as part of regional Islamist groups. These are Salafi-Jihadists and al-Qaeda affiliated militant groups that are infiltrating Syria, mainly from Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.⁶⁶² The most prominent of these groups include: Jund al-

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶⁶¹ Private communication.

⁶⁶² It is sometimes alleged that a number of these Islamists have been funded and used by the Ba'athist regime to serve its own regional agenda and even consolidation of power, such as discussed in chapter 6 of this work. But this is unlikely.

Sham (allegedly under the leadership of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), and al-Tali'a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila (the Islamic Fighting Vanguard) under the leadership of Abu Qutada al-Shami.

The Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami) is the only known Islamist militant group believed to work from within Syria as well as regionally. It has firm ties with the Hizb al-Tahrir that is active in Jordan, although these are not clearly defined. It is also described by Syrian experts as a shadowy offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, one that remains strongly opposed to reconciliation with the Ba'ath regime. The group emerged from hibernation in the late 1990s, and announced their comeback by ambushing and killing several Syrian intelligence agents riding in a car on the 30th of December 1999, which resulted in a series of intense clashes with security forces that continued for four days. Some of the members caught were reportedly from Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The ambush prompted the regime to launch a major crackdown in the year 2000.⁶⁶³ In fact, representatives of the group have said that 1,200 of its members were arrested by the Syrian security forces in the December 1999 – January 2000 operation against Islamists in Damascus, Homs and villages in the area. Bashar's release of Islamist prisoners soon after taking power included eight members of the party.⁶⁶⁴

As for the other groups, their leaders are Islamists who were initially members of the Fighting Vanguard, and who fled overseas in the 1980s. Of those who fled, some continued their Jihadi fight in Afghanistan by joining the International Jihadi movement, which explains the prevalence of Syrians in the leadership and within the ranks of al-Qaeda. These Jihadists could now be considered the leaders of Syria's Islamist movement, although the majority came back to Syria and now operate in Iraq. Among the most prominent names are: Mustafa Bin 'Abd al-Qader Sit Mariam Nassar (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, a former Syrian Muslim Brotherhood member), Abu Basir al-Tartusi, 'Uthman Abu Umar (Abu Qutada al-Shami), 'Imad al-Din Bakarar Yarkas (Abu Dahdah, a former Syrian Muslim Brotherhood member), the Damascene Badran Turki Hisham al-Mazidi, also known as Abu Ghadiya,⁶⁶⁵ and Mahmud al-Aghassi (Abu Qa'qa').⁶⁶⁶

Despite their shared opposition to the regime, Syrian Islamists are distinct from Syria's Muslim Brothers and the Democratic Islamic Current because of their effort to be part of an International Islamist movement before concentrating upon the "enemies from within," (i.e. in this case the Syrian regime). This sort of "foreign enemy first" approach is in sharp contrast to the domestic focus once shared by Syrian Muslim Brothers, a focus that confined the majority of the Syrian Muslim Brothers to Syria. The effect of this difference is quite significant, since it gives the movement an international depth that the

⁶⁶³ Moubayed, "Islamic Revival in Syria"; APS, 19 March 2001.

⁶⁶⁴ APS, 19 March 2001; *Al-Hayat*, 22 December 2000.

⁶⁶⁵ Abu Ghadiya is charged by US officials to be an al-Qaeda militant and a key figure in smuggling fighters into Iraq and fueling Sunni resistance. This claim justified, according to US officials, a raid on Sukkariya, a Syrian area on the border with Iraq. The raid supposedly targeted Abu Ghadiya, and ended in the death of eight Syrian citizens. For a profile on Abu Ghadiya, see BBC 28 October, 2008.

⁶⁶⁶ For excerpts of his work and the Fighting Islamic Vanguard, see <http://e-prism.org/images/alkhatf.pdf> (August 2005).

Syrian Brotherhood never really enjoyed, despite a number of foreign ties. In Islamist parlance, the need to concentrate on the external front before the internal one is often blamed on *Halat al-Jahiziya* (the state of readiness) that became particularly pressing post-9-11 in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Because of the present regional situation, Islamists argue that *Jihadi Fiqh* (Jihadist Jurisprudence) demands that the groups' members who are willing to sacrifice their lives engage in *Da'wa* and *Tableegh al-Islam* on the domestic front, so that Muslims are entirely ready to confront the enemy from without. The Islamists also emphasize that the present state of mind and lack of Islamic teaching amongst Muslims necessitates caution, efficiency and great labours to avoid having the whole resistance collapse. In other words, Islamists believe that they are not strong enough to take a lead role in Syrian opposition politics, though they hope to be in the future.⁶⁶⁷

For the moment then, Islamists operating in Syria, unlike Syria's Islamic Front, are still more interested in challenging external foes such as Israel and the United States in Iraq before directly challenging the Syrian regime. Warnings against unleashing violence and individual Jihad within Syria are often posted on Jihadi websites, based on the argument that such actions could prompt a reaction from the Syrian security forces.⁶⁶⁸ For example, warnings to Islamists traversing Syria towards Iraq have routinely appeared on the website *Minbar Suriya al-Islami*, cautioning against thinking that the Syrian environment is a friendly one due to the regime's anti-American stance, and reminding hopeful fighters that many have fallen into the hands of the Syrian security forces before entering Iraq.⁶⁶⁹ "It is a great regret that many sad incidents have befallen enthusiastic brothers who have fallen into the hands of the Tyrants before entering Iraq, or have been killed in entire groups trying to make entry, without [having the chance of] presenting any danger to the American forces."⁶⁷⁰ Therefore, despite a number of small-scale incidents within the country (see chapter 6), Syria is not yet a target. The Islamist aim remains to build a *Jihadi* movement strong enough to control the whole region, and not just a particular nation-state. Interestingly, that goal overlaps with the regime's similar ambition to exert control over the whole region.

Thus up until now, Syrian Islamists recruiting from peripheral urban areas have seemed to be simply isolated militant groups incapable of building any significant revolutionary momentum despite a few attempts and armed clashes in Damascus, Hama and the Hasaka. This view should be tempered by the fact that they are operating in Syria on the tacit understanding that they do not target the Syrian regime, and instead focus

⁶⁶⁷ See for instance "manhajoyat al-hazar wa al-bina' al-jahiziya fi al-fikr al-jihadi (The doctrine of Caution and building capabilities in the Jihadi activity" March 2006, available on http://e-prism.org/images/mn-fekeh_al-Jihad_-_Mar06.pdf (November 2008). See also Abu Basir al-Tartusi, "takafal allah lia bi al-sham" (God will take care of Greater Syria) available at www.tawhed.ws

⁶⁶⁸ Translated by Stephen Ulph, see Stephen Ulph, "Syrian Website Calls for Experienced Mujahideen," *Terrorism Focus*, 2, 13, (July 13, 2005). See also *Minbar Suriya al-Islami*, 3 July 2005; and 14 June 2005; *Al-Tajdeed Forum*, 25 July 2006.

⁶⁶⁹ See *Minbar Suriya al-Islami*, www.nnuu.com (10 January 2006 and 4 June 2005) (Last accessed 10 January 2006).

⁶⁷⁰ *Minbar Suriya al-Islami*, www.nnuu.com

upon regional adversaries – thus only looking at clashes with Syrian forces is not a good basis for judging the success of their efforts.⁶⁷¹

The seeming failure of the Syrian Islamists to build revolutionary momentum is also apparent in the peripheral areas, including those containing the Palestinian refugees (who are supposedly more vulnerable to the Islamist call), Islamists' infiltration attempts have allegedly met with little success.⁶⁷² When I asked about the reasons behind Palestinian reluctance to join Islamist groups, a number of Syrian observers noted that the Palestinians know better than to jeopardize their position in Syria. They have no passports and nowhere else to go if ejected from Syria, which makes it especially risky for them to even consider joining – at least knowingly – an anti-regime group. If anything, they would tend to join in the anti-Israeli and anti-American movements that are sponsored by the regime.⁶⁷³ Furthermore, Hamas' alliance with Damascus certainly constrains the growth of anti-regime Islamists among the Palestinians.

However, based on the views expressed in the discussion forums of Jihadist websites, it is only a matter of time before the Syrian Islamists move from fighting the external enemy to the “internal one” who is part of the “domestic front”, i.e. the Syrian regime. Certainly Syria is still perceived as being led by 'Alawi heretics. In fact, the relatively anti-Shi'i and anti-'Alawi culture has spread across most of the Islamist websites often under the title al-Shi'a al-Rawafed (The Shi'i Rejects), and has encompassed the movement's Syrian elements.⁶⁷⁴ Already, there have been postings in which Islamists have accused the Shi'as and the 'Alawis of acting like “pigs” and of worshipping *Allat* rather than *Allah*.⁶⁷⁵ It is also a recurring theme to attack Syrian 'Alawis for providing financial and ideological support to Lebanon's Hizbullah. Thus on April 20th 2002, one of the leading clerics of the Saudi Salafis, Sheikh 'Abdallah bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabirin, issued a Fatwa (*religious decree*) against Hizbullah because of its Shi'i discourse, saying:

It is prohibited to assist this rejectionist [*Rafidi*] party, nor to follow their command, or to pray for their success. We advise the Sunnis to wash their hands

⁶⁷¹ Abu 'Ubayd al-Qurashi, “madha ba'd ihtilal al-Iraq?” (What follows the invasion of Iraq?), *Majallat al-Ansar* (online) available at: <http://www.tawhed.ws/c?i=91>. Article summarized in William McCants and Jarret Brackhman (eds.), *Militant Ideology Atlas*, West Point, New York: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006, pp. 86-89.

⁶⁷² There are some 461,897 Palestinians in Syria today. Three quarters of them live in Damascus, with the rest in the cities of Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Latakia and Dara'a. Throughout the country there are ten refugee camps, with five around Damascus. See <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/syria.html>; See also <http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications/index.html>

⁶⁷³ The largest refugee camp in Syria is the Yarmuk Camp, an area in a Damascus suburb, housing around 137,000 refugees.

⁶⁷⁴ See “Muntadayat Mukafahat al-Shi'a al-Rawafed” at Sahat Ahl al-Sunna (the Sunni Space) available at: <http://www.antishe3a.com/vb/showthread.php?p=2779#post2779> (Last visited 23 September 2009). Especially *Tahzir al-bariya min nashat al-Shi'a fi Suriya* [Cautioning the Righteous from the Shi'as' activity in Syria] at: <http://www.ahlalhdeth.com/vb/attach...6&d=1086382370>

⁶⁷⁵ See *Shabakat al-Difa' 'an al-Sunna* (the network for the defense of the Sunna) <http://www.d-sunna.net> (13 August 2008).

of them, and desert whoever joins them. They [the Sunnis] should elucidate their [the Shi'is] animosity to Islam and the Muslims, and their damages in the past and in modern times for the Sunnis. The Shi'is will always keep their hostility towards the Sunnis. They will always do their best to present the disadvantages of the Sunnis, to discredit them, and manipulate them. Therefore, whoever follows them enters their control, since Allah has said: whoever enters their command becomes one of them.⁶⁷⁶

On this point, Zarqawi's message to his fellow Jihadists – which is reminiscent of Syria's Fighting Vanguard's statements in the 1970s – summarizes many of the messages posted regarding the Arab regimes and how they should be dealt with. In his message, Arab leaders are compared to the Ghasasina who helped the Romans against the Muslim Arabs in ancient times. They are said to have surely rejected Islam and to have exited the Muslim Millat as they worshiped the God of the crusaders. In Zarqawi's portrayal, Arab leaders help fight the Muslims and steal their money and land. They are therefore a gang of heretics and criminals, and are to be fought.⁶⁷⁷ As for the Ba'th regime in Syria, Abu Basir al-Tartusi asserts in his writings that Jihad against the atheist and heretic 'Alawis is a *fard 'ayn* on all Muslims, and that it is indeed a fight that must precede the one against the Christians and the Jews.⁶⁷⁸ This explains a number of the incidents that have already disturbed the quietude of the Syrian domestic scene, as was demonstrated in chapter 6 of this work.

Conclusion

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Islamic opposition in Syria did not enjoy a broad social base of support. The minorities, the peasants, the salaried middle class, the professionals and academics, and even the Sunni elite of Damascus, were not attracted to an Islamic nationalist alternative in league with the traditionalist rich landlords and

⁶⁷⁶ Reuven Paz, "Hizballah or Hizb al-Shaytan? Recent Jihadi-Salafi Attacks against the Shiite Group," *Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center* 2, 1 (February 2004),

⁶⁷⁷ See http://e-prism.org/images/Zarqawi_-_Mujahidin_road_map_-_July_04.doc (Last visited 21 November 2008).

⁶⁷⁸ See *Minbar Suriya al-Islami*, www.nnuu.com (Last visited 10 January 2006)

س127: كنت قد توجهت للشيخ حسين بن محمود بسؤال عن حكم الجهاد في سوريا هل أصبح على كل الشباب في سوريا فرض عين .. لكنه أعطاني حكماً عاماً عن ذلك ولم يفصل لي .. أرجو أن تفصل لنا الحكم ؟
الجواب: الحمد لله رب العالمين. جهاد هذه الطائفة النصيرية الحاكمة في سورية باسم حزب البعث الكافر .. واجب بنص الكتاب والسنة .. وإجماع علماء الإسلام .. وجهادهم عندي مقدم على جهاد اليهود والنصارى .. والشام لن يعود لها دورها الريادي الموعود والمنتظر .. ويُرفع عنها هذا النذل .. إلا بعد جهاد هذه الطائفة اللعينة الكافرة الممثلة في النظام الطائفي البعثي الحاكم .. وإزالتها عن سدة الحكم ومواضع القيادة.

merchants. As a result, the political Islamic movement was believed to have failed in its efforts to seriously impact Syria's political scene.

In this chapter however, I argued that although the Muslim Brotherhood's political movement was significantly curtailed, the rest of Syria's Islamic movement has managed to secure a continued presence on the Syrian domestic scene. In so doing, they have accumulated enough power and importance to effectively make an impact on the Syrian social scene, as well as to impact the state.

The argument was as follows: the Syrian Islamic movement has proven in general to be a very adaptable *realpolitik* player. In order to survive the Ba'th era, it has chosen to become a tacit ally of the regime. As a result, the different orders and shaykhs developed a seemingly apolitical program concerned with Islamic change from below. The movement shifted its focus from politics to ethical philosophy and political quietism.

Certainly the orchestrated accommodation of the regime is an essential part of the relationship between the Islamic orders and the Ba'thi Political Command. But the resulting willingness of the Ba'th to tolerate and to co-opt the Islamic orders has provided Syria's Islamic movement with an important, semi-autonomous space for organizing.⁶⁷⁹

Within the space provided, effective outreach and communication methods, and the organizational composition of the Islamic groups – marked by increasing institutional decentralization, a small-clustered profile, and a pyramidal hierarchical structure – have given them increased social influence. Indeed, the expansive and pyramidal hierarchical structure of the orders, similar to the one created by Hafez al-Asad himself during his rule of Syria, not only makes these orders reliable partners for the regime, but also greatly enhances their ability to practice effective social outreach, especially that the orders' members have direct access to the leading shaykh at the top of the Sufi pyramid. The ethical discourse of the Syrian Islamic orders has been molded to appeal to different social backgrounds and sub-national cleavages, thereby ensuring that a diverse Syrian public embraces it. Finally, the orders' growing strength also stems from a re-creation of Syria's "traditional" Islamic network through social action from below, particularly the organization of charitable services, the development of closer ties with the local communities that the orders are gradually being left to service (in light of the state's liberalization policies and abandonment of social supports such as goods-subsidization policies), a focus on youth, the collection of donations, and the organization of weekly get-togethers.

As a result of these efforts, the movement has succeeded in re-creating a network of neo-fundamentalist groups and Islamic charitable associations that are effectively operating and providing services within the available legal space. Moreover while doing so, the co-opted Syrian Islamic network seems to be supplementing and perhaps even to some degree replacing the once-populist Ba'th, which used to draw support from the

⁶⁷⁹ In so doing, the regime has since been moving closer to the early 20th century era during which the politics of the notables, in favour of classical liberalism, dominated within the Syrian context. Indeed, to counter in part the influence of the radical elements within the Syrian Islamic movement, the Ba'th regime has provided Islamic groups who were willing to compromise, albeit without concessions to their dogma, some effective organizational space. This space is reminiscent of the previous era during which the religious orders and the political leaders agreed to serve each others' purposes rather than fight over power. This will be discussed further in chapter 8.

disadvantaged rural and urban classes. In other words, Syria is effectively witnessing the resurgence of a very powerful, albeit still only semi-autonomous, Islamic network.

It was also argued in this chapter 7 that Syria's Islamic movement is not homogeneous. Rather, the different groups that are emerging are distinct in terms of their opposition or endorsement of the Ba'athist regime, but also in terms of their discourses and outreach methods: while the majority of the groups remain apolitical and in alliance with the regime, some are anti-regime and have overt political aims. Others are growing militant in nature and believe only a revolution from above can create the true Muslim society. Although there is not yet a tangible insurgency, the Syrian political Islamist movement is nonetheless re-emerging, and Islamist ideological and political outreach and framing are actively occurring from within the largest Syrian cities. At the same time, the al-Qaeda inspired Islamists operating in Iraq claim to have developed an underground network within Syria, although on their websites they still advise militants not to activate Jihad within the country given the necessity to first fight the foreign enemy (i.e. the American troops in Iraq).

Finally, this chapter has argued that there is a demonstrably firm relationship between militant Islamists and social Islamic groups, no matter how apolitical the latter claim to be. For instance, the Muslim Brothers first emerged in the early 20th century as a social welfare group, and then were transformed into a political party that used militancy when it was deemed to be necessary. As argued earlier, the laymembers of these governmentally co-opted groups could easily shift affiliation and join hands with the opposition neo-fundamentalist and Islamist groups if they should feel that the state has, or that their groups' leaders have, abandoned their cause, in a manner similar to 'Uqla, who joined the *Takfiri* militant Fighting Vanguard in order to advance their ideological and political agendas.

Chapter 8

Islamic activism and the Erosion of the Secular State

Introduction

The previous chapters have examined Islamic revivalism within the context of evolving state policy, and in often-dynamic interaction with a wide variety of other factors, both internal to the movement and external to it. In this final chapter, I turn to some larger questions grounded in the above analysis: what can an examination of the causes of Islamism's rise and the concurrent decline of secularism tell us about the future of politics in the country? Is the newly re-invigorated Islamic sector under the Bashar al-Asad regime liable to become an opposition independent of the state despite the regime's control and co-optation formula? Has the movement accumulated a social weight that the regime can no longer repress it? How will the economic factor, which has shaped both the struggle between the regime and the Islamic forces, as well as state policy vis-à-vis the co-opted and growing sectors of society, (i.e. the bourgeoisie and the Islamic civil society) continue to determine the nature of Syria's Islamic revivalism? Is it the beginning of the end for Syria's PA regime? Is Syria's new opposition Islamically-oriented? Do these newly forged state-Islam relations mark the beginning of *political* liberalization in Syria? And finally, will the secularization process that was originally initiated from above ever be resumed?

In examining these linked questions, it is important to reiterate three intertwined factors that mark the current political reality in Syria. First, the Islamic movement has once again become a powerful social phenomenon and a well-established and organized social welfare network capable of forging and sustaining close and personal relationships with the urban masses. Secondly, the Populist Authoritarian system that once broke the dominance of the liberal oligarchy has itself institutionalized a new oligarchy with political power increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few families who have successfully combined private ownership with bureaucratic and political power.⁶⁸⁰ Finally, the political elite has forged important alliances with Syria's religious figures.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁸⁰ To cite but a few of these new players, one can include: the Makhlufts, the As'ads, the Muhanas and the Da'bul. See Bassam Haddad, "Change and Stasis in Syria: One Step Forward," *Middle East Report* 29, 4, number 213 (Winter 1999): 23-27; Volker Perthes, "The Bourgeoisie and the Ba'th," *Middle East Report* 21, 170 (May-June, 1991): 31-37.

⁶⁸¹ Although these religious figures do not belong to the same traditional families that had emerged in the early 20th century and defined Syria's Islamic environment, still, these Sufi shaykhs have had deep roots in Syria and its Sufi orders, which since the late 19th century have helped define Syria's social and political

Indeed, in its buttressing of these social pacts, the regime has largely re-created the old order of the pre-WWII era.⁶⁸²

The information in the previous paragraph deserves some elucidation. With the deterioration in Syria's economic situation in the early 20th century, charitable Islamic organizations emerged to address many of the social, financial and psychological needs of the people. These organizations felt that it was important to start a process of re-Islamization of the allegedly enfranchized Syrian masses through a focus on the educational system (whose secular thrust they perceived as being foreign to Syria). With the introduction of parliamentary politics to the country, the re-Islamizing process moved into the political arena, with Syria's most important Islamic network – the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood – participating. However, when the traditional elite's vested interests were threatened, the Islamic movement's organizational efficiency resulted in collective actions that later gave birth to random violence (see Part II of this dissertation).

Accordingly, the current context exposes the present Syrian regime to domestic pressures that the Ba'ath had successfully avoided under the rule of Hafez al-Asad. This is particularly important today in light of the country's mounting economic challenges, one of which is a profound economic transition. This economic liberalization is leading to the development of new lower classes whose marginalization could lead them to become part of the "populist" Islamic groups. More importantly, this new marginalized class is a potentially fertile recruiting ground for the emerging Islamist militant groups functioning in Syria.

In previous chapters, I demonstrated the scope of Islamic revivalism in Syria, and also argued that political Islam is emerging within the country. In this chapter, I examine the possibility of a full-fledged political Islamic opposition in the country, willing to openly challenge the regime. In so doing, the first section of the chapter sees me contending that even though the future is not easy to predict, one thing is evident: just as it did in the past, the Syrian Islamic movement, that was once apolitical in the 1920s under a pro-elite Sufi leadership, turned political in the 1930s in its populist form, and then gave birth to a militant faction in the 1970s can easily witness a repeat of the same cycle. This outcome could be a result of the current economic challenges that Syrians are facing. In making this argument, I focus in particular upon Syrian youth. I then look at the repressive measures taken by the current regime in attempting to stop the possibility of Political Islam establishing itself in the country. In the last section, I contend that Syria's intellectual opposition is still secular in nature, but that if it is to re-engage the defecting masses, let alone remain an important part of Syria's political life, it must overcome its political and institutional divisions.

scenes. See Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 607-612.

⁶⁸² In the early 20th century, emerging Islamic movements, which converged to eventually create the Muslim Brotherhood, have had close relations to, and roots within, Syria's Sufi orders. See Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 103-110. Concerning the Sufi-Salafi divide in Syria, see Itzhak Weismann, "The Politics of Popular Religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim Brothers in 20th-Century Hama," pp. 37-59. Weismann explains that there is no necessary binary distinction, in fact Syrian Salafi thinkers had roots in the revivalist Sufi tradition, and the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders had successfully combined both Sufi and Salafi elements and influences in order to mobilize the Syrian masses.

Islamist Revivalism?

The Economic Burdens

The new fabric of Syrian society is presently being forged within the context of structural ‘reforms’ and the acceleration of economic liberalization. However, this relaxation of the economy that was aimed at sustaining the authoritarian political system has in fact also engendered a number of challenges. First, it has meant a cut in jobs in the public sector which generally acted as a repository for surplus workers the private sector cannot absorb. This, in addition to economic recession and rapid population growth (see Table 4), has resulted in a rise in unemployment in Syria leaving millions of Syrians at risk of falling under the poverty line.⁶⁸³ For instance, in 1994, 6.9% of the active population was unemployed. In 2004, this number rose to 12.3% according to Syrian official reports (see Graph 1 and Table 5).⁶⁸⁴ Secondly, the state-administered economic liberalization has meant the gradual termination of the regime’s subsidization policies and price intervention measures, which proved especially difficult to the poor.⁶⁸⁵ Already in 2003-2004, 19% were at risk and as much as 11% of the population could not afford their basic necessities.⁶⁸⁶

(Table 4 and the unemployment chart below show respectively the population increase in Syria from 1990 to 2010, and the sharp increase in unemployment rates from 1994 to 2004)

Table 4: Human Development 2009 Data

Indicators	Year	Syrian Arab Republic
Total population (millions)	1990	12.7
	2007	20.5
	2020	26.5
Annual rate of natural increase of the population (%)	1990-1995	2.9
	2005-2010	2.5
Urban share of the population (%)	1990	48.9
	1995	54.9

⁶⁸³ Heba al-Laithy, “Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004,” p. 26.

⁶⁸⁴ Satoof al-Shaykh Husseyn, *al-batala fi suriya 1994-2004*, the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics: Damascus, July 2007, p.32.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-35.

⁶⁸⁶ Al-Laithy, “Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004,” p. 9 and p. 26.

Total fertility rate
(births per woman)

1990-1995

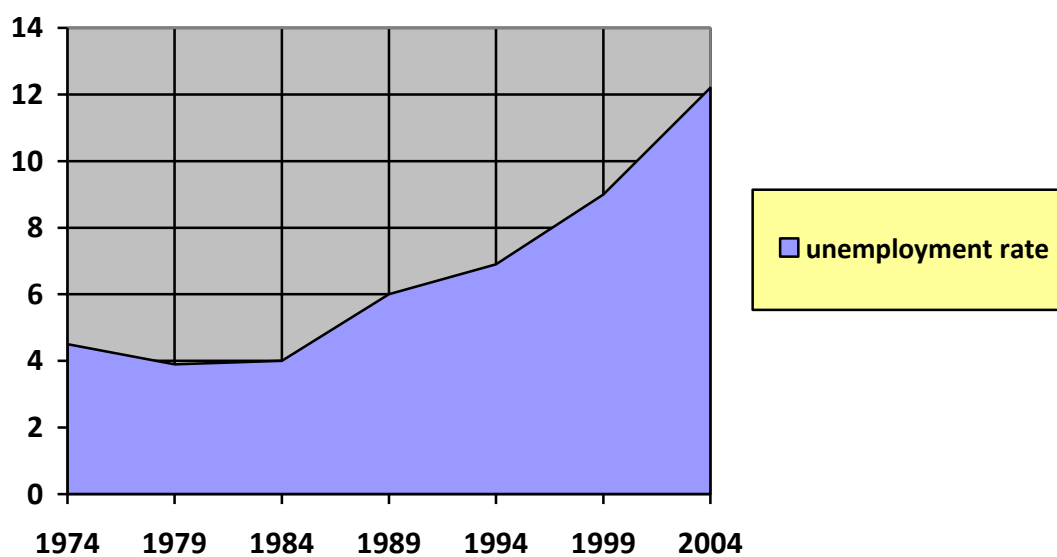
4.9

2005-2010

3.3

Source: UNDP, 2009 and 2007

Graph 1: Unemployment rate from 1974 to 2004



Source: Study published by the Syrian Bureau of Statistics, available at: <http://www.cbssyr.org/studies/st7.pdf> [Arabic]

Table 5: Employment and Unemployment Numbers in 1994 and 2004

	1994	2004
Employed (thousand)	2898,1	4334,0
Unemployed (thousand)	216,4	607,5

Source: Study published by the Syrian Bureau of Statistics, available at: <http://www.cbssyr.org/studies/st7.pdf> [Arabic]

These economic developments are creating an increasingly marginalized society. Indeed, as already mentioned in chapter 6, the economic growth that paralleled Syria's *infitah* policies has not been beneficial to the poor. The Gini index rose from 0.33 to 0.37 showing that despite economic growth, inequality in Syria has in fact risen by 11% between 1997 and 2004.⁶⁸⁷ This is also partly due to the fact that Syria's foreign trade has remained static, and about two-thirds of Syria's exports were oil-related, which disproportionately benefit the upper classes.⁶⁸⁸

Moreover only certain cities, such as Damascus, and Lattakia, are reaping the benefits of the economic opening, and poverty ratios are significantly higher in the rural areas than the national average, sometimes more than triple the rates of the urban areas. For example, in the rural North-Eastern region, the percentage of people living under one dollar per day is more than tenfold that in the urban area.⁶⁸⁹ The resulting process of urbanization that has proceeded apace since the early 1990s prompted Flynt Leverett to note that: "... the balance of urban versus rural Sunnis has shifted in favor of the former, creating a social climate potentially even more conducive than that of the early 1980s to Islamist resurgence."⁶⁹⁰ Even within the privileged cities, only the upper classes can afford to partake in the emerging new consumption habits (See Table 6 and Table 7).⁶⁹¹

Table 6: Poverty and Inequality Indicators in 2007:

Human Poverty Index (HPI-1)	Probability of not surviving to age 40 (%)	Adult illiteracy rate (%ages 15 and above)	People not using an improved water source (%)	Children underweight for age (% aged under 5)
12.6	3.9	16.9	11	10

Source: UNDP Syria, 2007

Table 7: Distribution of Expenditures

⁶⁸⁷ Al-Laithy, "Poverty in Syria," p. 9 and p. 12. See also Ziesser, *Commanding Syria*, pp. 111-118; the CIA World factbook (Last accessed 16 September 2008); Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics Reports available at: [Http://www.cbssyr.org](http://www.cbssyr.org) [Arabic]; UNICEF and the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, *al-Maseh al-'Unqudi Muta'aded al-Mu'ashira*, 2006, available at: http://www.cbssyr.org/people%20statistics/Final_Report_Syria_ARB.pdf; See also The United Nations Development Programme Syria, at <http://www.undp.org.sy/>

⁶⁸⁸ Al-Laithy, "Poverty in Syria," p.9.

⁶⁸⁹ Al-Laithy, "Poverty in Syria," pp. 16-17. See also UNDP Syria report, *The impact of subsidization of Agricultural Production on Development*, October 2006, p. 6, available at <http://www.undp.org.sy/files/psia.pdf>

⁶⁹⁰ Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, p. 36.

⁶⁹¹ Leïla Vigual, « La nouvelle consommation et les transformations des paysages urbains, » pp. 29-37.

Population deciles (poorest to richest)	Percentage of Total Expenditures
Bottom 20	7.24
Richest 20	45.25

Source: "Poverty in Syria" UNDP Syria, 2006

Statistically speaking, the Syrian GDP grew between 1996 and 2008. According to the World Bank, real economic growth averaged 3.4 percent per annum between 1999 and 2003, around one percentage point over the population growth. And despite the decrease in oil production, real GDP growth averaged 5.1 percent in 2004-2008. This was noted to be due to the expansion in private investments, stimulated by the recent economic reforms and to inflows from oil rich countries. Having said this, other experts and UN reports argue that when population growth and inflation are taken into account, the real growth rate is actually much less than calculated by the World Bank.⁶⁹² For instance, "data from national accounts...suggest that per capita GDP growth between 1996 and 2002 was less than 1 per cent per annum. The increase in average salaries, after adjusting for inflation, was also a rather moderate 0.8 per cent per annum between 1997 and 2001. Moreover, a breakdown of GDP by expenditure reveals private (real) consumption grew at only 0.3 per cent per annum between 1996 and 2002. Hence, per capita real private expenditure should have declined by at least 2.0 per cent annually throughout that period"⁶⁹³

The net effect of the economic liberalization (within the context of the economic recession) has been the re-creation of a powerful economic elite growing at the expense of the Ba'ath's traditional socio-economic base of support. It is also allowing an increase in both the opportunities and the resources available for a future challenge from below, one whose ideological tenor is almost certain to be Islamic and/or Islamist – given the lack of other ideological alternatives. This is especially true because of the successful outreach methods and lucrative rewards used by the Islamic groups, as well as because of the increased number of Institutes, mosques and *zawiyas* that are ever more beyond state control, and that give them a platform from which to promote their program.

It is important to add at this point that the Muslim Brothers had once failed to provide a solution to Syria's class problem because of an agenda that excluded the rural Sunnis and the subordinate classes. These consequently saw leftist parties as their only opportunity for social mobility. Today, the increasingly autonomous and powerful religious institutions are greatly influencing the Syrian youth – who are economically alienated and politically excluded – via their lucrative programs and functional networks (chapter 7).

Furthermore, the liberalization of the Syrian financial sector and banking system, particularly what some claim is a lack of regulations and laws regulating the banks' operations, has prompted a number of observers to warn about the possibility of terrorist

⁶⁹² Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, pp. 113-114.

⁶⁹³ Al-Laithy, *Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004*, p. 9.

financial-banking activity within Syria.⁶⁹⁴ If the government does not re-assert control over all financial institutions – not just banks – there is a risk that the country's economic liberalization could be exploited by peripheral Islamists. The Financial Action Task Force noted the following:

Syria is not considered as an important financial center in the region due to the stringent economic restraints imposed by the Government until recently, and to the restrictions imposed on the circulation of foreign currency at the time of the on-site visit. Therefore, the risks of ML/TF (Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing) are low in general, but the assessment team fears an increase of risks as a result of the economic openness policy which is currently adopted by the Syrian Government and is meant to attract capital for investment purposes.⁶⁹⁵

One example of how Syrian economic liberalization has impacted upon Islamist activity has to do with the control of anti-money laundering operations. These operations are governed by Resolution No 4 issued by the Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Commission (CMLTFC), and by Resolution No 71 of the Council for Money, which are to be implemented by the following: specialized governmental banks amounting to six institutions;⁶⁹⁶ Private banks (seven banks)⁶⁹⁷ which began operating in Syria around 2003, except for Syria Gulf Bank (which became its operations in August 2006); and the banking branches in Syria's free zones (six branches of foreign banks).⁶⁹⁸

However, because this is a new type of crime in Syria, no judgments related to money laundering and terrorism have yet been made.⁶⁹⁹ There have been some legal actions in this regard against Syrians in other countries however: recently in Spain, Basam Dalati Sattut and Muhammad Ghaleb Kalaje Zuaydi were indicted for draining a company's accounts of thousands of dollars and allegedly diverting the funds to finance Islamic terrorist activities. But the Spanish National Court threw out the indictments in July 2008. In clearing Sattut and Kalaje, the court said that the indictments were not backed by sufficient evidence to show that the two suspects, especially Kalaje – who was

⁶⁹⁴ Middle East and North-Africa Financial Action Task Force, *Mutual Evaluation Report of the Syrian Arab Republic: Anti-Money Laundry and Combating Financing of Terrorism*, p. 7.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁶ The Commercial Bank of Syria, Popular Credit Bank, Industrial Bank, Agricultural Cooperative Bank, Real Estate Bank and Savings Bank.

⁶⁹⁷ Syria and Overseas Bank (BSOM) – BEMO-Saudi French Bank – International Bank for Trade and Finance, Audi Bank-Syria, Arab Bank, Byblos Bank, and Syria Gulf Bank

⁶⁹⁸ There are six affiliates of foreign banks: Euro Mediterranean Bank, Société Générale Bank, Bank of Beirut and Arab Countries (BBAC), Arab Banking Corporation, Lebanon and Overseas Bank (BLOM), Fransabank.

⁶⁹⁹ Middle East and North-Africa Financial Action Task Force, *Mutual Evaluation Report of the Syrian Arab Republic: Anti-Money Laundry and Combating Financing of Terrorism*, p. 7. With regard to the Terrorist Financing crime, it is considered as a "new" crime covered by article 2, paragraph (b) of the Syrian Legislative Decree No 33 of 2005.

in prison at the time on a prior terrorism conviction – had carried out terrorist financing.⁷⁰⁰ This prompted Syrian experts to press for an acceleration of the recommendations of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force. Ultimately, the degree to which the regime has dragged its feet on this issue reflects its increasing fear of an Islamic revival in Syria.

Economic Liberalization and the Youth

Political and economic co-optation of religious Syrians, as well as of the bourgeois class, has produced, in light of today's economic hardships, new openings and spaces for Islamic outreach. This compares to the 1970s and 1980s, when the populace was insufficiently marginalized and alienated to facilitate recruitment to Islamist discourse. Currently therefore, the Ba'ath is no longer a populist party. It can no longer be seen as a unifying force for the country's minorities, its rising classes, and the liberal-minded if it continues empowering Islamic elements.⁷⁰¹

That being said, it is the combination of the widening gap between the upper and lower classes, the simultaneous rise in unemployment, and Islamic framing and outreach that make Syria's young population an unpredictable force (see Table 7). This is particularly the case because Islamic ideological framing has addressed many of the socio-economic burdens that the youth in Syria are facing. Revivalist groups and charities have often asserted in their lessons, tapes, and pamphlets that they alone are capable of meeting the youth's needs, be they psychological or material. The increasing visibility of their organizations and the efficacy of their charitable work attest to these claims. After all, it is estimated that some 80 percent of the 100 charitable organizations in Damascus are Sunni Islamic.

In Egypt, economic *infitah* (opening) only added to feelings of anomie or political alienation by the youth. Diane Singerman writes about Egyptian youth: "[T]here is considerable impressionistic evidence of two trends: first, that levels of political alienation are particularly high among urban educated youth and, second, that their alienation may have increased since the onset of political reform."⁷⁰² Although there are no nationwide opinion surveys on the subject of youth anomie in Syria – yet similarly to Singerman's observations in Egypt, one cannot but notice that a large number of Syrian youth are experiencing political and economic exclusion, social apathy and "aside from winning the Syrian *yanaseeb* (Lottery)" (as one university student put it to me), they face a strong likelihood of little or no social mobility. The latest Syrian statistics report that more than 50% of the youth in the country are under the age of 30. The Syrian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 16% of the active population in Syria are unemployed, that

⁷⁰⁰ See [Http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/07/21/spain.terror/](http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/07/21/spain.terror/) (Last accessed 14 October 2008).

⁷⁰¹ A number of leftist groups have expressed their fears about the rising political role and influence Islamic elements have acquired in the last few years, since Bashar's rise to the helm of power.

⁷⁰² Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, p.77.

263,497 are between the ages of 15 and 30, and hence 51% of those looking for a job are in the 15-30 year-old-category.⁷⁰³

Table 7: Youth Unemployment Rates in 1994 and 2004

Age	1994	2004
15-19	13.8	11.6
20-24	16.8	21.4
25-29	16.5	18
30-34	13.8	14.7
35-39	10.6	11.5
40-44	8.2	7.5

Source: Study published by the Syrian Bureau of Statistics available at: <http://www.cbssyr.org/studies/st7.pdf> [Arabic]

In other words, if we consider only the young unemployed, around 51% of those who are actively looking for work in Syria, and 8% of the population are potential recruits for the Syrian Islamic movement in its Islamist and neo-fundamentalist guises. This is a significant demography to tap into. Amplifying the fears of the Bashar regime is the possibility of the transformation of the Islamist movement in Syria into a Salafi movement, again following the Egyptian example. Member of Parliament Shaykh Muhammad Habash captured this concern when he said that 80% of Syrians are religiously conservative, yet “these do not have any political program, and when they think of politics, they look for a leader or a shaykh, one who could belong to either the reformers or the radicals.”⁷⁰⁴

These masses may be increasingly prone to becoming members of the Islamic and Islamist groups, which are funded and supported by both domestic and international actors, including Saudi shaykhs and Syrians whose wealth was made in the Arabian Peninsula. Already, programs on TV have recognized the problem of the youth’s “vain attempts to address the crisis.”⁷⁰⁵ It does not seem that young Syrians are feeling the same estrangement felt in Egypt, “not just yet” some argue.⁷⁰⁶ But impressionistic evidence from the 44 school and university students I informally talked to, some in groups and some individually, indicates that 23 of them felt Syria is heading down the same path as Egypt. Two of those said that Syrians are always around “ten years late in messing it up”, meaning ten years behind Egypt. Nineteen of the students to whom I spoke were still

⁷⁰³ Central Bureau of Statistics, *Syrian Statistical Abstract*, Prime Ministry, Damascus: 2006.

⁷⁰⁴ *Al-Hayat*, 18 June 2005.

⁷⁰⁵ Personal Interview, Damascus April 2008.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

optimistic and felt Syria could never be like Egypt given its smaller size, its higher literacy rate and its higher per capita income.⁷⁰⁷

Nonetheless, a majority of the students felt that economic liberalization is more harmful than good for the middle class, and felt that the gap was widening between the lower and the upper classes. All believed that the 1980s were more egalitarian times in terms of money, and that the ability of youth to gain a livelihood is certainly worrying to them, likely more so than to their parents and grandparents when they were their age. They all agreed that the Syrian government was doing much better than the rest of the Arab world, except for the oil nations. Said one, "Syria has a lot of resources; we are the only country still exporting wheat in the region." It is not certain whether these answers are representative of the population at large, and it is also possible that I was given slightly more positive answers because I am living abroad. In general however, the responses were in line with other informal conversations that I had with older Syrians.

Of particular interest were the almost uniformly negative views of the Egyptian situation. That is, whether they felt that Syria was following the Egyptian path or they believed that Syria's future was not likely to be similar to that of Egypt, there was general agreement that Egypt's *infitah* was a negative example to follow. They all also agreed – even those who belonged to the upper middle class – that only the rich youth are now getting a chance to prove themselves, with the rest having to struggle with any available opportunity. The majority seemed surprised by my question about whether religion helped them to cope with the situation. Seven of them said that religion was very important, while 12 believed that religion does not help at all. The rest said that religion helped on a spiritual level, but was not an answer to their material problems, although they acknowledged that Islamic associations have helped a number of their friends with their economic hardships.

This last response raises a further question: What if the Islamist discourse, in its re-invented guise and with its economic rewards, infiltrates both the *imaginaire* and the wallets of this marginalized youth? Their marginalization might cause them to take their destiny into their own hands, in opposition to their families, society, and the state. As one student, 'Ammar, explained to me:

We are held responsible for our future and for our destiny whether by our families or our society, and yet almost every part of our lives is outside the scope of our control. In a world where agency is elusive, despite all claims that we are an empowered generation given the new technological advances and the Internet, only religion makes sense. Volunteering and working with Islamic associations and going to the mosque give us some control, if not over our lives, then at least over our afterlife.⁷⁰⁸

When I asked 'Ammar what he meant by "agency" and "control," he explained that, "the youth have no control over anything anymore, not over their career, not over their marriage, and yet they are told that everything is possible...Our grievances are of an

⁷⁰⁷ These are too small a number of people to constitute any sort of representative sampling. While this informal sampling is not necessarily representative of the wider society, it does give a general sense of things.

⁷⁰⁸ Private communication, graduate student, University of Damascus, April 2009.

economic nature because money in this era opens all doors.” Ammar’s answer addresses a number of questions: the question of marginalization and agency, the question of control over one’s destiny and the feeling of disempowerment in a modernizing domestic and global environment. Islamic groups have been more aware and better suited to address, according to ‘Ammar, the challenges that the youth face. In the same conversation, a friend of ‘Ammar, who had been silent up until then, asserted that “Islamic associations provide us with answers to our problems.” When I said that Marxist groups also claim to provide their members with answers, and asked how Islamic groups differ, he answered, “they are more practical and pragmatic, I need a solution for now, I need a job, I need an apartment, I would like to get married one day, my aunt has cancer and the *shaykha* makes her feel better every time she visits. I don’t believe that Marxists can solve these problems.” The strength that these groups have acquired by transforming into neo-fundamentalist groups -- concerned with moral change and charitable work rather than politics-- is evident in these answers.

Olivier Roy’s conclusion that the entire Islamist movement is becoming neo-fundamentalist, with Islamism being “a moment, a fragile synthesis between Islam and political modernity, which ultimately never took place” provides an important insight into why youth are attracted to the new Islamic groups.⁷⁰⁹ In other words, the nature of the Syrian Islamic movement is key, since the movement is no longer the sort of opposition that took shape under, and challenged, the Ba’th. In its need to abandon the political dimension, it once again became ‘mundane’, and thus ‘pertinent’ to a generation facing the difficulties of transitioning towards a market economy.

Still, Islamist activism is a movement that, at least to those affected by it, is more than just a fleeting moment. Here, I argue, lies the limit of the regime’s co-optation measures. The government under Bashar is not intrinsically weak, and in fact has great control over Syria’s domestic scene (though as argued earlier, it is relatively weak compared to the regime of his father). But this control is much more difficult to maintain when state-society relations are transitioning. If economic liberalization means a wider gap between the rich and the poor, with the poor forming the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid, then in its bid for more power, an autonomous and strong Islamic sector that has effectively mobilized the youth, could gain in power⁷¹⁰. All will depend on the regime’s success at managing economic liberalization while still maintaining control over a mobilized and increasingly dissatisfied populace. The present situation in Syria is reminiscent of the Egyptian example referred to by Wickham: “[i]ndeed, an important finding is that even when opposition groups are denied access to the formal political order, ruling elites are unified, and the state’s capacity for repression is high, an authoritarian regime may permit -- or be unable to prevent -- the emergence of “autonomous zones” in which mobilization is possible.”⁷¹¹ Chiffoleau reaffirms this last point by addressing its economic dimension:

⁷⁰⁹ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, p. 75.

⁷¹⁰ As there are more marginalized to draw upon as members. See introduction of chapter 6 for more on the causal link.

⁷¹¹ Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, p. 94.

Malgré les initiatives récentes de l'État, notamment la création d'un programme national de lutte contre le chômage (Marzouk, 2004), celui-ci touche, selon les estimations, entre 12 et 20 % de la population active et sans doute plus si on prend en considération les formes précaires ou temporaires de travail. Cette précarisation de l'emploi suscite l'émergence ou la réactivation de stratégies de requalification qui, outre la pluriactivité, mobilisent très largement les réseaux d'entraides familiaux, sociaux et confessionnels (Boissière, 2005) ... Face au désengagement de l'État et à la dégradation des conditions de vie, les individus gèrent le quotidien à grand renfort de solidarités reposant sur les allégeances primaires, selon un modèle en contradiction flagrante avec le système de mobilisation corporatiste imposé par le régime et qui, réfugié dans la sphère privée, échappe en grande partie au contrôle de celui-ci.⁷¹²

Indeed, the youth are slipping out of hand as Chiffoleau notes:

La jeunesse, majoritaire dans le pays, porte une très lourde part du fardeau des difficultés économiques présentes. Celles-ci ont un impact direct sur la qualité du système d'enseignement déjà considérablement bloqué par une ba'thisisation profonde. Au sortir de l'université, les jeunes sont confrontés au chômage ou à l'insuffisance et à l'inadéquation de leur formation, dans un pays où tout ou presque est à construire et à inventer et qui aurait particulièrement besoin de compétences réelles. Dans ce contexte, la tentation du départ vers l'étranger est très généralement partagée mais la réalisation n'en est accessible qu'à un petit nombre. La plupart inscrivent donc leur destin à l'intérieur du pays et cherchent à y bâtir une position stable malgré les contraintes politiques et économiques. Les plus chanceux, souvent ceux qui possèdent déjà un capital social et économique, s'engouffrent dans les opportunités ouvertes par l'extension récente du secteur privé et des services qui offre un niveau de vie supérieur à celui de l'emploi dans le secteur public, désormais déprécié bien que la stabilité qui y est attachée demeure une valeur sûre. Mais une part de cette jeunesse ne se contente pas de rêver d'une vie meilleure, elle aspire aussi à une participation citoyenne.⁷¹³

⁷¹² Chiffoleau, "La Syrie au Quotidien."

⁷¹³ Chiffoleau, « La Syrie au Quotidien. » For a critical analysis of the economic situation in Syria, see Thierry Boissière, « Précarité économique, instabilité de l'emploi et pratiques sociales en Syrie », in É. Longuenesse, M. Catusse and B. Destremeau (eds.), *Le travail et la question sociale au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient*, REMMM n° 105-106, Aix-en-Provence : Édisud, 2005 ; Marzuk, *Al-Faqr wa al-Batala fi Suriya*.

Possibility of Turning Political

From the preceding, the point becomes clear that, in light of the vacuum created by the regime's repression of all other secular parties and groups and its economic liberalization without democratization, the Islamic movement's politicization is very probable. Indeed, prominent figures such as Salah Kuftaro and Sa'id al-Buti (as well as some of his followers), have been more critical of the state in the last few years, since Bashar's rise to the pinnacle of power. For instance, Salah Kuftaro, who preaches to about 10,000 followers every Friday at the Abu al-Nur Mosque in Damascus and operates the largest Islamic charitable foundation in the country, has recently called for an "Islamic democracy" in Syria, and has pointed out the failings of secular Arab regimes in leading their countries.⁷¹⁴ Pinto explains that "the complete submission of the state patronage would harm the legitimacy of the shaykh's authority in the eyes of his followers -- despite all the material, social and political gains that could result from it -- for it would reveal the socio-political origins of his power. Therefore the compromise between the shaykh and the state apparatus must allow both parties to be satisfied, yet the shaykh and his followers must remain distinct and above the logic of overt submission and control that organizes the webs of clientelism connecting different fractions of Syrian society with the structures of the authoritarian state."⁷¹⁵ The limited degree to which the shaykhs have subordinated themselves to the regime explains the latter's need to further accommodate these groups, in order to maintain its ruling coalition. Yet this mechanism of control is self-defeating, since more compromise invites the religious groups to appeal for more power. And this effect is heightened because the religious sector stands as a united front in its negotiations with the government. Thus the balance between the regime's need for legitimacy and its need for peace contradicts in the long run the need to control the rising membership of the religious civil society as, "Their [the Islamic leaders] collaboration can easily be transformed into open rebellion."⁷¹⁶

Interestingly, the rise of the Islamic element in Syrian society, which has emerged in the last few years as an important charitable sector that has assisted the state in the provision of social services and in helping people cope with the economic dislocations of a system in the process of a necessary market liberalization, has the unintended effect of increasing the membership and resources available for organized challenges to the regime.⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁴ Moubayed, "Islamic Revival in Syria." See also *The Washington Post*, 23 January 2005; and *The Daily Star*, 18 January 2005. Important to add here that Salah Kuftaro is serving a prison sentence for a "corruption case."

⁷¹⁵ Pinto, "Dangerous Liaisons," p. 8.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷¹⁷ On the one hand, Islamic leaders help as mediators to legitimize the regime, while consolidating -- the now unavoidable -- liberalizing economic reforms. On the other hand, since a grassroots change in the political complexion of the country is unavoidable, the regime opted to include the Islamic society (whose co-opted leaders are in favour of the regime's liberalizing economic policies) in order to pulverize the secular alternative; an alternative that in the Syrian case is in its majority leftist rather than liberal, and which is resolutely anti-regime.

Therefore, in spite of the apolitical neo-fundamentalist groups' alliance with the regime, these groups are also expanding their effective control over the Syrian social scene. Moreover, their growth has not reached its limit given that around 10% of the inhabitants of Syria live in informal zones (with this number on the increase),⁷¹⁸ and that an increasing number of people are turning towards informal saving associations and self-help groups that operate outside the realm of the state's economic decisions and decrees, and more importantly, its political supervision and control.⁷¹⁹

The political side of the Islamic movement is also being revitalized, with the re-emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood onto the Syrian political scene. This re-emergence has been facilitated by activism undertaken by the secular opposition, which has also forcefully re-emerged in Syria since the rise of Bashar to power in June 2000. Thus we see that the Damascus Declaration for Democratic and National Change, signed by the majority of Syria's intellectuals and civil society groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, reminded Syrians of these groups' political significance. Yasin al-Haj Saleh, a Syrian journalist known for his secular opposition to the Ba'ath, underlined the importance of the Damascus Declaration:

The main importance of the declaration derived from the identity of the parties that signed it. The original document was signed by five parties and gatherings, namely the Democratic National Gathering (composed of five parties with leftist and nationalist roots), the Committees for Civil Society Revival, the Democratic Kurdish Alliance in Syria, the Democratic Kurdish Front in Syria, and the Future (Al-Mustaqbal) Party. Also, nine prominent figures co-signed the document, of whom Riad Seif, a jailed parliamentarian, was the most prominent. No sooner had the declaration been issued than the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also joined in and called on others to sign it. The Brotherhood described it as a starting point for a new national consensus. Soon other smaller groups and individuals, both within Syria and outside, joined - the most problematic of them being the Reform Party of Syria headed by Farid Ghadry, which is based in the United States. The Damascus Declaration was a historic initiative. For the first time since the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963, a broad understanding was reached between the main body of the Syrian opposition and a majority of Kurdish parties, between secular parties and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷²⁰

In March 2005, a number of Syrian Kurds and Arabs created the National Coordination Committee for the Defense of Basic Freedoms and Human Rights. One month later, the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society issued a paper calling for dialogue between all the segments of civil society, including the Syrian Muslim Brothers.

⁷¹⁸ Syrian governmental study conducted in 2006. See www.champress.net, (19/04/2006) and (31/07-2006).

⁷¹⁹ Friederike Stolleis, "L'emprunt au féminin: réseaux de femmes et associations d'épargne a Damas", *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 115-116 - *La Syrie au quotidien. Cultures et pratiques du changement*, Décembre 2006, p. 70 and p. 73.

⁷²⁰ See SyriaComment: <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/10/yasin-haj-salih-sn-appeal-for.htm> (20th February 2008).

On the 30th of December, 2006, the regime's fears were realized with the formation of a new opposition coalition that united two powerful secular and religious parties. At the same time, former vice president 'Abdu Halim Khaddam defected from the regime. He did so in spectacular fashion, by appearing on the al-'Arabiya news network and accusing the regime of killing the late Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, even pointedly singling out President Bashar al-Asad as being implicated. After the interview, Khaddam moved to Paris and announced his alliance with a previous opponent, the Muslim Brotherhood. In March of the same year, the Muslim Brotherhood and Khaddam formed a new anti-regime coalition under the name of the National Salvation Front. Landis and Pace explain that:

The alliance has bolstered the positions of Khaddam and the Muslim Brotherhood. By linking up with the secular Khaddam, the Muslim Brotherhood has showcased its eagerness to prioritize political pragmatism over narrow ideology. It may have alleviated the anxieties of Alawites and military leaders who believed that the Muslim Brotherhood's first move in power would be to purge old regime loyalists. Khaddam can appeal to Ba'athists in a way Bayanuni never could. The former vice president issued an open letter to regime Ba'athists, appealing to them to reject loyalty to the small family clique ruling Syria and instead to give their loyalty to the fatherland, which the NSF claimed to represent. The Muslim Brotherhood also benefits from Khaddam's international and internal connections. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood has given Khaddam its Islamic imprimatur, and he can now piggyback on its support within Syria.⁷²¹

Khaddam has both personal wealth and international connections that could end up being worrisome to the regime. He is also a figure whose presence in the opposition could help to bridge divisions, a fact emphasized by a conference convened in Washington DC in January 2006 that gathered together both internal and external opponents of the regime.⁷²²

A few months later, the Ba'th regime had to face another challenge, in the form of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration. The Declaration, which was supported by both the secular and the Islamic opposition, was signed by 300 Syrian and Lebanese dissidents. Written by Michel Kilo, one of Syria's most prominent secular dissidents, it called for the normalization of relations between Lebanon and Syria following the Hariri assassination. "At first glance a harmless document, the regime interpreted it as evidence that the Syrian opposition was officially teaming up with the anti-Syrian government in Lebanon. Jumblatt, Lebanon's most vociferous anti-Syrian politician, who had called for US military intervention in Syria, had met with members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Khaddam."⁷²³ Kilo and ten other dissidents were arrested. Eight of them were later released, although Kilo remained in prison for three years and was only released in 2009.

In addition to the social and political Islamic presence being increasingly felt in the last few years, a militant Islamism has also re-emerged on the Syrian domestic scene.

⁷²¹ Landis and Pace, *The Syrian Opposition*, p. 58.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

As argued in the previous chapters of this work, the government's foreign policy has been conducive to an Islamist revival in Syria, particularly under Bashar's command: The recruiting and training of individuals, and the support of Islamist Sunni and Shi'i groups regionally, will be coming more forcefully into play once American troops exit Iraq. Indeed, while the regime is tapping into present regional grievances, it is also generating motivations, resources and opportunities for collective action that might turn against it. The problem with such a tactic is that it requires absolute control over the movements and of their potential recruits to be completely effective. Furthermore, this tactic facilitates movement toward the creation of an ideology of collective action. And though this ideology is presently much more concerned with the regional rather than the domestic situation, this could change in the future. According to Francois Burgat:

In order to be able to speak of an Islamist defeat as opposition, it would be necessary to prove that other political forces had replaced them – 'secularist' forces which would thereby show themselves to have a superior capacity to mobilize support. We are far from such a situation ... in contesting national political orders ..., the Islamists implacably continue to be both advance guard and main body of mobilised activity. In the Arab world, the conjectural success of state violence only now serves, in all probability, to reveal the society's general difficulty in making progress along the arduous road to democracy – a difficulty for Islamists, certainly, but also for the regimes and forces which claim to oppose them in the name of secularism. All this should not be taken as a denial of the fact that times change, for Islamists as much as for the regimes which they oppose.⁷²⁴

The regime's relational borders with the Islamic sector are certainly yet to be fully delineated. A number of Syrian observers and journalists maintain that behind the unsettled Syrian political scene lie conflicting ambitions between avid secularists, old-guard interests, and the rising religious elements within the regime. Some within the government are pushing for a complete secularization of the political system, while others are attempting to Islamize the legal code.⁷²⁵ Nonetheless, the regime's policy of moving closer to moderate Islam rather than to secularism is creating a situation that threatens to end Syria's allegedly secular traditions and to disrupt the current regime coalition. It is with an awareness of this that the regime still refuses to lift Syria's state of emergency law.

High-ranking security officials and military officers agree that there is no longer a sure way to keep these groups under the control of the state: "They are receiving financial aid from the Gulf region, essentially Saudi Arabia. Plus these are legitimate apolitical institutions that are helping the impoverished and the needy." When I asked about the Syrian secular system and what is left of it, one high ranking official stated that the regime is still secular, but that society is now making its own decisions. "Secularism cannot be imposed from above", he said, a statement that is reminiscent of Hafez al-

⁷²⁴ Francois Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam*, London, New York: I.B. Taurus, 2003, p. 182.

⁷²⁵ See the Ba'thi website Kuluna Shuraka (all for Syria) at <http://all4syria.info/content/view/16751/96/> (last visited 12 November, 2009).

Asad's speech in 1983 about the impossibility of preventing the resurgence of overt Islamic patterns in Syria.⁷²⁶

Repressive measures and the Limits of Syria's Islamic Movement

The Regime's counter-measures

Syria is still safe, one Syrian observer explained to me, noting that "a parallel Syrian Islamic sector has not fully developed just yet, and given Syria's very rich and diverse demographic environment, it is doubtful the Islamic sector will succeed in galvanizing enough of the populace to cause a bottom up change." This view might prove to be correct in light of the containment tactics deployed by the Bashar regime.

Like his father, Bashar's initial reaction to any immediate domestic threat has been an iron fist. The experiment of political liberalization known as the "Spring of Damascus", which was initiated only a couple of weeks after Bashar's rise to power, quickly turned into a harsh winter where the participants were arrested and harassed. In fact, during the Spring of Damascus, the new regime became increasingly concerned about the growing mobilization of the opposition. Due to pressures from hardliners within the regime, as well as fears about the effects of a chaotic and uncontrolled regional context – notably the situation in Iraq and the rise of Islamic activity there – there have been repeated waves of regime intimidation visited upon Syrian civil society and the Syrian opposition. This forceful behaviour, although much less harsh than that deployed by the regime in the 1970s and 1980s, was directed at the entire civil society movement. For example, the regime struck back by using emergency powers and restrictive legislation such as the 1958 Law on Associations and Private Societies (Law No. 93) to control civil society groups' access and ties to the Syrian community, and to prohibit them from operating as legally-recognized groups.⁷²⁷ The regime also struck back by harassing and arresting a number of the movement's intellectuals, by denying requests by

⁷²⁶ Personal Interview, Dubai, March 2008.

⁷²⁷ "Under the provisions of Law No. 93, the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MoSAL) controls the registration of all civil society associations and has wide jurisdiction to intervene in the internal governance and day-to-day operations of any association. Associations must notify MoSAL of their meetings, and representatives of the ministry have the right to attend. In addition, MoSAL has the authority to regulate the ties of any local group with the international community, ensuring that local associations are severely restricted in their ability to finance their operations or seek advice, expertise, support, and cooperation from abroad." See: <http://makkah.wordpress.com/2007/10/31/strangling-human-rights-in-syria/> (Last viewed 10 June 2008).

political forums to have their permits renewed, and by waging a war against the dissidents in the media and through the most prominent *'ulama' al-sulta*.⁷²⁸

The government justified this course of action to the public by blaming it on the conservative elements within the regime, particularly the old guard, which then included vice president 'Abdel Halim Khaddam. The arguments advanced were very similar to the ones put forward some 30 years earlier. Thus it was claimed that there was an 'abuse' of the regime's liberalizing moves, confusion as to what civil society meant, and that the opposition's activity was a recipe for chaos. This explained why the regime's patience with the opposition grew rather thin, and set up the possibility of intervention by the Republican Guard.⁷²⁹ Joshua Landis and Joe Pace reported that:

The hard-liners, anxious that the criticism was escalating beyond control, inaugurated the crackdown that would become known as the Damascus Winter. The regime unleashed its attack dogs, publicly impugning the opposition's nationalist credentials and even physically assaulting its critics. Syrian vice president 'Abdel Halim Khaddam warned that the calls for change had gone too far and claimed that the regime would not tolerate threats that could drive Syria into civil war. By the end of the summer, eight of the most prominent civil society leaders had been imprisoned, and all but one of the civil society forums were shut down.⁷³⁰

The pullout from Lebanon in 2005 led to another cycle of repression, including interrogations and accusations, arbitrary arrests, security summonses, and random harassment of civil society activists.⁷³¹ In March 2005, the Ministry of Information rescinded the permits of two American-sponsored channels, al-Hurra and Radio Sawa. "All4Syria" and the "Elaph" websites, known to be critical of the regime, were also blocked.⁷³² Only a few months later, the Jamal al-Atassi forum was closed down and its administration arrested for having read to the attendees of the forum a statement on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood. The forum that had initially survived the Winter of Damascus had apparently pushed too far. A conference gathering the internal as well as the external opposition in Washington DC in January 2006 prompted an anxious regime to outlaw, in March 2006, political contacts and the forging of alliances with any foreign element or government.⁷³³

⁷²⁸ Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, pp. 86-91.

⁷²⁹ The Syrian Republican Guard is an army based in Damascus and led by Maher Al-Assad, Bashar's brother. With its superior capabilities, the Republican Guard is in a position to quash any potential threat. "The main job of the security forces is to keep the country in an iron grip; it has no interest in politics and poses no challenge to the regime. Lightly armed and structurally diffused, these forces take orders from the president directly. Their job is to hunt down the regime's opponents and carry out routine law enforcement operations." See: *Al-Ahram*, 19 - 25 June 2008.

⁷³⁰ Joshua Landis and Joe Pace, "The Syrian Opposition," *The Washington Quarterly*, 30, 1, Winter 2006-2007, pp. 47-48.

⁷³¹ See the website of *Suria al-Hura* from March to July 2006, <http://www.Free-Syria.com>

⁷³² Reported by the *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, March 21, 2005.

⁷³³ Landis and Pace, *The Syrian Opposition*, p. 60.

This backlash, it should be noted, was particularly due to the regime's fear of an Islamist upsurge riding the wave of opportunity presented by the burgeoning secular civil society. As explained by Eyal Zisser: "This fear of a fundamentalist wave that threatened to sweep over the country had many partners, even outside the ranks of the regime, which could explain their support for it or more precisely their reservations about the activities of the reformist camp."⁷³⁴

As we have already seen, February 2006 saw the emergence of a new opposition coalition that united former vice president 'Abdu Halim Khaddam and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood under the name of the National Salvation Front.⁷³⁵ The regime for its part retaliated by sending a clear message. On the 28th of February 2006, the director of the Damascus *Waqf* (religious endowments), Muhammad Khaled al-Mu'tem, issued a decree re-banning religious lessons from Syria's 8,000 mosques. Quranic lessons were to be reduced to one or two a week rather than being given on a daily basis. The Mosques and *zawiyas* were also told to close their doors in between prayers, unless they received a special permit from the ministry of *Awqaf*. Loudspeakers that broadcast the voices of the shaykhs to very large numbers of people were banned during the morning and evening prayers. Most importantly, the decree also banned mosques and *zawiyas* from receiving any donations without reporting them to the ministry of *Awqaf*. It was only following a massive mobilization of the religious elites that parts of the ban were lifted, with the influential Member of Parliament Muhammad Habash intervening in Parliament to amend the situation. Still, the authorities refrained from commenting on the subject.⁷³⁶

During the summer of 2007, the Syrian security court handed down prison sentences of 12 years against four individuals accused of belonging to the outlawed Islamist opposition.⁷³⁷ Then in May 2008, the Kurdish Shaykh Muhammad al-Khaznawi was found dead under suspicious circumstances. His followers claim that his assassination followed vociferous sermons in which he denounced the Syrian government. The Shaykh was described as a powerful critic of the regime, particularly because of his great charisma and the resultant influence that he exercised over those who attended his Qamishli-based⁷³⁸ Islamic institute, where he taught the Quran and Islamic jurisprudence. Shaykh Khaznawi embodied the Kurdish political opposition in Syria, and he was interested in aligning the Syrian Kurds' struggle against the regime with that of the Muslim Brotherhood, an aim that led him to meet with leaders from the Muslim Brotherhood in February of 2008 in Brussels, Belgium. While Syrian officials have

⁷³⁴ Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007, p. 93.

⁷³⁵ As noted earlier, this coalition ceased to exist in May 2009.

⁷³⁶ *Al-Hayat*, 29 June 2006; See also *As-safir*, 6 April 2006. For commentaries on the issue ranging from the secularists to the religious, see www.champress.com (March 30, 2006). See also "Syria Rescinds Ban on Religious Lessons in Mosques" (<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/index.html>, 30 March 2006).

⁷³⁷ *Agence France Presse*, 28 August 2007.

⁷³⁸ Al-Qamishli is a northern city on the Syrian border with Turkey, the majority of its residents are of Kurdish origins.

blamed his mysterious death on radical Islamists who opposed his reformist and inclusive interpretation of Islam, the Shaykh's family and followers remain firmly convinced that the Syrian secret service assassinated him. After his death, tensions in the city of al-Qamishli were very high, resulting in instances of civil disobedience that caused the death of one police officer and the wounding of a dozen protesters.

While the previous paragraphs underline the regime's fears about an Islamist resurgence, they also demonstrate that the regime remains in control of the situation. As a result, the Islamic challenge is largely confined to the social realm. Moreover its shift towards an Islamist stance, although not impossible, is still not likely in the near future. For the moment, only the Syrian Muslim Brothers have dared to overtly join with the secular opposition, while the country's Islamists have only succeeded in disturbing the quietism of urban life, without presenting a viable political opposition to the regime. Therefore, the Muslim Brothers remain the only group playing the political game alongside secular groups, and are the most outspoken and politically relevant on the Syrian oppositional scene.

The Secular Opposition

It is important to realize that the opposition camp in Syria is not only Islamic. In terms of the intellectual debate, the Syrian secularists are still (up until the time of writing) a significant part of the opposition in Syria, despite the louder voice and greater public profile of the Islamic and the Islamist parties, not to mention the Western media's greater focus on the Islamic parties rather than on their secular counterparts. Indeed, the secular, largely left-wing, opposition has had some historic achievements since the beginning of Bashar's presidency. Examples include: the Forum of National Dialogue (*Muntada al-Hiwar al-Watani*) formed by Riyadh Sayf in August 2000, the Cultural Forum for Human Rights (*al-Muntada al-Thaqafi li-huquq al-Insan*) formed by Khalil Ma'tuq in 2001, Suhayr al-Atasi's forum, the petition of the 99, and the petition of the 1,000.⁷³⁹ Even after the end of the Spring of Damascus and the regime's decision to stage its counterattack, it was the secular opposition that continued to demonstrate the most stamina, while still asserting its secular stance.

Observers might look to the Declaration of Damascus, signed in October 2005, as proof that the secular opposition is of little importance today, since it says that "Islam – which is the religion and ideology of the majority, with its lofty intentions, higher values, and tolerant canon law – is the more prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people. Our Arab civilization has been formed within the framework of its ideas, values, and ethics and in interaction with the other national historic cultures in our society, through moderation, tolerance, and mutual interaction ...". Yet the Declaration also clearly says that its purpose is to "[b]uild a modern State, whose political system is based on a new social contract, which leads to a modern democratic Constitution that makes citizenship the criterion of affiliation, and adopts pluralism, the peaceful transfer

⁷³⁹ Petitions drafted and signed by Syria's secular opposition requesting political change in Syria and forming the cornerstone of the Spring of Damascus.

of power, and the rule of law in a State all of whose citizens enjoy the same rights and have the same duties, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sect, or clan, and prevents the return of tyranny in new forms.”⁷⁴⁰

It is furthermore worth noting the absence of many of the country’s different and diverse religious groups and individuals in these forums. Sylvia Chiffolleau provides part of the answer as she writes the following:

À l’occasion d’une série sur la littérature de prison dans le monde arabe, la chaîne de télévision qatarie al-Jazeera a tourné deux émissions en Syrie, avec l’autorisation des autorités locales, au cours desquelles sont interviewés plusieurs intellectuels et artistes ayant passé de nombreuses années en prison, qui font un récit sans concession de leurs conditions d’incarcération. Le texte de Yassine al-Haj Saleh présenté ici s’inscrit dans cette même veine. Avec une étonnante liberté de ton, celui-ci rappelle la dureté, l’inhumanité de la prison, sans jamais oublier de mentionner que la situation réservée aux islamistes était bien plus cruelle encore que celle faite aux communistes, groupe auquel il appartenait lui-même, et insiste surtout sur les difficultés d’une réinsertion dans un pays qui a certes changé mais qui vit toujours sous le joug du même régime.⁷⁴¹

Indeed, fear and the effects of fear, while difficult to accurately quantify, have yet to be studied in the Syrian case. However, the mistreatment of Islamists in prison does not entirely explain their complete absence as a prominent group within the politically active segment of Syrian civil society. For instance, if one looks at the year 2005 – which saw a peak in opposition activity in Syria – the activity was almost entirely secular in nature. The demonstration in favour of the Damascus Declaration on 18 October 2005, a mere five days before the scheduled release of the first United Nations report on Rafiq al-Hariri’s assassination, was one of the most important and bold attempts at undermining the regime, and included a diverse coalition of secular activists. Indeed and as stated earlier, despite claims that the regime feared Islamists taking advantage of its weakening authority and hence felt it important to stop the opposition movement in its entirety, yet it is key to emphasize that the regime’s iron fist was still very much directed towards Syrian secularists.⁷⁴² Pious Syrians seem keener to attend religious lessons and

⁷⁴⁰ For English and Arabic versions of the Damascus Declaration, see: http://annidaa.org/preview.php?id=49&kind=moved_news; <http://www.damdec.org> (5 January 2009).

⁷⁴¹ Sylvia Chiffolleau, «La Syrie au quotidien : cultures et pratiques du changement Présentation.»

⁷⁴² Concerning the Damascus Declaration, Landis and Pace write: “...the most diverse coalition of the opposition to date unveiled the Damascus Declaration, a document establishing a unified platform for democratic change. The declaration grew out of a clandestine trip to Morocco only a few months earlier by intellectual Michel Kilo to meet with Bayanuni to discuss a new initiative to unite forces. The two agreed on four guiding principles—democracy, nonviolence, oppositional unity, and democratic change—and Bayanuni delegated authority to Kilo to negotiate a broad-based alliance on the Muslim Brotherhood’s behalf. The intentional release of the final declaration, just days before the first Hariri findings were released, allowed the opposition to take advantage of inflated press coverage of Syria and magnified the political buzz about finding alternatives to Asad’s regime. The declaration was announced with the signatures of five party coalitions and civil society organizations as well as nine intellectuals. Within 24 hours, dozens of associations and parties, inside and outside Syria, began declaring their support. For the first time in Syrian history, an assemblage of bickering parties and scattered intellectuals representing

conferences than to become part of the re-emerging, inclusive and diverse Syrian civil society. It is for this specific reason that Syrian secularists are wary of Syria's Islamic revivalism; they do not see attempts on behalf of the pious to be part of an all-encompassing movement.

Still, when I asked one secular intellectual whether he believes that an Islamic resurgence will lead to an Islamic state in Syria, he answered in the following manner:

No, not if it is a democratic decision made by the Syrian people. We are Sunni Muslims, 'Alawi Muslims, Kurdish Muslims, Druze Muslims, non-believer Muslims, agnostic Muslims, practicing Muslims, un-practicing Muslims, Muslims who converted to Christianity, Buddhist Muslims ... and all other non-Muslim minorities. So, no! However, if the region continues on its path, and the Ba'th regime with its Islamization tactic, it is possible that the state could be transformed into an Islamic vehicle. Then yes, an Islamic revolution from above, meaning Islamization of society from above, is possible.⁷⁴³

To the question 'what about the idea that Islam is the very identity of this nation?', another observer explained that this is like saying that Christianity is the very identity of the French nation. "Of course Islam is the very identity of this nation, so is Christianity, so is secularism, so is paganism, so is our Roman heritage." In accordance with the observations of my interviewees, it is important to note that not only is secularism still Syria's guiding intellectual force, Syria is a nation with a young population – who because of their age, tend to be more open to change – and as stated in the introductory chapter of this work is composed of a mixture of ethnicities and religions. As a result, doctrinal attitudes are far from set in stone and monolithic, but are rather relatively, malleable, with a variety of different projects in action. In other words, the population is naturally divided into groups that are far too heterogeneous to present a unified front. Only a lack of alternatives or an Islamic coup could produce an Islamic state in Syria.

Furthermore, many secularists argue that even if the Islamists were allowed to participate politically, they nonetheless do not have a solution for resolving the tensions within the hybrid system created by the Ba'th, especially the fact that its hybrid nature is largely due to the concessions the regime made in the aftermath of Hama. These concessions have produced a system that is incapable of coping with modernity and that in fact itself reproduces sectarianism. Although one might argue that this has long been the case, Syrian secularists note that the solution Islamists adhere to is in itself sectarian, it does not guarantee equality of citizenship rights, for which a diverse Syria cannot vote:

What the Islamists fail to see is that Syrians are no longer an Islamic *Umma*. Islam is simply a sect, one faction among many others. The Islamic solution is a recipe for civil war because belief is not belief if it is forced upon us. People who are born into Muslim families have to be able to choose whether they want to be Muslims, Buddhists or simply nothing. This is what is missing from the *Shari'a* our Islamists want us so forcefully to abide by, we have no right to choose, we

Kurdish nationalists, Arab nationalists, Socialists, Communists, liberals, and Islamists united under a single platform for democratic change. Civil society activists who had previously turned their nose up at political parties joined forces with them, and a deliberate effort was made to ensure that the signatories of the declaration hailed from a majority of Syria's provinces. According to one activist, "[O]nly with the Damascus Declaration could we speak about a 'Syrian opposition.'" (Landis and Pace, p. 55.)

⁷⁴³ Discussion with Syrian secularists, April 2009.

are destined to be Muslims. The right to faith has to include the right to no faith *ma btirkab* (it does not fit). No one religion has the right to force itself on people, not Islam, not Christianity, not Judaism. *Ma btirkab*. The rational mind will not accept the idea of freedom of faith if it has a few alternatives, such as born Muslims do not have the right to choose. No power has the right to prevent choice in terms of belief.⁷⁴⁴

He continues: “The cancellation of freedom by the national party is very similar to that of the Islamic party. They think it is fine because they are Islamists, how different are they from the Ba’th?”

Indeed, despite palpable accomplishments and formal alliances with the secular opposition, the Islamic movement in Syria is still not as popular in certain circles as one might think when visiting Damascus and Aleppo. Not only is it still early for Islamic groups to amass the misery fruits of the regime’s economic liberalization, but the majority of Syrian society is evidently not keen on having an Islamic state, according to a number of Syrian observers. This reluctance was confirmed during my informal discussions with Syrians, the majority of whom – including practicing Muslims, and especially Muslim women – do not wish for an Islamic Syrian state at all. One school teacher explained to me that:

The West thinks we Muslims seek to be governed by Islamic states, this is evident in the ways the American leadership is organizing politics in Iraq, but this is not what Syrians want, despite the appearances. Of course, we all [Syrians] recognize the importance of Islam to guide our social and political interactions, even Christian Syrians seem to agree with us on this, nonetheless we are not interested in a reactive model [to the West], we would like to move forward, which means the necessity to secularize in order to become part of the larger global system. This [secularization] does not contradict our religious beliefs, if anything it underscores the true democratic values deep-rooted in our Islamic faith.⁷⁴⁵

Another woman, who is a supporter of Dr. Muhammad Habash’s teachings, provided a similar response. She said that, “If democracy necessitates secularization in Syria, then secularization it is.” She added, “We have different religions, but we share the same faith and the same spirituality, we all believe and love one God, and as long as our Constitution and governing bodies respect our Islamic heritage, secular configurations are welcome.”⁷⁴⁶

Even a number of pious Muslims I interviewed do not believe that an Islamic state is the solution to their problems. One observer made a very interesting point when he recognized that, “an Islamic state would simply mean a state governed by Muslim leaders who would claim to be governing according to their interpretations of the *Shari’a*.” Another devout interviewee observed: “Secularization does not equal Westernization, at least not within the Syrian context; we have contributed to it as much as the West has,

⁷⁴⁴ Personal Interview with a Syrian secular intellectual, February 2008.

⁷⁴⁵ Private communication, April 2009.

⁷⁴⁶ Private communication, March 2008.

was Ibn Rushd [Averroes] not an Arab and an Islamic thinker? Secularization is not necessarily corrosive of our culture and religion.” One further comment deserves highlighting: “Syrians of all ages still remember the fear and ignorance of life under the last Ottoman Caliphs.”⁷⁴⁷

The same types of answers were repeated during my open-ended interviews, that is, that an Islamic state is not the solution. These words resonate in Talhami’s statement that “[p]erhaps what the Islamist Movement symbolized for the Syrian people was not a political program but the civilizational heritage of Islam. It appears that very few people took the Brotherhood’s emphasis on the universal political bond of Islam and the inevitability of the universal Islamic state seriously.”⁷⁴⁸ In other words, aside from the challenges that Syria’s Islamic movement has had to face thus far, from the exile of its leaders, to limits imposed on its oppositional activities, to hindering its communication and diffusion methods (except for the Internet), the Islamists are not the main opposition in Syria simply because they have not been able to galvanize the Syrian masses, even if only in terms of ideational framing (though this does not mean that the potential for it to do so does not exist). It is this realization that prompted Syria’s previous main Islamic opposition, the National Salvation Front (which has since disbanded), to emphasize its secular element over its religious one. Moreover, those few who are gaining leverage through their Islamist rhetoric will likely soon have to face the same challenge that their secular counterparts have been facing for the last 30 years, which is the intrinsically diminishing novelty of their message to the youth.

Conclusion

In addition to reviewing the previous arguments made throughout this dissertation as regards the new Islamic reality in Syria, this chapter also looked at the possibility of a rise in Islamist political activity in light of the country’s Islamic – albeit still apolitical – revivalism and economic liberalization. It argued that although the regime’s repressive measures are still in effect, the nature of the PA regime deployed by the Ba’th since March 1963 makes these measures increasingly moot. It also suggested that in the unlikely event that these measures are accompanied by *political* liberalization, only a united secular political opposition could stop the growth of the monopolizing Islamization of Syria.

Indeed, the policies of Bashar’s era contain mixed blessings for both the regime and for Syrian society. At the start of his presidency, there was a dissipation of the culture of fear among Syrian youth. The media and the emerging civil society were more daring in their critiques of the regime, as is clear in the launch of such TV programs as *ʿAsr al-Waldaneh* (the era of childishness), in which a Sunni intelligence officer along with his ruthless ʿAlawite right-hand man scheme to silence the free and life-loving Syrian

⁷⁴⁷ Private communications, Damascus, April 2008.

⁷⁴⁸ Talhami, “Syria: Islam, Arab Nationalism and the Military in Syria,” p. 113.

intellectual. The elite under Bashar al-Asad was seen to be moving away from the illiberal stance of the old guard and the French legacy of a centralized understanding of the state's role. This move was pragmatic, and from the outset, the regime seemed to be ready to adapt domestically to the new regional and international conditions. Yet this adaptability was also a reflection of 20 years of the PA Ba'thist regime's inability to keep its mobilization and co-optation measures in place without losing some of its grip on power to the business class and to an emerging Islamic society. Today, the regime realizes the dangers of even a selective political liberalization and the risks of having Islamic groups, nurtured for so long by the regime, becoming vehicles of anti-étatist mobilization.

Indeed, the creation of a parallel world, and recruitment outside the formal channels are emerging despite the regime's close attention. But is it "a return to God" or "the return of the forgotten sons of the south"?⁷⁴⁹ This return to religiosity of the late twentieth century, although still in its early stages in Syria, is certainly gaining momentum. The structural reforms and the acceleration of the economic liberalization witnessed in the last 9 years by Syrians is unquestionably re-accentuating Syria's class structure. And the marginalization of the "periphery" (poor) within the periphery (the impoverished nations) itself is certainly a recipe to re-Islamize this "south." However, it is not a uniform re-Islamization that we are witnessing. Rather, modern times are encouraging the creation of a certain type of religious resurgence that is challenging the center's control over the periphery, the position of the bourgeoisie over that of the poor, the "North"'s predominance over the "South", or the "West"'s primacy over the "East."⁷⁵⁰

The Islamic resurgence is largely led by neo-fundamentalists, because of their economic and social power. However, these neo-fundamentalists could certainly also become Islamists if the Syrian regime does not allow greater democratization. Hinnebusch explains that "the Aleppine bourgeoisie, which supported the Islamic rebellion out of resentment at its marginalization under Damascus-centered *étatisme*, has been increasingly appeased by new business opportunities, such as the chance to cash in on export deals to pay off the Soviet debt. Syria's *souq* petite bourgeoisie may be well positioned, with accumulated capital and traditional know-how, to move into the economic space being vacated by the state. Thus the economic roots of the cleavage between the regime and the Islamic opposition are melting away."⁷⁵¹

It should be added that the new trends of privatization have created, and are still creating, a class of urban and rural families who find themselves increasingly marginalized in terms of economic and social wellbeing. Indeed, the regime's emphasis in the 1990s and beyond on capitalist development meant a concomitant retreat as regards its role as a provider of social benefits and an enforcer of basic civil rights, which has disproportionately affected disadvantaged groups. This situation opens the door wide for

⁷⁴⁹ In other words, the impoverished masses. See Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam*, p. 70.

⁷⁵⁰ The French school of Political Islam highlights the international economic dimension to explain the return of the impoverished masses to Islam. In this sense, Political Islam has come to replace Communism in the face of "Western" exploitation.

⁷⁵¹ Hinnebusch, "Syria," p. 236.

Islamic groups to play a larger role in the lives of the urban lower classes. Ultimately, the victims of economic liberalization are likely to ride the rising tide of Islamic groups, who like their Egyptian counterparts are portraying themselves as the *porte-parole* of the workers and the disadvantaged, against the state and the business class.

Despite the regime's intolerance of any political independence, it is now more than ever clear that the Islamic movement – which transformed itself with the blessing of the regime from an Islamist to a neo-fundamentalist movement – is infiltrating society's *imaginaire* through civil society. While the bourgeoisie, along with pro-regime Islamics, are willing to put off their access to power in exchange for stability, personal freedoms, prosperity and greater political access, anti-regime Islamists, who once played or were willing to play the parliamentary democratic game in Syria, are not interested in possessing a mere playing card within the actual regime. This is because they have witnessed the regime's transformation from a powerful populist coalition of lower classes to a business/military marriage of equals.⁷⁵²

Furthermore, the more inclusive corporatist system that is giving some outlet to the politically ambitious within the bourgeoisie is also opening the door to the Islamists in Syria, who see the regime's inclusion measures as a form of weakness. They believe that they can see the light at the end of the Ba'ath tunnel and that the regional circumstances are in their favour, especially because the inequalitarian consequences of poorly-checked capitalism and access to the international markets are likely to heighten popular discontent and thus weaken the regime's base of support.

Most importantly, the state's co-optation measures have transformed the Syrian Islamic movement as much as the regime itself. Reconstruction of state institutions and associations originally built by Hafez al-Asad in the late 1970s have helped to monitor and control, or at least limit, the potential Islamic recruits. But while this co-optation tactic might have been effective then, today much of the Islamic struggle is waged through social and cultural discourses rather than state institutions. Furthermore, the Ba'ath has recreated a bourgeois class, and by venturing, albeit gradually, away from its original ideology, it has reduced its social base of support while creating a formidable alliance of elites, one that is reminiscent of the one that existed during the inter-war [between WWI and WWII] period, yet that is considerably more cohesive and conscious of its interests.

At the same time, the question of how numerous the victims of selective economic liberalization are, and how efficiently they are being recruited, is where the secularist Syrian intellectuals also see hope for their cause. The weakness of the secular groups' determination to present a significant opposition or to achieve significant socio-political change has long been evident in Ba'athist Syria. That being said, secularists in Syria feel threatened by the newly tolerated groups who arose at their expense due to the backing of the state.⁷⁵³ One conclusion is safe to make: If they remain divided, the

⁷⁵² At least a dozen millionaires are now very outspoken in parliament, and coordinate for common interests. See Hinnebusch, "Syria," p. 235.

⁷⁵³ Reminder: Fears of successful mobilization by Islamists are sharpened given that the regime has abandoned most of its original populist rationale. With the re-emergence of Syria's free enterprise, a mercantile ruling class of Damascenes and naturalized Damascenes and an urban Sunni trading middle class – which is dependent on these rising entrepreneurs and their political allies – are certainly re-emerging at the expense of the lower urban and rural classes.

secular opposition has no chance at recruiting the masses to their cause. But if unification is achieved – in terms of political activity, if not at the level of discourse – then Syrians can still revive a secular system that is relatively more accommodating of social and intellectual diversity.

Chapter 9:

Conclusions

Scope of Study

This study has explored Islamic and Islamist revivalism in contemporary Syria. In so doing, it has shown how the regimes of Hafez al-Asad and Bashar al-Asad paved the way for Syria's increasing Islamization, and it elucidated how and why there has been a resurgence of Islamism in the country.

This examination is especially important given that in 2004, after 22 years of silence, Syria began witnessing the resurgence of militant Islamist disturbances in the country, and in the heart of its capital, Damascus. Furthermore, given the importance of understanding how regimes organize state-society relations to ensure their political survival, it is essential to unpack the choices (and the limitations inherent to those choices) made by the Populist Authoritarian Syrian regime so as to contain the possibility of a viable Islamist alternative emerging, including their encouragement of an apolitical Islamic alternative. Thus the dissertation also provides a critical insight to the Populist Authoritarian regime-type more generally.

In fact, despite a very palpable religious revivalism in Syria (which has greatly concerned the country's secularists), there is a clear absence of research on Islamic and Islamist activism in the country, other than a few works that narrowly focus upon certain prominent shaykhs and their teachings. And yet Syria is a classic case to study. It is a state in crisis because its Populist Authoritarian regime is reaching the limits of its ability to balance ideological commitments with concrete political actions. This crisis is being exacerbated by the effects of the war in neighbouring Iraq, as well as by international censure over its foreign policy (though admittedly this disapproval has been quite muted). It is also being exacerbated by the country's Islamic sector, which is growing and deepening its control over society as a result of the new apolitical and neo-fundamentalist guise adopted by the state co-opted Islamic groups. Indeed, the new Islamic sector is changing both the cultural and social structures of Syrian society by taking advantage of the PA regime's need to continue promoting economic liberalization while avoiding any political liberalization.

In spite of this however, there is not yet a significant degree of opposition activism within the country, that is, of a magnitude that could threaten the government. The Muslim Brotherhood is Syria's only avowedly important Islamic opposition, but it is operating from outside the country. Self-interest and fear on the part of the populace are perhaps the greatest impediments to larger scale mobilization by the Islamic and Islamist movements. That being said, recruitment is increasingly occurring outside the formal political channels in spite of the regime's watchful eye, though more often because of it.

Questions Explored

In its exploration of Islamic and Islamist revivalism in Syria, this study has examined the following questions: Who are today's Syrian Islamic and Islamist groups? Why and how are they re-emerging after 22 years of relative silence as an important political force in Syrian civil society and political circles? How has the regime contributed to their re-emergence? Does Syria find Islamist groups to be a mechanism for

wielding influence in the region, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon? If yes, how is this affecting the Syrian domestic scene? How successful are Syria's Islamic groups in recruiting followers within the authoritarian context of Syrian politics, and how is the Syrian regime dealing with their re-emergence in light of Syria's multi-sectarian society on the one hand, and its Pan-Arab foreign policy on the other hand?

To answer these questions, the present study has re-examined the ways in which the secular Ba'athist regime dealt with the Islamic militant opposition from its rise in 1963 to the seeming demise of the Islamist movement in Syria at the beginning of the 1980s. This re-examination was structured as a comparative analysis of the shifts in the state's responses to, and relationship with, the Islamic movement (independent variable), and its impact on Islamic revivalism (dependent variable) in the Syria of Hafez al-Asad and Bashar al-Asad. It illustrated how the Syrian Ba'athist regime is re-deploying in the face of recent threats (i.e. the Syrian economic crisis and the new regional reality), and how it is using various domestic economic and socio-political survival strategies in order to keep religious discontent from boiling over into militancy, to eradicate the militant religious opposition, and to limit popular restlessness while still maintaining the unity of the regime coalition.

The dissertation also offered an explanation for the Ba'ath regime's shift from muting secularism and co-opting the religious class under Hafez al-Asad to promoting Islamic revivalism under Bashar. In causing this shift, the regime has employed an admixture of incentives and disincentives to consolidate its power and ensure its survival, in a manner typical of Populist Authoritarian regimes. Thus it has concocted a new state-Islamic relationship and a new state-Islamic alliance, in an attempt to retain a considerable degree of control over the most active sectors of society, namely the Islamic groups. In so doing, it has also produced significant changes in the nature of both the state and of society.

Yet despite the many similarities between the challenges facing Bashar al-Asad and those faced by his father Hafez al-Asad, there are also some significant differences, most importantly the former's need to address the inherent limitations of the PA political model. Indeed, at this critical juncture, state-society relations are re-configuring and resulting in durable mutations that have set up Islamic groups as a powerful and effective economic and social force. I thus argued that the state-mobilized Islamic sector has become a challenge to the regime and to Syria's secular and diverse society, particularly in light of the increasing underground Islamist activity within the country.

Theoretical Analysis

The contribution to the scholarship arising from this dissertation's case study is indeed part of an emerging analytical trend that bridges area studies, Islamic studies, and broader political science theorizing, in an attempt to broaden the boundaries of research into Islamic groups.

Having said this, and although this study consulted relevant works from the different theoretical approaches and their intervening variables, it ultimately examined Islamic revivalism and the resurgence of Islamism in Syria through the lens of the political economy approach. In so doing, the study provided new testing grounds

regarding the limits of the Populist Authoritarian model: A major recurring theme was how economic decompression and selective liberalization have been closely linked to the political consolidation of the Syrian regime, but also to the seemingly paradoxical resurgence of Islamic activity in Syria.

This dissertation also showed that understanding this connection requires recognition of how these processes have been shaped by other intervening variables. These intervening variables include: 1) the Syrian Islamic movement's successful use of the space provided; 2) their internal methods of outreach developed in the last 20 years (such as the role of ideology, the role of informal institutions in providing an important space for Islamic groups to expand their membership and activities, and the role of women); and 3) the need for the Syrian regime to control its regional environment in view of Syria's central role in the Middle East.

While this study employed theories and concepts from comparative politics and the political economy approach as a unifying framework of analysis, its interdisciplinary sensibilities and focus on intervening variables such as ideology, the role of women and informal institutions, allowed it to also contribute to theory building in the domain of social movement theory. This is because it delineates new testing grounds for such theory, through an empirical analysis of the factors resulting in the seemingly surprising re-emergence of the Syrian Islamists within a secular authoritarian setting.

Contribution

Despite the attention devoted to the question of the Syrian Ba'athist struggle with the Muslim Brothers in the 1970s and the early 1980s, none of the works published so far have dealt extensively with the impact of that struggle on Syrian society today. Nor have any of these works dealt with the considerable social and political influence that the new Syrian Islamic movement has attained under Bashar al-Asad's regime, a development that is especially important given the country's ethnic and religious heterogeneities, and widening class disparities.

My dissertation has attempted to complement existing studies by addressing the root causes, social profile, and ideology of the new Syrian Islamic groups. My findings suggested that Syria's new Islamic groups are proving more successful at Islamizing Syrian society than their earlier counterparts.

In order to explain this development, this study offered a typology of Syria's current Islamic movement, dividing it into two streams: one that is pro-capitalism and business-oriented – this in spite of its charitable discourse and associations – and that is in alliance with the regime, and another that is anti-regime, driven by a clear populist thrust. In this typology, the two streams are not hermetically sealed off from each other – if anything, it was argued that they can each empower the other, while the socially liberal elements within the Syrian regime and Syrian society continue to grow weaker. Indeed, the Islamic groups are in the process of drawing upon the same center of support that once propelled the statist Ba'ath to power, by focusing on the marginalized elements in society that are today in particularly dire need because of the country's ongoing transition toward economic liberalism. In so doing, Syria's Islamic movement, which is now very much in control of the social milieu, could potentially finally achieve the political

position that it has sought since the early 1930s. Therefore, these revivalist groups are no longer mere clients of the state. It was argued that the limits of the Ba'athist Populist Authoritarian regime and the regime's survival strategies, coupled with the movement's efficient use of the organizational space that it has been provided, have elevated the status of the Syrian Islamic movement to that of an ally of the state.

Map of the Work and Main Arguments

In unpacking these arguments, the first part of this work situated the study within its historical context, by examining the rise to power of a secular Ba'ath party and the formation of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, first as an Islamic political democratic party and then in its shift toward militant Islamism. While some readers already know much of this information, Part I provided an essential background to those who are less familiar with the Syrian case. Therefore, in its re-examination of fundamental aspects, chapter 2 explored the rise of the Ba'ath Party to power, shaped as it was by domestic constraints and the regional context. The chapter opened with a brief survey of the Ba'ath doctrinal paradigm, traced through its different ideational sources and dominant theorists. The Ba'ath party's route in its ascent to power and its implications were subsequently explored, before moving on to examine the Ba'ath state's behaviour and its salient policies from 1963 to 1970, i.e. until the arrival of Hafez al-Asad to power.

Chapter 3 explored the formation and rise of Syria's Islamic movement by focusing upon the organization *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (the Muslim Brotherhood) in Syria. The movement's base of social support was discussed, as was the socio-economic and political program its creators advanced. This background was necessary to understand the conflict that arose between the Ba'ath regime and the Syrian Islamic movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as the consequences of this conflict. It was also necessary for a full understanding of the reasons and complications underlying today's relationship between Syria's various Islamic groups and the Syrian regime.

The rebellion of the 1970s and early 1980s and its consequences were the subject of Part II of this work. The main contention advanced was that while the rise of Islamic political activism in Syria during the era of Hafez al-Asad was very much contingent on the Ba'ath regime's socio-economic and political policies, its subsequent demise was due to the coercive and uncompromising strategy of the regime in dealing with the immediate and long term threat to its rule. This was demonstrated by an examination of the Asad regime's conflicts with the Muslim Brotherhood from 1970 to 1982, which traced the domestic socio-economic and political roots of the dispute, and which delineated the bloody contours of the clash between them, paying special attention to the secular aspect of the conflict (in chapter 4). The resulting decline in the 1980s of political Islam and Islamism as a model for change in Syria was the focus in chapter 5. Part II also explicated the Asad regime's policies aimed at containing and co-opting the Islamic class in Syria, and underlined the results of these policies, namely the muting of secular elements within the regime, the sponsorship of an Islam that was considered "moderate" and essentially pro-regime, the shaping of a socio-economic order at odds with the previously populist

Ba'athist doctrine in order to co-opt Syria's religious class, and the use of regional Islamist groups in order to assert Syria's Arabist and nationalist stance while also influencing regional realities.

In my view, it is the socio-economic paradigm that best explicates the relationship between the Syrian regime and the Islamic opposition. This is because the paradigm's explanatory variables are best suited to illuminating not only the reasons behind the emergence of Islamism in the 1970s, but also the noticeable resurgence of Islamism in Syria today, after a more than 20-year absence. The socio-economic school even takes into account the sectarian, regional, and tribal aspects of the struggle. It argues that these are impossible to separate from the socio-economic cleavages when studying the relationship between urban Sunnis and rural compact religious minorities in Syria, though it also insists that the economic aspect ultimately trumps other cleavages when predicting choices and behaviors. This explains why the impoverished populace who supported the populist Ba'ath in the 1970s and 1980s is turning its eyes towards the populist Islamic movement today. Importantly, the socio-economic paradigm also incorporates the variables addressed by social movement theory, namely the role of repression and of loss of socio-economic status in engendering militant opposition. Taken as a whole, the socio-economic paradigm has the potential to explain the new attraction of Islamism for Syria's urban masses, who once felt indifferent to the Muslim Brothers' position.

As stated hitherto, in the 1970s, Islam happened to strategically offer an alliance of great traditional notables, merchants, and religious '*ulama*', who came together under an ideology that advocated an advantageous status quo, reflected their cultural values, and had the capacity to unite them with a large segment of the urban masses against their Ba'ath antagonists. Whereas their project ultimately failed due to the alliance's elitist orientation, Islam was reclaimed by the Ba'ath regime and used as a tool for controlling the Syrian masses. The regime did so through a policy of economic accommodation and socio-political compromise with the uncommitted Damascene bourgeoisie and a number of accommodating '*ulama*', as was demonstrated in chapter 5.

Part II also argued that although the Hama events described in chapter 4 had a deterring effect over anyone who opposed the government, the massacre and the realization that the regime was willing to do anything to remain in power meant that their support was now rooted in fear rather than in popularity. Concurrently, Hama seemed to confirm the Muslim Brothers' accusations against the Ba'ath regime, and ignited a grassroots-driven revival of religious sensibilities. This forced the Asad regime to make a number of changes in order to quell the remnants of revolutionary Islam, to co-opt the opposition, and to pre-empt future Islamic mobilization, by creating a new legitimizing formula for itself that could replace the Ba'athist dogma while still avoiding any sort of political liberalization, let alone democratization. The regime thus undertook a two-part action plan, which ended up changing the Ba'ath regime and its social policies as much as it affected Syria's Islamic movement. The first part saw the state move to crush the immediate opposition in an open confrontation, while the second part sought to establish tighter state-society relations by co-opting the religious class and by instituting official Islam from above (see chapter 5).

This second part of the Ba'ath plan was mainly inspired by the government's realization that in spite of the Hama massacre and all the various attempts to uproot the threat posed by political Islam, the traditional quarters' pervasive religious sensibilities

had proven very resistant to state penetration, at least partly due to their autonomous economic base. The new approach aimed at blurring the borders between state and society, in an attempt to transform the conflict from one between 'a corrupt and authoritarian clique and Sunni Islam' to one between 'official moderate Islam and a revolutionary de-stabilizing and radical Islam'. But to make this strategy work, the government had to intensify patronage and bureaucratic clientelist relations, reinforce corporatist institutions, and most importantly given this dissertation's focus, manipulate religious symbols while at the same time abandoning women's emancipation programs, in an attempt to control potential agents as well as the sites and targets of mobilization. More explicitly, the new strategy meant: 1) an increasing disregard for the secular principles of the Ba'th ideology; 2) the creation of new alliances and institutions to broaden the regime's social base of support beyond its traditional supporters, and to control possible targets of Islamist outreach; 3) a relaxation of Syria's populist stance; and 4) the creation by the state of an official Islam, dubbed moderate and rightful, deployed to oppose and replace the one advanced by the Muslim Brothers and its allies, in an attempt to shift the conflict from one with the corrupt 'Alawi sectarian rule to one between 'moderate good Muslims' and 'radical terrorist Muslims.'

As a result, religious expression and practice were channeled through state-monitored institutions, and a *modus vivendi* with the mistrusted bourgeoisie and the religious class was promoted. The selective economic liberalization that was deployed was meant to co-opt the business class, but also to mobilize alternative Islamic Sufi shaykhs and their communities through the integration of certain "moderate" and "true" Sufi shaykhs within the clientelistic network of the state. The government further constructed thousands of new mosques, established two dozen Islamic higher education institutes, and developed a variety of other quasi-official religious institutions such as the Asad Institute for Memorizing the Quran, which has branches in most cities and governorates. All of these measures were intended to replace channels that the Muslim Brotherhood had used for recruitment.

Interestingly, the economic and political compromises that were made by the regime and which were intended to sustain the authoritarian system engendered one unintended effect: they tended to increase the resources and opportunities available for organized challenges from below, especially Islamically-based challenges, as a result of the omnipresence of religion in society. Suffice it to say that in the late 1990s, as many as 72,000 families received direct assistance from charitable Islamic associations.

Part II concludes that these survival-oriented policies ended up establishing a new dynamic of state-society relations in which state-society interactions were equally affected and mutually transforming. Effectively therefore, the control and co-optation measures of the Ba'th under Hafez al-Asad reinvigorated both Syria's Islamic environment and a Damascene bourgeois class that today are already outgrowing the government's ability to control them. And while the regime's balancing act between the different social forces was relatively successful in the 1980s, it became somewhat tenuous in the 1990s, and even more tenuous under Bashar al-Asad's government. In fact, the Syrian regime's strategy of shifting the conflict from one between the Muslim Brothers and the regime to one between 'moderate good Muslims' and 'radical terrorist Muslims' has been fraught with dangers and paradoxes. Chief among these is the manner in which the muting of Syria's secular elements and the co-optation of its Islamic groups

has resulted in the creation of a large Syrian Islamic sector that is growing powerful enough to encroach on all aspects of Syrian life, including the political. At the same time, the old alliance between the elite (in its older and newer forms) and the religious class is re-emerging, again at the expense of socially and economically marginalized groups. And Syria's foreign policy, which includes relying on and supporting Islamic groups operating in the region, is adding fuel to the ongoing Islamization of Syrian society.

Hence, far from dying, the Islamic movement in Syria was actually reinforced in the 1980s and 1990s, though its form changed for the most part from that of an illegal Islamic/Islamist movement to a regime-tolerated, co-opted, mobilized, apolitical, neo-fundamentalist movement focusing on the reform of individuals. This new brew has resulted in a significant change to the nature of both state and society in Syria.

Part III of this dissertation focused on the Syrian domestic and regional contexts from Bashar's rise to power in June 2000 up until the writing of this work. It demonstrated that the manner in which the conflict between the Ba'ath and the Islamic class was overcome has had a significant impact on today's Syria. In particular, this section noted that the Bashar regime has seemed to be facing similar economic, social and geo-political challenges as those faced by his father, namely an economic crisis exacerbated by significant demographic growth, Islamist militant activity domestically, and a new geopolitical reality precipitated by a war in Iraq. But unlike his father, Bashar's regime is *also* facing a critical juncture in which reconfigured state-society relations are producing durable mutations that are no longer entirely under the regime's control. This critical juncture, I argued, is the natural outcome of the built-in limitations of the Populist Authoritarian (PA) regime created by the Ba'ath in 1963, as well as of Hafez al-Asad's mobilization and co-optation of Syria's Islamic sector.

Therefore, while Hafez al-Asad's regime was able to successfully co-opt Islamic groups, the current regime's use of similar tactical maneuvers strongly risks opening up an area for Islamic groups to re-transform from communal welfare groups back into active political actors. In other words, the increasing empowerment of neo-fundamentalist groups within Syria, and of Islamists regionally, accompanied with economic decompression favourable to Syria's economic elite, may be seemingly useful to Bashar's command. Yet given the widening gap between the rich and the poor, as well as the inherent contradictions of the PA political model – particularly its aim of mobilizing social groups while also limiting their political participation – it becomes evident that a socially active Islamic sector not only presents a significant political challenge to Syria's authoritarian regime, but also a more broad-based challenge to the country's ideologically, religiously and ethnically diverse society in the longer run.

In illustrating these points, Part III began by showing that the co-optation of Syria's Islamic sector at the expense of its Ba'athist ideology has been accelerated by Bashar al-Asad's regime. Chapter 6 showed how the Bashar regime felt it important to bolster its rule in the face of the growing popularity of the Islamic groups within Syria, as well as of the regional and international pressures it was facing, by increasing the profile of the religious element in society. This was made even more urgent because the country's new bourgeoisie-elite was becoming a significant and self-aware social force to contend with. But because of the regime's decreased coercive capacity for repressing dissent, as well as the need for it to appear to be 'moving forward' with its announced agenda, economic co-optation through liberalization was pursued. Indeed, the Syrian

economic system is increasingly deserting its planned socialist structure: structural reforms and trade liberalization measure have been endorsed, private banks have been created, authorizations have been given to establish private insurance companies, and more recently, a financial market was launched through the creation of the Syrian Stock Markets Authority, which is in charge of setting and monitoring the stock market's regulatory framework.

However, an increased liberalization of the economy, while it would satisfy the powerful capitalist and *arriviste* elements linked to the regime, would not only result in a widening of the gap between the impoverished masses and the elite, but would also mean that the regime could no longer maintain its populist and social welfare orientation and would thus no longer be seen as being allied with the lower and working classes.

In chapter 7, it was demonstrated that Syria's Islamic movement has broadened its base of support to the subordinate socio-economic classes, something that the Muslim Brothers never succeeded in achieving. According to the typology offered in this dissertation, Syria's Islamic groups have split into two streams: 1) A pro-capitalist and business-oriented –albeit its charitable discourse and associations—group, which is in alliance with the regime, and 2) an anti-regime group which is driven by a clear populist thrust. It was argued that the two streams are not hermetically sealed off from each other – if anything, they can each empower the other while the leftist elements within the Syrian regime continue to grow weaker. It was also shown that the Islamic groups are drawing upon the same center of support that once propelled the statist Ba'ath to power, by focusing on the marginalized elements of society which are today in particularly dire need because of the country's ongoing transition toward economic liberalism. In so doing, Syria's Islamic movement, which is now very much in control of the social milieu, could potentially finally achieve the political position that it has sought since the early 1930s.

Chapter 8 showed that the policy of economic liberalization and co-optation has been a double-edged sword for the current Syrian regime, since it has elicited the rise of a growingly autonomous bourgeoisie which could in the long term present a united front against the regime, and has also created a context where the regime is no longer the most important supporter of the middle and lower classes. Under these circumstances, support for the regime strongly risks crumbling, by becoming increasingly conditional and critical. Abandoned by the regime, the once-subsidized lower classes will probably turn to the only sector that has been allowed to prosper under the secular Ba'ath, namely the Syrian Islamic Society. As was argued in chapter 7, the latter has indeed started acting as the new *de facto* backer of the unemployed and the poor in Syria.

The “Damascus Spring” allowed political dissidents to get to know one another, and exposed the regime to domestic pressures that could induce opposition activism, particularly of an Islamist nature. As shown, fears about such an outcome resulted in a reversal of the political liberalization experiment, though not of the economic one, thereby narrowing the options for the increasingly marginalized and disaffected youth.

Ultimately then, the social and economic power that the new Syrian Islamic movement has attained under the Bashar al-Asad regime is considerable. The specific ways that this development will impact on Syria in light of its ‘fragile mosaic’ of ethnic, religious and regional cleavages, as well as its class stratifications, remains to be seen.

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