Authoritarian Legacies and the Failure of Controlled Liberalism

With the restoration of Syria's sovereignty in September 1961, its first experience of populist authoritarian rule came to an end. Following Syria's secession from the U.A.R., local politicians revived the institutional form of pluralist politics. Parliament was reconvened, and national elections for a constituent assembly were scheduled for December. Following a vigorous campaign, voters elected a large number of first-time officeholders, including an unprecedented number of representatives associated with landlords. Syria's government emphasized its determination to break with the "dictatorship" of the union and restore Syrian "liberalism," both economic and political. Leading politicians once again defined their vision as the construction of a social pact that would encompass capitalists and labor, landowners and peasants.

Often, scholars of Syria define the union period as a brief interruption in Syrian politics, which resumed their previous course once the union ended. Yet the union had deeply transformed Syria's political arena. "Class spirit" had become firmly embedded in institutional practices and routines. State institutions became more fully engaged in the mediation of social conflicts following the corporative restructuring of interest groups. The institutional and legal mechanisms of Egyptian-style authoritarianism were implanted in Syria. Through land reform, the dramatic expansion of state intervention, and the deepening of import substitution industrialization, the structural contours of Syria's economy underwent significant change.


The legacy of internal dependency and the social and political coalitions it sustained did not disappear, but it had been substantially weakened. The changes brought about during the union suggested that the "struggle for Syria" in the secessionist period and beyond can be explained more fully in terms of conflicts over the legacy of the union—whether to sustain or reverse the economic and social trajectory established under the U.A.R.—than in terms of the unresolved social conflicts of the preunion period. Among the most significant of the union's legacies was its relative success as a popular "incorporation project." The corporative restructuration of interest groups carried over during the union gave popular sectors—labor and peasant in particular—a more powerful presence in Syrian political life. For secessionist governments, however, this legacy was decidedly mixed. Hope to reverse what Syrian business leaders and landowners viewed as the statist excesses of the union period, government officials found themselves enmeshed in a new cycle of conflicts associated with their efforts to redefine the role of the state in the economy.

During a critical period of intense struggle to reduce the scope of state intervention and redirect Syria's development strategy, government officials confronted a political arena characterized not only by high levels of popular mobilization but also by organized popular sectors determined to preserve what they regarded as their organizational and social gains of the union. In addition, Syria's post-U.A.R. political discourse emphasized the socially divisive character of Nasserist authoritarianism, attributing it class-based social conflicts that would otherwise have become so sharp. The business-dominated government thus linked denunciation to an ideology of social unity, "social peace," and the suppression of class conflicts that might disrupt economic development and undermine efforts to secure the hegemony of the private sector. As a result, the corporatist expression of popular demands that resumed after 1961 was seen by its business-political elite as indicators of Syrian democracy or as a legitimate process of reconfiguring political and economic arrangements but as threats to the unity of Syrian society and a manifestation of "Nasserist" sympathies that could justifiably be suppressed. In this setting, the authoritarian and counterrevolutionary mechanisms and routines established during the union proved highly adaptive for secessionist officials. Despite widespread condemnation of "Nasserist dictatorship," and despite the restoration of multiparty competitive politics, ministers and other officials turned easily to the authoritarian repertoire of the U.A.R. period to suppress competing political voices. Syria's experience, like that of other postcommunist and postauthoritarian systems, shows that the relationship between transitional regimes and their authoritarian pre-
decreases is by no means straightforward: civilian politicians often rely on authoritarian routines and institutions—bureaucratic, executive, and judicial—when faced with the proliferation of popular demands, the "resurrection of civil society," that accompanies the breakdown of authoritarianism. Consolidating democratic institutions and the regime become opposing rather than complementary aims.

After 1961, Syria's post-authoritarian political leaders sought to secure the hegemony of the private sector and rebuild a liberal form of capitalism as the framework for Syria's development. Yet they pursued this aim not by rejecting the authoritarian legacy of Nasserist rule but by appropriating and adapting the state-centric, authoritarian, and corporatist practices of the United Arab Republic. The new civil service leadership only selectively de-institutionalized authoritarianism in Syria. This strategy should not be seen merely as the cynical tactic of an opportunistic political elite but as a reflection of the very real ambivalence of Syrian capitalists regarding the extent to which a new political order should be democratic and their reluctance willingness to accept the compromises that accompany democratic state building; an ambivalence shared by important factions in the military. Businessmen readily perceived many of the changes introduced during the union as enormously useful in the deepening of Syrian capitalism and in maintaining civil peace (a concept in and of itself more commonly associated with authoritarianism than with democracy). Including rule by decree, the use of emergency law legitimizing military control, continued repression of the Syrian Communist Party, and control of trade union activities by the state.

Maintaining such policies reflected the very real differences between a "capitalist project," even one articulated in liberal terms, and a "democratic project," differences that had contributed to the breakdown of Syrian politics in the years 1954–58. Moreover, the strategy of Syria's capitalists demonstrated a lack of serious attention to how they might pragmatically accommodate their union of liberal capitalism with a viable democratic system of rule. Restoring the hegemony of the private sector and economic reconstruction figured prominently in the discussions and writings of businessmen. But institution building and political reconstruction occupied a much less prominent place. Even as a reaction to the developmental failures of the union, therefore, the authoritarian path to capitalism—a strategy pursued with much economic success in East Asia—proved to be structurally and institutionally unsustainable given the changes in the organization of the political arena that had occurred during the union. Secessionist governments hoped to accommodate the interests of labor and peasants by evoking populist regional initiatives' policies and land reform, as well as to develop a ruling ideology.

Based on the principles of national unity and social harmony. Yet efforts to achieve a stable class compromise or to construct a stable social pact could only obscure the narrow base of the regime and its pre-business agenda. Nor could a discourse of democratic inclusion—contra Nasserist authoritarianism—easily be reconciled with a reliance on authoritarian methods of political control and decision making. Democratic rhetoric came to be seen as a thin cover for efforts to impose the hegemony of one social class over others. The extent to which capitalists and landed elites manipulated efforts to construct a liberal, inclusive social pact in their own interest was not lost on the Ba'ath or its military allies.

For the younger generation of Ba'ath leaders and their supporters in the military, this perception underscored their sense of the private sector's determination to prevent meaningful change. It sharpened their commitment to radical social reforms and their willingness to engage in civil conflict to secure the consolidation of a transformational regime, attributes that had a profound effect on political life in the post-1963 period. Like the union, therefore, the secessionist period provided critical experiences of political learning for the generation that would seize power following the Ba'athist coup in March 1963. It reinforced the perception that capitalists were determined to use the discourse of inclusion to secure political arrangements that ultimately were highly exclusionary.

Reliance on authoritarian practices to construct a social pact that privileged the interests of capitalists was thus a direct cause of the instability of postunion politics. By upholding the populist claims of the union period and by preserving the corporatist arrangements developed by Nasserist officials, the regime not only failed to contain the demands of labor and of other interests that actually enhanced their capacity to oppose the larger project of liberalizing Syria's economy and to resist the regime's authoritarian tendencies. At the same time, reliance on emergency measures and rule by decree elevated the power of the military, undermined efforts at democratization, and created precedents that crippled subsequent efforts to bring the military under civilian control.

The Resurgence of the Private Sector

Following Syria's secession from the union, the struggle between reformist and conservative coalitions over the organization of Syria's political economy—with the military always present—once again became a critical aspect of political life. Debate returned to the issues involved in giving shape to the political economy of independent Syria, centering on the question of
defining boundaries—the boundaries of state intervention and the role of the private sector; of central planning versus markets and of the incursion or exclusion of workers and peasants, the share of workers and peasants in the distribution of national income, and the position of the landed oligarchy and its control over rural production. From its inception, the secularist period was marked by frequent cabinet turnovers, military interventions, and parliamentary disruptions.

Throughout these years, the question of Arab unity and the proliferation of various pan-Arab unification schemes further exacerbated the level of social conflict. "Nasserite sympathizers," both overt and covert, worked to destabilize secularist regimes, leading to the rapid erosion of Syrian-Egyptian relations and of Nasser's standing in Syria. Politicians were sharply divided over the U.A.R. and about what Syria's position should be with regard to reunification efforts in general. Bitter debates concerning who was to blame for the perceived failings of the union caused a split in June 1962 between Amin al-Hassani's urination and anti-Nasser faction of the Ba'ath and the faction headed by Salih al-Din Barak and Michel Aflaq. For most of the period, Syrian political elites publicly proclaimed their commitment to pan-Arabism—entering unity talks with Iraq—even while exhibiting a new commitment to Syria's separate path as a nation and continuing to cultivate both Nasser and the U.A.R. The issue of Arab unity generated conflict not just among political elites but also in trade unions, on university campuses, and in towns across Syria, where violent clashes between pro- and anti-unity forces were a frequent occurrence.11


2. There were several governments during this brief period. Cabinets were formed or substantially reorganized in the following six months: September 12, 1961 (with Mahrin al-Shamlawi as prime minister); November 21, 1961 (with a new cabinet); January 19, 1962 (with a new cabinet); April 19, 1962 (Rashid al-Ati); June 20, 1962 (Rashid al-Ati); September 29, 1962 (Khalil al-Araji); and February 16, 1963 (Khalil al-Araji).

3. The domestic politics of Arab nationalism efforts are covered in detail in Mahri Wehbi, Amongst Communist Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq (Oxford: Cornell University Press, 1996)."}

Other than and beyond the question of Arab unity and Syria's place in the region, however, the enduring consequences of the U.A.R. period were manifest through conflicts over the organization of Syria's domestic political economy. In contrast to the political dynamics of the pre-war period, these struggles were heavily influenced by the new prominence of Syrian capitalists and the extent to which they shaped the character of economic policy and state intervention. Nasser's emphasis on industrialization, as well as the successful efforts during the union to marginalize large landowners and impose corporatist controls over labor, combined to leave the business community in a position of relative strength after the union's collapse. With the resumption of civil authority and of multiparty politics, political leaders and factions associated with business moved into central positions in the newly reconstituted Syrian government. This was especially evident in the construction of the new executive branch—in the selection of People's Council leader Nazim al-Qadhi in October 1962, as president of the republic, a position to which he was re-elected after the general elections of December 1961, and in the first cabinets of the secularist period. Reflecting the outlook of pro-reform Syrian capitalists, al-Qadhi supported removing the primacy of the private sector but also favored retaining some of the social reforms introduced during the union. The first secularist cabinet did not contain any of the leading political figures of the pre-war period or the most visible representatives of the old landed elite. It was headed by Mahri Wehbi, also an attorney, who had in 1958 allied himself with General Adib al-Shishakli and whose pragmatism is suggested by his subsequent leadership of the Nasserite National Union branch in Damascus during the U.A.R. The cabinet consisted of members of the People's and National Parties, both of which contained factions representing the landed oligarchy. But unlike previous cabinets, which consisted of a small number of regulars who rotated in and out of government, only Khusari and two others, Leen Zarnia and Farhan al-Jandali, had previous cabinet experience, and none of them had occupied senior cabinet posts.12

1. This historiography covers Faisal's role in Egypt was interesting in Syrian politics, as is also the case that it has contradicted the idea that "Nasserite sympathizers" was considered a valid category in the 1960s, especially in the trade unions, who refused to accept the pro-Arab policies of the new administration and sought the retention of social welfare policies introduced during the union. 12. For background on al-Qadhi, see David Roth, Last of Politics in the Arab World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). 13. The first of several pre-war cabinets. 14. The second of the pre-war cabinets. 15. See the text for the full and detailed account. See Khalil al-Araji, Mahri Wehbi and Adib al-Shishakli (Amman: Dar al-Ma'an, 1997), pp. 9-39. 16. In 1937, al-Qadhi was born in September 1937, in Damascus, Syria, and in December 1957, he became a member of the Union of Students, a member of the People's Party, and in October 1960, he became a member of the People's Party, serving until his death in February 1967, as leader of the Damascus faction of the U.A.R. cabinet, and also leader of the People's Party, serving in four cabinets at 1959 and 1961 in the post, respectively, as minister of health and education, minister of national economy, and also minister of public health.
Capitalists, moreover, were much better represented than in any previous cabinet, where merchants and industrialists had made up around 40 percent of all cabinet ministers from 1933 to 1939. In the Kaddoubs’ cabinet, six of the eleven members had identifiable business connections of one kind or another. Kaddoubs himself had served as consul to the Kathmandu company and also came from a family involved in trading and industrial activities.88 Ahmad Barakat, another attorney, had served as director of the Société des Bauxires Qunifié68 Ahmad Saltar’s family had large investments in industry throughout Syria, an example of the new national bourgeoisie that had emerged following World War II.89 Ahmad Qouneh, a respected professor of law, came from a family with strong business connections. The Qouneh family had extensive landholdings but was also involved in some of the earliest and most significant industrial enterprises in Syria, notably the founding in the 1930s of the Syrian Companies Corporation. Other cabinet members were less prominent representatives of the business community, but Finance Minister Louis Zamir was sympathetic to business concerns, and Public Works Minister Abd al-Rahman Husayn was part owner of a construction company in Latakia.

As in most political levels, parliament contained an unusually high number of beneficiaries of the 172 deputies, 89 had not previously served in the assembly. Business interests were less well represented among parliamentary deputies, where landowners and lawyers were the two largest occupational categories, compared with the cabinet, but even at this level in all, many of the deputies had strong family ties to business.90 In addition, pro-business

depuies dominated key economic committees. In his memoirs, Kaddoubs noted that the majority of members on the parliament’s economic committee, which included many men who also held posts as company directors, were entirely sympathetic to private enterprise. Their views, he noted, were close to those of the industrialists.91 Indeed, in some respects the commerce and parliament in general were more conservative than the government. Thus, even in parliament, the business and financial communities had important channels of access for shaping economic policy.

The business bloc of Syrian governments continued through at least April 1954, during which two subsequent cabinets were formed. Though cabinet turnover was rapid, persistently high levels of business representation continued. Muawi al-Dessalhi, a strong opponent of the union and supporter of business interests, appointed a man whose family owned a textile manufacturing company, Muhammad ‘Abduh, as minister of labor and social affairs in his cabinet, formed after the December 1953 general election.92 Throughout the 1950s, labor-management relations had been particularly contentious in the heavily unionized textile sector, both in Damascus and Aleppo. ‘Abduh’s appointment suggests that the rhetoric about the preservation of workers was tempered by its commitment to the interests of industrialists, among whom the conditions of labor ranked high.

Once in office, senior politicians immediately began to rebuild the web of connections that had bound capital and state officials in the previous period. It authorized the formation of the Economic and Fiscal Reform Commission to advise the government on matters relating to the reform of U.A.R. policies, headed by ‘Aziz Tarabulusi and with the participation of private sector businessmen.93 In a dramatic shift from the approach of the union governments, which in which officials clearly designated the business and state relationship, cabinet officials began a series of visits to regional centers to meet with local Chambers of Commerce, industry, and agriculture.94 The meetings were intended to network business leaders

89 Al-Mahdi, Muhanna, 157ff.
90 Kaddoubs, Al-Muqaddam, 57ff.
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92 ‘Aziz Tarabulusi, ‘Abduh, as minister of labor and social affairs, in his cabinet, formed after the December 1953 general election.93 In a dramatic shift from the approach of the union governments, which had prominent business officials clearly designated the business and state relationship, cabinet officials began a series of visits to regional centers to meet with local Chambers of Commerce, industry, and agriculture.94 The meetings were intended to network business leaders
that their concerns were once again matters of central importance to the government and that the government's priority was now to regain the ground that allegedly was lost under the U.A.R. Officials also met sporadically with leaders of the Barzouan chambers to at their headquarters to explain government policy, a sharp contrast from the union period when chamber members had to knock on government doors to petition for changes in economic regulations.17

Liberal Capitalism and the Search for a New Social Pact

The enhanced position of the business community was visible not only through its role in government and the reemergence of strong business-state connections but also by its efforts, both intellectual and policy-oriented, to undo the status quo of the union and shift Syria's political economy in less interventionist directions. In practice this did not mean the complete dominance of markets over planning. Given the increasingly radical Arab political environment of the early 1960s and the popular legitimacy of the union, even the pro-business cabinet of the succeeding period felt compelled to speak of their continued support for "socialism" and for the maintenance of popular organizations.18 The resulting arrangements occupied a middle ground between the heavily corporatist and populist state capitalism of the U.A.R. and market capitalism. Its basic premise, as described by the Kubbari government on September 29, 1961 -- only days after the break with Egypt -- was a hybrid model captured in the phrase "natural dinar."19

According to the statement, the government pledged to follow a four-point program: (1) to reestablish and guarantee political liberty, including freedom of speech and the press; (2) to abolish the emergency laws and

the intent of the government to rebuild relations with business. See Kubbari, "Kubbari: al-mawâdha wa-anu'ddî hâl," al-watan (24 October 1961); see also Al-Khayat, "Dar al-Milh" (13 May 1961); "Dar al-Milh: Al-Milli" (14 May 1961)

17. In May 1961, for example, the announcement of nationalization went to the headquarters of the Barzouan Chamber of Commerce to the chagrin of its members, who claimed to have been advised by the government of the forthcoming measures. See Kubbari, "Kubbari: al-mawâdha wa-anu'ddî hâl," al-watan (24 October 1961).

18. For example, in October 1961, in two successive announcements, the cabinet declared that it would follow a "light touch" approach to liberal economic development programs, would resort to "live and learn" methods, and would promote the participation of the government in all public sales programs. Several days later it declared that "the new raison d'être will be the base of economic, social, and agricultural development of the country." COC 47 (1961) (November 1961).

reduce inflation, raising the Central Bank discount rate, devaluing the currency, and eliminating restrictions on foreign exchange and on capital transfers in general. Stabilization also involved taking on foreign debt, paying for imports needed to make up for local shortages and for capital goods. In July 1992, Central Bank Director K. Hossain Shafie announced that Syria had received foreign loans totaling $416 million to help importers pay for their purchases.25 In the fall of 1992, a visiting IMF delegation concerned with Syrian officials that the stabilization program was a receding success, helped along by the end of the three-year drought that greatly improved the output of Syria's crucial agricultural sector.26 Cost-of-living indexes showed that prices had dropped to about about 75 percent of the previous level. A balance of payments surplus had been achieved, Syrian export taxes had been raised, and private sector lending had remained within program limits, and other positive results had been recorded. Overall, therefore, the conditions attached to the stabilizing conditions provided a critical step toward the liberalization of the Syrian economy. They also provided a convenient justification for a program of economic reconstruction that attached greater importance to the preferences of industry and merchants than to those of labor and peasants.

At the same time, the various separate cabinets sought to consolidate their vision of Syrian society within a more broadly based economic and social coalition. These efforts focused on constructing a pact between businessmen, labor, and the state of the kind that had first been envisioned by business leaders and progressive politicians in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The pact rested on an explicitly corporatist trade-off: in response for the recognition and preservation of their rights, the government expected peasants and workers to accept an economic strategy which balanced the claims of business and which would place new limits on the scope of agrarian reform policies. Within these boundaries, the government was prepared to recognize and preserve the economic gains of labor and peasants.

As this suggests, sectarian governments by no means excluded large landowners from their efforts to create an inclusive coalition. While it as possible for some to politically or economically in the past and while business interests predominated during the secession period, the landed elite also enjoyed a revival of its fortunes following the collapse of the union. It found the doors of government once again open, and the efforts of landlords to

26. The IMF mission, headed by M. Gough, director of the Middle East department of the International Monetary Fund, has been particularly critical of the decision to withhold the foreign debt, raising the question of whether the same decision could be made in Syria.

under the agrarian reform program met with a measure of success. Nonetheless, in a clear statement of the landed elite's diminished influence, sectarian governments explicitly and repeatedly rejected the wholesale reversal of land reform legislation. In opposing the policy's "correct excesses" in the application of land reform while preserving intact its redistributive and collective elements.

The explicit rationale for the construction of a such a broadly based, inclusive social pact is that of Syria's capita to avoid the polarizing conflicts that characterized Syria in the previous period. Justifications for a pact-building strategy also reflected a clear interest on the part of the new government and business leaders to overcome what they saw as the institutionalization of class-based social divisions and class-based state structures resulting from the populist policies of the union, divisions that constrained their control over the Syrian economy. Nasserism's legacy was seen as divisive of social peace, petty private sector initiative, and economic development. As an economic analysis noted of the 1962 law that institutionalized the new government and business leaders to overcome what they saw as the institutionalization of class-based social divisions and class-based state structures resulting from the populist policies of the union, divisions that constrained their control over the Syrian economy. Nasserism's legacy was seen as divisive of social peace, petty private sector initiative, and economic development. As an economic analysis noted of the 1962 law that institutionalized the new government and business leaders to overcome what they saw as the institutionalization of class-based social divisions and class-based state structures resulting from the populist policies of the union, divisions that constrained their control over the Syrian economy. Nasserism's legacy was seen as divisive of social peace, petty private sector initiative, and economic development.
Syrian economic reform law was considered a fundamental principle for the realization of social justice and national production. All the rights acquired by peasants during the union would be maintained, and the state would continue to offer peasants technical advice, seeds, loans, water, electricity, and education and to support agricultural cooperatives and participation in peasant syndicates. At the same time, however, the government would “preserve the rights of the landowners struck by this law,” to reimburse them fully and promptly, and to return lands incorrectly expropriated. Emphasizing the regime’s interest in dampening class conflict, Daoudi announced that the overall goal of his government was to create an atmosphere of “charitable human relations and of close and fruitful collaboration between all of those who work the land.”

A similar approach was adopted with regard to industry and trade. On the hand, the government pledged to provide support for exports, for the liberalization of imports, and for the free movement of capital into and out of Syria—thus Arab capital offered special incentives to encourage the creation of an Arab common market. More important as an indication of the regime’s orientation, however, Daoudi noted, was the effort to overcome the exploitative, unjust, and disruptive effects of state monopolies, his government found it “necessary to liberalize the nationalization legislation in its present form, total or partial, and to reorganize the nationalized enterprises on an equitable basis.”

On the other hand, industry would not be totally deregulated. Shareholders would be subject to a “reasonable” ceiling on the number of shares they could hold; the state would guarantee the purchase of shares exceeding the number permitted to be privately held and would make such shares available first to workers. Despite the government’s promise to embark on a large-scale privatization program, two categories of workers received explicit guarantees either restoring rights and benefits lost during the union of preserving benefits already gained, such as social security, health insurance, and regulated working conditions. State employees, whose working conditions and salaries had been set at lower, Egyptian levels during the union, received assurances regarding job security, improved working conditions, and higher wages. Private sector workers received more sweeping promises: the government committed itself to a full-employment policy, to protect and promote the formation of trade unions, to expand the limits of trade union activity, and to “maintain and protect the rights acquired by workers and assure them of social services.” Here, too, however, the im
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...t推出了“class harmony” was manifest, indicating that trade union autonomy would be substantively strengthened. The regime, according to Dauditi, would “coordinate the interests of employers and employees and establish relations of good will between them.”

Following a vote of confidence from the constituent assembly, a vote opposed by Bushist and other progressive deputies, Dauditi’s cabinet immediately began to implement a program of economic reforms based on the terms of the nationalization of state-owned enterprises. In January and March, the government moved to dismantle the state and public foundations of the previous regime and create instead the “controlled liberal” economy Dauditi had described. In January, import restrictions began to be lifted on basic commodities. Regulations covering the management and investment practices of private companies also were relaxed. In late January, the Economic and Fiscal Reform Commission issued a report to President Quabadi endorsing the denationalization of state-owned enterprises. The report recommended that Dauditi had proposed, that individual shareholdings in private companies be limited and that surplus shares be offered for sale—with preference given to workers, who would receive government help to buy them. In fact, the coalition went further than Dauditi in some areas: It received from the denationalization law provisions that would have maintained the state a 25 percent stake in Syrian banks, advocating instead their complete privatization.

In the parliamentary session that opened on January 29, the government forwarded three major pieces of legislation for review: the revised agrarian reform law and two denationalization proposals, one for industry and the other for banks, incorporating the changes recommended by Tschaab’s commission.24 On February 17, after discussions in the economic committee of parliament and several days of debate, the assembly approved the privatization of all industries and all banks nationalized under the union. The government had presented the bill as a crucial step in reversing the “nazi capitalist dictatorship” of the union period, restoring the essential role of private capitalists in national development and guaranteeing the confidence of business.

Dauditi’s commitment to maintaining workers’ rights also figured prominently in the bill, which was depicted as advancing three aims in this regard: preventing the concentration of capital in a few hands, safeguarding workers’ benefits, and guaranteeing state supervision over production. The new law retained two seats out of seven on company boards for workers and raised labor’s share in corporate profits from 10 to 25 percent. These measures were applied only to firms with capital of $50,000 or more, however, which were required to become joint-stock companies and to make 70 percent of their shares available to the public.25 The measures affected an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 workers but excluded almost as many. In addition, limits on individual shareholdings were instituted to prevent the restoration of closely held, family-based corporate ownership. No individual could own more than 7 percent of any company with capital under $5 million or more than 5 percent of any company larger than $5 million. These limits, obviously, would not have prevented the return of industrial oligopolies. In addition, however, no individual was permitted to own more than $3,750,000 worth of shares in total, only a slightly more effective means of ensuring broader distribution of corporate ownership.26 The reform of commercial, monetary, and fiscal law continued throughout the short tenure of the Dauditi government as well. Later in February, the Ministry of Economy approved the circulation of shares of denationalized companies: some twenty thousand people, the ministry estimated, had been affected by the end of state trading that followed the nationalizations of 1961.27 In March, the ministry began to rewrite Syria’s tax, customs, and finance laws to eliminate those “no longer in harmony with the economic situation of the country, notably those concerning progressive taxation.”

The government was simultaneously working to reevaluate the agrarian reform program. On February 17, after several days of debate, the parliament approved eight amendments to Agrarian Reform Law 161 of 1938 which were essentially designed to undermine its intent.28 The changes raised the limits of individual landownership from eighty to two hundred hectares of irrigated land and from two hundred to six hundred hectares of nonirrigated land, thereby exempting all but a small number of the largest landowners from the requirements of the law. The changes reduced the

24. A summary of the debate surrounding these bills can be found in M. Al Khatib, 1970, 44–45.
compensation payments for confiscated land, raised the interest rate on compensation payments, increased the amount of land that owners could distribute to family members, and reduced the amount of nonirrigated land to be distributed to peasants. On the other hand, despite this apparent setback for agrarian reform, the regime accelerated the distribution of seized lands, and peasants now received the land for free, whereas under the 1968 law they had been required to pay the full price of the land over a forty-year period, plus administrative costs. Peasants were assured, moreover, that no land that had already been distributed would be returned to its previous owners.

Collectively, these legislative efforts represented the most thorough attempt in Syria's modern history to create the material and institutional bases for an inclusive social pact. Workers, peasants, capitalists, and landlords were envisioned as participants in a grand, classless coalition of social forces. The compromises contained in the legislation of January–March 1962 were intended to ensure the social stability necessary for economic growth, under the supervision of a state that reserved for itself the capacity to define the public good and to set boundaries on the role of individual classes. The state would actively manage the processes of capital accumulation and distribution according to a rather ambiguous notion of social justice based on the incorporation of workers and peasants in the project of deepening capitalism in Syria.

The Failure of Controlled Liberalism

Yet neither the rhetoric of democracy and popular participation nor the explicit safeguards and concessions offered to workers and peasants were sufficient to guarantee the success of Syria's experiment with controlled liberalism or the consent of the governed to the new regime's ideology of "just capitalism," for at least three reasons. First, the government never fully honored its commitment to restore political and personal freedoms. From the first days following succession, the regime's continuing reliance on authoritarian tactics undermined the rhetoric of democratization. It sought to impose consent and compel the formation of a social pact through non-democratic means, adopting the same repressive practices as the regime it replaced. Second, organized interest groups immediately understood that the compromises asked of them far outweighed the potential gains they were being offered. Finally, despite the Damascus government's best efforts to appear inclusive, its revolutionary character was painfully transparent.

Restrictions of various kinds affected virtually every area of political life and expression in the post-U.A.R. period. While individual politicians from the prepatition period were permitted to take part in politics, the most prominent were banished on the grounds that their revival would rekindle the conflicts that created Syria's political crisis in 1944-45. Whatever the validity of these concerns, the restriction prevented progressive and reformist movements in particular from organizing effective campaigns for the December elections. Secessionist governments kept in force a ban on the Syrian Communist Party that had been introduced during the union, continuing to harass its members. Party leader Khalil Baladie tried to return to Syria in the first days after the secession. His plane landed at the Damascus airport, but the authorities prevented him from disembarking, and he was returned to exile without setting foot on Syrian soil.

A wide range of emergency laws also remained in effect, along with severe restrictions on the press. Unions continued to be forbidden from engaging in political activity. Viewed as potential sources of opposition or Nasserite inspiration, unions were kept under particularly close scrutiny by internal security agencies, though they were not purged of opposition members as they had been during the U.A.R. The expansion of state institutions under the union had greatly increased the capacity of official to intervene in economic and political affairs, and the state apparatus was used by secessionist regimes to suppress opposition and reward supporters. A number of institutions established during the union to ensure compliance with emergency decrees remained in operation, including the system of state security tribunals.

The government also used the ongoing process of constitutional reform to try to strengthen the power of the executive, reduce the autonomy and power of the judiciary, and institutionalize the practice of rule by decree, a much criticized hallmark of President Nasser. Moreover, the military was never fully excluded from politics. After the secession the army had taken over district-level administration, which it refused to relinquish to the Ministry of Interior. On the national level, it saw in its role as the ultimate guarantor of the constitution a means to reinforce the military's power over society.
in economic and social policies at home. These demonstrations led to violent, sometimes fatal clashes between Ba'athists and Islamist student groups, often spilling over into larger confrontations. Indeed, it was during this period that business and Islamist interests came together to oppose the secular socialism of the Ba'th, an alliance that would play an important role in Syria over the next three decades. The government responded by imposing stricter controls on universities and intervening in university administration and appointments in an effort to quell campus unrest.

Students were not alone in their opposition. Trade union federations, individual syndicates, journalists, and former politicians joined to protest economic liberalization and political repression. Despite assurances from President Hafez to the head of the General Federation of Trade Unions that he would do everything permitted by the constitution to preserve workers' rights, the rank and file continued to express their opposition to the government's economic programs. Unionized bank employees in Damascus went on strike in early February 1962 to protest the loss of benefits they felt would accompany denationalization. Tensions were high in the textile sector as well, where workers viewed the return to private ownership as a threat to job security. The Ba'th Party added its voice to the larger chorus of criticism, though it was still politically weakened by its public association with the failures of the C.A.R. and by its internal position with assessing blame for what went wrong. Along with other opposition parties and movements, the Ba'th had been subjected to the regime's general efforts to repress its critics. Statements released in the fall of 1959 and following the Fifth Congress of the National Command made clear the party's sharp critique of the policies adopted by various succession governments and its sense that the 'center of reaction' had taken over the country. Following the closure of its newspaper, Al-Ba'th, and a crackdown on leading members of the party, the Ba'th National Command launched its attack, issuing a blistering communiqué that left little doubt about the extent of its antagonism toward a government it clearly associated with the interests of capitalism. The scope of opposition indicates that while the Kaddawi and Douma governments succeeded in moving their legislative agenda through parlia-
Perhaps most important, the government failed to appreciate that cor-
porate arrangements are not easy to reconstruct. Although unions consid-
ered only one element of the opposition to Dassault, the centralization of
unions during the U.A.R. period had provided them with a more cohesive
institutional base from which to protect their interests and resist de-
centralization. And although decentralization was eventually implemented, the
process of unions, together with campus unrest and the efforts of pro-
democracy parliamentarians, brought about the downfall of the Dassault
政府, a renewed cycle of direct military interventions, and the col-
lapse of controlled liberalism.

In late March 1969, under increasing pressure from parliament, Prime
Minister Dassault averted demands for a debate on the government's
refusal to rescind the emergency laws. During that debate deputies with-
drew their confidence in the government; requested Dassault's resignation;
and proposed the formation of a National Unity government to oversee the
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March 25, but negotiations over the formation of a new government were
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reinforced the pattern of "corrective" military intervention in politics.

Initiated by some of the officers who had brought about Syria's break with
Egypt, the March 28 coup was justified on the grounds that the civilian
government had denied the goals of the separatist movement—social
reform and the reunification with Egypt on the basis of Syrian-Egyptian
equality—and had moved too far to the right. Parliament was dissolved, and
dozens of politicians, including President al-Quibbi, were arrested. Notably,
the directors of the Khamisya company were also among those detained, a
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Sharp public criticism, however, and despite the imposition of a military
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To repair the split in the armed forces, Syria's commander in chief
General Zahir al-Asmar negotiated a settlement that called for the withdrawal
of the military from politics, the return to office of President Qasim, the for-
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Office (PRO), FO275/73999.

50. This document is cited in the coup was permitted to run unintercepted. They were to be
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that brought Bashir to power. The coup and subsequent events are described in detail by

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officers apparently hoped for a quick return to parliamentary rule, deputies resisted returning to office under military sponsorship, demanded new elections, and resumed their campaign for the full restoration of democracy. The General Federation of Trade Unions was among the groups that applauded the changes and the promise that liberalization would no longer serve as the basis of government policy. Al-A'Azma's government renationalized the Khumaytia company, even while emphasizing that it did not intend to launch a systematic program of renationalization. It restored the land reform legislation of 1958 essentially intact and raised labor share of company profits to insure a more equitable distribution. Shortly thereafter, on May 21, it issued a decree partially renationalizing banks; the state would retain a 73 percent stake in Syrian banks, and 50 percent of non-Syrian, Arab-owned banks; foreign banks were completely nationalized. Stricter import controls were imposed, and flour mills were nationalized.

The Damascus Consensus

Beyond the drama, confusion, and uncertainty that attended these events, they illustrate the extent to which the boundaries of political and social policy established during the United Arab Republic and the institutional legacy of the union constrained post-Arab union regimes in Syria. The populist "bargains" negotiated between Nasser and various social classes, in Egypt and in Syria, imposed crucial limits on the ability of the Khdari and Dawalibi governments to restructure the economy, to redefine the position of interests within the ruling coalition, and to construct a social pact that reflected the preferences of business. At the same time, the authoritarian character of existing institutional and legislative mechanisms provided a readily accessible repertoire of tools for responding to what the government perceived as excessive popular demands, threats to social peace, and the presence of a diverse class spirit in Syrian politics. Combating an upsurge of high social mobilization, the first civil servants of post-Arab union Syria limited democratic freedoms, deployed the authoritarian and corporatist instruments of the U.A.R. period, and undermined efforts to establish any democratic forms of political participation.

At the same time, the events of March and April 1963 established a pattern that persisted throughout the remaining months of the separatist period and further contributed to the emergence of a radical, populist authoritarian strategy of state formation after March 1963. They reinforced the threshold beyond which no subsequent efforts to form a social pact or class compromise could be expected to succeed. In so doing, these events helped define what might be called a "Damascus consensus," deferring the boundaries beyond which the mobilizational gains of the union could not be rolled back. They institutionalized a set of minimum conditions which guided the two subsequent sequenial cabinets (those headed by Khalil al-Atrash and which were taken as a starting point by the Ba'th after 1963). These minimum conditions were, first, that the rights and benefits of workers and peasants had to be protected and, second, that the privileged relationship between workers, peasants, and the state had to be maintained. State management, if not full ownership, of the largest industrial concerns and banks was seen as essential for guaranteeing that the private sector and the national economy as a whole, operated according to some general principles of distributed equity. Initially, the position of the private sector and of private property were also protected by guarantees Khalil al-Atrash, like his predecessor, rejected wide scale nationalization and welcomed private investment, both domestic and foreign. The conclusion was not that the few in-

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erigible that interests of the private sector would not determine the orientation of the national economy. The fundamental relationship between state and capital was thus defined in terms of the control and subordination of capital to social criteria established and defended by the state, not in terms of its cooperative participation in the process of capital accumulation. This relationship was reflected in the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood's resistance to the al-Atrash and al-A'Azma regimes and in the consolidation of an opposition alliance among business, landlords, and the Muslim Brotherhood, deepening the level of social conflict and adding an additional element of instability to Syria's already strained political system. In short, as in the previous
period, Syria's capital investment to the threat of growing state control and the rising demands for by forming a conservative coalition with landed elites and, in this case, with militant Islamic movements as well.

The March 1962 coup and its aftermath also established the role of the armed forces in the defense of these minimum conditions. As in the past, military officers would not hesitate to intervene when they perceived that civilian politicians were unable to fulfill their mandates. By its actions—its resistance to civilian control and its endorsement of rule by executive decree—the military sought to ensure the survival of any future government was dependent on its support. It also ensured, however, that the balance of democratization—in particular the problems of reconstituting the military forces—would not emerge after the coup and would ultimately determine the survival not only of subsequent governments but also of the sectarian regime itself.

The al'Azam government was permanently tainted by its origins in the March 1962 coup and never succeeded in either establishing its legitimacy or consolidating its authority. Throughout its tenure it was plagued by cabinet disruptions, as ministers resigned to protest al'Azam's failure to live up to his campaign promises. In May 1961, the government quickly lost the support of even those groups which had initially welcomed it, in particular the trade unions. In June and July 1962, the government attempted to reduce the degree of trade union centralization imposed during the U.A.R. period, which was seen as a key source of pro-Arabian and pro-Western sympathies. Yet organized labor perceived these measures as efforts to fragment unions and render them more amenable to government intervention. The organization (Decree no. 59) provoked nationwide labor unrest.

In protest, the president, the minister of interior, and the trade union leaders called for a general strike. The strike, which began on July 2, was supported by the trade union congress on July 3. Within days, in a move to protest the new decree, textile workers in Aleppo went on strike and demand the resignation of the government. The strike subsequently spread to

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strait for legally dissolving the 1958 chamber, amending the 1959 constitution, and agreeing to hold a session of parliament to permit the investiture of as Sal al-’Umar as prime minister on September 13. The opposition was accepted by the vast majority of deputies, but rejected by a small group of Nasserites, members of the Cairene faction, and other progressive deputies.

For the remaining few months preceding the “revolution” of March 8, 1958, al-’Umar’s government was subject to continuos disruptions from Islamic movements, the military, conservative members of parliament, the Egyptian government, and the newly installed Ba’thist government of Iraq. Nonetheless, al-’Umar moved to implement serious reforms and protect democratic institutions from the intervention of the armed forces. Against the opposition of the military, he renewed the emergency laws in December, once again permitting political parties to function. Elections were planned for the following summer. His government accelerated the distribution of expropriated land to peasants and reduced the amount they were charged for it. At the same time, he continued his efforts to attract private investment, offering assurances that no further nationalizations were planned.

Threatened by al-’Umar’s efforts to create military autonomy and in the context of escalating civil violence, the rise of a Ba’thist government in Iraq, and an emerging Egyptian-Umayyad alliance, a pro-Ba’th faction of the officer corps seized power on March 8, creating a tumultuous and brief effort to dismantle the authoritarian legacy of the regime. The popular and political forces who had brought about the restoration of parliament following its dissolution in 1957, which had begun to place Syria’s democratic institutions and practices on more solid footing, were pushed into the background by the return of direct military rule. Only one of several groups participating in the March 8 coup, the Ba’th Party, was able to consolidate a durable national-conservative system of rule. Ultimately, the tentative and flawed transition from authoritarianism gave rise to a much more fragile and resilient form of authoritarian regime than Syria had experienced in the past.

Throughout the authoritarian period, as in previous phases of Syrian politics, the role of capital was particularly important in the collapse of Syria’s transition from authoritarian rule, by working to establish a system of rule that served its own economic interests first and democratic interests second, by its willingness to embrace the authoritarian structures and institutions of the previous regime, and by adopting a strategy of economic reconstruction that intended to consolidate the hegemony of the private sector, Syria’s business community effectively undermined its well-proven commitment to social unity and to building an inclusive social pact. In the end, the “authoritarian path to democracy” was a poor strategy for the creation of either stable democratic institutions or the hegemony of business.

These choices led to a bidirectional authoritarian system far less sympathetic to the concerns of business than any of the authoritarian regimes that had been. The Ba’th engaged in a radical populist form of social mobilization and capital accumulation, marked by widespread nationalizations and extensive state intervention in the economy. Through what could arguably be considered a social revolution from above, Ba’th leaders achieved the successful consolidation of a radical populist authoritarian system of rule. Despite assertions that their power initially rested on a thin social and institutional base and that Syria’s capitalists and landlords retained considerable power of their own, the Ba’th adopted a radical strategy of state building. Yet its success was far from inevitable given the organizational fragility of the Ba’th and the strength of the forces that opposed it. Indeed, the emergence of a stable system of rule under the Ba’th continues to strike observers of the period as one of the core puzzles of Syrian politics. Addressing this puzzle, making clear why the struggle for Syria took the course it did during the subsequent years, and explaining how such an outcome was possible are my tasks in the following chapter.
Consolidating Populist Authoritarian Rule

For many Syrians the events of March 8, 1969, combined a sense of familiarity with the sense of sudden change. Several times the military had intervened during the roughest political movements of the post-invasion period. Now, once again, the streets of Damascus were filled with signs of a military coup d'état. Armored units took up positions around key government offices and communications centers. Military vehicles moved slowly through residential neighborhoods, loudspeakers blaring the contents of "proclamation number one," urging citizens to stay calm, remain indoors, and observe curfew rules. Lines formed at neighborhood bakeries and small grocery stores as people rushed to stock up on bread, milk, and other essentials before the curfew took effect.

March 8, however, was not the beginning of just another short-term disruption in Syria's crisis-ridden political system. With the success of the military coup and the subsequent consolidation of Ba'athist power, Syria's social, economic, and political life was dramatically and thoroughly transformed. By 1970, the year that marked Hafez al-Assad's full ascension to power, the trajectory of Syrian state formation had been decisively altered.

The scope of the changes brought about by the Ba'ath between 1963 and 1970 would be hard to overestimate. Although Syria does not figure in the literature on social revolutions, its experiences during these years represent nothing less than a revolutionary transformation of the state, society, and economy. In this relatively short span of time, the leadership of the Ba'ath completed the marginalization of Syria's landlord class; broke the political power of capital; created a public sector that controlled three-quarters of the national economy, redistributed some 40 percent of agrarian land; and strengthened the repressive-corporatist model of mobilization and social incorporation introduced by its predecessors. The Ba'ath's leadership consolidated the populist authoritarian transformation of state bureaucratic structures and practices, reconstituting the state as an omnipresent agent of development.

In accomplishing these aims, the leaders of the Ba'ath exhibit few of the reservations about unleashing "potentially uncontrollable elements of class conflict" that are more characteristic of populist politicians such as Nasser or Gardencs. Instead, they enthusiastically embraced the "iron fist" and deployed both state-sponsored violence and class conflict as central elements in their strategy of populist authoritarian state formation. And despite impressive levels of intensity in the conflict between 1963 and 1970, the Ba'ath consolidated a system of rule that has proven remarkably durable, even relatively adaptive. Although they have faced numerous crises over the years, the core elements put in place during this phase of Ba'ath rule remain tangible and potent elements of Syrian authoritarianism today.

In short, Ba'athist politicians succeeded during these seven years in consolidating a radical, populist authoritarian system of rule. In the process, they managed to depart from the path of failed consolidation that is more characteristic of such regimes. Unlike the brief but dramatic experience of radical populism in Peru at about the same time or the experience of popular revolution in Mexico or Egypt—where established durable systems of rule subdued their populist commitments—successive Ba'athist regimes in Syria were able successfully to overcome the dilemmas that typically attend efforts to institutionalize populist norms and institutions. Mobilizing opposition to an existing system of rule, transforming newly mobilized groups into a stable political coalition; and, perhaps most difficult of all, overcoming the constraints of dependent capitalist development to institutionalize a radical strategy of capital accumulation—these dilemmas have gradually ended the anticorporatist, transformationalist character of other experiences of populist state formation. Indeed, they contributed to the failure of earlier efforts to improve a populist authoritarian system of rule in Syria, notably during the 1958–61 war with Egypt.


Between 1963 and 1970, however, the Ba'thist Party surrounded the institutions of mobilization and counter-mobilization through the massive re-design of Syria's institutional landscape, creating a dense array of new political and social institutions to incorporate yet control large segments of Syrian society. Ba'thist elites also avoided the economic-structural dilemma that typically constrain the institutionalization of a radical populist political economy, repressing and excluding capitalisms and setting Syria on a developmental trajectory that many observers viewed as deeply anticapitalist, though it clearly fell short of its self-announced socialist identity.

As the experiences of Mexico, Egypt, and Peru demonstrate (see Chapter 5), the balance of populist consolidation is usually explained as a result of the embeddness of a local economy and local business interests in transnational capitalist networks that restrict the development options of populist trajectories and limit the possibilities for domestic social transformation. Failed consolidation is also attributed to the resistance of populist clients to adopt strategies of state formation that exclude capitalist, corporate, and popular social actors, groups, and processes for accumulation. In Syria, however, these constraints were largely absent. The local economy was relatively unintegrated into transnational capitalist networks. Local capitalists, who were virtually unanimous in their opposition to the Ba'th, had few external resources on which to draw to bolster their domestic standing and check the transnational ambitions of the Ba'th. As a result, Ba'thist elites benefited from an unusual degree of autonomy in adopting an exclusive strategy of state formation as the basis for securing their control over the national economy.

By the time of Assad's accession to power, the competing visions of the Syrian state that had emerged with the coming of independence—visions that were centrally implicated in post-independence political struggles—had been suppressed in favor of a single, dominant vision of Syria's political identity as a socialist-populist regime. The restructuring of Syria's political economy had been consolidated, shattering capitalists' hopes for the creation of a social order organized around some vision of controlled liberation. While tensions over the organization of Syria's economy continued to generate serious conflicts throughout this period, by 1970 the state that alternative trajectories were possible for the organization of the Syrian political economy had been decisively suppressed. 1

1 Challenges to domination were successfully repressed and the state was consolidated, undermining opposition in the face of increasing repression. By 1970, the Ba'th had successfully consolidated its political power, eliminating opposition and institutionalizing its control over the entire society. This consolidation was achieved through a combination of repression, co-optation, and institutionalization. The Ba'th Party was able to maintain its monopoly on power, ensuring its dominance in various sectors of Syrian society. The state's monopoly on power was further reinforced through the use of a repressive apparatus, which effectively suppressed any opposition to the regime.
rule during these years is ignored, presented as a puzzle, or seen as the unintended outcome of the more important power struggles within the party. In the definitive study of intra-Ba'athist politics during the 1963-66 period, for example, Harun Rubinovich concludes by noting the profound gap between the turmoil that marked elite politics, on the one hand, and the stability of the system of rule created during those years, on the other. "It is curious," he writes, "that the years 1963-66 which saw such profound social and political changes take place in Syria witnessed there also the emergence of a relatively solid (or at least durable) political structure." In a more recent study, Mailk Mifi emphasizes his sense that "state building clearly did not stop the agenda of Syrian or Iraqi rulers during the postwar era. Their energies remained focused almost exclusively on the acquisition and consolidation of power."

In these accounts and others, the consolidation of Ba'athist authoritarianism is depicted as having happened through a process that might best be described as incidental to or even accidental state formation. Deeply personalized struggles for power are presented as having pushed aside, suppressed, or overwhelmed efforts to institutionalize building. Nor is the existing institutional context seen to affect political dynamics in a meaningful way. In this conventional account of Syrian politics after the coup of March 8, 1963, politics and the formation of a durable system of rule are understood as incommensurate practices.

Rejecting such perspectives, I offer an alternative argument, in which the formation and consolidation of populist authoritarian institutions move to center stage. In place of the intra-Ba'ath conflict, the personal rivalries, and the political instability that define the dominant narratives of this period, I foreground the processes of institutional and social reorganization that such narratives neglect, linking these processes to my larger argument about the effects of economic and institutional structures on the organization of social conflict, especially their effects on the possibility for consolidating a populist authoritarian system of rule. Among other things, this approach reflects my sense that a narrow focus on personal rivalries within the ruling party obscures the extent to which various factions of the Ba'ath pursued a rather consistent strategy of state building from 1963 to 1970, a strategy designed explicitly to overcome the political and economic dilemmas associated with the consolidation of a populist authoritarian system of rule.

This outcome was not in any sense incidental to the leaders of the Ba'ath. From a core focus of their policies throughout the 1963-70 period and survive deep disagreements among contending Ba'athist elites. Such differences were not only personal or sectarian, as is typically emphasized, but substantive as well. They concerned relations between state and capital, strategies of popular mobilization, and—no less consequential—strategies of control and repression. Conflict among Ba'athist leaders reflected a keen understanding of the demands of state building and of economic restructuring, including the relationship between institution building and popular legitimacy, the need to incorporate workers, peasants, students, and small merchants, to rebuild state institutions, reestablish property rights, and overcome the residual power of former ruling elites. How to manage these demands occupied a significant place on the Ba'ath's political agenda and united important intra-party differences over issues of institutional design.

Institution building was thus explicitly recognized as a critical element in the Ba'ath strategy of state formation and regime consolidation, even by party leaders who otherwise had very little in common. Contrary to conventional understandings of Syrian politics in these years, Ba'athists elites did in fact carry them into power a rather well-formed theory of populist authoritarian state formation. Indeed, they brought with them more than one theory, and disagreements over which theory should guide the party's practice are as important for understanding the dynamics of intraelite conflict as the personal rivalries that most accounts single out for attention.

**Shaping the Ba'athist Regime: The Role of Intellectuals**

Referring to the question at the core of this book, what role did it play for Ba'athist elites to act? In two previous phases of Syrian state formation—the anticolonial period from 1930 to 1958 and the union with Egypt—undermined forces had failed in consolidating a populist system of rule. How were they now able to overcome the obstacles that previously had defeated such efforts? What made it possible for these elites to translate their understanding of state building into a durable populist authoritarian regime in Syria between 1963 and 1970, an outcome which scholars of Syria find mystifying and which scholars of populism largely discount?

Two factors stand out in answering these questions. In part, Syria's rela-
tive lack of integration into the world capitalist economy lowered the political and economic costs associated with a radical populist strategy of state formation. Just as important, however, the Ba’th inherited a rich legacy of authoritarian institutions and practices to draw on in implementing a strategy of radical populist state formation. Experiences of social conflict during the second intifada period in particular had established a framework—a "Dangerous Consensus" of sorts—concerning the appropriate organization of the political economy and the boundaries of popular incorporation. Together, these resources not only helped shape a distinctive strategy of authoritarian state formation but also helped to define and make accessible the goal of populist social transformation. They provided a basis for explaining how the politics of factionalism and elite rivalry interacted with a set of institutional constraints and incentives to influence the strategic choices of Ba’thist elites as they labored to build a viable populist system of rule.

More specifically, I argue that the imperatives of regime consolidation took on a particular form—and were possible to address through a popular authoritarian strategy of state formation—as a result of two critical factors: first, the institutional environment in which the Ba’th constructed a system of rule and, second, the Ba’th’s perception of its own vulnerability in the face of a weakened but still powerful coalition of landed, commercial, and industrial elites. The former had a defining impact on Ba’thist notions about how to construct a state and the institutional mechanisms available to implement them. The latter—the result of political learning that was most profoundly shaped by the lessons of the U.A.R. and the accessionist period that followed—shaped the perceptions of all Ba’thist elites, not only those identified in the literature as radicals, concerning the limited possibilities for establishing a durable political order on the basis of a broad, inclusive social coalition. It helped to structure the dynamic of conflicts over the economy as an irreconcilable struggle between the Ba’th and the social groups from which it derived power, notably Syrian capitalists.

Importantly, it was precisely the Ba’th’s conscious vulnerability—the extent to which Ba’thists could undermine the party’s capacity to reorganize the Syrian political economy through their control over capital and other resources—that gave social conflicts this distinctive strategic dynamic. Economic vulnerability shaped perceptions among Ba’thist elites concerning their political options and the limited possibilities for an accommodationist rather than a confessional strategy of state formation. It promoted a high-risk strategy of state building based on the large-scale transfer of property assets to the state, class polarization, and repression. This vulnerability also created a strategic context in which the demands of regime consolidation compelled the emerging leadership of the Ba’th to seize control of the economy and push forward the radical reorganization of Syrian society in the context for ensuring the decisive marginalization of the commercial, industrial, and landed elites, who, though weakened politically, remained the dominant economic actors in the country.

Several elements of the institutional legacy inherited by the Ba’th and set as central to controlling their movement, as I described in Chapters 4 and 5, the institutional, legislative, and judicial changes brought about during the union with Egypt—that changes that necessitated a hybrid strategy in Sunni Shari’i law-based legal systems—provided the Ba’th with a readily accessible set of mechanisms and techniques that could be appropriated and redesigned to meet the particular requirements of populist authoritarian state building. Indeed, during the 1958–70 period, Ba’thist leaders were sometimes depicted as perfecting practices such as rule by decree, domestic surveillance, and the corporatist restructuring of society which had become the dominant currency of governance during the union.

In addition, as demonstrated throughout previous chapters, the deepening of state intervention since independence and the increasing prominence of the state in the organization of the Syrian economy valorized and made available to the Ba’th a broad popular willingness to view the state as the legitimate agent of social change. Even while quite profound differences over the appropriate role of the state persisted, the expansion of the state apparatus during the 1950s and 1960s permitted Ba’thist leaders to indulge a radically transformative social and political project within an existing set of state institutions, rather than having to create them de novo. Ba’thist elites also recognized, however, that the enormous growth in state capacity over the previous two decades represented a double-edged sword. It held out tremendous potential but could be harnessed reliably to their particular strategy of state building only if this capacity were first brought under their control. Describing the state structure (and the state bureaucracy that they inherited as "agents of coercion and frustration," they made civil service reform, the reorganization of state institutions, and the subordinating of the state to the party critical elements in their strategy of populist authoritarian state building. Ba’thist elites thus pursued the dual task of transforming Syria’s institutional landscape through a hybrid strategy, appropriating the institutions and practices of their predecessors, mixing in state and community innovations, and combining both with borrowings from the models and rhetorics that were current in much of the Middle East, the broader developing world, and the social sciences.

In short, Ba’thist elites had much to work with, considerably more than is acknowledged by those who emphasize the lack of internal unity and deeply fractional intraparty conflicts. Their raw materials included not only
the availability of a distinctive form of state institutional capacity but also a well-tested model for how to deploy that capacity. Discourses of populism had long since established a broad resonance within the Syrian political arena. The notion of the state as an instrument of social reform and social organization was no longer at issue. Corporatist strategies of social mobilization and control had become familiar aspects of the Syrian political repertoire. Seen in this light, the Ba‘th’s consolidation of a populist authoritarian system of rule appears much less mystifying than many observers of Syria make it appear.

In the following sections of this chapter I explore the factors that shaped the Ba‘th’s strategy of state formation, with a particular emphasis on the conditions that permitted Ba‘thist elites to overcome the differences that typically constrain the consolidation of a radically populist authoritarian system of rule. In emphasizing these factors, I will refer relatively little to the well-documented factional struggles within the Ba‘th. Instead, the focus will be on the several transformations that marked the populist reconstruction of Syria’s political economy and the consolidation of a populist authoritarian system of rule. As in earlier chapters, I single out three broad areas for special attention: transformations in the structure and content of key political institutions and practices of governance; relations between state and capital; and the reorganization of Syrian society, notably the profound transformations achieved by the Ba‘th in the institutional and associational life of the country. Each section underscores the central arguments of this chapter concerning the intentional nature of Ba‘thist state building, the structural underpinnings of Ba‘thist political strategies, and the dynamics that generated a consolidated populist authoritarian system of rule in Syria.

State Reform and the Radicalization of the Bureaucracy

The basic difficulty facing any socialist experiment consists not so much in the ideology and class interests which are ascendant to socialism but rather in creating new state agencies and clearly defining their various spheres of authority so that no struggle for power can occur.

—Michel Affif, “Interview with Mr. Michel Affif by the Beirut Daily Al-Akhbar”

The Ba‘th’s performance during its early years in power appeared to many observers to be something of a tragic comedy. Despite the party’s long years of opposition and its ruthless pursuit of power, its leadership seemed profoundly ill-equipped for the actual demands of governance. Inexperienced in the mundane tasks of national administration, struggling to contain powerful domestic opposition, lacking popular support, and riven by deep factional disputes, the Ba‘th did not leave a terribly positive impression on its new subjects. Indicators of its ill-preparedness abound. Cabinets formed and collapsed at an alarming rate. Civilian and military factions of the party vied to advance their positions at one another’s expense. Party leaders struggled to cope with both internal and regional pressures to enter again into some form of unity agreement with Egypt, Iraq, or both. Syndicates, capital flight, and demonstrations signaled the discontent of Syrians ranging from supporters of Nasser to businessmen, civil servants, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the stormy environment surrounding the Ba‘th’s early months in power, the leadership of the party nonetheless managed to establish a broad and lasting template for its approach to issues of governance and for the popular transformation of Syrian society and economy. Moreover, the Ba‘th’s strategy of state formation took clear shape within months after the March 1 coup. By the time of the Sixth National Congress of the party in October 1963, radical factions among the leadership had produced a fully elaborated statement of party goals. Within two years, the design of a Ba‘thist system of rule shaped by these goals largely complete.

This is not to suggest that such a template emerged fully formed on the morning of March 8. It developed slowly, unevenly, in fits and starts, and often as a result of particular instances of crisis management rather than the careful implementation of well-crafted policy measures. Nevertheless, how the Ba‘th leadership perceived of and responded to crises was not by any means haphazard. Its actions were deeply influenced by notions of how to construct relationships among the state apparatus, the party, the economy, and society in ways that would contribute most effectively to the consolidation of Ba‘thist power and to the transformation of Syria’s political economy—outcomes that were understood as highly interdependent. Its approach was powerfully influenced by what institutional resources were available and by the leadership’s perceptions of what had and had not worked during the years of postindependence political struggle. And while many observers tend to dismiss the effect of Ba‘thist ideology on the political practice of Ba‘thist domestic policies and the discourses adopted to legitimize them, one can see that the Ba‘th’s leadership had produced lengthy treaties intended to guide the party’s policymaking and held cabinet-level positions in Ba‘thist governments from time to time during the 1960s.
As in any political authoritarian transition, a key dilemma confronted by the Ba'ath in March 1963 was how to manage the turmoil and deeply conflicting process of mobilizing a populist social coalition and restructuring the Syrian political economy. An essential prerequisite for this was the consolidation of a state apparatus that operated as a predictable and reliable instrument of the regime. Among the first areas of reform tackled by the Ba'ath, therefore, and one in which the imprint of Ba'ath ideology was most distinct, was the reorganization of the state bureaucracy to establish party control over agencies and institutions that had acquired substantial autonomy in the period since independence. The project of state bureaucratic reform aimed not only to change the social composition of the bureaucracy but also to redefine the identity of the state and state institutions, to embed within them the norms of radical populism, and to use them as the means for constructing a populist social pact.

Beginning with its initial announcement of the coup in the early hours of March 8, the petty leadership launched what would soon grow into a far-reaching program to transform the institutions of economic and political governance and bring under party control the military, the civil service, the police, workers, unions, provincial authorities, and the judiciary. On May 20, Prime Minister Salah al-Din Bitar, who held the prime ministership numerous times between 1955 and 1957, gave a midnight radio address in which he presented a lengthy statement on the policy aims of his government. Turning to the subject of state reform, Bitar emphasized the need to "develop the government machinery in a manner making it responsive to and facilitating the realization of the goals drawn up by the revolution. . . . It is the duty of the state machinery," he said, "to change its mentality and the method of its activity in a rational manner. This requires the removal of all the residue and the various types of impediments obstructing it from accomplishing its task."11

Bitar's speech signaled the start of a broad-based campaign to purge the civil service and replace existing personnel with those perceived to be loyal to the Ba'ath. Although relatively small numbers of civil servants enjoyed protection from political interference, on May 29 the government published two legislative decrees amending existing civil service laws and increasing its authority to intervene in the hiring and firing of protected state personnel.12 Large-scale dismissals of top civil servants from a wide range of agencies and ministries followed their publication.13 These were accompanied by the rotation of party personnel out of significant positions in the Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Interior, Central Bank, and other key agencies. Salaries of top civil servants were reduced to levels faced in keeping with the new populist identity of the state bureaucracy.

Attacks on the civil service were supported by a spate of highly polemical articles and editorials that appeared in party- and government-controlled media over the course of the summer and fall. These articles conveyed a well-honed sense of the capacity of the bureaucracy to obstruct Ba'ath plans for Syria's economic transformation. They noted the potential for the emergence of opposition coalitions between military bureaucrats and former economic and political elites, many of whom came from similar social backgrounds.14 In attacking the precarious civil service, new reports focused on its lack of loyalty, corruption, and submission to interests of Syria's former reactionaries rulers. They highlighted the "popular revolution" for a broad range of "support elements" within the state apparatus and the need for measures to compensate for the civil service's "insufficient bearing on the new cadre of its personnel,"15 and its "failure to adapt" to the requirements of the revolution.16 Bitar's message was clear: "We are ... a revolutionary body of cadres, a revolutionary force."17

11. For more on Bitar's speech, see "Speech by Prime Minister Salah al-Din Bitar to the Nation," in Al-Baath, May 1, 1963, p. 2.
12. For more on the civil service reforms of 1963, see "Decree on the Civil Service," published in al-Baath, June 22, 1963, p. 4.