

What is Syrian Nationalism?

Primordialism and Romanticism in Official Baath Discourse

Abstract

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This article addresses the evolution of Syrian nationalism, showing how the early pan-Arabist ideals of the Baathist founders morphed into a cult of personality focused narrowly on emotional attachments to the regime. Current Syrian state nationalism is a “constructed primordialism” consisting of vague and sentimental concepts of the Syrian people and their history, despite the fact that the Syrian state in its current territorial identity has only existed for a few decades and incorporates a diverse mosaic of ethnic, cultural, religious, and national backgrounds. In the absence of a cohesive pre-existing community to form the basis of Syrian national identity, the regime tempered its nominal commitment to Arabism with heavily Romanticized rhetoric emphasizing familial bonds of love and devotion between the people and the leader. This primordialist construct has thwarted the emergence of a civic-oriented national identity in Syria and contributed to tensions underlying the current civil war.

Keywords: primordialism; belonging; Syria; Baath; regime discourse

Introduction

Recent studies have often referred to the term “Syrian nationalism” in discussing the origins and outlines of current conflicts in the Middle East (Hinnebusch 2020: 140-145; Wedeen 2019: 107-113; Saleh 2017: 92). In many cases the term is used with little reflection or analysis of how this nationalist ideology has developed from the 1970s onwards. Scholars frequently conflate “Syrian nationalism” (al-qawmiyya al-Suriyya) with the related concept of “pan-Syrianism,” which refers to long-standing movements originating in the colonial era seeking an integrated homeland in the greater Levant region, including present day Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, and sometimes even broader

territories (Beshara 2011: 8). This concept of pan-Syrianism does not entirely overlap with nationalist loyalty toward the current Syrian state, and therefore using “Syrian nationalism” to refer to both ideas can be misleading. At times, Syrian nationalism is also conceptualized as a subset or product of Arab nationalism, which is a region-wide ethnic and linguistic construct (Dawn 1962; Muslih 1991; Tauber 1995). I argue in this article that it is vital to separate out a distinct concept of Syrian state nationalism, defined as an emotional, identity based attachment to the existing Syrian state and its Baathist ruling party, and to consider it separately from the broader and more amorphous concepts of pan-Syrianism and Arab nationalism. Doing so allows us to more accurately understand the contours of this state-oriented Syrian nationalism and how it has been shaped by the Baath regime as a legitimising strategy.

Due to its origin in the rather arbitrary partitioning of the Ottoman empire after World War I, the nation of Syria has never had a strong territorial identity (Hinnebusch 2008: 265). Syria is a mosaic of ethnicities, religions, sects, and national backgrounds, including significant minorities who identify as Armenians, Assyrians, Druze, Palestinians, Kurds, Yazidi, Mhallami, Arab Christians, Mandaeans, Turkmens, and Greeks, among others. When the Baath Party rose to power in independent Syria in the 1960s, it did so in part by promoting a new type of national identity that sought to merge the mosaic of Syrian society into a more cohesive and stable structure. I will show in this article that Syrian state nationalism, which continues into the present day, centers around a project of homogenizing these diverse Syrian subjects into a single imagined cultural identity. Since there is little ethnic, geographic, or historical continuity to form the basis of this national community (see Zisser 2012: 192), Syrian state nationalism has tended to focus on the Baath party itself, which is lent a primordial and emotive character through rhetoric emphasizing bonds of “love,” “brotherhood,” “struggle,” and “loyalty” between the people and the party leader. While this absence of a developed territorial state identity is not exclusive to the Syrian context as most newly emerged Arab states in post World War Two have experienced the rise of militaristic regimes that employed ‘constructed primordialism’ in the form of Arab nationalism as a form of legitimacy and authority, what is shared among these states is that state nationalism becomes substituted with leadership cult such as that of

Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Muamar Ghadhafi in Libya and Jamal Ab al-Nasser in Egypt (Kramer 1993: 185-188).

The political upheavals of the past few years in Syria have given nationalism a fresh relevance. There has been much discussion of alternative or revitalized notions of identity and belonging that emerged during the initial 2011 protests just prior to the outbreak of civil war—a euphoric moment that saw the rise of a more civic-oriented and modernised concept of national identity in the narrative of the Syrian opposition (see articles by K. Bachleitner and by A. Chevée forthcoming in this same issue of *Nations and Nationalism*). The concepts of citizenship and rights that informed these protests stood as a challenge to the primordialist, loyalty-based nationalism that has defined the Baathist state since its inception. Gaining a better understanding of how Syrian state nationalism was conceived and propagated under the Baathists can therefore help to enhance our knowledge of the affective split that contributed to the civil war, and the deep ideological and cultural gulfs that underlie the conflict.

I will discuss how Syrian state nationalism has been propagated from above during three historical phases: the antecedents in the pre-Baath era (1920s–1960s), the relatively stable personality cult of Hafez al-Assad (1970s–1990s), and the conflicted rule of his son Bashar al-Assad (2000–2007). The research approach is textually based, focused on political writings of Baath ideologues, the Syrian Constitution of 1973, nationalist songs written in celebration of the regime, and central political speeches of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. The analysis of this nationalist discourse reveals the centrality of primordialism and emotional attachments to the nation and the leader as a form of identity and belonging in the Syrian state construct. While focusing on the writings and speeches of prominent Baathist leaders, I do not want to overemphasize the agency of any particular individual in creating this Syrian state nationalism. Nationalist rhetoric was clearly instrumentalized by members of the regime, but it is also important to recall R. Brubaker and F. Cooper’s caution that: “identification . . . can be pervasive and influential without being accomplished by discrete, specified persons or institutions. Identification can be carried more or less anonymously by discourses or public narratives” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4). Through the following discussion my interest will be less on the personal goals of the agents who perpetuated or reinforced Syrian state nationalism, and more

on the contours of the identity construct itself, as presented in Baath party discourses for public consumption.

Background: “Constructed Primordialism” as a Theoretical Framework

The philosophical debate surrounding concept of nationalism has largely settled on a distinction between two variants: primordial and civic (Berezin 2002; Smith 1986: 7-1; Bayar, 2009: 2-4; Bruilly 1996: 146-174). Primordial nationalism is associated with the global influence of the 18th- and 19th-century Romantic movement; it emphasizes emotional attachment to the nation along with the centrality of language, ethnicity, geography, education, and history. In the primordialist outlook belonging to the nation is seen as involuntary, usually entered into at birth as an extension of one’s family and culture. The nation as a homogenous cultural group is viewed as preceding the state, and only through the realisation of the cultural identity of the underlying nation can the political state be achieved (Connor 1994: 45; Dawisha 2002: 7; Geertz 1994: 31; Isaacs 1975: 38; Motyl 2000). As a response to the Romantic version of nationalism, which mostly originated in Germany, a different outlook known as the French school of thought emerged, emphasizing a form of nationalism grounded in modernism and civic duty. The chief characteristic of this civic nationalism is the belief that the belonging to the nation is intentional and voluntarily chosen, rather than a product of one’s birth community (Miscovic, 2008: 85; Renan 1882).

There has been plethora of studies addressing the link between civic nationalism and democracy. Among these studies is Donald Ipperciel’s study on how civic nationalism facilitates the democratic process. Such process becomes available only when sufficient conditions such as communicative relationship exists between the ruler and the ruled. This is manifested in the application of constitutional democracy that allows citizens to participate in civic engagements such as political debates in public (2007: 398-400). This is vigorously debated in Habermas’ theorisation of the relationship between democracy and the type of nationalism (1996; 1998). In his account of how imposing homogeneous culture impacts implementation of the rule of law and even citizens’ ability to freely engage with politics, Habermas argues that cultural homogenisation sets criteria of inclusion

and exclusion, which in turn constructs a system that is not based on common rights shined by the constitution (Habermas 1998: 140). While Habermas' criticism of cultural and ethnic nationalism that impose homogenic culture has been voiced by the well-known opponent to nationalism Elie Kedourie in his book on nationalism in 1960. Kedourie insists on the intimate relationship between how nationalism that homogenises culture will in turn excludes minority and ensues conflicts. What is defined as a civic nation is measured by its inclusive nature and 'concrete effectuation' of 'universal principles made possible through public communication' (Ipperciel 2007: 402). It is this public communication that is guaranteed by the implementation of civic nationalism that establishes the foremost principle for democracy (Habermas, 1998: 153). As Habermas importantly argues that 'the true functional requirements for democratic will-formation' rest on 'the communicative circuits of a political public sphere' (Habermas 1998: 153).

The interesting thing about Syrian state nationalism as promulgated by the Baath Party is that it incorporates a primordialist, rather than civic, approach despite having almost no historical or geographical continuity to draw from. I characterize this type of nationalism as "constructed primordialism" to emphasize the extent of its top-down and aspirational character. It is important to note that this imposition of 'constructed primordialism' has not been exclusive to the Syrian context following the uncertainty of the post-colonial era. Most newly emerged Arab states have adopted Arabism despite being composed of multi-sectarian, ethnic and linguistic communities. Herein, Arabism was imposed as a form of constructed primordialism as a legitimation tool in the absence of fair and free elections.

Martin Kramer's article *Arab Nationalism: A Mistaken Identity* puts forward the question how Arabism as a national consciousness has ascended in the revolutionary era against Ottomans and colonialism. While a sense of 'Arabness' has existed 'for as long as the Arabs have walked the stage of history...for nearly a millennium and a half' (Kramer 2007: 172), this imagined collective identity was manipulated by 'revolutionary' regimes as a legitimation tool (Kramer 2007: 186-190). This perpetuation of top-down ideology after independence took the form of 'constructed primordialism' in an attempt to unify the multi-sectarian, linguistic and ethnic states (Kramer 2007: 187).

As I will show in detail below, the primordial aspect of this state construction can be seen in its emphasis on family ties, bonds of love and loyalty, and involuntary belonging, despite the fact that a historical precursor to the Baathist state does not exist. In making this analysis, I am employing Viera Bačová's theoretical approach to understanding the state's instrumentalization of primordial attachments to ensure legitimacy and loyalty. Bačová argues that states may substitute the ethnic affiliation of traditional primordialism with "mythical arguments on metaphoric kinship, horizontal solidarity, common history, and common fate" (Bačová 1998: 37). Without long-standing community ties to serve as a basis for primordial nationalism, this constructed primordialism "has to be constantly repeated, promoted, and propagated" (Bačová 1998: 38). The term "constructed primordialism" also follows Ronald G. Suny's (2001) analysis of how newly emerging nations may tend to reify their history, projecting the constructed national identity into the distant past.

Scholarly literature addressing Syrian nationalism is very limited. As noted above, most studies that have examined this phenomenon tend to conflate Syrian state nationalism centered on the Baath Party with the broader movements of pan-Syrianism and Arab nationalism. The reluctance to discuss Syrian state nationalism as a separate phenomenon may be grounded in the reality that the Syrian state has no deep history. For example, in Franck Salameh's account of the origins of Syrian national identity (Salameh 2013) he emphasizes that, until 1946, the outlines of the current Syrian nation did not exist in literature, historiography, or popular expression. From this point, Salameh goes on to suggest that loyalty to the current Baathist state is merely a continuation or expression of the broader ideology of pan-Syrianism tenuously emerging since the early 20th century. In a similar fashion, Raymond Hinnebusch argues that Syrian national identity cannot be disentangled from Arab nationalism: "Syrian identity wholly distinct from Arabism has not emerged, with the content of Syrian identity remaining Arab, and the regime continuing to see its legitimacy as contingent on being seen to represent Arab causes" (Hinnebusch 2008: 265; see also Phillips 2013: 9; Sadowski 2002: 147). While it is not my intent to dispute the salience of pan-Syrianism and Arab nationalism as long-standing ideologies in Syria (Antoun and Quataert 1991; Khoury 1987: 7), simply reducing Syrian state nationalism to these broader movements limits the potential to examine how nationalism in Syria has evolved under the Baath and how it has taken on a specific character and focus.

One notable study that presages my arguments is Eyal Zisser's article, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism?" (Zisser 2006). In this discussion Zisser identifies Syrian state nationalism as a distinct phenomenon associated with the current rule of Bashar al-Assad. He argues that throughout the brief history of the modern state of Syria, its leaders have struggled to conceptualise Syrian national thought as separate from Arabism or pan-Syrianism. Even in the twenty-first century, these concepts remain in tension: "strictly Syrian state identity, however, has not yet supplanted the initial Arabist or the [pan-]Syrian identities, but coexists with them somewhat uncertainly" (Zisser 2006: 196). I will take this argument further by showing that, under Baathist rule, there has been a strong push to usurp or co-opt broader Arabist and Syrianist discourses so that they come to serve merely one function—legitimising the rule of the Assad regime. Within the Syrian state discourse the broader ideologies of Arabism and pan-Syrianism are no longer admissible, as they undermine the sovereignty of the state and its current national boundaries (Beshara, 2011: 8; Mufti, 1996: 90–1). Distinguishing Syrian national identity from the peoples of surrounding states such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq requires a specific construction of common interest and Syrian state culture that follows no preceding contours. While Arabism and pan-Syrianism are at times incorporated into this state discourse, they are subsumed within an emotive, primordial identification with the Assad regime and its specific political and territorial structures.

Antecedents of Syrian State Nationalism (1920s–1960s)

The Baath ideology in its earliest formulations emerged during a tumultuous time when the governance and territorial boundaries of Syria were in continuous flux. The primary founding fathers of the movement were Sati al-Husri, Michael Aflaq, and Zaki al-Arsuzi (see Aldoughli 2016; Aldoughli 2019a: 54). The philosophies of these thinkers are not directly continuous with the later development of Syrian state nationalism under the Assad regime, but they were foundational in the sense of establishing the primordialist and emotive character of the Baathist vision, which continues up to the present day. This vision was overtly grounded in the influence of the German Romantics and their understanding of cultural–national identity as a timeless essence (Cleveland 1971: 85–6; Safi 1994: 142; Tibi 1997: 14; Viereck 2004: xxii–xxiii).

In the Romantic concept of the nation as a primordial unit, early Arabists discovered a counterweight to colonial practices that diminished the cultural identity of subjugated people (Fanon 1996: 236–7). Based on these Romantic outlooks, the founders of Baathism emphasized the linguistic and historical unity of the Arab region, as well as the involuntary belonging and affective ties that characterize the primordialist worldview. Al-Husri, for example, described the Arab community as an organic whole: “a living being, with life and feeling; life through its language and feeling through its history” (Al-Husri 1985: 63). At the same time, confronted by the vast diversity of the region, he found it necessary to make some modifications, replacing ethnic and cultural continuity with the idea of “psychological and spiritual kinship” (Al-Husri 1928: n.p.). According to this modified primordialism, it is nothing more or less than the idea of a shared culture that defines the nation: “The important thing in kinship [qarābah] and lineage [nasab] is not blood relations but rather the belief in this relationship” (Al-Husri 1928: n.p.).

In a similar fashion, Aflaq drew directly from the German Romantics when arguing that emotional feelings of national belonging precede all knowledge and practical definition. In his early essay “Al-qawmīyah hub qabl kul shā’” (Nationalism Is Love Before Anything Else) (Aflaq 1940), he outlined a primordialist concept of involuntary belonging to the nation, grounded in the unconditional love for one’s birth family. These affective ties are viewed in Aflaq’s work as binding the individual to obligations of submission, sacrifice, and heroism for the sake of the national community:

Nationalism is like every love . . . and as love it is associated with sacrifice, and the sacrifice for nationalism leads to heroism, for the one who sacrifices for his nation and its glorious past and for the happiness of its future, is perfecting life in its highest image He who loves does not ask for reasons. (Aflaq 1940: n.p.)

Aflaq continues on in this essay to argue that the love of one’s community is transmitted through the generations in the same way as the inheritance of physical features, and that these affective ties more than anything else define the national identity of the individual. In his later works Aflaq shifted toward a greater emphasis on preserving the unifying factors of language and culture (Aflaq 1946), and he criticized the “sentimental and inactive wistfulness” of Romantic nostalgia in favor of pragmatic action to achieve political goals (Aflaq 1955). Nonetheless, throughout his life and as one

of the founders of the Baath Party Aflaq continued to endorse a primordial view of the nation as a common identity preceding the state and grounded in kinship.

Al-Arsuzi, who is the other primary founder of the Baath Party, put forth a primordialist vision of the nation once again grounded strongly in linguistic identity and family ties:

The words “nation” [umma] and “mother” [umm] are derived from the same root, and the mother is the living image of the nation; and like subjects of society is the mother with her sons (al-Arsuzi 1973: 213)

During the time when these founding fathers of the Baath movement were writing, the creation of a Syrian or Arab state was a matter of aspiration and conflict, more so than an established reality. The rhetoric of primordialist nationalism was intended to forge a political *movement*, grounded in regional identity and cultural destiny in contrast to colonial rule. As local control of national entities consolidated during the 1960s and 1970s, new leaders confronted a somewhat different imperative, centered around the need to promote loyalty to an existing state structure.

The Hafez al-Assad Era (1970s–1990s)

The Baath seized power in Syria in 1963 through a military coup, which was orchestrated from above and involved little grassroots mobilisation. Supporters of the party were a minority in Syria at the time, and so the regime set upon a course of rigorous state-nationalist indoctrination to consolidate Baathist rule and establish popular legitimacy (Hinnebusch 2008: 266; Kienle 1995: 67). While the creation of the modern Syrian state has appropriated a seemingly secular national ideology in an attempt to create a connection among its heterogeneous subjects, the Baath regime under Hafez al-Assad made significant religious concessions, such as establishing a co-opted relationship with the religious sector (Aldoughli 2020; 2020a, 2021). Among other endeavors, the Baathists sought to manipulate tribal and sectarian identities, seeking patronage by enhancing the status of previously marginalized groups (Dukhan 2019: 71; Saleh 2017: 65–90). In the broader sense, however, the overarching goal of the nationalist construction was to subsume local identities into a broader concept of the “Syrian people,” defined according to the state’s territorial borders. Carrying

forth the Romantic/primordialist concept of the nation that was emphasized by the party's founders, citizens within Syrian state territory were gradually reconceptualized as a unique cultural group, forging a distinct identity and history in contrast to their fellows in neighboring states.

The Syrian Constitution of 1973 demonstrates the centrality of this nation-building enterprise, along with the early stages of the shift from Arabism toward Syrian state nationalism (an English translation of the Constitution is available from the Carnegie Middle East Center, at carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50255). In this document broad, socialist-inspired references to “the common folk” (jamaheer) and “the people” (shaab) are overtly linked to primordialist language about “the Arab nation” and its struggle to preserve its traditional homeland. In Article 1 of the Constitution, for example, the entirety of “the people” who inhabit the Syrian state are presumptively defined as Arab—without specifying what exactly an Arab is. The constructed nature of this national identity becomes further apparent in Article 21, which reads:

The educational and cultural system [of the Baathist state] aims at creating a socialist nationalist Arab generation which is scientifically minded and attached to its history and land, proud of its heritage, and filled with the spirit of struggle to achieve its nation's objectives.

In these formulations, *de rigueur* nods to Arabism show signs of being subsumed into the Syrian state project—Arabism has begun to merge with the territorial state identity, with a corresponding expansion and ambiguity of who qualifies as an Arab. By focusing on the passionate struggle for self-determination in opposition to colonial rule, and identifying that struggle with the Baathist state, complex issues related to the historical mosaic of diverse ethnicities and sects in Syria are swept under the rug.

The evolution of a new national identity can also be seen strongly in the speeches of Hafez al-Assad (HA), after he assumed the party leadership in 1970. These speeches were fundamental in spreading the Baathist ideology and shaping the contours of belonging in modern Syria, where it would be almost impossible for a visitor to miss a governmental building, supermarket, or street wall containing quotes from HA's public discourses (Wedeen 1999: 20-25). Students from primary up through the university level have long been encouraged to quote HA's words when writing pieces on nationalism (which is a required subject in the Syrian education system), as well as for lending a

patriotic tone to essays in geography, history, literature, and many other topics. Despite the pervasiveness of these quotations, there is no official Syrian archive of HA's speeches in their full context—perhaps intentionally so, as a means of reinforcing the authority and eternal relevance of his familiar quotes (*al-'aqual al-khalida*). The closest thing available to a full account of HA's canonical speeches is a collection of video recordings that in recent years have become widely circulated among regime loyalists through social media and YouTube.

Examining these speeches reveals the continuation of the emotive and primordial nationalist ideal familiar from the earlier Baathist founders, now appended to the existing Syrian state and its leadership. For example, in a popular televised speech announcing the 1973 October War against Israel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGSiQvV_B4U), the theorization of the “homeland” as a cultural construct takes center stage. HA emphasizes national belonging in this speech by repeatedly addressing Syrians as “brothers” and by describing a shared cultural destiny. “I address in you the authentic soul of Arabism,” he says, “the soul of sacrifice, heroism . . . I address in you your love of the homeland, to which you have been born.” In the context of rousing support for the Syrian war effort, this speech characterizes an emotional affiliation with the state and its territory as a natural and primordial feature of all legitimate citizens. In another speech from 1980, commemorating the seventeenth anniversary of the Baathist coup (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tduY8lxBXFc>), HA makes vague references to the heroic deeds of the “grandfathers” (*ajdad*), while stating that the goal of the regime is to build “a society dominated by love, because this land does not have anything but love.” These invocations of primordial attachment to the state are notable for the way that they have continuously circulated in Syrian society, exerting a magnetic pull even into the current era.

Another valuable source for interpreting the evolution of nationalist discourse in the HA era is the romantic songs that were endorsed and propagated by the regime. With themes of emotive bonds and sacrificial heroism, these narratives remained fully grounded in the primordialist tradition, while foregrounding the Syrian state as the locus of affection. The song “*Rāyatik bil-'āli ya Suriya*” (Your Flags Are Forever High, Oh Syria), was written in 1973 in the context of the October War. It begins with statements that appear to be the regretful devotions of a lapsed lover: “You are my eternal love, oh the sun that shines tenderness / It is we who used to protect you, our homeland.” As the song

continues, the Syrian nation is revealed to be a caring mother, whose children are called upon to defend her dignity and honor. Another highly canonical song written during the October War is “Suriya yā habībatī” (Oh, My Beloved Syria), which again presents strong familial allusions by personifying the homeland as a female lover. In addition to the gendered component of these sentimental narratives, it is notable how far removed such national ideals are from the concept of voluntary civic participation. Rather than a free and rational choice to support beneficial civic institutions, love for the state and its leadership is presented as an involuntary romantic compulsion, heedless of thought or reason.

A notable patriotic song that emerged in the late 1970s is called “‘Ana Surī w ‘ardī ‘Arabiyya” (I Am Syrian and My Homeland is Arab). This song indicates an ongoing shift in which Arabism has become merely a characteristic of the Syrian nation, rather than a primary identity. The Syrian identity and homeland described in this song are based on the territorial and political contours of the state, which are ascendant in the hierarchy of loyalties. The emphasis on the pride of being Syrian is associated with the sacred sacrifice of dying for the nation: ‘I swear and my pledge will be witnessed that I will sacrifice myself for the glory of my flag. The eagle is still flying high hugging your glory, oh Syria’. This gradual evolution from cultivating an Arab identity towards a Syrian one was reinforced by the personality cult of Hafez al-Assad, who by this time had become the instantiation of the Baath Party and the Syrian government. Subsequent conflicts during the Muslim Brotherhood’s insurgency against the regime during the 1980s proved to be a linchpin in Syria’s history, both in terms of the intensive use of violence against civilians in Hama and in the ongoing consolidation of Syrian state nationalism centered around the personal authoritarian rule of HA (Wedeen 1999: 10). Another song that saliently captures this overemphasis on the idolization of HA comes out in ‘*Abu Bāsil Qa’idna*’ (*Abu Bāsil, Our Leader*), a song produced in the first half of the 90s. The title overtly emphasizes the nation as a familial site where HA is configured as its patriarch. The cult employs an emotive language that venerates the leader as source of nation’s pride and identity:

The light of his faith on us has shone
And in his eyes, God’s gravity we always find.

From our high mountains and their might
 His forehead has taken its pride and height.
 Our hopes have been shown on his forehead.

Love and loyalty toward the state leader who imposes stability began to appear as a distinct phenomenon from the earlier constructs of pan-Syrianism and Arabism.

Arguably, this shift toward the veneration of the state leader—a phenomenon we might refer to as “Assadism”—would not have been possible in a context of civic nationalism. Identification with civic institutions tends to preclude an overemphasis on the power of any one individual, but the Romantic idealization of culture and homeland in Baathist ideology lent itself fairly readily to being transformed into the love of an authoritarian leader. Despite the surprising revival of the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP), a political party that advocated pan-Syrianism, in the official national discourse in early 1990s, however, this alliance could not but be seen as one of the regime’s authoritarian techniques to co-opt rival political parties (Zisser 2012: 206). As Zisser comments on this alliance that this alliance does not prove the regime’s departure from its propagated narrative to using ‘Arabism’, but it was a ‘useful tool...while still paying lip service to the Arabist ethos’ (2012:206). As a result, the primordial concept of cultural identity and anti-colonial resistance seen in Arabism and pan-Syrianism diverged into a new type of nationalism, one that celebrated bonds of love and loyalty to the Syrian state and its authoritarian regime. The rule of the Baath Party in Syria began with the concept of the state as an organic and provisional expression of broader Romantic Arab nationalism, but over the course of three decades of HA’s rule, it shifted strongly to become an end in itself, with a specific territorial and operational concept of the nation based on affective identification with existing Syrian state institutions.

The Bashar al-Assad Era (2000s–2007)

When Bashar al-Assad (BA) succeeded his father as the leader of the Syrian Baath Party in the year 2000, many observers expected a softening of the authoritarian regime. Regarded as a relatively Westernized, youthful, and modernising leader, BA seem poised to move Syria towards a more civic and democratic style of governance. This hope was borne out as BA moved quickly to encourage

civic participation and de-militarise the national culture, for example by ending mandatory martial education (*tarbiyya `askaryya*) and changing school uniforms from the traditional soldier-like khaki to civilian blues, pinks, and greys. However, the younger Assad had inherited from his father not only an entrenched state apparatus with significant vested interests, but also a decades-old legitimising tradition founded on a Romantic cult of homeland and personality. Unable to shake this status quo, BA oversaw a discursive adaptation in which the Romanticism of the Assad personality cult actually increased, from the stern-yet-affectionate father-image projected by Hafez al-Assad during his later years, to a more passionate, forceful, and dynamic presentation of the youthful Bashar as the new national leader (Aldoughli 2019: 149-152; Dagher 2019: xxi).

Reviewing the prominent speeches of BA between 2000 and 2007 shows an initial foray into more civic-minded concepts of the nation, which were associated with the intellectual reform movement known as the “Damascus Spring” in 2000–2001. This was followed, however, by a rapid retreat into the regime’s conventional Romanticized rhetoric and authoritarianism as BA began to sense a threat to Baathist hegemony. These events ultimately led to an ossification of Syrian state nationalism in the primordial mode, and a thoroughgoing rejection of the alternative civic structures demanded by the opposition, culminating in the outbreak of widespread protests and civil war. The following sections will use an analysis of BA’s speeches to show the trajectory of his evolution in office, from initial hesitant gestures toward opening and reform, to a hardcore retrenchment of primordial nationalism as the ideological power of anti-regime movements began to escalate. Similar to Hafez al-Assad’s speeches, there is no official government archive in which BA’s rhetoric can be found, but video recordings of his more prominent and influential addresses continue to circulate widely on the Internet.

First Inaugural Speech (2000)

BA’s inaugural speech showed a marked difference in style and tone compared to that of his father <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsNwHs9B6RI>). Eschewing the familial and emotive rhetoric of solidarity and “brothers and sisters,” BA gravitated toward a formal and legalistic language, using a dry, rationalist, or even professorial narrative in which he addressed the Syrian people as fellow

citizens. This rhetoric appears to be a shy attempt to gravitate towards a civic form of nationalism, focused on institutional participation:

You have expressed this trust in me through following the decision of the Baath Party to elect me to the role of president . . . your dedicated discussions to achieve this reflect your sense of responsibility and national consciousness. . . . I also thank everyone, women and men, inside and outside Syria, young and elderly, for granting me their trust through participating in this national duty and voting.

Strikingly absent here are the usual Baathist depictions of emotional bonds and familial relationships between the president and the Syrian people, not to mention any discussions of honor, sacrifice, or the “homeland” and its enemies. Such formulations are replaced by relatively sterile references to “trust,” “dedication,” and the responsibilities of the social contract. As such, this speech is likely the first time in modern Syrian history that a prominent leader elaborated the concept of government without recourse to primordial and emotive constructs.

It is particularly notable that references to “national duty” (*wajeb watani*) are associated in this speech with the bureaucratic duty to vote and participate in political discussion. Prior to BA’s inauguration this phrase had been monolithically used by the Baathist regime to describe military duty and martial sacrifice (see Aldoughli 2019a: 65-69). Similarly, BA applies the term “noble citizen” (*mutatin sharif*) in an unconventional fashion, linking it to civic engagement, voting, and participating in modernising and development projects. In the previously entrenched Baathist discourse this ideal of the “noble citizen” was associated almost exclusively with military service. These striking adjustments to the conventional rhetoric of the Baathist party would be apparent to nearly all Syrian listeners, signaling a turn toward a more civic-oriented view of national identity.

By emphasizing voting, BA is also clarifying that his ascendance to power was not a quasi-monarchical inheritance, but rather a legal process and a public mandate. The sincerity of this rhetoric may be suspect—particularly since the Syrian parliament had recently amended the Constitution to lower the minimum age for the presidency so that BA, as Hafez al-Assad’s chosen successor, could occupy the position. In the public referendum giving a choice between “yes” or “no” to his presidency, BA won the approval of 97.29 percent of the voters, an outcome that seemed improbably

high. Nonetheless, BA was at pains to emphasize that his legitimacy stemmed from a civic relationship and the sanction of law, rather than from military power or bonds of familial obligation:

Legitimacy is the determination of the people, and taking part in this voting is an important fulfillment of your national duty . . . I am honoured to have been chosen by the people, and I have no other option but to accept and fulfill my duty.

Intimately linked to the notion of legal legitimacy in BA's speech is his repeated characterization of Syria as a state (*dawla*) rather than a cultural homeland (*watan*). In focusing on state institutions, BA conveys the goal of modernising Syria and moving away from loyalty-based patronage networks. He also depersonalises and decentralises the concept of political authority (*sulta*) by defining it as "service to the state" and "activating the role of institutions" rather than a position of overt executive power.

BA refers in this inaugural speech to the need for "institutional thinking" and "democratic thinking." These phrases seem to further indicate a turn toward a new paradigm based on bureaucratic rule and legal accountability. Apparently rejecting the cult of personality, he announces that: "We need to place the public interest over the personal one, and the mentality of state over the mentality of patronage [*za'ama*]." In a vague sense, BA even gestures toward inclusivity and pluralism by indicating that institutional thinking involves "all denominations and components" of Syrian society (though he never actually mentions the words "ethnicity" or "sect"). Perhaps most astonishingly, he announces that "talking about Arab nationalism has become Romanticized and a waste of time." This does not mean that BA rejects the "Arab character" of the Syrian nation completely, but the rhetoric of the speech shows a clear distaste for the sentimental regional Arabism that motivated the Baathist founding fathers such as al-Husri and Aflaq. In its place, BA suggests a distinctive Syrian state identity, existing in solidarity with other Arab countries (*tadamon Arabi*) but defined primarily by modern Syria's territorial boundaries and sovereignty.

BA's inaugural speech lasted for more than an hour, and it was not until the last two minutes that he made any mention of the nation's cultural and emotive bonds. Even during these final gestures to tradition and a one-sentence acknowledgement that Syria was still an Arab country, he made it clear that these primordialist cultural outlooks should no longer be considered the central foundation

of modern Syrian society. The speech therefore marked a profound shift away from defining belonging and identity in emotional and cultural terms, in favor of civic concepts. BA indicated that he did not want to be glorified or to see his pictures and words adorning every street in the manner of his father; and in fact, very little was seen of his pictures or words during the first three years of his tenure. Unfortunately, this turn toward civic nationalism would prove to be extremely short-lived in BA's regime. Resurging opposition, particularly in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, prompted a crackdown in 2001 that put an effective end to the Damascus Spring. In his subsequent speeches, BA returned with a renewed focus to the primordial nationalist rhetoric and cult of personality that had legitimised his father's rule.

Speeches of 2003, 2005, and 2007

The rhetoric of BA after 2001 seems to indicate that the civic constructs of his inaugural speech were a naive aberration, or perhaps an "emergency" response to the critical moment of succession. It could be argued that the inauguration speech represented a unique political and social setting that naturally lent itself to civic formality and an appeal to legalism. Alternatively, it may be that BA's initial ambition toward democratic opening was thwarted by a perceived existential threat, as fundamentalist factions moved quickly to fill the perceived void in authority. Whatever the reason, prominent speeches given by BA in 2003, 2005, and 2007 show an increasing re-activation of primordialism in the nation-citizen relationship. Each of these speeches was given on the occasion of a significant political event, and after receiving widespread attention they have each been enshrined in the informal canon of the regime's supporters. The first speech took place in Homs as part of an attempt to modernise that city and initiate a new national development/construction programme (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vt7hilSRH-g>). The second speech was given in Damascus to the Syrian Parliament, discussing the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and its implications for Syria (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVf4787e5fc>). The third speech was presented in the city of Deir al-Zour as part of BA's second election campaign (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6I8D9BsI_IQ).

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the 2003, 2005, and 2007 speeches is BA's pervasive return to the language of emotional ties in describing national belonging. Familial references such as

“dear brothers and sisters” were once again prominent and unremitting. In the 2003 speech before masses cheering him, Assad repeatedly emphasizes that this is a ‘meeting of love’ and he greets them with ‘love and only greeting of love’. He even went further to say that ‘I wish I can shake hands with everyone of you’. In his comments on the war against Iraq, Assad said that only through ‘love we can win against those haters from inside and outside...Syria is strong through this love...this love makes Syria strong’.

In the 2005 speech before parliament he exclaimed, with an apparent effort toward warmth: “My meeting with you today stems from my gratitude for this honest and loving relationship [‘alaqa hamima] with you.” In his 2007 speech in Deir al-Zour, BA opened with:

I salute you with the brotherhood greeting.

I salute you with the Arabism greeting.

I cannot explain these happy moments. . . .

I am between my family and my brothers.

While seeking to emphasize affective bonds as a means of generating support, this language diminishes the civic notion of national membership. It presumes an involuntary love for the nation and its leader, and implicitly excludes anyone who may not feel such intense bonds of emotional loyalty.

The primordial construction of the nation is further evidenced in BA’s revival of historical references and the “sacrifices of the grandfathers.” In the 2007 speech, for example, he stated:

Like your grandfathers before independence—your fathers and grandfathers loved this homeland—and you too now show this love. . . . Your grandfathers sacrificed a lot for this nation. . . . Their revolutions against colonisation will never be forgotten.

In a similar fashion, the bonds of martial honor and violent struggle were emphasized in the 2005 speech when BA commented on Syria’s purported role in bringing peace and stability to Lebanon. He declares that the Syrian nation will never renounce its historical identity as a defender of the Arab people—which of course disregards the rights of the Kurds and other ethnic and sectarian identities that exist within Syria. Relying on a homogenizing concept of the national culture and heritage, BA seems to have temporarily forgotten the relatively recent origins of the Syrian state: “Our belief is in

history We are a nation that has existed for millennia.” The call to an imaginary past is quickly followed by an emotive statement: “We will stay together . . . with this love we will win . . . we will win by our love for each other.” As R. G. Suny has noted, an excessive emphasis on national history often comes at the expense of pragmatic and effective development (Suny 2001: 870), and the trajectory of BA’s regime is no exception. The speeches from 2003 through 2007 indicate a strong retrenchment of state loyalties in the form of primordialist rhetoric, and they also signal a retreat from the civic-minded flourishing and optimism that marked the first years of BA’s rule.

Second Inaugural Speech (2007)

The return to a Romanticized relationship between the Syrian state and its citizens is strikingly evident in BA’s second inaugural speech, particularly in contrast to the first inaugural speech of 2000. After being reconfirmed for the presidency in another widely criticized public referendum, in which BA was the only candidate, his acceptance speech shows a complete rejection of the civic concept of national belonging in Syria (http://www.mideastweb.org/bashar_assad_inauguration_2007.htm). Instead, the language of affective ties predominates, as BA seeks to return to the personality cult of his father and to present himself as a passionate lover of the people:

Sisters and brothers, speaking to you on this national day while embarking on a new phase of our national process, I am overwhelmed by the multitude of feelings which have been growing inside me since the people chose, seven years ago, to make me their leader. These feelings have become my most valued resource which inspires my every action, responsibility, and decision. I feel love, appreciation, pride, and gratitude towards a great country and a proud people, towards my larger Syrian family who have engulfed me with a flood of noble emotions and provided me with power and will in difficult times Your expressions of love, while taking part in the referendum for a new constitutional mandate, and your expressions of support manifested in your various activities in schools, universities, villages and cities, your places of residence and work, in Syria and in countries of expatriation, have been extremely significant indicators of the sublime emotional relationship that connects us in Syria.

These words succinctly combine three points that convey the outlines of primordial nationalist loyalty. First, the leader–people relationship is about maintaining personal and familial ties, based on emotional attachment and “love.” Second, these ties of love serve as a measure of the leader’s legitimacy and the consent of the governed, replacing the integrity of legal and civic processes. Third, the benefits of citizenship and belonging are predicated upon an individuals’ readiness to demonstrate unconditional love for the nation and its leader.

Using this formulation, BA is able to avert potential criticisms of his accomplishments and activities during the first seven years of his rule. In fact, where his 2000 address vowed to implement modernisation and development, build a strong institutional state, and promote “democratic thinking,” the second inaugural speech reduces all such trivialities to an act of “returning the people’s love”:

My vow to the people of our beloved country was to meet their expectations when they chose me, to assume this greatest of responsibilities and assimilate the ethics it involves. My vow was to return the people’s love and support by more determined work in order to realize their aspirations, to return their trust and loyalty by lifting performance and action to the status our people deserve, to return their steadfastness and resolve with more giving, and by doing my best in order to protect their interests and the interests of the country.

The aggressive suppression of independent thought and opposition that marked the end of the Damascus Spring is glossed in this speech as part of a “lively” relationship between the passionate leader and his people, one that supposedly serves to reveal their common humanity:

Sisters and brothers, during the past few years a lively relationship full of patriotic and human meanings has developed between us. Through this relationship you have known me closely in different stances and positions. It has embodied a real case of the people coming together with one of its own, one who has carried the people’s concerns, expressed their desires, and exchanged with them forms of love and belonging.

The nature of the “love” between the leader and his people is not one that tolerates disagreement and diversity, nor is it measured by civic rights and accountability. It is a construct imagined as eternal, involuntary, and sacrosanct, though in reality it fluctuates with the whims and impulses of the moment.

It is notable that in this second inauguration speech, cultural references to the Arab-ness of the nation and its history are minimal. Instead, the sentimental affiliation between the state and its people takes an almost abstract form, centered on the figure of the leader himself. This indicates a culmination of the shift toward a Syrian state nationalism, as distinct from pan-Syrianism or Arabism. Whereas those broader movements projected an inclusive and aspirational identity in contrast to the self-identified other (the coloniser), Syrian state nationalism appears increasingly paranoid about the purity of the community and the threat of the “internal enemy.” The role of the citizen in this familial relationship takes on something of an ominous tone when BA discusses the importance of citizens’ dedication in accomplishing (or failing to accomplish) the national development project:

[We should focus on] the image of the citizen before the image of the president in order to realize the concept of the responsible citizen and the official who feels and behaves as a citizen. Any success in that regard should be attributed to you, a vibrant and genuine people who understood the relationship between citizenship and responsibility.

The negative contrapositive that lurks threateningly in this statement is that a failure in the national project may well be laid at the feet of degenerate and non-genuine citizens who fail to act responsibly, at least according to the dictates of the regime. Thus, the bonds of love that are overtly celebrated by the leader have a dark side, as they allow any deficiencies or setbacks to be projected onto individuals whose emotional attachment and enthusiasm for the primordial construct are deemed to be insufficient.

Conclusion

The view that the Syrian regime has championed Arabism as its overriding concern should be mitigated by an awareness of how this nationalism has shifted under the Assads to focus on a cult of personality and state-centered identity. Despite a few brief forays into more civic-oriented national ideals during the early years of Bashar al-Assad’s rule, this Syrian state nationalism has been overwhelmingly characterized by a primordialist view of the Syrian people that seeks to homogenize the country’s ethnic and sectarian mosaic into a nation of regime loyalists. The nominal Arab-ness of this citizenry was emphasized by the founding fathers of the Baath movement, but this region-wide

ethnic construct has diminished in importance as the bond of emotional affiliation to the Baathist state itself has taken precedence. In addition to being Arabist, the regime has at different times also been labelled as socialist (under Hafez al-Assad) and as neo-liberal (under Bashar al-Assad), but the more basic reality of its identity is a primordial nationalist cult focused on sentimental loyalties toward the regime and its leader.

The intensely Romanticized rhetoric addressed to Syrians in the national narrative weakens concepts of citizenship and rights, while heightening emotive attachments to the regime and helping to ensure its continued survival. The original Romantic and democratic construct of cultural identity that fueled the anti-colonial movement in an earlier era has thus morphed into a state nationalism with little reason for existing other than the continuation of its own patronage networks. What binds Syrians together in this construct is not ethnicity, but rather an imagined and metaphorical kinship premised on familial feelings and emotional attachments to the regime that are constantly reinforced in the official rhetoric of the Baathist state. The power of this construct is to be found not only in the staged mass marches glorifying the leader, but also in the performative tender sentimentalism of emotional speeches, and in the continuing emergence of popular songs such as “Minhabak” (We Love You, ...), which declares, “We are all your kin and your people” (Aldoughli 2019: 151). In such national formations, there is little room for citizens who do not see themselves reflected in the contours of the enforced familial relationships.

It is worth noting that the shortly lived hope of moving into a civic nationalism after BA first inaugural speech was obstructed by the regime’s intricate authoritarian nature. The sustainability of this authoritarianism partially stems from the lack of legitimacy of a militaristic regime that rose to power not by adherence to popular support but a military coup, which in turn has weakened the development of civic nationalism. As such, the evolution into a civic nationalism under Bashar al-Assad could not have been achieved in a state that came into existence by the solidification of its military and sectarian bases. At the same time, the Baath regime has further entrenched its reliance on shifting its ideological discourse in terms of how national identity and belonging is reconfigured in

post 2011 uprisings. This is evidenced in how the official national discourse in post 2011 has maintained its propagation of an emotive national ideology, yet also insisted on mobilizing Sunni Islam as a tool for survival (Aldoughli 2020; 2021). He even insisted on the correlation between nationalism and Islam proving further that for authoritarian regimes winning a war militaristically is never enough and ideological legitimacy is needed to mobilize support (Aldoughli, 2021).

While in recent years the study of legitimacy has become increasingly popular in the Syrian context, the fundamental question that dominates the political landscape in an authoritarian regime is how the ruler constructs a convincing legitimacy beyond the material use of military force. In the Syrian context, maintaining legitimacy has not been limited to material factors encompassing reliance on coercion, security forces, and fear. Rather, the Baathist state has substantiated its right to rule using various resources, one of them is ideological. What adds to the complexity of the Syrian case is that despite nation and state are not synonymous, under Syria's Ba'athist regime they have been conflated: supporting the Ba'ath Party and belonging to the nation are understood to be the same. Hence, assessing whether Syrians living under regime-controlled areas consider Assad legitimate or not, or the question whether they are loyal to the leader or state institutions need an excruciating investigation. Yet, what is beyond speculation is that Assad has adapted and revived various authoritarian measures to ensure that monopolization of Syrian communities encompassed full infiltration of all activities of in Syria.

We can conclude that over the past 50 years the Ba'athist regime has experimented with a number of approaches to define the state–citizen relationship. Today the citizens of Syria face an uncertain future, which includes many possible scenarios carrying diverse forms of nationalist sentiment. Even if the national narrative of the Assad regime ceases to be enforced, there will still be fierce feelings and personal questions about how to define the nation and national belonging moving forward. There will be many questions to be answered, such as how the legacy of primordial nationalism affects transitions to democracy, and how extensively Syrians have internalised the

Baathist ethos and ideals. The struggle to establish civic notions of identity (*muwatana*) in Syria since the outbreak of conflict in 2011 has contributed to the rise of sub-state and supra-state affiliations, including a revival of previously submerged ethnic, tribal, and sectarian groups (see Clowy, Dukhan forthcoming).

Studies on the politics of authoritarianism have focused on the role of military in sustaining the survival of these regimes (Heydmann 2007; Hinnebusch 2012). Others have provided psychological explanations of ‘loyalty’ to authoritarian regimes that lies people’s fear of ‘uncertainty and insecurity’ (Husain & Liebertz 2019: 21). survival of authoritarianism such as explored that ‘loyalty’ Will the Syrian war result in new subsets of national ideologies in different population groups, or in different geographical regions of the country? The attempt to answer these questions will be left to future scholars, as well as to the Syrian people themselves. The broader human community will be interested in their solutions. Syria is far from the only nation in which regimes have emphasized a constructed primordialism to help entrench their authority (see Cohen 1996; Connor 1993; Suny 2001). Although this article is not, strictly speaking, comparative, its findings and future insights from Syria may have a great relevance for other countries in the region and beyond that are confronting issues of national identity and belonging.

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