

The Ba'ath Party

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The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party :

(حزب البعث العربي الاشتراكي) was **founded** in Damascus in the **1940's** as the original secular Arab nationalist movement, to combat Western colonial rule. In Arabic, ba'ath means renaissance or resurrection. It functioned as a pan-Arab party with branches in different Arab countries, but was strongest in Syria and Iraq, coming to power in both countries in 1963. In 1966 the Syrian and Iraqi parties split into rival organizations mainly for ideological reasons – the Syria-based party being aligned with the Soviet Union while the Iraq-based party adopted a generally more centrist stance. Both Ba'ath parties retained the same name and maintain parallel structures in the Arab world.

The Ba'ath Party **came to power in Syria** on **8th of March 1963**. Later that same year, the Ba'athists gained control of **Iraq** and ran the country on two separate occasions, **briefly in 1963** and then for a longer period lasting from **July 1968 until 2003**. After the de facto deposition of President Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in the course of the 2003 Iraq War, the invading US army banned the Iraqi Ba'ath Party in **June 2003**.

The Arabic word Ba'ath means "renaissance" or "resurrection" as in the party's founder Michel Aflaq's published works "On The Way Of Resurrection". **Ba'athist beliefs combine Arab Socialism, nationalism, and Pan-Arabism.** The mostly **secular ideology** often contrasts with that of other Arab governments in the Arab world, which sometimes tend to have leanings towards Islamism and theocracy.

The **motto of the Party is "Unity, Freedom, Socialism" (in Arabic wahda, hurriya, ishtirakiya).** **Unity refers to Arab unity, freedom emphasizes freedom from foreign control and interference in particular, and socialism refers to what has been termed Arab Socialism rather than to Marxism.**

Underlying Political Philosophy

The Ba'ath party and the Arabian national movement have been influenced by 19th century mainland European thinkers, notably conservative German philosophers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte of the Königsberg University Kantian school and center-left French "Positivists" such as Auguste Comte and, more importantly, professor Ernest Renan of the Sorbonne University in Paris. Tellingly, Ba'ath party co-founders Michel Aflaq and Salah al Bitar both studied at

the Sorbonne in the early 1930's, at a time when center-left Positivism was still the dominant ideology amongst France's academic elite.

The "Kulturation" concept of Johann Gottfried Herder and the Grimm Brothers had a certain impact. Kulturation defines a nationality more by a common cultural tradition and popular folklore than by national, political or religious boundaries and was considered by some as being more suitable for the German, Arab or Ottoman and Turkic countries.

The Ba'ath party also had a significant number of Arabic-speaking Christians among its founding members. For them, most prominently Michel Aflaq. A resolutely nationalist and secular political framework was a suitable way to evade faith-based minority status and to get full acknowledgement as citizens.

After 1945, the traditional Arab Muslim elite failed to prevent the foundation of Israel and was not able to provide welfare and administrative standards comparable to the western world. The secular and highly disciplined Ba'ath movement was seen as less corrupt and better organized. In multi-ethnic, multi-faith and highly divergent countries like Iraq and Syria, the Ba'ath concept allowed non-Muslims, as well as secular-minded Sunni and Shi'a Muslims to work under one common roof. The mentioning of a socialist stance allowed as well for a closer co-operation with the Soviet Union after 1945.

Structure

The Ba'ath Party was created as a cell-based organization, with an emphasis on withstanding government repression and infiltration.

This made the party very difficult to infiltrate, as even members would not know the identity of many other Ba'athists. As the U.S. and its allies discovered in Iraq in 2003, the cell structure has also made the Party highly resilient as an armed resistance organization.

* The Party Cell or Circle, composed of three to seven members, constitutes the basic organisational unit of the Ba'ath Party. There are two sorts of Cells : Member Cells and Supporter Cells. The latter consist of candidate members, who are being gradually introduced into Party work. Cells functioned at the neighborhood, workplace or village level, where members would meet to discuss and execute party directives introduced from above.

- * A Party Division comprises two to seven Cells, controlled by a Division Commander.
- * A Party Section, which comprises two to five Divisions, functions at the level of a large city quarter, a town, or a rural district.
- * The Branch comes above the Sections; it comprises at least two sections, and operates at the provincial level and also, at least in Syria, with one Branch each in the country's four universities.
- * The Regional Congress, which combines all the branches, was set up to elect the Regional Command as the core of the Party leadership and top decision-making mechanism. A "Region" (quṭr), in Ba'athist parlance, is an Arab state, such as Syria or Iraq or Lebanon, reflecting the Party's refusal to acknowledge them as nation-states.
- * The National Command of the Ba'ath Party ranked over the Regional Commands. Until the 1960's, it formed the highest policy-making and co-ordinating council for the Ba'ath movement throughout the Arab world at large in both theory and practice. However, from 1966, there has existed two rival National Commands for the Ba'ath Party, both largely ceremonial, after the Iraqi and Syrian Regional Commands entered into conflict.

The Ba'ath in Syria, 1954–1963

Syrian politics took a dramatic turn in **1954** when the **military regime of Adib al-Shishakli was overthrown** and a democratic system restored. The Ba'ath, now a large and popular organisation, gained representation in the parliamentary elections that year. The Ba'ath was one of these new formations, but faced considerable competition from ideological enemies, notably the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which was intrinsically opposed to Arab nationalism and was seen as pro-Western, and the Syrian Communist Party (SCP). In addition to the parliamentary level, all these parties as well as Islamists competed in street-level activity and sought to recruit support among the military.

In **1958, Syria merged with Egypt in the United Arab Republic (1958 - 1961)**, an extremely popular position in any case. As political parties other than Nasser's Arab Socialist Union were not permitted to operate, the Ba'ath along with Syria's other parties faced the choice of dissolution or suppression.

In **August 1959, the Ba'ath Party** held a congress which, in line with Aflaq's views, approved of its **liquidation into the Arab Socialist Union**. This deci-

on was not universally accepted in party ranks, however, and **the following year a fourth party congress was convened which reversed it.**

Meanwhile, a small group of Syrian Ba'athist officers stationed in Egypt were observing with alarm the party's poor position and the increasing fragility of the union. They decided to form a secret military committee : its initial members were Lieutenant-Colonel Muhammad 'Umran, majors Salah Jadid and Ahmad al-Mir, and captains Hafiz al-Asad and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi.

The **merger** was not a happy experience for Syria, and in **1961**, a **military coup in Damascus brought it to an end.** Sixteen prominent politicians signed a statement supporting the coup, among them al-Hurani and al-Bitar (although the latter soon retracted his signature!). The party was in crisis : the secession was extremely controversial among Syrians in general and most unpopular among the radical nationalists who formed the Ba'ath membership. A large section of the membership left in protest, setting up the Socialist Unity Vanguard and gaining considerable support. The leadership around Aflaq was bitterly contested for its timidity in opposing the separation. Al-Hawrani, now a determined opponent of reunification, left the Ba'ath and re-established his Arab Socialist Party.

Aflaq sought to reactivate the splintered party by calling a **Fifth National Congress** held in Homs in **May 1962**, from which both al-Hawrani's supporters and the Socialist Unity Vanguard were excluded. A **compromise** was reached **between the pro-Nasser elements and the more cautious leadership.** The leadership line was reflected in the position the **congress adopted** in favour of **"considered unity" as opposed to the demands for "immediate unity"** launched by the Socialist Unity Vanguard (later the Socialist Unity Movement), the Nasserists and the Arab Nationalist Movement. Meanwhile the Syrian party's secret Military Committee was also planning how to take power, having been granted considerable freedom of action by the civilian leadership in recognition of its need for secrecy.

The Ba'ath takes power in Syria and Iraq, 1963

That same year, the Syrian party's military committee succeeded in persuading Nasserist and independent officers to make common cause with it, and they successfully carried out **a military coup on 8th of March 1963.** A National Revolutionary Command Council took control and assigned itself legislative

power. It appointed Salah al-Din al-Bitar as head of a "national front" government. The Ba'ath participated in this government along with the Arab Nationalist Movement, the United Arab Front and the Socialist Unity Movement.

As historian Hanna Batatu notes, this took place without the fundamental disagreement over "immediate" or "considered" reunification having been resolved. The Ba'ath moved to consolidate its power within the new regime, purging Nasserist officers in April. Subsequent disturbances led to the fall of the al-Bitar government, and in the aftermath of Jasim Alwan's failed Nasserist coup in July, **the Ba'ath monopolized power.**

Ideological transformation and division, 1963–1968

The challenges of building a Ba'athist state led to considerable ideological discussion and internal struggle in the party. The Iraqi party was increasingly dominated by Ali Salih al-Sa'di, an unsophisticated thinker according to Batatu, who took a hardline leftist approach, declaring himself a Marxist. He gained support in this from Syrian regional secretary Mahmud al-Shufi and from Yasin al-Hafiz, one of the party's few ideological theorists. Some members of the secret military committee also sympathized with this line.

The far-left tendency gained control at the party's Sixth National Congress of 1963, where hardliners from the dominant Syrian and Iraqi regional parties joined forces to impose a hard left line, calling for "socialist planning", "collective farms run by peasants", "workers' democratic control of the means of production", a party based on workers and peasants, and other demands reflecting a certain emulation of Soviet-style socialism. In a coded attack on Aflaq, the congress also condemned "ideological notability" within the party.

Aflaq, bitterly angry at this transformation of his party, retained a nominal leadership role, but the National Command as a whole came under the control of the radicals.

The volte-face was received with anger by elements in the Iraqi party, which suffered considerable internal division. The Nationalist Guard, a paramilitary unit supported al-Sa'di, as did the Ba'athist Federation of Students, the Union of Workers, and most party members.

Most of its members among the military officer corps was opposed, as was President Abd al-Salam 'Arif. Coup and counter-coup ensued within the party, whose factions did not shrink from employing the military in settling their inter-

nal **differences**. This eventually **allowed 'Arif to take control in Iraq and eliminate Ba'athist power in Iraq for the time being.**

After disposing of its Nasserist rivals in **1963, the Ba'ath functioned as the only officially recognized Syrian political party**, but factionalism and splintering within the party led to a succession of governments and new constitutions. On **23 February 1966, a military junta led by Salah Jadid took power, and set out on a more radical line**. Although they had not been supporters of the victorious far-left line at the Sixth Party Congress, they had now moved to adopt its positions and displaced the more moderate wing in power, **purging from the party its original founders, Aflaq and al-Bitar.**

The Syrian Ba'ath and the Iraqi Ba'ath were by now two separate parties, each maintaining that it was the genuine party and electing a National Command to take charge of the party across the Arab world. However, in Syria, the Regional Command was the real centre of party power, and the membership of the National Command was a largely honorary position.

At this juncture, the Syrian Ba'ath party split into two factions : the "progressive" faction, led by President and Regional Secretary Nureddin al-Atassi gave priority to the radical Marxist-influenced line the Ba'ath was pursuing, but was closely **linked to the security forces of Deputy Secretary Salah Jadid, the country's strongman from 1966.** This faction was strongly pre-occupied with what it termed the "Socialist transformation" in Syria, ordering large-scale nationalization of economic assets and agrarian reform. It favored an equally radical approach in external affairs, and condemned "reactionary" Arab regimes while preaching "people's war" against Israel. This led to Syria's virtual isolation even within the Arab world.

The other faction, which came to dominate the armed forces, was headed by Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad. He took **a more pragmatic political line, viewing reconciliation with the conservative Arab states, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as essential for Syria's strategic position regardless of their political color.** He also called **for reversing some of the socialist economic measures and for allowing a limited role for non-Ba'athist political parties in state and society.**

Despite constant maneuvering and government changes, the two factions remained in an uneasy coalition of power. **After the 1967 Six-Day War, tensions increased, and Assad's faction strengthened its hold on the military.**

From late 1968, it began dismantling Salah Jadid's support networks, facing ineffectual resistance from the civilian branch of the party that remained under his control. This duality of power persisted until **November 1970**, when, in **another coup, Assad succeeded in ousting Atassi as prime minister** and imprisoned both him and Jadid. He then set upon a project of rapid institution-building, re-opening parliament and adopting a permanent constitution for the country, which had been ruled by military fiat or provisional constitutional documents since 1963.

Membership numbers were increased to well over one million (reflecting both a conscious desire to turn the previous vanguard party into a regime-supporting mass organization, and the fact that party membership was now vital to advancement in many sectors).

Other socialist parties that accepted the basic orientation of the regime were permitted to operate again, and in **1972** the **National Progressive Front was established** as a coalition of these legal parties. However, they were only permitted to act as junior partners to the Ba'ath.

Hafez al-Assad, one of the longest-ruling leaders of the modern Arab world, remained as president of Syria until his **death** in **2000**, when his son **Bashar al Assad succeeded him as President and as Regional and National Secretary of the party**. Since then, the party has experienced an important generational shift, and a discreet ideological re-orientation decreasing the emphasis on socialist planning in the economy, but no significant changes have taken place in its relation to the state and state power.

The Ba'ath today holds 134 of the 250 seats in the Syrian Parliament and the Syrian Constitution stipulates that it is "the leading party of society and state".

The party outside Syria

Through its Damascus-based National Command, the Syrian Ba'ath Party has branches in Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, Iraq (currently split into two factions).

Among the Palestinians, as-Sa'iqa, a member organization of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, is the Syrian Ba'ath party branch.

The Iraq-based Ba'ath Party

History

In Iraq, the Ba'ath party remained a civilian group and lacked strong support within the military.

The Ba'athists first came to power in the coup of February 1963, when Abd al-Salam 'Arif became president. Interference from the historic leadership around Aflaq and disputes between the moderates and extremists, culminating in an attempted coup by the latter in November 1963, served to discredit the party. After Arif's takeover in November 1963, the moderate military Ba'athist officers initially retained some influence but were gradually eased out of power over the following months.

In July 1968, a bloodless coup brought to power the Ba'athist general Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr. Wranglings within the party continued.

Emerging as a party strongman, Saddam Hussein eventually used his growing power to push al-Bakr aside in 1979 and ruled Iraq until June 2003. Although almost all the Ba'athist leadership had no military background, under Hussein the party changed dramatically and became heavily militarized, with its leading members frequently appearing in uniform.

Post-Saddam

In June 2003, the US-led occupation forces in Iraq banned the Ba'ath party. Some criticize the additional step the US took - of banning all members of the Ba'ath party from the new government, as well as from public schools and colleges - as blocking too many experienced people from participation in the new government. Several teachers have lost their jobs, causing protests and demonstrations at schools and universities.

The party outside Iraq

The Iraq-based Ba'ath Party had branches in various Arab countries, such as Lebanon, Mauritania and Jordan. After the fall of the Saddam government,

some branches have distanced themselves from the central party, such as the branches in Yemen and Sudan.

The party works amongst the Palestinians directly through the Arab Liberation Front (known as ALF or Jabhat al-Tahrir al-'Arabiyah) founded by Zeid Heidar. It is a member organization of PLO.