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# **The Ba'th Party of Syria**



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**A Research Paper**

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August 1986*

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# The Ba'th Party of Syria

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**A Research Paper**

This paper was prepared by [Redacted]  
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis.  
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**The Ba'th Party of Syria** [Redacted]

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**Key Judgments**

*Information available as of 8 July 1986 was used in this report.*

The Ba'th Party has served as an ideological guide for Syria's rulers for nearly a quarter of a century and is a pervasive feature of Syrian life. The party effectively uses multiple tools to indoctrinate Syrians and mobilize popular support for the regime's revolutionary aims. The party may play an even larger role in a post-Assad Syria. [Redacted]

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Since the Ba'th Party came to power in Syria in 1963, its focus has shifted from Pan-Arab aims to Syrian nationalist goals. The party has backed away from its original hardline socialist agenda to one that reflects President Hafiz Assad's more measured and pragmatic style of rule. [Redacted]

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Syria's confrontation with Israel is at the heart of Ba'th Party rhetoric. The party justifies and ennobles its policies by equating its success with the eventual attainment of victory over "the Zionist entity." The party's confrontational approach is likely to outlast Assad and deeply influence any successor's policy. [Redacted]

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Ba'th ideology provides a flexible medium through which Syria can promote its foreign policy and avoid political isolation. As a socialist party, the Ba'th Party acts as a point of contact between Syria and Communist states, particularly the Soviet Union. As a party of national development, the Ba'th includes itself in the ranks of the nonaligned. As a Pan-Arab party, the Ba'th fancies itself as representing the interests of all Arab people. [Redacted]

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The party's zeal to implement socialist reforms has waned over the years, but centralized planning of the economy persists. In response to the current economic crisis, President Assad is considering backing advocates of liberalization of the Syrian economy. Should Assad endorse a new direction for the economy, he probably would have to press the party to depart from the status quo. [Redacted]

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Despite the belief throughout Syrian society that the Ba'th Party is merely a rubberstamp for Assad's policies, the effects of the massive political indoctrination of a generation of Syrians are great. Most Syrians have been born since 1963 and raised on the notion of secular government and society, and, although this has not eliminated the importance of sectarian ties, it may have weakened them. [Redacted]

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The Ba'th Party has not alleviated sectarian tension between the ruling Alawites and the Sunni majority, but it has had considerable success in recruiting members from the Sunni population, elevating many to prominent government positions. Advantages afforded to Ba'th Party members in educational opportunities and career advancement have created strong incentives for Sunnis and members of other sects to join the party. [redacted]

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In the event of Assad's death or incapacitation, the military will play the decisive role in choosing a successor, but the Ba'th Party will have a key role in ensuring the stability of any future regime. The military will be certain to solicit the endorsement of the party to give legitimacy to the selection. The Alawite military kingmakers are certain to choose a successor with solid Ba'th Party credentials. Although the Ba'th Party lacks the power to promote its own candidate in a post-Assad Syria, any successor with less power than Assad would probably delegate a greater share of decisionmaking to the party apparatus to smooth the transition and broaden his power base. [redacted]

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Should the Sunnis make a play for power after Assad's departure, they may use the Ba'th Party as a rallying point. Even though most Sunnis consider the party to be an instrument of Alawite control, they probably ascribe its shortcomings to the minority elite and not to Ba'thism itself. In particular, the generation of Sunni youth who have been reared in a secular society may find it hard to identify with the traditional Muslim Brotherhood opposition, which advocates a theocratically based government. [redacted]

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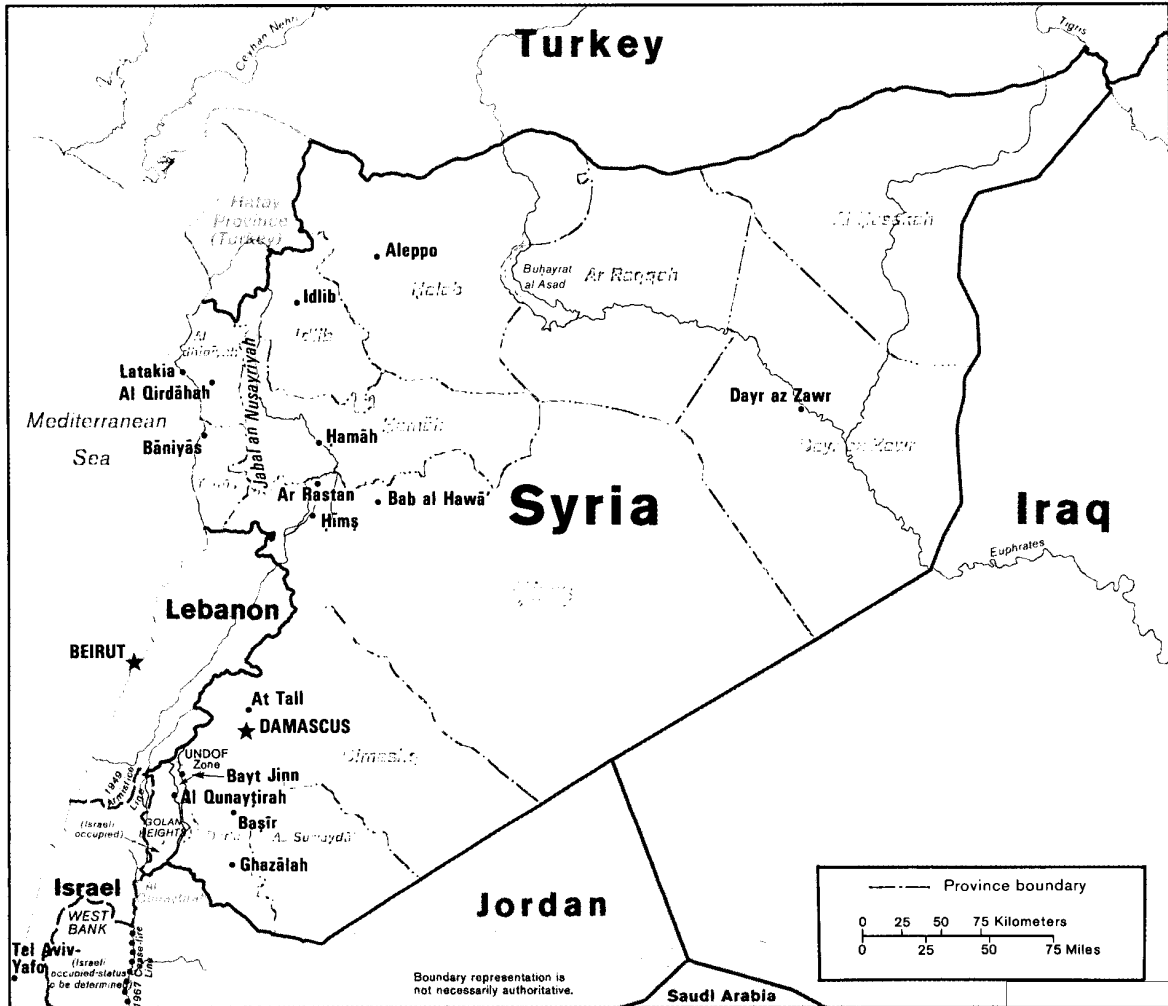
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**The Ba'th Party of Syria** [Redacted]

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We believe that the strength of the Ba'th Party is attributable to its ability to give vent to the unsatisfied aspirations of a majority of Syrians. Historians note that Syrians have been instilled with the notion that the post-World War I definition of their borders by the European powers prevented the fulfillment of their role as the historic center of the Arab nation or at least greater Syria. For example, Syrian maps still identify Hatay Province in Turkey (returned to Turkey by France in 1939) as part of Syria; the Syrians have never had an embassy in Lebanon (also formerly part of Syria); and there have been several Syrian attempts to seek political federation with other Arab states, intended to at least symbolically erase national borders. [Redacted]

to reaffirm its radical credentials through ties to Libya and Iran and continuing support for extreme Palestinian elements. Embassy reporting suggests the Ba'th's radical views are widely held among Syrians. [Redacted]

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Under Assad, the Ba'th reoriented its revolutionary ideology to consolidate the Syrian nation. The regime has rationalized this as consistent with Pan-Arab aims since it ostensibly strengthens Syria's ability to oppose "Zionist imperialism." We believe this aim has also served as a rallying point to unite a Syrian population that is troubled by deep-seated sectarian tensions between the Sunni majority and the ruling Alawites.<sup>1</sup>

Although individuals who have attained full Ba'th Party membership represent less than 5 percent of Syria's voting-age population, an entire generation of Syrians has been indoctrinated with its secular political values. Sunnis can achieve social and political advantages through their membership in the Ba'th Party. Prominent Sunni party members and close associates of the President, such as Vice Presidents 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam and Zuhayr Mashariqa, along with Ba'th Assistant Secretary General 'Abdallah al-Ahmar, provide models for Sunni youths who aspire to high office. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Many Sunnis view the Ba'th Party as an instrument of Alawite control, but Embassy reports indicate they apparently do not believe that this invalidates the institution or its goals. Having become accustomed to a secular state, many young Sunni activists probably do not regard the aims of groups like the traditional Muslim Brotherhood opposition as representing their vision of a future Syria. Should the Sunnis vie for power, they probably will attempt to use the Ba'th Party as a common denominator and legitimizing link to the past. [Redacted]

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**Indoctrinating Radicalism:  
The Major Success**

The revolutionary aims of Ba'thist dogma, while irreconcilable with the political realities of the region, still appeal to many Syrians. During the 1950s and 1960s, Syrian Ba'thists continually pressed for unification with other Arab states, despite notable failures in their experiences with Nasir's Egypt and Iraq. More recently the Ba'th Party in Syria has attempted

**The Ba'th Party's Grassroots Organization**

The Ba'th Party is organized down to the grassroots level to generate popular support for the Assad regime and indoctrinate the masses. Western academic observers note that the party organization consists of a series of assemblies, including formal party congresses and the more frequent meetings of party branch secretaries with the commands, which provide limited channels for the expression of popular views to the

<sup>1</sup> The Alawites, a heterodox Muslim sect, make up the largest religious minority in Syria (12 to 14 percent of the population). Most Alawites in Syria are from rural areas and are concentrated in the Jabal an-Nusayriyah (Alawite Mountains) in western Syria. Alawites believe in divine incarnation and the divinity of Ali and hence are viewed as heretical by most other Muslims. [Redacted]

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Figure 2. Celebration of the Ba'th Party's 39th anniversary.

**The Ba'th Party Militia**

The quasi-military arm of the Ba'th Party is the Ba'th Party militia, the Jaish al-Sha'b (The People's Army). The militia was founded in 1963 as a civilian home guard in the event of foreign invasion. Since 1964 the militia has been under the command of old-time Ba'thist Gen. Muhammad Ibrahim Ali. Scholars note that in the 1960s the militia's role was like China's Revolutionary Guard, and it was often used by Syrian officials to harass political enemies of the regime.

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Militia members are drilled in the use of small arms and indoctrinated in Ba'th Party principles.

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decisionmakers and the party bureaus that implement government policies and explain them to the public. These assemblies are linked to a series of auxiliary organizations that serve as lobbying groups for peasants, workers, youth, women, and professionals.

incentives to steer students into vocational studies that are compatible with long-range development plans.

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The effort to impose ideological discipline on the Ba'th Party has had only limited success, according to academic observers. Following the Ba'thist seizure of power in 1963, recruitment procedures were often bypassed. The leadership needed to reconstruct the party's ranks—depleted by defections during the period 1958-61, when Syria and Egypt were united—and elite conflicts drove rivals to try to pack the party with their own supporters. Party ranks were flooded with newcomers brought in on the basis of friendship, kinship, and sectarian ties. As the party has continued its control of government institutions over the years, use of the party as a vehicle for personal and professional gain has flourished.

The Ba'th Party Vanguard is a youth organization that indoctrinates selected elementary school students with party ideals in preparation for their later service as party cadres and leaders. Vanguard members are sent to summer camp where they study Ba'thist ideology and analyze President Assad's speeches to the accompaniment of national and patriotic music broadcast continually over loudspeakers.

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**Education as Indoctrination**

The public school system, in which 94 percent of Syrian youth are enrolled, plays the key role in indoctrinating new generations of Syrians in Ba'thist ideology.

The Higher Institute for Political Science, attached to the Ba'th Party National Command, trains party cadres for positions of responsibility in Syria and abroad. Among the thousands of graduates are foreign students who return home from Syria to serve as officials in their own country's Ba'th Party, according to an Arab scholar. The school offers the equivalent of a master's degree to students completing the four-year curriculum.

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In the last decade the party has also created financial

Intense indoctrination in Ba'thist principles in Syria and parts of Lebanon has inspired a small cadre of Lebanese and Syrian youth to volunteer as martyrs for the Ba'th cause. The press reports that many of the suicide car bomb attacks in southern Lebanon in the last year have been carried out by Lebanese Ba'th Party cadres in their late teens or early twenties.

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Figure 3. Lebanese Ba'ath "martyrs" in testimonial to Ba'ath principles and President Assad.

According to the US Embassy in Damascus, at least one of these attacks was carried out by a Syrian Ba'ath Party member. These youth, both men and women, make preattack videotapes in which they praise the leadership of President Assad and extol the virtues of Ba'athist socialism.

**The Media as a Tool**

Although the Syrian media appear to have as their main task the lionizing of President Assad, they also disseminate party positions to further indoctrinate the masses. In the mid-1960s, competing factions within the party were represented in the media, resulting in confusion among the rank and file as to the party position on many issues. Since that time party officials have worked with the media to present a uniform position on every issue of public concern. Scholarly sources point out, however, that party officials allow some debate and self-criticism in the press.

Television, radio, the press, and publishing houses are largely owned or centrally controlled by the Ministry of Information. The Ministry coordinates its activity with various offices of the Ba'ath Party, especially the Ideology/Indoctrination Office headed by Ahmad Dirgham. The government and the party control media output directly via censors and indirectly through self-censorship. According to the US Embassy in Damascus, the party's journal, *Al-Ba'ath*, is one of the three most widely read newspapers in Syria (circulation 25,000 to 30,000). The party heavily

influences the other two leading state-controlled newspapers, *Tishrin* and *Thawra*, which resemble *Al-Ba'ath* in content and format.

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**Perquisites and Rewards**

Ba'ath Party indoctrination is reinforced by a wide range of perquisites offered to party members, which have been an important factor in the party's steady growth.

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an individual's career prospects in the ministries or the military often depend on his standing within the party.

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party members and their children are given preference for admission to universities and professional schools. Ba'ath members seek to preserve their privileged status by maintaining a strict and protracted membership application process.

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The advantages of party membership extend to the private sector. According to a US scholar, businessmen overcome bureaucratic obstacles to obtain licenses through their party contacts. Party membership is considered a status symbol by social climbing Sunnis who are trying to get ahead in an Alawite-dominated society. Tradespeople and peasants join party associations and use them as lobbying groups to insure the government's support for their economic interests.

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**The Ba'ath Party and the Government**

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The Ba'ath Party officially shares power in the Syrian Government, including the Cabinet, the ministries, and the People's Assembly, with several other parties in a coalition called the National Progressive Front. The Ba'ath dominates the Front; it provides the chairman and eight of the 16 seats on the Front's governing board. Four other parties share the remaining seats—the Communist Party, two Nasirite parties (the Arab

Socialist Union and the Socialist Unionists), and the Arab Socialists (followers of Akram Harwani, a powerful politician of the 1950s). By law, only the Ba'th Party is allowed to conduct political activity in the military. [redacted]

The Ba'th and other parties in the National Progressive Front participate in parliamentary elections every four years for seats in the People's Assembly. [redacted]

[redacted] the candidates from all parties are carefully selected by leading members of the Ba'th Party and Assad, who also determine the percentage of seats each party will hold in parliament. In the most recent election held in February 1986, the Ba'th won 129 seats out of a total of 195. Of the remaining seats, eight went to the Socialist Unionists, nine to the Arab Socialist Union, five to the Arab Socialists, nine to the Communists, and 35 seats went to independents. [redacted]

Ba'th Party members also hold most portfolios in the Council of Ministers. According to the Syrian Constitution, the President alone has the authority to appoint ministers, including the Prime Minister and any number of deputy prime ministers (of which there are presently three) who may be drawn from the ranks of the People's Assembly. Subordinate to the Council of Ministers is a large bureaucracy that carries out the day-to-day operations of the government. We believe that Ba'th Party membership as much as technical aptitude offers a decided advantage for those seeking prestigious civil service positions. [redacted]

**The Parallel Government**

The Ba'th Party's Regional Command parallels the Syrian Government in structure. Its role is to guide government policy along Ba'thist principles. Each of the 21 members of the Regional Command has a specific function like a ministerial portfolio, and in some cases a Regional Command member is also a government minister. Among the most notable of these are Prime Minister Kasm and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Talas. [redacted]

The parallel structure often results in rivalries and duplication of work. In the area of foreign policy, non-Command member Shara as Foreign Minister clearly is overshadowed by foreign affairs specialist and



Figure 4. President Assad meeting with the Regional Command following his recuperation. [redacted]

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Regional Command member Vice President Khaddam. Parallel offices exist for national security, labor, youth, education, higher education, "peasants," and economy and finance. These lines occasionally become tangled in the case of the economy. For example, until 1985 Regional Command members Kasm and Qaddura specialized in economic affairs in their Cabinet posts but not in the Command's economic office, which was then headed by non-Cabinet member Sulayman Qaddah. [redacted]

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Ba'th Party members have become more active in their jobs, creating a situation in which some areas are managed more by the party than by the government ministries. [redacted]

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[redacted] The party has formed branch commands on all state university campuses, and [redacted] [redacted] student members enjoy preferential treatment with regard to admission, grading, and job placement. [redacted]

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**Foreign Policy Uses**

Ba'th Party ideology is a flexible medium through which Syrian leaders conduct much of their foreign policy. For socialist countries the Ba'th emphasizes socialist fraternity and promotes exchanges between

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worker and student organizations. The US Embassy in Damascus reports that since the party's takeover of professional organizations in 1981, contacts between these groups and their Communist counterparts have been stronger than ever. The Ba'th Party structure approximates East European models, and visiting Communist Party officials are often greeted by their Ba'th Party counterpart. [redacted]

The Ba'th characterizes itself as a party of national development when dealing with developing countries and Western nations. The Ba'th sends delegates to conferences of nonaligned nations, and Syria consistently votes with Third World nations in the United Nations. As a Pan-Arab party, the Ba'th, bolstered by its opposition to Israel, considers itself a champion of the Arab cause. [redacted]

Despite its dogma, we believe the Ba'th Party has evolved over the last two decades from a Pan-Arab socialist party to one with a more nationalist character. Under Assad, the party has deemphasized the need to pursue federations with other Arab or Ba'th states and instead has concentrated on giving the party an indigenous character. Assad's policies have been marked by pragmatism, which has offset some of the initial excesses of socialist reforms. [redacted]

#### The Ba'th Party and the Economy

We believe the area in which the Ba'th Party enjoys the greatest amount of authority is in the planning and implementation of the centrally planned economy. According to a US scholar, Assad and his inner circle are unfamiliar and therefore uncomfortable with economic theory and prefer to delegate responsibility for economic decisions to others, provided they stay within the loose strictures of Ba'thist ideology. As with other sectors of government, the economic Cabinet ministers follow the advice of the party's Regional Command and the quadrennial party congress, where delegates, both technocrats and ideologues, debate the course of economic policy. [redacted]

The Ba'th Party congress and Regional Command set general economic targets consistent with their ideological goals, which are translated into one-year and

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#### The Syrian and Iraqi Ba'th Parties

*As neighboring Ba'thist states, Syria and Iraq have been in competition since 1968 when Iraqi Ba'thists seized power. The new regime in Baghdad invited Ba'thist ideologues who had been ousted from power in Syria two years earlier by leftwing neo-Ba'thists to join their government. Since that time, both parties, while guided by the same doctrine, have developed their own brand of socialism and Arab nationalism. Both countries have their own National Commands, and recurrent attempts to join them have been thwarted by intense regional rivalries and personal hatred between Assad and Iraqi President Saddam Husayn.* [redacted]

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five-year production plans by the Ministry of Economy. The ministry is responsible for meeting production quotas and allocating resources to the various state-run enterprises. [redacted] the party's economic office acts as a watchdog to ensure that the ministry stays within Ba'thist guidelines. [redacted]

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The Ba'th Party envisions a Syria in which economic development will lead to the fulfillment of two goals: a self-sufficient society and social justice. According to Ba'thist doctrine, a self-sufficient society will come about through the mobilization and development of all resources, both human and material. Economic self-sufficiency is seen as a means to achieve political autonomy. In contrast to the Marxist model for economic development, Syrian socialists stress the importance of rural development. This emphasis on agriculture reflects the Ba'th's strength in rural areas. [redacted]

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Syrian socialists aim to create social justice through the provision of public goods and social services, which is consistent with the traditions of Islam. According to a US Embassy study, many Muslims who otherwise hold the Ba'thist regime in contempt believe that its socialist economic programs are preferable to the capitalist alternative. [redacted]

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Figure 5. President Assad addressing the Regional Congress, January 1985. [redacted]



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#### Altering Socialism to Syrian Economic Realities

From 1963, when the Ba'thists first came to power, to 1970, the development of a socialist economic policy ebbed and flowed between competing factions. [redacted]

[redacted] the moderate wing dominated by older, experienced party founders, emphasized gradual economic reform to avoid major social dislocations. The progressive wing, controlled by mostly Alawite Army officers, called for a radical restructuring of the economy along socialist lines. [redacted]

The progressive group, the so-called neo-Ba'thists, came to power in 1966 in a coup led by Alawite Gen. Salah Jadid. The moderates, mostly civilian Ba'thists, including founders Aflaq and Bitar, were exiled from the party and in some cases from the country. For the next four years the neo-Ba'thists embarked on an ambitious program of land redistribution and farm collectivization. [redacted]

When Assad took power in 1970, he attempted to unite the moderates and progressives and ousted the most militant progressives. He launched a "Corrective Movement" designed to reverse some of the more radical policies and to encourage expatriates to return to Syria by creating incentives for private initiative in some sectors of the economy. Although Assad did not repudiate the socialist direction of the economy, he curtailed agrarian reform in response to major shortfalls in production between 1966 and 1970. [redacted]

Assad's encouragement of a larger role for the private sector did not prevent the Ba'th Party from pressing ahead with ambitious programs to develop Syria's state-owned industrial base. Impressive development programs extended paved highways, electricity,

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schools, water supplies, and health care to all of Syria. The Ba'th's principal focus, however, was on developing the rural sector, making it a bulwark of Ba'thist political support. [redacted]

We believe one of Assad's key aims has been to break the hold on Syria's economic life traditionally exercised by the Sunni Muslim elite and to improve the economic standing of traditionally impoverished rural Alawite coreligionists. The basis of the Sunnis' predominance—privately held banks, factories, and large farms—has been undermined by land reform and nationalization. [redacted]

#### **Economic Problems and Inconsistencies**

The structure of economic decision making in Syria, while dominated by the Ba'th Party, reflects the centralized administrative structures of the military and the government. The high degree of centralization and interdependence of these structures has imposed a heavy burden of bureaucracy with authoritarian inclinations at the top of the economic hierarchy. For example, the Planning Minister is responsible for reaching the yearly target of the centralized plan, but he is generally restricted by the excessive power of the Ministers of Economy, Finance, Defense, and Supply. [redacted]

According to Embassy reports, the Syrian economy is plagued with problems common to other centrally planned economies:

- Shortages of consumer items.
- Lack of a skilled managerial class.
- Lack of worker and peasant incentives.
- Rigid structure that allows little flexibility and creativity in the marketplace.
- Low-quality industrial outputs (particularly in import substitution industries).
- An unrealistic pricing system that makes Syrian goods uncompetitive abroad and contributes to smuggling and black marketeering. [redacted]

We believe that disagreements within the economic apparatus between party ideologues and technocrats responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the economy are a major source of bureaucratic disruption. Party cadres act as watchdogs to ensure that the government does not deviate from the socialist guide-

lines established by the party congress. [redacted] technocrats, who are mostly Western-educated, believe that the private sector should be allowed to play a more visible role in the economy. [redacted] debate took place during the party congress in 1985 when leftist delegates argued that Syria should adopt an economic relationship with the Soviet Union similar to Cuba's, while moderates recommended opening up Syria to foreign investment from the West. [redacted] Assad seems content to let this debate continue, as long as the result does not stray too far from standard Ba'thist formulas. [redacted]

In talks with US officials in April 1986, Assad affirmed the importance of the private sector, which in Syria includes farmers, merchants, and contractors who supply state-owned industries, to the Syrian economy; but officially it remains scorned. In an authoritarian state such as Syria, toleration of thriving private markets must be regarded as tacit government policy. The private sector provides capital through savings and foreign investors and also fills productivity gaps created by the public sector's lack of skilled labor. [redacted]

Although the uneasy coexistence of the two competing systems deprives the public sector of resources, we believe it holds important political benefits for Assad:

- By clinging publicly to Ba'th Party ideology, where state domination of the economy is a key element, he legitimizes his one-man rule while avoiding the increased inefficiency and consumer dissatisfaction that would result from greater state control.
- Underground trade, one of the few sectors of the economy in which people can act independently of state control, helps forestall more open opposition to Assad's sometimes heavyhanded authoritarian rule.
- By placing the private sector under constant scrutiny, Assad keeps the business community psychologically and financially vulnerable and impresses on them the importance of not antagonizing the regime.

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- Factories are kept operating and workers employed because the nationalized industries use the black market to obtain raw materials. [ ]

For all its economic failings, the Ba'th Party, particularly under Assad, has made significant improvements in the material lot of the lower classes:

- Hundreds of villages have been electrified and thousands of kilometers of roads paved since Assad's accession to power.
- The percentage of children attending school has risen sharply in rural areas—particularly in Assad's predominantly Alawite home district of Latakia.
- Regional development has helped head off massive rural-urban migration characteristic of other developing nations.
- Government clinics provide free health care to rural residents and to those city dwellers whose income falls below a set minimum. [ ]

#### **Opposition to the Ba'th Party**

Despite the Ba'th Party's preeminence in Syrian life, it suffers a serious image problem resulting in cynicism among large segments of society, according to scholarly sources and US Embassy reporting. This diminishes regime support and may damage the party's survivability in a post-Assad Syria. It is not clear whether Syrians view the country's problems as systemic or an aberration caused by the current regime. In the latter case, the rank and file may hope to reform the party once the present regime is gone. In any event, [ ] scholars note that the following attitudes are prevalent throughout Syria:

- Assad's monopoly in decisionmaking and his reliance on mostly senior Alawite military advisers relegate the role of the party to that of a rubberstamp.
- The manipulation of elections and the preselection of candidates by the Ba'th Party make a mockery of participatory government.
- The Ba'th and its centrally planned socialist economic agenda are the source of economic stagnation and rampant corruption, neither of which are likely to improve. [ ]

Scholarly sources suggest that cynical if not hostile attitudes toward the Ba'th Party exist within the majority Sunni community, particularly among the prominent urban landowning families, and include the following grievances:

- The political and economic reforms of the Ba'th have promoted the interests of the peasants and minority sects, reducing the Sunnis' traditional power base.
- Senior Sunni officials in the Ba'th, even in the Regional Command, lack a power base comparable to their Alawite counterparts.
- The grassroots organization and indoctrination of the Ba'th Party is an instrument of state control geared toward secularizing the Sunni community in the hope of eliminating them as a recognizable political entity.

- Although the party in principle is a secular one, it is controlled by Alawites, a sect many Sunnis regard as heretical. [ ]

#### **Islam and the Ba'th Party**

The Ba'th Party has emphasized Arabism as the focus of national identity and as a means for transforming Syria's Islamic identity. The party has tried to reconcile the two by identifying Islam and Ba'thism as complementary manifestations of Arab culture. By its doctrine, however, the Ba'th provides for freedom of religion, placing no one faith above the rest. The one exception to this rule, as a result of public pressure, was an amendment to the 1973 Syrian Constitution requiring the President to be a Muslim. The regime's omission of this requirement from the draft constitution prompted Sunni riots. [ ]

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the leading opponent of the Alawites and the Ba'th Party in the early 1970s, when it mobilized popular conservative sentiment against the secular orientation of the new elite on behalf of the traditional urban merchants. According to Western academic studies, the merchants' resentment of government interference in trade—and fear of Ba'thist socialism as a weapon

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in the hands of long-neglected and suppressed rural people to extract revenge against the cities—led to their support for the Brotherhood and contributed to the revival of Islam as an answer to wrenching change and the loss of unity within the Sunni community. Assad's brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in 1982 in Hamah has minimized the threat the Brotherhood poses to the regime. [redacted]

A recent demographic study noted that, despite widespread disgruntlement, conditions for many middle- and lower-class Sunnis have improved over the last two decades—an improvement they probably ascribe to the Ba'thist system. We believe families uprooted from their villages, taking up new and more secular lifestyles in the cities, have left behind both traditions and a politically meaningful Sunni identity. The Ba'th Party and its numerous affiliated institutions have supplanted the Sunni-dominated political parties of the 1950s. Many Sunnis from the old elite, particularly the younger generation, have joined the party, realizing it is the only path to power. [redacted]

**The Ba'th Party and the Succession**

Article 88 of the Syrian Constitution, which sanctions procedures for selecting a successor, stipulates that, in the event the President is permanently incapacitated or dies, a successor is to be nominated by the Ba'th Party Regional Command, ratified by the People's Assembly, and approved in a national referendum. We believe that any successor to Assad will rely heavily on the Ba'th Party apparatus to lend continuity and legitimacy to his rule. [redacted]

We believe that the Ba'th Party stands to gain a greater role in ruling Syria should Assad's successor be less willing or able to monopolize decisionmaking. As none of the leading candidates in Assad's inner circle appear more knowledgeable on economic matters than Assad, we expect the party to continue its leading role in this sector. Should any successor attempt major policy changes, we believe he would depend on the party apparatus for their implementation. [redacted]

Most experts believe that in a post-Assad Syria, power will be assumed by senior Alawite officers who, after agreeing on a successor, will go through the formality of seeking Ba'th Party endorsement. Under these circumstances, we believe a senior Ba'th Party leader, particularly, a Sunni official, stands a good chance of being selected as nominal head of state as well as party secretary general. The selection of a high-ranking Sunni Ba'thist—such as Ahmar, Khaddam, or Mashariqa, who are not in a position to compete for the presidency because they lack a military power base—would legitimize the party's role and possibly galvanize support from the Sunni community for the new regime. [redacted]

[redacted] In time, a figurehead president could eventually accrue substantial decisionmaking power as an arbitrator of factionalized Alawite kingmakers, but real power would remain in the hands of Alawite officers. [redacted]

Should Syria be ruled by a collegial body of Alawite generals and some prominent Sunnis, the members probably would use the Regional Command as a medium through which to govern. Many inner circle members are already on the Command and have used this forum to air their grievances against each other. The size of the Command may have to be reduced to serve as a "Politburo" for Syria's elite. [redacted]

[redacted] this could result in inner circle members establishing patron-client relationships with particular offices of the party bureaucracy, which would compete to promote their parochial policy interests. [redacted]

**Implications for the United States**

We believe that Assad or any successor will continue to garner popular support by adhering to the Ba'thist hardline position toward US interests in the region. Although a pragmatic leader like Assad may be open to compromise, the party will continue to act as the

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Figure 6. Ba'th Party Assistant Secretary General Ahmar boarding Libyan airplane after Israeli interception. [redacted]

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conscience of the regime and implacably oppose an accommodation with Israel. Although Ba'thist doctrine does not preclude peaceful coexistence with the United States and the West, a successor less confident than Assad may adopt a more anti-US position to curry public favor. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, the evolution of the Ba'th Party from a Pan-Arab socialist to a more Syrian nationalist party has made it more amenable to improving ties to the West. The party's retreat from a revolutionary platform to one striving for domestic stability and, to a limited degree, experimentation with a mixed economy may provide US interests with greater opportunities for economic involvement with Syria in terms of trade and foreign investment. The Syrian perception that the United States supports Israel unconditionally, however, will prevent a significant realignment of foreign policy away from the Soviet Union. [redacted]

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### Appendix A

## History and Structure of the Ba'th Party

The Ba'th (Renaissance) Party was founded in Damascus in April 1947 at a time when Arab political thinkers were groping for expressions of statehood and an ideology that would be unique to the Arab condition. The party's primary ideological commitments were to Arab unity, socialization of the economy, and secularization of politics. The Ba'th from its start has had a multiconfessional character. Its founders included an Alawite, Zaki Arsuzi; an Eastern Orthodox Christian, Michel Aflaq; and a Sunni, Salah Bitar.

The Ba'th became the political instrument of the Syrian military in the 1960s. Originally dominated by Syrian civilians, a group of officers—including Hafiz Assad and Salah Jadid—clandestinely founded a Ba'th military organization separate from the main party apparatus while Syria was united with Nasir's Egypt (1958-61). This small group of officers masterminded a coup on 8 March 1963, taking over the party and ousting its founders, including Aflaq and Bitar, in February 1966. Assad steadily rose to the top, ousting regime strongman Salah Jadid in November 1970.

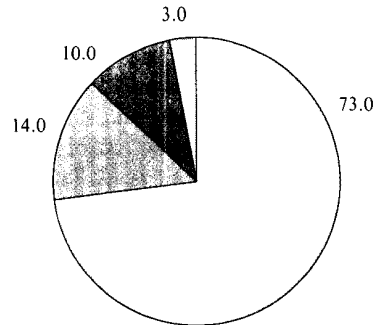
The officers who came to dominate the Army and the party in the 1960s represented a sharp break with Syria's traditional political leadership. The latter had come from the landlord-merchant class centered in the big cities and were primarily Sunni. The officer corps, in contrast, contained members of minority groups and often stressed rural reform. The minorities were overrepresented because they found the military to be the only path for social and economic advancement, given the Sunni domination of political and commercial life.

Since 1963 the Ba'th Party has drawn its broader membership as well as its leaders from minority and rural segments of the population. scholars note that Damascus has never been a Ba'thist stronghold and that the party's support there has been drawn essentially from rural-based students and

**Figure 7**  
**Sectarian Affiliation in Syrian Society and the Ba'th Party Central Committee (BPCC)**

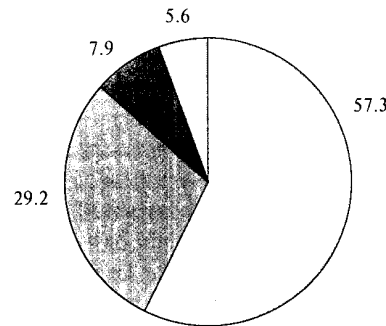
Percent  
Sunni      Combined Christian  
Alawite      Druze

Sect Affiliation in Syria



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Sect Affiliation in BPCC



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teachers. The core of the Ba'th base in the military has come from the Alawites, the Druze group from Jabal al-Duruz, the Sunni group from Hawran, and the Sunni group from Dayr az Zawr. [redacted]

The Ba'th has retained a multiconfessional character by extending the political alliance to Sunnis who share the rural background of the rural Alawites or who have forged their own connections to the new elite. Most of the Sunni officers who rose to high-level military positions during the past 20 years have come from the country towns and rural areas or from the city districts inhabited by former peasants. Army Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi, for example, is from a small town near Aleppo, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Mustafa Talas is from Ar Rastan, a village between Hamah and Hims. Vice President Khaddam is a Sunni, but he is married to a member of the Hawwash family, which provided leadership of the Assads' Alawite Mutawirah tribe under Ottoman rule. [redacted]

The Ba'th Party professes to be a revolutionary organization, but Western scholars note that it has increasingly assumed the character of a large bureaucracy. Members advance by progressing through a training program as much as by performing required functions. Party schools at various levels run courses for cadres and potential leaders. [redacted]

Information on party membership is difficult to obtain, and no official statistics on the size of the party have been made public. The Ba'th came to power in 1963 with no more than a few hundred members. [redacted] although party officials boast a membership of nearly 400,000, the actual figure is probably less than half that number. According to the US Embassy in Damascus, the discrepancy in the numbers is probably attributable to the various levels of party affiliation, which range from full member, to candidate, to supporter. [redacted]

The basic unit of the party is the ring (*haqlah*), which consists of two to seven individuals, one of whom is in command. Some rings, particularly in the military, are based on profession. Recruits outside the military who form a ring are called supporters (*nasir*). The first three months are usually probationary for most

recruits. Following three years of heavy indoctrination, recruits may join the company (*firqah*). The company is made up of five rings or less. At this level the recruit is referred to as a worker. Mobility to the next stages, which are the division (*sha'bah*) and branch (*far'*) depends on perceived commitment by party officials, regularity of attendance at meetings, favoritism, and luck. Two or more companies constitute a division, and two or more divisions constitute a branch. [redacted]

The Ba'thist branch is the highest party organ below the Regional Congress. All relatively important Syrian cities and each of Syria's 13 provinces has a branch. The branch secretaries occasionally gather in Damascus for sessions with party commands. General secretaries and undersecretaries attend the Regional Congress to elect the party leadership. There is a separate structure of branches in the military. [redacted]

The Regional Congress is the supreme Ba'th Party forum in Syria. The National Congress, to which it is formally subordinate, has had no real power for the last 25 years because of the split in the Ba'th Party within the Arab world. The Regional Congress meets every four years, most recently in January 1985, at which time it determines party policy and elects members to the Regional Command. [redacted]

The party leadership is divided into two commands: a Regional Command responsible for the Syrian "region" of the Arab "nation," by far the more important of the two, and the National Command, which supervises the Ba'th Party organization throughout the Arab world. Until 1966 there was one Ba'th National Command. Since then there have been competing commands and competing parties centered in Syria and Iraq. President Assad is secretary general of both the Regional and National Command in Syria. [redacted]

The National Command regularly disseminates information designed to portray the external Ba'th Party organizations as activist bodies that have an impact on the politics of the countries in which they are

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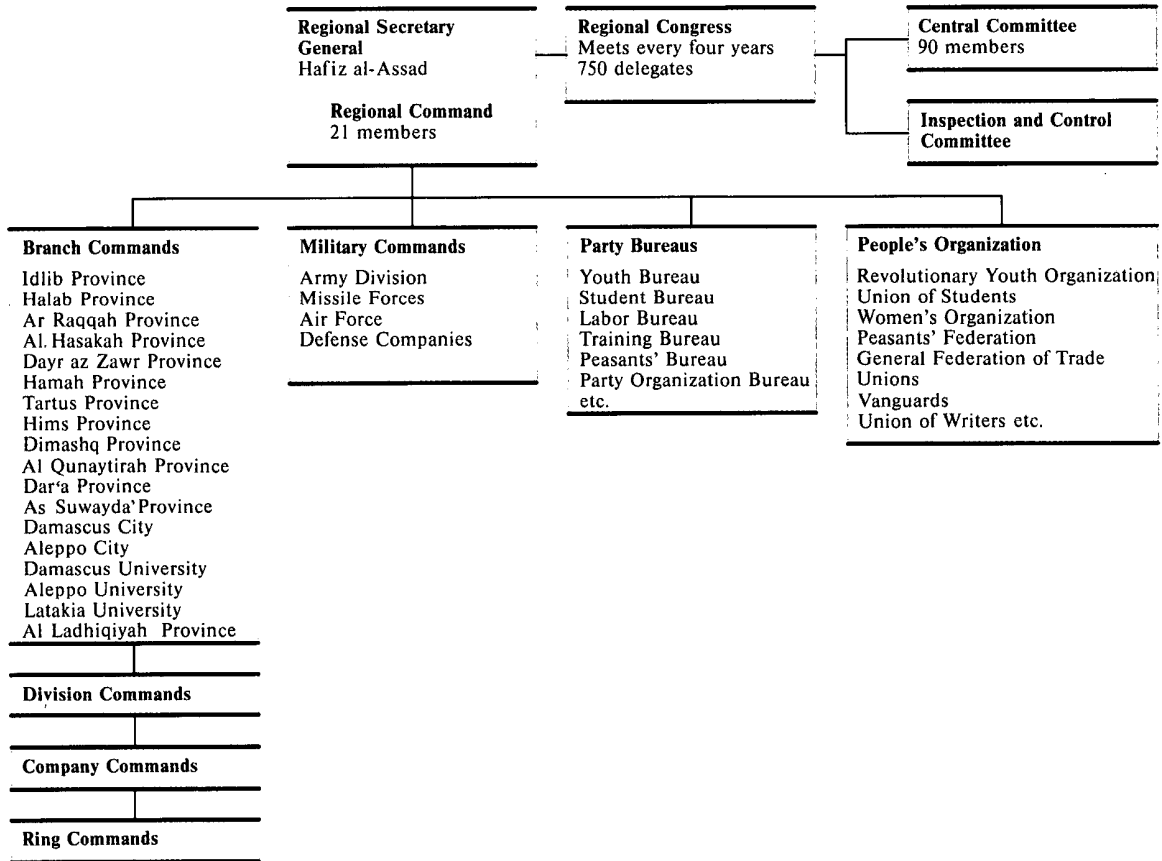
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**Figure 8**  
**The Ba'th Party Organization**



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located. The US Embassy in Damascus reports that these organizations attempt to promote Ba'th Party principles among host country citizens, including the promotion of Palestinian rights and achieving Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. [redacted]

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National Command organizations operate with the permission of the host country, both Arab and non-Arab, and therefore try to avoid being perceived as instruments of Syrian foreign policy. An exception to this rule is the Ba'th Party in Lebanon led by Assam Qansu, which has consistently, overtly, and directly supported—both politically and militarily—Syrian foreign policy objectives in Lebanon. In Arab countries the local Ba'th parties are staffed by nationals of that country, but funding often comes from Damascus. In non-Arab countries Ba'th Party members organize within the Arab student populations and expatriate communities. [redacted]

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The Regional Command consists of 21 members and is the official party governing body responsible for the day-to-day management of party affairs. According to the US Embassy in Damascus, the President will often encourage debate in the Regional Command to gauge the depth of public feeling on a broad range of issues and policies. These discussions may often lead to selection of a new Cabinet, many members of which are represented in the Command. [redacted]

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A subsidiary Ba'th Party leadership body was created during the party's Regional Congress in January 1980. A Central Committee of 90 members was established, according to press accounts, to serve as a supreme governing body for the party. It consists of the Regional Command, representatives of the Army leadership (13 senior officers, among them the Chief of General Staff, division commanders, and the heads of the security apparatus and Syria's elite forces), and some provincial governors and Cabinet members. The Central Committee meets once or twice a year, and its discussions center mainly on economic matters, approval of budgets, annual party programs, and the party's and country's five-year plan. In practice, the Regional Command and the Cabinet have been answerable to the Central Committee only when government policy has been debated approximately every six months. [redacted]

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## **Appendix B**

### **The Ba'th Party in Modern Syrian History**

17 April 1946	French forces leave Syria.
April 1947	Ba'th Party founded.
16 May 1948	Syrian forces move into Palestine.
30 March 1949	Husni Za'im seizes power in Damascus.
14 August 1949	Sami Hinnawi ousts Za'im.
19 December 1949	Adib Shishakli ousts Hinnawi.
25 February 1954	Shishakli ousted, restoration of civilian rule.
February 1958	Syria and Egypt form the United Arab Republic (UAR).
1959	Military committee formed by Syrian Ba'thist officers in Egypt.
28 September 1961	Military coup takes Syria out of UAR. By December 1961 coalition government is formed representing all important factions except the Ba'th and pro-Nasir elements.
March-April 1962	Three coups.
January 1963	Coup attempt.
8 March 1963	Army elements led by non-Ba'thist Ziyad Hariri stage a coup with assistance of Ba'th leaders.
June 1963	Ba'thists oust non-Ba'thists from office.
July 1963	Pro-Nasir officers fail in attempted countercoup. Amin Hafiz becomes President.
23 February 1966	Amin Hafiz deposed; rival Ba'thists stage coup putting extremist wing of Ba'th in power. "Old Guard" of Ba'th Party ousted in coup. Move toward socialism intensifies.
8 September 1966	Salim Hatum fails in countercoup against Salah Jadid, flees to Jordan.
June 1967	Syrian Army loses Golan to Israel.  Coup conspiracy uncovered; Hatum, who had returned to Syria, is shot.

February 1969	Assad uses control of military to strengthen his standing.
September 1970	Syrian forces enter Jordan to aid Palestinians.
13 November 1970	Hafiz Assad seizes power from Jadid; Jadid imprisoned. Assad begins "Corrective Movement."
March 1971	Assad elected President, also leads military and Ba'th Party.
October 1973	War with Israel.
February 1976	Muslim Brotherhood begins anti-Ba'th activity in Syria.
8 October 1980	Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union.
February 1982	Security forces destroy much of Hamah in putting down Brotherhood revolt.
June 1982	Israeli move into Lebanon; heavy losses of Syrian aircraft.
November 1983	Assad seriously ill.
11 March 1984	Assad appoints three vice presidents to share workload.
November 1985	Two Syrian jets shot down by Israeli Air Force over Syrian territory.
February 1986	Israeli Air Force forces down Libyan passenger jet; Ba'th Assistant Secretary General Ahmar aboard.



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