Burning Country

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Syrians in Revolution and War

NEW EDITION

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Revolution from Above

O Sultan, my master, if my clothes
are ripped and torn
it is because your dogs with claws
are allowed to tear me.
And your informers every day are those
who dog my heels ...
the reason you've lost wars twice
was because you've been walled in from
mankind's cause and voice.

Nizar Qabbani, 'Notes on the Book of Defeat'[1]

Geography bestowed diversity on Syria.[2] Unlike Egypt, with its central river and ancient tradition of central government, the lands to the east of the Mediterranean consist of mountains, forests, plains and deserts, and have housed plural and sometimes fiercely independent peoples.

This topography of division made cooperation necessary, and encouraged the free interchange of goods and ideas. For millennia, Syria's various communities have argued and traded in the Levant's great cities. Both Damascus and Aleppo claim the title of oldest continuously inhabited city on earth. Before the Umayad Mosque in Damascus was a mosque it was a cathedral (it still houses the head of John the Baptist); before it was a cathedral it was a Roman-style temple to Jupiter; before that, a temple to Haddad, the Aramean thunder god.

As part of the fertile crescent, Syria was the site of the first agricultural revolution; the plants and animals domesticated here became staples for much of the world. The world's first alphabet (Phoenician) was excavated north of Lattakia. And the country is pocked with tells, hills made over millennia of human habitation – the pebbles beneath your

feet are not pebbles but the shards of ten million pots manufactured and discarded generation after generation.

It's been a land of invasions – Hittite, Egyptian, Assyrian, Macedonian, Crusader, Mongol, among many others – and was once, under the Islamic Umayad dynasty, briefly the seat of a world empire. It's welcomed peaceable immigrants too, pilgrims and poets, and refugees from countries including the Balkans, the Caucasus, Turkish Armenia, and most recently from Palestine and Iraq.

And it's always been a trading zone, once – before Europe developed and dominated the sea routes – one of the world's most important, on the caravan route through Jerusalem to Mecca and Yemen, and on the Silk Route linking Europe and Africa to India and China. Aleppo's textile industry still provided underwear to Harrods until the revolution and war.[3]

The country was crucial in the development of the three main varieties of Abrahamic monotheism, and has been a site of constant contestation between religions, sects and ideologies, and more violently, between warlords and armies harnessing religious rhetoric. Its sectarian composition shifted with time and according to the dominant power structures. Christians remained a majority in the first centuries of Muslim rule. Later heterodox Shia groups, particularly the Nizari Ismailis, prospered alongside the Crusader states. Saladin's Ayyubid dynasty and then the Mamluks re-established orthodox Sunni rule, which the Ottomans continued for 400 years.

Today about 65 per cent of Syrians are Sunni Arabs. Alawi Arabs are 10 to 12 per cent. The mainly Arab Christians, mostly Orthodox and Eastern Catholic, but also Assyrian, Chaldean and Armenian, including a small Aramaic-speaking community at Maalula, constitute 10 per cent. Kurds, almost all Sunnis, speaking two main dialects, account for another 10 per cent. The remainder are Druze, Ismailis, Twelver Shia, and Turkmen. The Bedouin, their circulation blocked by postcolonial borders, are mostly settled now. Of course, these categories fail to reflect the enormous diversity within each group. Sunni Arabs, for instance, are differentiated by urban–rural, regional, tribal, familial, and of course gender and class cleavages, and then by individual temperament and experience.

Social differences often count a great deal, but sometimes don't matter at all. Tolerance and purist bigotry are two of the poles of any country's life. Even today, with battle lines drawn, common interests, alliances and love affairs cross political and sectarian divides. Generalisations are sometimes necessary, but it's most accurate to think of Syria as a collective of 23 million individuals.

* * *

The Ottoman Empire ruled Syria from 1516 until 1917, first as a thriving multicultural Caliphate, later as Europe's 'sick man' struggling at once to keep more vigorous imperialisms at bay and to resist internal nationalisms.

The Ottoman 'millet' system, whereby the major religious communities applied their own jurisprudence to their own affairs, provided some local, if patriarchal, balance to the central state and allowed for a continuing cosmopolitanism. But the system had its limits. The Alawis, deigned a heretical group, were not recognised as a millet. (The Druze were also considered heretics, but they enjoyed a level of autonomy in recognition of their actual power in the Lebanon mountains.) The technological limits of the pre-modern state meant that the Sultan cast very little shadow on most Syrians. Immediate government was local and traditional; Istanbul lay in a distant land. The dramatic exceptions to this general rule were the armed taxation and conscription convoys which periodically made their way around the increasingly poor villages demanding grain, gold and men who'd disappear in unheard-of wars.

Syria's economy stagnated. Samuel Lyde, an Anglican clergyman on a hopeless mid-nineteenth-century mission to convert the Alawis of the coastal mountains, described 'the increasing desolation and depopulation, which in the neighbourhood of Ladikeeh are going on at the present moment, in the burning of villages, and the death, in perpetually recurring petty fights, of their inhabitants ... scenes of blood and desolation which must ... end in the utter ruin of the country and extirpation of the population'.[4]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conditions of poverty, famine and recurrent epidemic spurred a wave of emigration

to South and North America, the Caribbean, and west Africa. A couple of hundred Syrian-Lebanese drowned with the Titanic. The 'Street of the Turks' in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fictional Macondo is so called because the people were Ottomans when they arrived in Colombia, but they were Syrian Ottomans, Arabs. Today millions describe themselves as Syrian-Brazilians. Guyana's richest family is the Maqdeesis. Carlos Menem, former Argentinian president, is of Syrian origin too. Beyond South America, the Argentinian drink Yerba Maté is best known on the Syrian coast.

By now the Islamic aspect of Turkish rule was relegated to the propaganda department. Turkish chauvinism – a response to European national and colonial models – was the governing ideology. The result was a stirring of cultural nationalism in the Arab provinces, involving the revival of classical Arabic as a language of education and politics, and a rediscovery of its literature. Various reformist attempts to decentralise the empire ultimately failed, and the Ottomans met nationalist agitation with harsh repression.

For decades the ailing empire had been kept intact only by European agreement – the competing states hadn't wanted their profitable power balance upset. World War I, and Turkey's alliance with Germany, changed that. In 1917 the British-assisted Arab Revolt ended Turkish rule in Syria.

The agreement between Sharif Hussain of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon appeared to grant British support for 'the freedom of the Arab peoples' in return for armed action against Turkey. What Sharif Hussain and the nationalists understood from this was a promised Arab independence (in the eastern Arab world) and unity through federation, but the British and the French had already signed the Sykes–Picot agreement, which carved up the Arabs into British and French zones, and the British, with the Balfour Declaration, had granted a section of Palestine to Zionism.

At the post-war conferences of Versailles and San Remo, Sykes–Picot was readjusted and then implemented against the clearly formulated wishes of the people of the region. In July 1919, delegates had attended a Pan-Syrian Congress in Damascus which specifically called for the unity of 'bilad al-sham', a cultural and quasi-administrative unit under

the Ottomans containing the current states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel-Palestine, Jordan and parts of southern Turkey.

Sharif Hussain's son Faysal, now king of Syria, was pressured to accept a French Mandate. He conceded, but his Chief of Staff Yusuf al-Azmeh, refusing to accept the surrender, led a small army to Maysaloon, where 2,000 were killed by French warplanes.

The Arabs called 1920 – the year of San Remo, of French occupation in Syria and British occupation in Iraq – *aam al-nakba*, the Year of Catastrophe. In July an intifada broke out in Iraq. Then in 1947 and 1948 a new Nakba – the ethnic cleansing of Palestine – drowned the memory of the old.

Under the French, the Maronite statelet on Mount Lebanon was expanded into a larger Lebanese state including reluctant Orthodox Christians, Shia and Sunni Muslims, and Druze. Next, Arab-majority areas north of Aleppo were ceded to Turkey, and in 1939 the entire Iskenderoon governorate was handed over in return for Turkish neutrality in the approaching global war. Cities lost their hinterlands, markets and water supplies.

The French made further, unsuccessful efforts to dismantle the country, envisaging an Alawi state in the mountains around Lattakia and a Druze state based on Sweida in the south. 'Autonomous' puppet governments were set up in Aleppo and Damascus.

To some extent the origins of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Lebanese civil wars, and the current chronic instability in Iraq and Syria can be traced to this early twentieth-century bout of imperialist map-making and sectarian engineering. The Kurds – split between Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran – inherited no state whatsoever from the ruins of Ottomanism; the Arabs were embittered by the imposition of mini-states. For Syrians in particular, the dismemberment of *bilad al-sham* was a primal trauma. Because the truncated postcolonial state had no historical legitimacy, Syrians tended to affirm either more local identities or supra-state allegiances – to *bilad al-sham*, or the Arab Nation, or the global Islamic community.

Alongside the political-geographical cutting came a deliberate economic stunting. The French 'open door' policy flooded the country with cheap imports, while Syrian exports were heavily taxed. Consequences included a diminishment of gold reserves by 70 per

cent, a depreciation of the currency, mushrooming unemployment, and a collapse in traditional skilled manufacturing. Throughout the French occupation, when 40 per cent of children died before the age of five, less than 3 per cent of the state budget was spent on health care. And crippling collective punishments caused grievous social as well as economic ramifications. For example, the gold fine imposed after an Alawi rebellion in 1921 made the mountain peasants for the first time hire their daughters out as domestic servants to the urban rich, which led to mutual resentments, which in turn intensified sectarianism when an Alawi-dominated army (developed from the French 'Army of Minorities') later took over the country's political life.[5]

Resistance to the occupation was constant, and from 1925 to 1927 it flared into a large-scale uprising. The Druze rose under the anti-sectarian slogan 'Religion is for God and the Homeland For All', while the peasants of the Ghouta, aflame with the nationalism of nearby Damascus, also acted. The French bombarded the Ghouta's villages – today these are towns ravaged by Assad's bombardment – and brought in colonial troops from Morocco and Senegal to put down the rebellion. A residential quarter of Old Damascus was burned to the ground by French bombing. Rebuilt, the area is now called Hareeqa or 'Fire'. This is where the first Damascene mass protest of 2011 would occur.

The French finally evacuated in April 1946, and power was inherited by the nationalist elite. The Mandate-era National Bloc split along regional lines into the Damascus-based National Party and the Aleppo- and Homs-based People's Party, but both represented the same merchant-landlord oligarchy. The big landowners had only established absolute private control over their territories during the Mandate and were often themselves city dwellers, as unresponsive to peasant needs as they were distant from their lands.

The bourgeois democracy which Syria at this stage enjoyed was incapable of redressing the popular grievances of the deprived social classes. Elections were held, but there was no secret ballot to protect dependent peasants, nor any non-elite parties to vote for. After the disastrous 1948 defeat in Palestine, the ruling class was utterly discredited among Syrians of all backgrounds. The calls that would

be raised within a decade for an independent socialist economy were stirred not by workers' action but by outraged nationalism.

Colonel Husni al-Zaim's CIA-backed coup in March 1949, the first such coup in the modern Arab world, was rapidly followed by two more. Democracy was briefly re-established in 1954, but by then the centre of gravity in the Syrian polity had shifted irretrievably to the army – now both a vehicle of advancement for hitherto marginalised rural and minority groups and a vanguard of nationalist opinion to pressure civilian decision makers.

Soon the ideological and factional battles fought within the army would determine the fate of the country, but in the 1950s there was still space for political and social action beyond the armed forces. Throughout the decade, urbanisation and industrialisation created new opportunities as well as further dislocations. Trades unions were set up by the small but growing working class. School and university education expanded greatly; this as well as employment by the military explains the upward mobility of rural minority groups. The mechanisation of agriculture, on the other hand, led to widespread rural unemployment.

The most important response was a powerful peasants' movement harnessed and directed by Akram Hawrani, a key figure whose story illustrates the interconnection of nationalist and class politics. A descendant of the fifteenth-century *shaikh* who established the Rifa'i Sufi order in Hama, Hawrani grew up resentful of the town's *zawaat*, the big landlords who called themselves 'the flower of God's elect'. His Arabism was fired in 1915 when his friend Ali al-Armanaazi was hanged by the Turks in Beirut's main square. Hawrani fought to expel the French garrison from Hama in 1945, and commanded perhaps the greater portion of Syrian raids on Zionist forces in Palestine in 1948. He blamed the Palestine defeat on social backwardness and 'feudalism', and held that, given the peasants were a majority of Arabs, peasant emancipation was a prerequisite of Arab national success.

Hawrani was the prime mover in the Arab Socialist Party (ASP), which had strong grassroots cross-sectarian support. A famous ASP slogan was 'Hatu al-quffah wal-kreik lin'ash al-agha wal-beik', or (in nearly rhyming translation) 'Bring shovel and brush to bury lord and boss'. In 1951, amid peasant protests across northern Syria expanding

into incipient revolt, 20,000 people attended a three-day peasant congress in Aleppo, and Hawrani launched a 'land to the peasant' movement.

The ASP called for the secret ballot, which became law in 1954, when Hawrani sat in parliament. In that election the oligarchy still won a majority, but the new middle class parties made a breakthrough to gain 20 per cent of the seats. Hawrani was also behind the Ghab marshes reclamation project launched in 1952 to turn the malarial swamp between Hama and Idlib into fertile agricultural land. In 1957, thanks to his efforts, it became illegal to eject peasants from their holdings.

Hawrani was a democrat who vehemently opposed the 1951 to 1954 Shishakli dictatorship which suspended parliamentary life, repressed the peasant movement, and for the first time installed the presidential system. Yet the ASP merged with the Baath Party in 1952, bringing it much of its popular base. Hawrani was influenced by the pro-peasant statements of foundational Baathists such as Michel Aflaq, who wrote: 'the struggle can only be based on the generality of the Arabs, and these will not take part in it if they are exploited'.[6]

The Baath (its name means 'Resurrection') linked the battle against the oligarchy to a romantic version of Arabism, a term which requires brief examination. The definition of 'Arab' has expanded over the last 150 years from describing tribal nomads (as opposed to townsmen), to the people of the Arabian peninsula, and finally to those peoples, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf, brought together by the Arabic language and culture.

Egypt's Abdul Nasser appealed to the Arabs in the latter sense, as peoples connected by historical forces, for the purposes of strategic strength; the Baath Party, however, reached far beyond the traditional nationalist picture and saw the Arabs as a nation outside history, as an eternal creative force embodying a unified will (Henri Bergson's philosophy was important). That Baathism found religious significance in the Arab identity is evident from its slogan 'One Arab Nation Bearing an Eternal Message'. The word used for message here (*risala*) is the term for the message revealed to the Prophet (more often called 'Messenger' in Arabic) Muhammad. And the word used for nation is *umma* – a word previously used to denote the international

Muslim community. In this respect Baathism (like, in a very different way, activist Salafism) should be seen as one of the twentieth century's many attempts to compensate for the collapse of traditional religion and to channel religious energies to political ends. Michel Aflaq was clear on this: 'Europe is as fearful of Islam today as she has been in the past. She now knows that the strength of Islam, which in the past expressed that of the Arabs, has been reborn and has appeared in a new form: Arab nationalism.'[7]

In its effort to spiritualise and mythologise the Arabs, Baathism surely takes nationalism to absurd extremes, but it is significant that the Baath Party was founded by a Damascene Christian, and that it often appealed to minority communities. Arab nationalism's potential strength was its inclusive nature, the possibility that Sunni and Shia, Christians and Muslims, urban and rural populations would all identify together as members of the Arab Nation.

The Baath called for a unified Arab state from Morocco to Iraq, from Sudan to Syria. Economically, it opposed 'feudalism' and the oligarchy, but not small or medium business. It had a lower middle class base and in its first stage was a party of schoolteachers (leadership) and schoolboys (mass membership). Itinerant doctors and intellectuals too spread Baathism to the provincial towns and countryside.[8]

The Party's pan-Arabism stood midway, 'geographically' speaking, between the Greater Syrian nationalism of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the internationalism of the Syrian Communist Party. The radically secularist SSNP's quasi-fascist vision of the Syrian homeland included Iraq and Cyprus as well as *bilad al-sham*. It attracted support particularly in minority communities, but was ruthlessly suppressed after it assassinated the Baathist officer Adnan al-Malki in 1955. The Communist Party never recovered from its disastrous decision to follow Moscow's line and recognise the partition of Palestine, but it did build a significant base, especially among Kurds excluded from Arabist politics.

In the wake of Nasser's 1956 nationalisation of the Suez canal and the consequent British-French-Israeli attack on Egypt, a surge of anti-Western nationalist sentiment benefitted Syria's middle class and leftist parties. The influence of Baathist and Communist ministers in cabinet was buttressed by support from the army and on the streets.

The nationalist tide – and dissatisfaction with truncated Syria – was such that in 1958 Syria's rulers voluntarily ceded power to Nasser and the country became part of the United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR redistributed some land and offered social provision to the poor. On the other hand, it repealed the right to strike and banned independent trades unions. The only legally permitted party was Nasser's Arab Socialist Union. The Syrian Baath therefore dissolved itself in 1959.

The dream of union was wildly popular in Syria, yet the UAR failed miserably. In effect, Syria became a colony of Egypt, its government, economic planning, and security controlled by Egyptians. Worse, this period installed (and to some extent normalised) a police state on a grander scale than before. In any case, the UAR fell apart in 1961 and so, more or less, did the Baath Party. Opposing reunification, Akram Hawrani broke away to refound the ASP. The remnants squabbled over the correct response to Nasser's version of unity.

The secessionist coup of 1961 was led by conservative officers who immediately reprivatised nationalised businesses and served redistributed land back to the landlords. Meanwhile a clandestine Baathist Military Committee, including Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad, had been founded in 1959, aiming first to prevent secession from Egypt, then to seize power in Syria. On 8 March 1963, the Military Committee staged a successful coup, at first in coalition with Nasserist and independent officers. For the rest of the decade various factions jostled for control within government; the losers were killed, exiled or imprisoned. The first victims were hundreds of conservatives, then Nasserists of the urban Sunni communities. The still-vocal pro-Nasser street presence was violently repressed, the media brought under absolute state control, and a new influx of rural and minority recruits were brought into the army to replace those pushed out. Akram Hawrani went into exile.

Within the Baath, the pro-Aflaq wing favoured an accommodation with the bourgeoisie and an expanded democratic space, but Salah Jadid's leftists won out, and at the Sixth National Congress, top-down revolution in Syria was prioritised over pan-Arab unification. During the dictatorship of what is sometimes known as the neo-Baath, nationalisations and agrarian reforms accompanied Soviet-style economic

planning. Meanwhile Jadid demanded, but didn't prepare for, a 'people's war' to liberate Palestine.

Then came Israel's June 1967 defeat of the Syrian, Egyptian and Jordanian armies. Syria lost its air force and, shockingly, the entire Golan Heights, including the city of Qunaitra. Syrian soldiers fought fiercely to defend the city, but panicked and fled when they heard the infamous Communique No. 66, issued by the defence minister himself, which stated that Qunaitra had fallen before it actually did. The defence minister in question was Hafez al-Assad. The bitter notion that Assad *père* had deliberately given up Syrian territory persisted in whispers for decades, and in 2011 spurred a chant which illustrated the gulf between state propaganda and popular perceptions of the regime's nationalism: *ibn al-haram/ba'a al-jowlan* (The Bastard Sold the Golan). But there are other, more convincing, explanations for Assad's blunder. Perhaps by announcing the fall of Qunaitra he hoped to spur the Soviet Union into action on Syria's behalf; or perhaps he hoped the UN would pressure Israel into a ceasefire. Most likely the key problem was amateurism. Assad failed to double-check reports from the front of an Israeli tank column near Qunaitra, assumed the city had fallen, and scrambled to save his forces. In any case, the army, profoundly weakened by its politicisation and the years of recurrent purges, suffered from poor communications.

The defeat sharpened the struggle within the Baath, now one between the partisans of Assad and those of Jadid. Power decisively shifted to Assad during the 1970 'Black September' conflict between the Jordanian monarchy and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) guerrillas. Jadid had sent a Syrian-Palestinian tank column to support the PLO, but this was forced to retreat when Assad refused to provide air cover. In November Assad seized full control in an internal coup called the Correctionist Movement. Salah Jadid lived for a further 23 years, until his death in Mezzeh prison, Damascus.

Combining pragmatism with ruthlessness, Hafez al-Assad proceeded to build an absolutist regime which would end the age of coups and dominate the country's life until 2011. He ended Jadid's 'revolutionary' foreign policy and patched up relations with the Gulf monarchies, winning large amounts of Gulf aid and investment for Syria as a 'frontline state', particularly after the 1973 war against Israel