



Appearance and Reality: Syria's Decisionmaking Structure

By Eyal Zisser*

Shortly after the signing of the Oslo accords was announced, President Hafiz al-Asad advised Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasir Arafat to take more care of his personal safety. Asad immediately added that he did not wish to insinuate that Arafat might be assassinated, and he added that he himself was against political assassinations. But he said Arafat must know that a leader who is not attentive to the feelings of his people might find himself in conflict with them and may even be murdered by his would-be supporters.(1)

It is true that many in Israel and in the West at large believe that Asad should have taken the path of such courageous and prophetic leaders as Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat, who opened new horizons to their peoples. Asad's point of view is obviously different, though, and in contrast to those leaders, Asad appears to be hesitant, cautious, and even conservative. Yet, whereas both Rabin and Sadat paid for their courage with their lives, Asad has survived. He is not a trailblazer, but he is hardly a blind follower, either. He is attentive to the consensus--both within Syria and in the Arab world at large--and he tries as best he can to operate according to it. This reflects the fact that Asad's is a representative regime that reflects the social and political forces in Syria and thus also the balance of power among them. His decision-making process, therefore, is the result of a dialogue that he takes care to maintain with the public in his country or, at the very least, the result of attention and attentiveness to the Syrian

consensus. This is why the ideological, political, and social envelope within which Asad operates and in the context of which he makes his decisions is, in the end, of importance.

TWO VIEWS OF ASAD AS DECISIONMAKER

Asad's decision, in summer 1991, to join the Middle East peace process was probably a difficult one for him to take. It marked the first departure from Syria's traditional stance on the conflict with Israel. It set the country on the course of direct negotiations under U.S. sponsorship and carried it forward a long way toward achieving peace--even though the final goal was not reached and may currently prove more elusive than before.

This decision as well as the one a year earlier to join the Gulf War coalition, was perceived by the government in Damascus as the inevitable consequence of changing regional and international circumstances--even, one might venture to say, of an existential distress triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union a short while before. Both decisions came in response to the need for a dialogue with the United States--a dialogue that, in the eyes of Syrian leaders, had now become imperative because of a perceived U.S. threat to the stability of their regime. To these anxieties must be added the positive prospect of recovering the Golan Heights and of

underpinning Syrian hegemony in Lebanon.
(2)

And yet, despite such obvious Syrian interests, Damascus had joined the peace process only in response to massive U.S. pressure exerted by James Baker, President George Bush's secretary of state. In his memoirs, Baker describes in detail the wearisome negotiations he conducted with Asad, thereby providing some insight (even if from a U.S. angle) into the conduct of such vital talks, the considerations at work in Damascus, and the way decisions are finally made.

Baker's memoirs attest to the great weight Asad attached to public opinion in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world. According to Baker, Asad repeatedly stressed the need for decisions to be understood properly and supported fully by the public at large. Asad once remarked, "If you were in my place...you wouldn't be more flexible than I am now." To underscore his demand for U.S. backing for the return of the Golan Heights, Asad said: "The land is important....It connotes dignity and honor. A man is not chosen to go to paradise unless he can do so in a dignified way. We don't want anyone to say we have given up what we have been talking about for twenty years." (3)

At another point, Asad was more peremptory. Referring to a U.S. proposal regarding the United Nations (UN) role in the future peace conference, he reportedly told Baker: "We will lose Arab domestic public opinion....They will know what is going on. This would not only be adventurism, it would be a form of suicide. It is one thing to adopt a suicidal policy if it brings benefits to the people, but it is truly foolhardy if there is no positive result." (4)

Baker tended both to discount the importance to Asad of domestic political constraints and to think of their mention as a mere negotiating tactic. Underlying his judgment was the sense that Asad exercised

sole power to the extent of being able to set policies entirely by his own decision. A passage in his memoirs, relating how Baker pressed Asad to waive UN sponsorship of the peace negotiations, illustrates Baker's thinking. Baker recalls that Asad replied: "I can't give you an answer without consulting with the institutions of the party and the Progressive National Front [for which, see below]....We will do what we can." Baker further recalls: "It was, I knew, the ultimate brush-off; there was no one in the Syrian Arab Republic with whom Asad needed to consult, except himself. 'Okay let's leave it,' I abruptly concluded, slamming my portfolio shut to make sure Asad absorbed my irritation." (5)

Some twenty years earlier, the then-secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, had conducted a long and exhausting series of negotiations with Asad in the aftermath of the 1973 War, with the aim of arriving at a disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights. Like many other U.S. diplomats and officials, he found Asad to be a skillful and sophisticated negotiator. His memoirs reveal that he, too, noted Asad's concern-and that of his close associates-with ensuring the support of Arab public opinion at every turn. He quotes Asad as saying:

The Syrian difficulty is that people here who have been nurtured for twenty-six years on hatred [of Israel], can't be swayed overnight by our changing our courses. We would never take one step except in the interests of our own people. We are all human-we all have our impulsive reaction to things. But in leadership, we have to restrain ourselves and analyze and take steps in our own interest. A just peace is in the interest of our people.

To which Kissinger replied:"And of Israel and of all people in this area.(6)

At another point, Kissinger describes Hikmat Shihabi, the Syrian chief of staff and a close collaborator of Asad: "He said that he was an old friend of Asad's. He could

assure me that Asad and his closest associates wanted an agreement but it had to be one they could defend domestically against bitter radical opposition."(7)

Unlike Baker, Kissinger tended to acknowledge that concern for the public mood was a genuine consideration in shaping Syrian decisions. He recognized an authentic need on the part of Asad to satisfy Syrian public opinion, secure its support, and convince it of the correctness of his chosen path. He sensed in Asad a genuine commitment to his overall world view and believed that his concern for broad public support stemmed from his personal character and the character of the regime he headed. In his memoirs, Kissinger points to Asad's habit of convening very lengthy meetings with his principal associates; he does not regard that practice as a means to exhaust his interlocutor, but as a genuine concern for domestic reactions. In his own words:

By then, Asad and I were acting as if in rehearsal for a play. Time-consuming, nerve-wracking, and bizarre as the procedure was, it had the great advantage from Asad's point of view that he never had to argue for a concession himself, at least in the first instance. That onus was on me. His colleagues were part of the negotiations; they had a chance to object; they almost never did so. Whatever argument persuaded Asad would also have persuaded his colleagues. It was effective domestic politics at the expense of many sleepless nights for me. (8)

Kissinger describes the crucial moments of the negotiations as follows: There being no further point in abstract explorations, I put forward the "United States proposal." Asad stopped me at this point and called in his Defense Minister and his Chief of Staff. Clearly, he did not wish to take sole responsibility for major steps. And he wanted to be sure that his colleagues (and potential rivals) could not claim later

that he had been taken in. To this end, it was not enough for him to repeat what I had said; they had to be persuaded by the same arguments. It proved, at any rate, that matters were reaching a point of decision.(9)

This was the background against which Kissinger arrived at the following sweeping judgment - so utterly contradictory to Baker's:

From the beginning, it was clear that he [Asad] did not possess the personal authority exercised by Sadat. I do not recall that Sadat ever mentioned domestic obstacles to his policies. Even if they existed, he absorbed them in his own position, he acted in his own name, which is another way of saying that he assumed the responsibility for Egypt. (And in the end paid for this bravura with his life.) Asad at no point claimed this authority.(10)

The contradiction in Kissinger's and Baker's assessments might be reconciled by recalling that the former met Asad at barely three years after the Syrian president's rise to power. Asad, then still at beginning of his presidential career, was inexperienced and somewhat insecure in the conduct of foreign policy. His main preoccupation was still the full consolidation of his own position in Syria.

By the time Asad met Baker, however, the Syrian president had come a long way. He accumulated a great deal of personal and political experience; had created a position of power for himself unprecedented in modern Syria; and had made his country stable and strong enough in regional, Arab, and international affairs to be considered a regional power. To bring this out, it is enough to note the titles of two books by Patrick Seale, a British journalist and confidant of Asad's whose writings provide a kind of running commentary on Asad's career: A book by Seale about pre-Asad Syria, first published in 1965, is called *The Struggle for Syria*, and a biography of Asad, published in 1988 entitled *Asad of*

Syria-The Struggle for the Middle East." (11)

But for all Asad's achievements in the intervening years, Kissinger's view is worth serious consideration even today; it points to an important, even vital, side of Asad's political personality later commentators and researchers tend to ignore. It should be stressed that Kissinger's observation is not at all tantamount to saying that Asad is a weak leader. On the contrary, one might well regard Asad's quest for public support and the degree to which he has gained it as a source of strength marking him out from other Arab leaders. It is not, as Clinton seems to have thought, a matter of a higher IQ; rather, it is heightened and informed awareness of the political limitations and weaknesses of his own power, of regime, and of Syria as a state. True, this awareness has rendered Asad cautious, even hesitant, but it also provided the basis on which his accomplishments rest. This is true first and foremost of the achievement of domestic political stability, and thus of Asad's own political survival.

THREE ORBITS: 'ALAWI, SYRIAN, ARAB

Asad's assumption of power, on November 16, 1970, was a watershed in Syrian history. Until then modern Syria had been described--and rightly so--in terms of internal strife, of an often frantic search for a proper political road to travel, and of casting about for a sense of national identity. The Struggle for Syria, as Seale called it, ended with Asad's takeover. (12) His political flair, aided by changes then taking place inside and outside Syria, enabled him to set up a strong and centralized state.

But some reservations are in order. Although not detracting from Asad's achievements, the following points allow a more realistic view of his regime and a

better understanding of the context in which operates.

The first point that must be made is that, despite the continuity of the regime, which gives it perceived appearances of stability, Asad's rule has been a long fight for survival against domestic and foreign challenges. Often enough, these challenges--such as the Islamic uprising (1976-82) and the struggle for power between Asad and his brother Rif'at (1983-84)--threatened the regime's equilibrium or even its very existence. True, Asad emerged victorious in these and other cases, but uncertainties persist, more conspicuously with regard to the regime's future after Asad. The issue of succession has become more prominent during the last few years and its lack of solution has a dislocating effect in which the uncertainties of the future seem to be projecting themselves backward into the present." (13)

A second point is that Asad alone cannot claim responsibility for the measure of stability now prevalent in the country. He was greatly aided by circumstances: the many years of ruthless power struggles over ideological, political, communal, social and economic issues--that preceded his takeover had exhausted those elements involved. The principal rivals had neutralized or liquidated each other, leaving the stage almost empty for a relatively new actor to play the protagonist.

By the time Asad came to power, the old Sunni urban elite that had run the country for centuries had virtually lost its power. Ideological parties, like the Syrian National Party (PPS) or the Communists, had been suppressed in the 1950s and 1960s. The founding fathers of the Ba'th party (notably Michel 'Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Baytar) had been removed from the scene. The corps of senior Sunni army officers had dissipated its strength in prolonged power struggles for the control of the armed forces and thus of the government. More than that:

The leaders of the neo-Ba'th group that had seized power in February 1966--many of them from the Druze or Isma'ili minorities--had been neutralized. Only the Ba'th radicals--Salah Jadid and his political allies still constituted an obstacle barring Asad's way to the top. But Jadid cut away the ground from under his own feet, in Syria as well as in the Arab world, by his intransigent--not to say adventurist--approach to governance. All Asad, himself a member of Jadid's ruling group, had to do was to administer the last push to bring him down. The moment was ripe for a new leaders man who would confer on his regime the prestige of firm, centralized, and stable rule and the appearance of no longer facing any substantial domestic challenge. (14) Asad proved himself an extremely skillful and sophisticated leader who turned every circumstance to his own best advantage.

Asad's regime is often described as brutally dictatorial, representing only the interests of a small sector of the population: the 'Alawi community to which he himself belongs. To safeguard its rule such accounts add, the regime relies on those units in the armed forces officered and staffed largely by 'Alawis.(15) Yet realities are more complex than that. The regime moves in and is sustained by three orbits: the 'Alawi, the Syrian, and the Arab (to borrow from Nasser's well-known dictum of Egypt moving in the Arab, Islamic, and African orbits).

Asad is an 'Alawi by virtue of his background and the formative influences on his mind, a Syrian by his bearing and appearance, and an Arab from inner conviction. 'Alawis provide the inner core of the regime; Syrians from other communities envelope and surround it; and Arab sentiment and identity give it its soul, purpose, and legitimacy.

To take the 'Alawi orbit first: True, Asad's regime is basically a form of one-

man rule, with himself at the center. But it has a familial, even tribal, side to it. This, for instance, explains the president's attempt to groom his son Bashar to succeed him. It is seen clearly in the filling of numerous influential positions with Asad's kinfolk or by people from his tribe, the Kalbiyya. The communal character of the regime is evident in the central role 'Alawis play in it--a role that is out of all proportion to their percentage strength in the population. 'Alawi officeholders provide the ties bonding the various components of the regime.

In a broader context, Asad's rise to power and the structure of his regime illustrate the emergence the 'Alawi community from its former status as a minority held in rather low regard and its assumption of a dominant role in the state. Only half a century earlier, the 'Alawi community was marginal to Syria as whole, in geographical, political, social, and economic terms. The first clearly visible sign of its quiet march forward and upward came at the time of the neo-Ba'th takeover of February 1966. The coup propelled the 'Alawi army officers into dominant power positions, but they still preferred to act behind the scenes. Only Asad's own so-called "corrective revolution" of 1970, which gained him the presidency finally placed the 'Alawis in the limelight. Since then, it would be true to say that Asad has bonded the 'Alawis around him and they, in turn, provide the bonding material for the regime.(16)

This being so, it is understandable why, though Asad's regime was close to the Soviet Union political terms, his own role models were the personal, family-oriented regimes of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania and of Kim Il Sung in North Korea. No wonder, then, that Ceausescu's downfall in December 1989 was a great personal shock to Asad--and a source of encouragement to his opponents: Graffiti reading "Every Ceausescu's day will come" appeared in

Damascus at the time. (17) Kim Il Sung's death also came as a shock to Asad. In a most unusual gesture, he went himself to the North Korean embassy in Damascus to express his condolences, proclaimed several days of national mourning in Syria, and sent a personal message to the North Korean leaders stressing the close ties between the two states and adding that North Korea had been a source of inspiration for himself and his regime. (18)

But 'Alawi communal, tribal, and familial aspects do not reveal the full story of Asad's rise to power. Surrounding the 'Alawi core is a body of other figures who together reflect the broader Syrian realities. This non-'Alawi "envelope" is stronger than is often supposed. It fully reflects the political and social upheavals that came in the wake of the original Ba'th party takeover of 1963. It comprises the same forces that in 1963, caused the collapse of the old ruling elite--those of the Sunni urban notables. True, the 'Alawis occupy a central, even dominant, place in it, but one should point to the following other components:

--Sunnis from the rural areas. Under the rule of the urban notables, this group was denied any kind of social mobility and prevented from entering politics. It remained at the bottom of the social scale, much like most of the minority communities. Only in the wake of the 1963 Ba'th takeover were its members able to launch themselves on the road forward. The second Ba'th coup, of 1966, gave them another boost even though their progress was now conditional on their acceptance of 'Alawi predominance. Presently they began occupying most of the influential positions in the new establishment--at least those openly perceived as such. Behind the scenes, much power remained reserved for 'Alawis. Among the representatives of these Sunnis are 'Abd al-Halim al-Khaddam, vice president for foreign affairs; Mahmud al-Zu'bi, prime minister; Faruq al-Shara,

foreign minister; and Mustafa Talas, minister of defense. Two other Sunni leaders are survivors from the urban class: Zuhayr al-Masharqa, the vice president for domestic affairs, and Hikmat Shihabi, the chief of staff.

--Non-'Alawi minorities in Syria: Christians, Druze, and Isma'ilis. These regard 'Alawi dominance as a guarantee for their own status and security which, they fear, would not be safeguarded under a regime dominated by the Sunni majority.

--The Sunni economic elite, especially that of Damascus. Since the early 1990s, this group has gradually become integrated into the establishment. These are the individuals who knew how to turn the recent policies of economic and-to some extent-political "openness" to their advantage. So far, their access to, let alone their influence on, the central core of decision makers has been limited indeed; their acceptance as power partners, if it happens at all, will be very slow.(19)

It is this coalition of forces whose representatives now hold the political and economic key positions and form the regime's social upper class. Their rise became possible by means of two conduits not open to them before 1963: the army and the Ba'th party apparatus. The army had, from its inception, attracted men from among the minorities and the socially underprivileged. This was particularly true of 'Alawis and rural Sunnis. Historical circumstances enabled members of these groups to rise to senior positions in the army and then to make their military career a springboard for joining the higher echelons of the regime. The Ba'th party appealed to similarly marginal groups. Initially, the party was a radical grouping that placed itself far from the center of the political gamut. Its social and economic platform, as well as its secular doctrine, suited membership candidates from the minorities and the lower, especially the rural, social

orders. After the first Ba'th takeover, its cadres were able to make their way into the institutions of state. Following the wave of nationalizations carried out by the Ba'th, others were able to occupy intermediate or senior economic positions as well.

Asad's regime, more so than those of his predecessors, thus truly reflects the fabric of Syria as it was created in 1963 (and as it has remained, almost unaltered, since then). This claim is pivotal to the main argument of this paper because it implies that the regime is more representative of the population as a whole, its constituent parts, and their balance of strength than is commonly assumed. This is one key to the support Asad enjoys.

Because of broad popular support, Asad's regime was able to weather the Islamic rising, a rebellion that has been described as a real threat to the very existence of the Ba'th regime. For that reason, Syria's rulers have brutally and relentlessly suppressed it. Yet, support for the Islamic rebels was limited to a number of Sunni towns in northern Syria. The rural Sunni population, the minorities, and even the urban Sunnis of Damascus remained supportive of the regime, or at least firmly refrained from acting against it. In doing so, they contributed a great deal to the government's success in putting down the rising.(20)

Nevertheless, the cohesion of the coalition underpinning the regime rests on two conditions. One is Asad's ability to make the various components of the coalition experience a sense of belonging and partnership in running the state and to satisfy, at least in part, their social and economic needs. The available data attest to a remarkably successful record in both respects.(21) Yet, further social developments already under way, such as rapid urbanization and the growth of urban lower classes, will give rise to new

expectations and require different means to satisfy them.

The other condition is sustaining a clear balance of power between the participants in the coalition; in other words, maintaining a clearly marked preponderance of 'Alawis in the army and the security services. Only by doing so can the regime ensure the cooperation of the components of the coalition among each other and of each of them with the 'Alawis.

The real danger to the future of the regime is thus not from factions outside the regime--that is, from opposition groups in Syria or, mostly, abroad--these are weak and marginal. Rather, the potential source of danger lies within the coalition itself: A breakdown of the cohesion of its parts or even the 'Alawi element within it, for instance over the issue of the succession, could well bring down the regime.

The Arab orbit comes to the fore in the ideological aspect of the Ba'th regime--an aspect of undeniable strength, even predominance, in it. The party is genuinely committed to an Arab world view and its doctrine embodies that commitment, "Arabism" is a source of inspiration and of legitimacy at home and abroad. True, a number of researchers hold that Asad is a cynical leader lacking principles and solely concerned with buttressing his power in Syria and, if possible, beyond Syria's borders as well (by means of the notion of Greater Syria). (22)

But the history of Syria under the Ba'th, and 'Asad's personal political record, make it apparent that pan-Arabism rather than pan-Syrianism lies at the core of his and his party's ideological commitment. Ba'thism revolves around the idea of comprehensive Arab unity. As a matter of course, Syria is to play a leading role in its realization. As a preliminary step--a precondition for achieving the broader aim--Damascus is called upon to establish Syrian hegemony over the adjacent Arab areas (the

"near abroad," as it would be called in another context): Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Palestine. (Seale's above-mentioned title *Asad of Syria--The Struggle for the Middle East* seems to say precisely that.)

Such ideological commitments appear to be altogether authentic; they reflect needs felt broadly among all ranks of the regime as well as personal and political needs of Asad. It should be stressed once again that cadres running the regime (most particularly the 'Alawis) comprise men who were new to power when they achieved it and, initially, lacked experience, political maturity, and self-confidence. Commitment to the Ba'th doctrine of pan-Arabism became their trademark as well as the surest means of winning over minds of other sectors of the population, particularly the urban Sunnis (who had hitherto been the chief guardians of that idea). Ideological commitment became the glue holding the various parts of the coalition together. The tenets of "Arabism" were a platform, indeed more than that: a program for action, capable of rallying a broad consensus around it.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SYRIAN REGIME

Syria is run by a dual power system. To the outside, it presents the picture of a normal government: a well-ordered series of institutions of state (mostly created by Asad's regime itself), each having its place in a hierarchy laid down by the constitution (or sometimes by the statutes of the Ba'th party). These institutions include the presidency, the People's Assembly (parliament), and the cabinet. The party has its own institutions and its own hierarchy. In addition, a number of so called "popular organizations" represent distinct sectors of the population: among these are trade unions, professional associations, and the farmers and the students associations.

This formal system of government reflects the numerical strength of the components of the coalition described above. In the eyes of the ruling group, the system's main task is to create a sense of legitimacy and give an appearance of legality to the measures taken by the regime. In addition, it provides ample scope for rewarding supporters by appointing them to government posts. This creates a measure of social and economic mobility and in some cases access to the centers of political power.

Contrasting with this structure, a hidden side of the regime exists: the informal power exercised mainly by the heads of the security services and by senior army officers--in short, the men on whom the regime depends for its stability and its future. These officers have their place--some overtly, most covertly--in the ruling hierarchy. Their positions of power may not be recognized by the constitution, but they are indicative of the political weight and the intrinsic (rather than numerical) strength of the elements of the coalition.

To illustrate: Approximately 60 percent of the cabinet ministers, the members of the People's Assembly, and the deputies to the Party Congress are Sunnis--much like the percentage of Sunnis in the overall population. The informal ruling cadres, by contrast, attest to the real power and predominance of the 'Alawis: Close to 90 percent of the officers commanding the major military formations are 'Alawis, and so are most of the top echelons in the various security services.(23)

The formal government apparatus is arranged along two parallel lines: the administration and the party. The constitution places the party and its institutions above the state administration, Clause VIII laying down that "the Ba'th Party leads society and the state and stands at the head of the National Progressive Front, which acts to unite the forces of the

masses and to mobilize them in the service of goals of the Arab nation.(24) (The National Progressive Front is a formal coalition of the Ba'th with other parties permitted to operate. Together, they make up a large majority in the People's Assembly.)

Party branches and cells are spread throughout Syria, and through them the party line is brought to everyone's notice. Every four years, the branches elect deputies to represent them at the Party Congress. The Congress in turn elects the top party institutions: the ninety-person central committee (al-Lajna al-Markaziyya) and the twenty-one-person Regional Command (al-Qiyada al-Qutriyya). The latter is the party's highest organ and therefore also the country's most senior body. Its role is evident from the constitutional provision laying down that a presidential candidate is to be approved first by the Regional Command, and only following such an approval is the People's Assembly free to approve his candidacy and to submit it to a public referendum.(25) The top party position is that of secretary-general, currently held by Asad himself.

It should be added that, in theory, the Syrian Ba'th party is only part of a wider body, the all-Arab Ba'th. The individual parties in the various Arab countries, including the Syrian party, are supposedly subordinate to the so-called National Command (al-Qiyada al-Qawmiyya). In at least one case, in Iraq in 1963, the National Command actually demonstrated its superiority. Led by two of the party's founding fathers, Michel 'Aflaq and Salah ad-Din Baytar, it intervened in Baghdad and laid down for the Iraqi Regional Command the steps it should take in the domestic crisis that had erupted there. It then turned out that the line prescribed from Damascus in the name of the National Command was disastrous and caused the Iraqi party to lose power for some five years. (26)

Today, the distinction between the "regional" (countrywide) and the "national" (all-Arab) level has become meaningless. From among the Ba'th parties in various Arab countries, only two have remained important--the Syrian and the Iraqi--but each denies the legitimacy of the other in terms of party politics and party ideology, and they are not on speaking terms.

Their rift spilled over into the smaller Ba'th parties elsewhere. In Lebanon, for instance, there used to be a pro-Syrian and, separately, a pro-Iraqi Ba'th. The latter was eliminated after the entry of Syrian troops into Lebanon. Whatever remains of the Jordanian and the Palestinian Ba'th parties is now dominated from Syria, just like the surviving Lebanese party. Syria thus also dominates the "national" party institutions, almost defunct though they may be. They are, however, still important enough--both as a lesson from the past and a possible hope for the future--for Asad to have placed himself at the top of the "national" hierarchy, together with his post as "regional" secretary-general of the Syrian party.

The formal government apparatus, though theoretically working in parallel with the party, is actually controlled by it. Control is maintained by filling almost all key posts with party members. The 250 members of the People's Assembly are elected by constituency elections once every four years. The parties making up the National Progressive Front-led, as has been seen, by the Ba'th-fill about 60 percent of the seats. The rest are independents. The constitution gives the Assembly the prerogative of naming a presidential candidate, but his name must first be approved and recommended to it by the Regional Command. The Assembly further enacts laws, approves the budget, pronounces on development plans, and ratifies international agreements. It is entitled to review government policies and

to criticize them, as it deems necessary. As already mentioned, the regime has been endeavoring over the last few years to broaden the social composition of the Assembly by the inclusion of the Sunni business elite, especially that of Damascus-a group with whom it is trying to mend fences.(27)

The executive power includes the president and the cabinet. The constitution describes the latter as the highest executive and administrative authority in the country. The president appoints the prime minister and the other members of the cabinet and they answer to him, but they are obliged to report to the Assembly on their activities. As has been seen, the various communities are represented in the cabinet roughly according to their percentage strength in the population. It is worth stressing this point: In the 1960s, 'Alawis and people from the peripheral areas of Syria (also for the most part members of minorities) were overrepresented. Only after Asad's advent to power was the disproportion corrected.

Other parties allowed to operate in Syria include several varieties of communists and of Nasserists. They are no more than the mere remnants of earlier political groupings that have their roots in the politics of the 1950s and the 1960s. All are joined together in the National Progressive Front established in 1972 and headed by Asad. Alongside them, so-called popular organizations act as quasi-parties. They include professional unions, workers' organizations, the farmers' association, women's organizations, and others.

As against all these bodies, the informal apparatus centers mainly on the army and the security forces. Their influence cannot be overstated; it derives most of all from the basic fact that they hold the ruling coalition together. Among its prominent members are 'Ali Duba, head of the military security branch (Shu'bat al-Mukhabarat al-'Askariyya the army's internal security

service); Ibrahim Huwayji, head of air force security directorate (Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya); Bashir Najjar, head of the general security directorate (Idarat al-Amn al-'Amm); and 'Adnan Badr Hasan, head of the political security directorate (Idarat al-Amn al-Siyasi). To their ranks must be added a number of senior officers: corps commanders and the generals commanding the armored divisions deployed near Damascus. Among them are Shafiq Fayyad, commander of the third corps; Ibrahim Safi, commander of the second corps; 'Ali Hasan, commander of the Republican Guard unit; 'Ali Habib, commander of the "Special Forces" (commando units); and a few others. Together, they are responsible for the state's stability and, in large measure, are holding the key to its future. (28)

Yet in the day-to-day life of society and in the functioning of the economy, the influence of this group of largely 'Alawi officers is felt much less than foreigners often assume. With the measure of stability already achieved, the regime's dependence on them is receding. Besides, they themselves view their environment almost entirely from the military and security angle and hold no strong opinions on social or economic issues.

It falls to the Ba'th party to try to mitigate the inherent contradiction between the formal and the informal government elites. It does so mainly by providing the ideological "envelope" for both. The party lays down the "correct" political, social, and economic lines binding on all who have a share in power formal or informal. Moreover, the party furnishes the interface where both elites meet and interact, the arena where they both gather, and the bodies in which both are represented. The party has its cells in the armed forces and the security services and, just like other branches, these cells elect their representatives to the higher party bodies. The central committee, for instance, has ninety members, including

party functionaries of various types and ranks and individuals drawn from the higher ranks of the administrative bureaucracy, the armed forces, and the security services; nine members are senior 'Alawi officers and several are senior Sunni commanders. (29) Such a composition is meant to give palpable expression to the superiority of the party over all other power elites, certainly over the army officers. (The regime never fails to speak of Syria's "ideological army,"- a term meant to convey that the armed forces act on behalf of the party and are the executors of its line.) It is in these party bodies that a dialogue between the formal and the informal power-holders can be conducted and frictions can be resolved.

Yet, that the party apparatus has not always been able to assert its superiority over the military or to act as an effective moderator between the civilian elite and the senior officers. In 1969-70 for instance, both the party cadres and the institutions of the state sided, almost in their entirety, with Salah Jadid in his confrontation with Asad, who was then minister of defense and commander of the air force and was on his way to the top with the backing of the armed forces and the security services. Their support enabled him to complete his take-over in November 1970. Jadid's supporters were promptly purged from party bodies and the state service and replaced by men loyal to Asad. (30)

A similar example is provided by the power struggle, in 1983 and 1984, between Asad and his brother Rif'at. For all intents and purposes, it was carried out within the ranks of the senior officers, who totally ignored the institutions of the party and the state. At the time, Asad was in bad health and the question arose of how to run affairs until his recovery. Asad's attempt to turn to the party and state bodies-by appointing a six-man interim body drawn from their ranks to exercise the president's functions temporarily-was countered by organized

resistance on the part of the senior 'Alawi officers. They rallied around Rif'at Asad in an attempt to foil a move that they interpreted as intended to diminish their status or even to end 'Alawi dominance altogether.

As soon as Asad recovered, he confronted his brother and most of the officers who had backed Rif'at abandoned him and reaffirmed their loyalty to the president. But what is of concern here is not so much the eventual outcome but the fact that the confrontation was conducted within the higher ranks of the armed forces and security services, without reference to the party hierarchy or the "formal" state elite. It was only after the struggle had been decided in favor of Asad, and after Rif'at had in effect been removed from all positions of influence, that the outcome was formalized: a party congress, convened in January 1985, elected new higher party bodies in which Rif'at's supporters were no longer included. (31)

Against the background of the structure previously described, Asad's personal role stands out all the more strongly: He heads the groups of both the formal and the informal power-holders and acts as the real strongman of both. As president, he heads the formal state apparatus; as secretary-general of both the Regional and National Commands, he leads the party hierarchy. Under the constitution, the president is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces, giving him full control over the informal elite of the officers. But it is not the constitution that gives him his status: It is his authority as a strong, skillful, and effectual leader.

**This article is from Chapter 2, Eyal Zisser, Decision Making in Assad's Syria (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998). Reprinted with permission of the author and publisher. Dr. Eyal Zisser is a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center*

for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University and an assistant professor at the university. In 1995-96, he was a visiting assistant professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and a visiting research fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy the following summer.

Dr. Zisser has written extensively on Syria and its power in the Middle East. His recent works include *Syria--The Renewed Struggle for Power* (Haifa University Press, forthcoming) and "Syrian Foreign Policy: The Reverse Side of the Same Coin," which was published in spring 1997 by the Japanese Institute of Middle Eastern Economics in *JIME Review*."

NOTES

1. "al-Ra'is al-suri lil-Akhbar" (The Syrian President in an interview to al-Akhbar), al-Akhbar, September 20, 1993, p. 1.
2. See Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1991); Daniel Pipes, *Damascus Courts the West: Syrian Politics, 1989-1991* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1991); Daniel Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 1996).
3. James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 456.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 448.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 457.
6. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), p. 1087.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 1068.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 781.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 1083.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 780-781.
11. Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965; reprinted in 1987), *Asad of Syria--The*

Struggle for the Middle East (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

12. See Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*.

13. See Eyal Zisser, "Toward the Post-Asad Era in Syria," *Japanese Institute of Middle Eastern Economies-JIME Review*, no. 28 (Spring 1995), pp. 5-16.

14. See Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

15. See Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked & The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process*.

16. See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*; Eyal Zisser, "The 'Alawis, Lords of Syria: From Ethnic Minority to Sect," in Gabriel Ben-Dor and Ofra Bengio, eds., *Minorities in the Middle East* (forthcoming).

17. Dan Avidan, "Hadashot misurya" (News from Syria), *Davar*, March 8, 1990, p. 9; see also Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 14 (1990), p. 653.

18. Al-Qa'id al-Asad Yursilu Barqiyat Ta'ziyya lishab Shimal Kuriya" (President Asad sends his condolences to the people of North Korea), al-Ba'th, July 14, 1994, p. 11.

19. See Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995); Eberhard Kienle, ed., *Contemporary Syria, Liberalization Between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994).

20. See Raymond A. 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: Praeger, 1982), pp. 138-169.

21. Interview by the author with a Syrian academic in Washington, D.C., June 23, 1996.

22. See Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria--The History of an Ambition* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1990); Pipes, Syria Beyond the Peace Process.

23. Dar al-I'tisam, Hama, Ma'sat al-'Asr alti Faqat Majazir Sabra washatila (The Tragedy of Hama-Far Beyond the Massacre in Sabra and Shatila) (Cairo: Dar al-I'tisam, undated), p. 150; see also Moshe Maoz, Asad Hasfinks shel Damesek (The Sphinx of Damascus) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1988), pp. 63-66.

24. See "al-Nuss al-Kamil lil-Dustur al-Da'im" (The full text of the Syrian constitution) al-Thawra (Damascus), February 1, 1973, pp. 3, 7.

25. Ibid.; see also Hani Khalil, Hafiz al-Asad Wadawlat al-Dimuqratiyya al-Sha'biyya (Hafiz al-Asad and the Popular Democratic State) (Damascus: Dar Talas lil-Nashr, 1987).

26. See Itamar Rabinovich, Syria Under the Ba'th 1963-1966.- The Army-Party Symbiosis (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1972), pp. 80-84; Eberhard Kienle, Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict Between Syria and Iraq 1968-1989 (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), pp. 30-35.

27. See Perthes, The Political Economy of Syria under Asad; Kienle, ed., Contemporary Syria; Eyal Zisser, "Surya-Liqrat Seder Hadash mibayit" (Syria--Toward a New Order?), Hamizrach Hadash 28 (1996), pp. 116-134.

28. See Alain Chouet, "Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power: Disintegration by Politics," Maghreb-Machrek, (January-March 1995), pp. 93-119, as translated in the Daily Report of the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), October 3, 1995; Eyal Zisser, "The Succession Struggle in Damascus," Middle East Quarterly 2, No. 2 (September 1995), pp. 57-64

29. For the composition of the party institutions see Radio Damascus, January 28, 1985; Itamar Rabinovich, "Syria," Middle East Contemporary Survey 9, (1984-85), pp. 645-646.

30. Van Dam, The Struggle for Power in Syria, pp. 62-74.

31. See Rabinovich, "Syria," pp. 645-646; Seale, Asad of Syria, pp. 421-440