

The Syrian Enigma: What is the Baath?

A few weeks before the Israeli-Arab conflict last June, an uncharitable commentator compared the Baath to Samson. Blinded and weakened like the Biblical hero, he wrote, the party in power in Syria was doing its best to pull down the pillars of the temple which would kill it. Samson did not fail in his suicide. He also succeeded in burying his enemy the Philistines. The Baath, however, by no means destroyed the Israelis and their imperialist allies; on the other hand, it emerged very much alive from the ruins of military defeat.

Those who sought—and doubtless still seek—its death were nevertheless numerous. Since last autumn, the Israeli leaders have proclaimed their intention of overthrowing the Damascus régime, made solely responsible for the commando raids on Israeli territory. Since the seizure of power by the Left of the Baath in February 1966, the Americans have shown their disapproval of the Syrian leaders, whose political options seemed to lie mid-way between those of Moscow and Peking. In a talk to the businessmen of Latakia, the American ambassador reassured them with the following words: 'Do not worry. In the

near future there will be major changes in Syria. Free enterprise and democracy will triumph.’¹

The British, deprived overnight of important contracts; the oil companies, who were forced to pay higher royalties under threat of nationalization; the conservative régimes of the Arab world, sapped by agitation sponsored by the Baath; not to speak of ‘friendly’ countries such as Iraq, embarrassed by propaganda from Damascus, do not nourish much affection for these left-wing, ‘semi-anarchist’ and ‘romantic’ socialists, whose revolutionary zeal—even if it lacks commensurate means of action—disrupts established order and the *status quo*.

Isolation and Secrecy

If the Baath has many enemies, it has also won very few allies. One of the founders of the party recently said to me, somewhat bitterly: ‘The Baath leaders, it must be admitted, have an extraordinary gift for turning even potential friends into allies.’ On the eve of Israeli-Arab hostilities, neutral observers were unanimous in thinking that the Syrian régime had only limited popular support, in spite of the social measures it has taken in favour of the dispossessed classes. It was confronted with the hostility of the mercantile petit-bourgeoisie of the towns, the indifference of a part of the peasantry, restrained criticisms by the working-class, and the distrust of numerous intellectuals. The Muslim Brothers, the followers of the former leadership of the Baath (Michel Aflak, Salah el Bitar and Mounif el Razzaz) and even some small left-wing groupings were plotting against it, while Nasserites and Communists were supporting it almost against their will. The Soviet Union was giving it aid more from necessity than from sympathy.

One might, of course, explain the relative isolation of the Damascus régime at home and abroad in terms of its policies in recent months. Any such explanation, however, risks being superficial if it does not take account of the origins of the party and its leaders, of its past and present ideology, its organization, its activities and its very special role in the Arab world.

The Baath is a very elusive party. It has a number of faces. Its general physiognomy has changed over the years. It has reached its majority, without acquiring the definitive traits of maturity. A quarter of a century of clandestine life has made secretive, and obsessively distrustful. Even in power, it continues to behave more like an occult sect than a political party aspiring to popularity among the Arab masses.

There are very few studies devoted to the Baath. This is what makes the book which Kamel S. Abu Jaber has recently published in the United States such an important contribution.² The author, an American of Jordanian origin, who is a professor at the University of Tennessee, has made extensive use of Arabic materials and has interviewed leaders of

¹ *Le Monde*, October 19th, 1966, ‘Un neutralisme à sens unique’.

² *The Arab Ba’th Socialist Party—History, Ideology and Organization*. Syracuse University Press.

the Baath and observers of the Arab political scene. By talking mainly to Michel Aflak and Salah el Bitar, who are certainly the two best known personalities of the party, but are also the leaders of only one of the three factions which constitute the Baath, he has left the other founders of the party in the shade: Zaki Arsouzi, Wahib el Ghanem, Slimane Issa, Darwiche Zouni, Ali Mohsen, Sedky Ismail and Yousef Chakra who formed the 'Arab Baath' in 1940, not to speak of Akram Hourani, leader of an organization which joined the Baath in 1954 and left it again in 1961. To omit these two political currents is necessarily to limit our understanding of the ideology of the Baath and the influences which it underwent.

On the other hand, by entitling the first chapter of his book *The Beginnings of Arab Socialism*, Kamel Abu Jamer risks lending credence to the thesis that the early founders of the Baath were descendants of the humanist and 'utopian' socialist thinkers who appeared in the Arab World in the 19th and above all the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, the preoccupations and the ideology of a Michel Aflak or a Zaki Arsouzi were, and still are, in essence purely nationalist. It is significant that the party called itself from 1943 to 1954 'Party of Arab Resurrection' (Baath) and only adopted the designation 'Socialist' after its fusion with the 'Arab Socialist Party' of Akram Hourani, whose aspirations to social justice themselves were based on no socialist doctrine whatsoever.

Aflak and Arsouzi

It is true that Michel Aflak and Salah el Bitar showed a certain leaning towards the left during their studies at the Sorbonne between 1928 and 1932. But this ephemeral attraction was nationalist in its motivation, just as were their apparent sympathies for Nazism in the early years of the Second World War. The refusal of Leon Blum's government, in which there was Communist participation, to grant Syria independence in 1936 ended the influence which the European Left exercised over them. In the course of an interview in 1963, Aflak told me that he had not been influenced by any Western philosopher or writer. He added: 'Besides, I have lost contact with the currents of Western thought since the beginning of the Second World War, devoting most of my time to the practical tasks of my party.'³

The political initiation of Michel Aflak is strikingly similar to that of Zaki Arsouzi, the other 'spiritual father' of the Baath. Both studied in Paris, in the same epoch. Both taught at Damascus, where they formed separate groups of nationalist students, before creating political organizations whose main aim was to expel the French from Syria and to work for the 'reunification of the Arab nation' and its liberation from the grip of imperialism. Professors of history, they both borrowed the names of their respective organizations from the Italian Renaissance. Aflak initially called his movement: 'Al Ihya al Arabi' ('Arab Revival'); Arsouzi called his 'Al Baas al Arabi' ('Arab Rebirth'). The two organizations fused into a single party in 1947, at the First Congress of the

³ *Le Monde*, March 21st, 1963.

Baath, in which Arsouzi refused to participate personally—less because of deep political differences than personal dislike for a man whom he calls in private a ‘screech-owl’.

Zaki el Arsouzi at the age of 67 is a picturesque personality who continues to expound his ideas to circles of admirers in a well-known Damascus café. He explained to me his aversion to Michel Aflak as follows: ‘Aflak is an opportunist. He came back to Damascus professing allegedly progressive ideas. But when the pro-Axis rebellion of Rachid Ali Gailani erupted at the beginning of the war in Iraq, he formed a support committee for it in Syria, with the encouragement of the Vichy administration. I, on the other hand, actively opposed the strike in support of the German cause which was called in Damascus, and was rewarded with the persecution of the French authorities.’ Born in Alexandretta, Arsouzi had led the movement against France’s cession of the Sandjak to Turkey. But his nationalism did not yield to the temptation of Nazism. He observed: ‘The Arabs are the only human group who have remained faithful to the spiritual values bequeathed by Adam. Hence they could only hope for the victory of the Allies.’

Deeply influenced by the work of Bergson whom he has ‘re-read ten times’, Arsouzi recounts how in 1928 he had ‘a metaphysical experience’. ‘I was at the entrance to the Sorbonne, plunged in thought,’ he told me, ‘when I was suddenly invaded by a feeling of ecstasy. My soul was metamorphosed and my way of seeing the world completely transformed.’

To his numerous disciples, who included General Salah Jedid, the present Syrian strong man, and General Hafez Assad, Minister of Defence, Arsouzi explained that ‘The white race is divided into two branches, one Semitic (of Arab origin) and turned towards spiritual affairs, the other Greco-Germanic and oriented towards the sciences of domination.’ The regenerated Arab nation thus had the mission of ‘inundating humanity with the light of the soul’.

It is not known whether Aflak also had a ‘metaphysical experience’. But the message which he sought to convey to the new generation was equally saturated with mysticism and Arab chauvinism. The speech which he gave on April 5th, 1943 in the great amphitheatre of Damascus University, which marked his début in the political scene and won him a certain notoriety, is considered in this respect one of the texts most representative of his thought.

Nationalism and Islam

To the Memory of the Arab Prophet, which his followers still quote with fervour, confers a capital role on Islam in the ‘eternal mission’ of the Arab Nation; for Aflak, Islam is a manifestation of the Arab genius, a superior form of its civilization. Himself a Greek-Orthodox, Aflak did not hesitate to assert: ‘Islam is the motor which sets in motion the latent forces of the Arab nation; this nation then overflows with warm life, sweeping away the obstacles of tradition and convention to renew its bond with the universe. It is overcome with wonder and enthusiasm; it

begins to express its wonder and enthusiasm with new words and splendid actions, and unable to contain itself, under the impulse of its ecstasy, overflows into other nations by its thought and by its action. In this manner it attains universality.’

Aflak goes on to say that: ‘The duty of Arabs is to spread through the world their qualities and their virtues until other peoples can grow to resemble them or raise themselves up to their level.’ The founder of the Baath hastens to add that this must not be interpreted as any form of will to conquest, but simply the desire to accomplish ‘a divine duty full of truth, conviction, pity, justice and sacrifice’. ‘It is obvious’, he continues, ‘that the Arabs can only accomplish this duty if they are a strong and reborn nation . . .’

In the name of this triumphant nationalism, Aflak invited his own co-religionists to range themselves under the banner of Islamicizing Arabism: ‘Christian Arabs will become aware, when nationalism fully awakes in them, that Islam is a national culture for them which they must assimilate until they understand and love it. They will then be devoted to Islam as to the dearest aspect of their Arabism. If this aspiration has still to be achieved, the new generation of Christian Arabs is called to achieve it with audacity and disinterest, sacrificing pride and egoism, for there is no honour equal to that of belonging to it.’ For the hundreds of thousands of Arabs of Jewish faith, Aflak had no word, whether of friendship or hostility. He ignored them. They were excluded from the Islamo-Christian ‘Arab Nation’ which he wanted to place under the sign of the Prophet Mahomet.

One of his companions of that time, today a Professor at the University of Damascus, wrote to me recently: ‘In 1937, Michel Aflak spent his holidays in France, with Salah el Bitar. He came back to Syria full of admiration for the works of Alfred Rosenberg, the theorist of Nazi racism, and in particular for *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, which he had read in Grosclaude’s translation. He thought at the time that Hitler’s Germany, by contrast with the Communist countries, had succeeded in achieving the perfect synthesis of nationalism and socialism.’ However, in his speech *To the Memory of the Arab Prophet*, Aflak never refers to socialism. His text, written in a lyrical and passionate style, is a hymn to the Arab nation whose every line expresses his will to restore its former magnificence to it.

Several years later, Kamel Abu Jaber tells us,⁴ Michel Aflak had to correct his statement that Arabs were morally and intellectually superior to other nations, in the following manner: ‘We do not say that we are better, only different from others.’ But the legacy of national-socialist ideology is a tenacious one. As late as 1960, his inseparable friend Salah el Bitar was writing: ‘The greatness of nations is not measured by the size of their populations but by the number of geniuses and leaders they produce.’⁵

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁵ *Al Siyassa al Arabiyya Bayn al Mabda wal tatbiq* (Arab Politics between Principles and Practice), cited by Abu Jaber, p. 15.

Class Basis

The emphasis on the notion of the leader is not accidental. The founders of the Baath, whether of Arsouzi's or Aflak's current, addressed themselves exclusively to an elite: students, professors, intellectuals and country teachers, who were expected in their turn to carry the good tidings to the people. In effect, the great majority of recruits to the Baath belonged to the small and middle bourgeoisie. Their natural milieu was that which produced the leaders of nationalism throughout the Arab world. The ideas of an Aflak, however shocking to a Westerner living in an advanced industrial society, answered a psychological need. At the time the Arab peoples were living under the shadow of colonialism, and were profoundly humiliated by it. The leaders of the traditional parties were in eclipse or were collaborating with the occupier. The prospects of an Allied victory over the Axis powers afforded little hope for liberation. A feeling of impotence, disillusion and discouragement overcame those who had hoped for the military defeat of the colonial powers.

The Baath had the merit, despite its nationalist verbiage, of reviving hope and restoring confidence to certain elites in disarray. By exalting the Golden Age of the Arabs, their past conquests and achievements, and telling their descendants that they were a 'nation not like others' endowed with a 'mission' to humanity, the Baath nourished a new optimism and spirit of resistance, even if it was essentially xenophobic. Baathist ideology seemed equally attractive to the middle classes, who were sincerely nationalist but hostile both to the traditional political formations in Syria, dominated by the large land-owning and merchant bourgeoisie, and to the Communist Party.

Towards the end of the Second World War, the extreme Left in Syria had the wind in its sails. The epic of Stalingrad had strongly impressed Arab opinion, which began to turn its attention from Nazi Germany and to 'discover' the Soviet Union. The USSR proclaimed itself, moreover, anti-imperialist and a champion of the right to self-determination and equality between peoples. The Communist Party, led by Khaled Bagdash, had acquired a solid experience of political action in its 20 years of existence. It had enjoyed the opportunity to organize and extend its influence in conditions of legality from 1936 to 1938, thanks to the Popular Front government in France, and had forged militants steeled in the wartime underground. The entry of the Free French Forces into Syria allowed it to re-emerge into the open, to launch its propaganda on a large scale and to re-establish its relations with the fraternal parties, especially with the Soviet party. The Communist Party thus appeared to the Baath a potential political power and henceforward a formidable rival.

Anti-Communism

Michel Aflak and Salah el Bitar devoted their first political manifesto, written in 1940-41, to a denunciation of the 'anti-national character of Communism'.⁶ From 1944 onwards, Aflak set about the task of refuting

⁶ According to one of their companions at the time, now a professor at the University of Damascus, who wishes to be anonymous.

Marxism.⁷ He began by attacking it for being ‘a Western ideology, foreign to everything that is Arab’, into which Marx ‘has breathed something of his vengeful Jewish spirit’. Moreover, he wrote, ‘The Arab nation is not a small nation of secondary importance which can adopt any other message than its own, or follow in the path of another nation and feed on its scraps.’ He went on to claim that Communism ‘denies the spiritual bases of the nation’ and ‘establishes between the Arabs and the world a dangerous, party-based relationship.’ Aflak rejected the economic and historical determinism of Marxism, the class struggle, the dictatorshipship of the proletariat and the internationalist character of the working-class movement. ‘If they free themselves from the nightmare of Communism,’ Aflak ended by promising, ‘the Arabs will have no difficulty in pursuing the path of Arab Socialism. . .’

‘Arab Socialism’

The formula was born: ‘Arab Socialism’. It was to be authentically national, having no roots or connections with Western socialism, still less with the ‘pseudo-socialism’ of the Communist East. Kamel Abu Jamer states that Aflak considered European socialists disguised imperialists who pursued the policies of conservatives when they were in power. However, Baath socialism in the 1940’s was merely a variant of social-democratic doctrine. It promised to combine individual freedom with limitation of private property, ensure the welfare of the unprivileged classes while protecting the legitimate interest of the possessing classes, and install social justice while respecting ‘spiritual values’. Above all, socialism was to be subordinated to the interests of the nation, and become the instrument of its unity and development. It was by the re-education of the Arab citizen that the society in which he lived would be improved. Rejecting ‘sterile abstractions’, Aflak believed that socialism should not rest on any dogma or doctrine, but be the fruit of lived experience and pragmatic action.

If we are to believe Dr Wahib Ghanem, one of the founders of the Baath, neither Aflak nor Bitar originally wanted to include socialist objectives in the party’s programme. ‘At the beginning of 1947’, he told me, ‘Aflak and Bitar came to see me in Latakia to negotiate the fusion of their movement with that of Zaki Arsouzi to which I belonged. I professed socialist ideas at the time, influenced by Marxism which I began to study after the Soviet victory of Stalingrad, and I insisted that the unified party be oriented to the Left. My two interlocutors, above all Bitar, were firmly opposed to this, arguing that the Baath should be an exclusively nationalist formation. After 40 hours of discussion, Michel Aflak, who was mainly anxious to unify the two organizations into a single party, yielded. This was what made possible the founding congress of the party in the Luna Park café of Damascus, in April 1947.’

The programme which was adopted, and which may be read as an an-

⁷ ‘L’idéologie du Parti de la Résurrection Arabe’, reproduced in ‘Fi Sabil al Baas’, Dar al Talia, Beirut 1963, pp. 193–197; translation published by the review *Orient* No. 29, 1964.

nexe in Kamel Abu Jaber's study, was the fruit of this compromise. It presents a curious *mélange* of an exacerbated nationalism and a socialism that was audacious, almost revolutionary for the epoch.

The 'Arab Nation, one and indivisible', endowed with an 'eternal mission', is characterized by its 'vitality and creative genius'. Class struggle is 'banished' from its midst, but the interests of the collectivity predominate over those of the individual. The Baath undertakes to nationalize large industry including public utilities, natural resources and means of transport; to limit agrarian property, control internal and external commerce, introduce planning into the economy, industrialize the country, ensure the workers participation in the profits of enterprises and encourage the establishment of a 'welfare state' similar to that advocated at the time by the British Labour Party. However, in contrast to the Labour Party, the Baath declared that socialism would triumph only by 'revolution and struggle'. On the other hand, it said nothing about the right to strike and abstained from defining the régime—monarchical or republican—with which it intended to endow the Arab State.

'The contradictions and lacunae in the programme', Dr Wahib Ghanem told me, 'are to explained by the heterogeneous character of the participants to the Congress. We were 247 intellectuals from countries as different as Syria and Morocco, Iraq and the Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan. There were rightists and leftists; conservatives and socialists, monarchists and republicans. It was inevitable that a compromise was forced on the Congress arbitrarily. Unfortunately, none of us could endorse entirely the objectives that we were supposed to defend to the Arab masses. This was the origin of the incoherence, the internal struggles and the weaknesses of the Baath.'

Consequences of the Palestinian War

However, by making the Palestinian conflict its battle-charger, the Baath succeeded in safeguarding its unity, extending its influence and bidding for power. The nationalist platform of the party was also its safety-plank. The Arab world was going through a period of acute crisis: humiliated by the Zionist victories, infuriated by the installation of a Jewish state in the Holy Land and indignant at the impotence of its governments, public opinion sought new solutions. The wave of nationalism which swept the region tried to dislodge bourgeois or feudal régimes, now completely discredited. The Communists were not in position to fill the political vacuum. Having supported the partition of Palestine, following the example of the socialist camp, they were isolated or actually consigned to popular opprobrium. The Baath, intransigently nationalist and socialist to boot, offered an attractive alternative.

Its leaders returned from the front, where they had fought with the irregular Palestinian forces, invested with the prestige of *mujabiddine*. Three months before the outbreak of hostilities, Salah el Bitar had denounced the UN in the party's daily newspaper, *Al Baas* (February 16th, 1948), as an 'instrument of Zionism and the Western Powers, and

added: 'The Palestinian problem will be solved on the spot, and not at the United Nations.' If the Arabs had lost the war, explained Dr Mounif el Razzaz, the future secretary-general of the Baath, it was the fault of anachronistic governments which should never have been in power in the middle of the 20th century.⁸

In effect, governments and régimes were crumbling, one after the other, in the Arab world. Before the fall of the Iraqi and Egyptian monarchies, King Abdullah of Jordan and the Lebanese Prime Minister Riad el Solh were assassinated. In Syria, a cascade of military coups followed one after the other. The Army, now the only organized force left in the country, profited by popular anger to replace the traditional elites. The Baath, like all the other political formations, was not strong enough to seize power.

In the vortex of events, the party radicalized. In 1949, it pronounced in favour of republican government. Its conception of Arab unity evolved: henceforward it sought to regroup the countries with progressive régimes, while waiting to overthrow the corrupt monarchies. It denounced the supporters of the 'Fertile Crescent' and 'Greater Syria' (a plan for uniting Syria and Jordan) as agents of British imperialism and launched a resolute struggle against the extreme right Syrian People's Party. In opposition to the dictatorship of General Shishakly at the end of 1951, the Baath was led to a *rapprochement* with the other parties engaged in the same resistance, particularly the Communist Party. From 1954 to 1958, comments Kamel Abu Jaber, there was a 'slide to the Left' not only in Syria but in the whole of the Arab world, where the Baath numbered several 'regional' organizations.⁹

In fact, the projects for 'common defence' such as the Bagdad Pact which the British and Americans tried to impose on the Arab countries contributed to refuelling the anti-Western struggle with greater intensity, this time actively supported by the Soviet Union. Nasserite Egypt resisted the pressures from Washington and London by accepting Soviet arms and Soviet funds to build the High Dam at Aswan. The nationalization of the Suez Canal marked the high point of its anti-imperialist policies. In Jordan, King Hussein refused to join the Bagdad Pact under pressure of public opinion, sacked Glubb Pasha, the English commander of the Arab Legion, permitted elections which produced a genuinely nationalist government, and denounced the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty. In the Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Libya, the nationalist movement—often inspired by Baathist elements—gained a new élan. Meanwhile in the Maghreb, the Algerian people was fighting heroically against France under the leadership of the FLN.

The Baath, temporarily abandoning its anti-Communist policies, began to collaborate with the Arab Communist parties, particularly in Jordan against the British presence there, in Iraq against the Hashemite monarchy, and in Syria against the traditional parties. After the

⁸ Kamel Abu Jaber, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁹ For the Baath, Arab countries are 'regions' of the 'national' Arab territory, which extends from the Atlantic to the Arab (Persian) Gulf.

delivery of Soviet arms to Egypt in 1955, it played down its anti-Soviet propaganda, 'forgot' that Moscow had voted for the creation of a Jewish State at the United Nations, and advocated, especially after the Suez crisis, close co-operation with the USSR.

This apparent metamorphosis was not only due to the anti-imperialist climate which dominated the country. The Baath had absorbed new blood when it fused in March 1954 with Akram Hourani's Arab Socialist Party. Entrenched in the rural zones, especially the poverty-stricken region of Hama, Hourani's organization provided a contingent of militants from the poor peasantry who were much more radical than the urban petit-bourgeois who made up Aflak's party. Moreover, the Syrian Army, purged of its conservative leaders after the overthrow of Shishakly, had been taken over by younger officers who had not been chosen and trained under the French Mandate. Most of them, whether Baathists, Socialists, progressives or Communists, were markedly to the Left of Aflak's apparatus.

Union with Egypt

Syria, it was said at the time, was in danger of 'sliding into the socialist camp'. In fact, there was no chance of the Communist Party seizing power, but it was expanding rapidly. After the overthrow of the dictatorship of Shishakly in 1954, Khaled Bagdash was elected deputy for Damascus with a huge majority. A brilliant orator, he made great use of the Chamber and pursued a policy of alliance with the 'national bourgeoisie', for whom he increasingly became a moderate reformist inspired by the best anti-imperialist sentiments. His party became a pole of attraction for the very middle classes which provided the clientele of the Baath. The latter now risked being thrown into the shade by its formidable competitor or being dragged along in its wake, as it tried to outbid it in a path it had not chosen.

Confronted with this dilemma, Aflak and his friends found an unexpected exit: unity with Nasser's Egypt, whose popularity had been constantly increasing since the Soviet arms deal of 1955. Previously, they had had nothing but contempt for the Egyptian colonel, who in their eyes completely lacked 'Arab consciousness', knew nothing of socialism and had 'made concessions to British imperialism'. They had, in fact, violently criticized the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954. But the Nasser of 1955 and above all of 1956 was a revelation to them. He had 'broken the arms monopoly of the West' and nationalized the Suez Canal, one of the largest prizes of imperialism. He had, above all, showed that one could be simultaneously anti-imperialist, pro-Soviet and anti-Communist. Leader of the most powerful country in the Arab world, he deserved to become the leader of the whole Arab nation from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf, beginning with the 'Syrian region'.

To this effect, the Baath was willing to show self-denial and a spirit of self-sacrifice. Nasser demanded as a condition of unity the dissolution of all the Syrian political formations. The Baath decided to scuttle itself. The operation, however, was only to be a simulated suicide. The leadership of the party thought that Nasser would undertake to elimin-

ate the Communists from the Syrian political scene. After that, the Baathist leaders and militants were the obvious candidates to organize and lead the single party of the new United Arab Republic. Aflak and his friends thought, in effect, that they were changing one steed for another, stronger and faster one.

Their calculations, however, proved partly incorrect. Nasser certainly unleashed a massive repression against the Syrian Left, but he also did not delay in getting rid of his Baathist 'friends' who had thought that they would control him.

The Emergence of the Left

The Syrian-Egyptian Union, which lasted from 1958 to 1961, resulted in a failure which helped to aggravate the contradictions within the Baath. A left wing, which challenged the content of Aflak's Pan-Arabism, now emerged. Its members, mostly a younger generation who had joined the party since 1950, wanted priority to be given henceforward to socialism, whose installation would hasten the era of Arab unity. Clandestinity under the Nasserite régime favoured the crystallization of numerous groups and factions within the party, and above all of a military 'clan'. By a reflex of self-defence, young officers—among them Salah Jedid, the present Syrian 'strong man'—formed their own autonomous organization, which was later to eliminate the historic leaders from power, on February 23rd, 1966.

The path of those who are today called 'Neo-Baasists' was not an easy one. It took them five years, from 1961 to 1966, to achieve their aims. The 'national' (i.e. Inter-Arab) leadership of the Baath, inspired by the Aflak-Bitar tandem, controlled the party machines—a control which allowed them to engineer successful coups in Iraq, on February 8th, 1963, and Syria, on March 8th of the same year.

Apparently strengthened by this double triumph, the Aflakist wing of the party soon, however, began to experience the boomerang effects of its own policies. In Iraq, it approved the massacre of some 5,000 Communists and the atrocious war against the Kurds. In Syria, it showed its inability to make clear political and social choices, and earned the hostility of both the middle and the labouring classes.

The hour of truth came in October 1963. At the Sixth Party Congress the Aflakist group was outvoted, and Left faction gained dominance of the party. Resolutions inspired by Marxism, amounting to a new programme replacing that of 1947, were passed: the ideas of scientific socialism, class struggle and international solidarity were subtly introduced into a text whose nationalist character was still not in doubt. The expression 'the eternal mission of the Arab nation', in particular, subsists. In spite of this, at the end of the Congress Michel Aflak cried: 'I no longer recognize my party!'

The Right, nevertheless, did not renounce its leadership of the party. Allying itself with the group of Salah Jedid, which was temporarily distanced from the Left, and conducting numerous manoeuvres, Aflak

and his followers managed to put their adversaries in a minority at the Seventh Congress. The struggle between the two surviving clans continued for two years before being decided in favour of Salah Jedid. The latter now took over the aims and slogans of the Marxist wing of the Baath, to whose elimination he had contributed.

Social Upheaval in Syria

The Neo-Baathists now in power have multiplied bids to win the support of the socialist camp and the dispossessed classes.

The authenticity of their radicalism need not be doubted. In the past three years, Syria has undergone a major social upheaval. The Baath government has decreed an agrarian reform with ceilings of 15 to 55 hectares for irrigated, and 50 to 300 hectares for unirrigated land. Uncultivated estates have been expropriated without further ado. In a country where as late as 1958, 45 per cent of all irrigated land and 30 per cent of non-irrigated land was owned by only 2 per cent of the population, while 70 per cent of the population owned no land at all, this is a very drastic change. The reform has not yet been fully implemented, although the Baath claimed to have redistributed 2,500,000 hectares out of the national total of 6,000,000 by early 1967. Simultaneously, the signing of an agreement with the USSR for the construction of the Euphrates Dam ultimately promises a huge leap forward for agriculture: the Dam will double the area of irrigated soil in Syria. In the industrial sector, the Neo-Baathists have been no less intransigent. The lightning decrees of January 1965 nationalized 80 per cent of Syrian industry. Foreign trade was effectively made a state monopoly. The scope of these measures can be gauged from the fact that they instantly led to a general strike and shut-down of all business and trade in the great urban centres and bazaars, while mullahs preached open revolt against the government from their muezzins. In an armed social conflict, the Baath régime, aided by workers' militias, trade-unions and Communist militants, succeeding in crushing bourgeois resistance to the new order. This unfolding of a mass social crisis and violent armed clashes distinguishes the Syrian experience sharply from the tranquilly bureaucratic Egyptian nationalizations of 1958. It led to wave of emigrations among the once prosperous Syrian bourgeoisie: there are now 200,000 exiles in the Lebanon. Beirut has become the Miami of this class.

Political Prospects

The Baath régime, however, despite these sweeping measures and the new support of the USSR, has not yet succeeded in winning a wide popular base. Its architect is General Salah Jedid, an Alawite from Latakia who is forced to remain an *éminence grise* because he belongs to a religious minority. The Army has been transformed in recent years, after the massive purges of 1963 when hundreds of 'separatist' officers of bourgeois origin were cashiered. The new officers who dominate the Army are now predominantly of poor peasant origin, but are heavily recruited from the Alawite and Druze minorities. The Baath never possessed a large cadre of militants. Indeed, in 1963 it had only 400 active members

in the whole country. Hence the zeal of the neo-Baathists to monopolize power in Syria is a source of weakness. They are to some extent aware of this, as the inclusion of one Communist and two independent Marxists in the Cabinet indicates. But the régime is still somewhat fragile. The other Leftist groups, meanwhile, call for the widening of the government in a national Revolutionary Front.

As in the decade of the 1940's, the new Baath leaders have decided in recent months to make the Palestinian problem their main issue. But it is not certain that their slogan of a 'people's war of liberation' has brought them many political dividends, especially after the military defeat of June. Confronted with an impasse which has now lasted 20 years, the Arabs are, in effect, showing a growing scepticism about the promises of their leaders. On the other hand, the Baath has undoubtedly weathered the Israeli-Arab war better than Nasser in Egypt—partly because it has allowed such popular initiatives as the formation of workers' militias. But there is still much to be done. The Baath, like every other Arab political formation, is now at the cross-roads. All the present Arab governments risk disappearing from the political scene as did the elites who ruled the Arab World on the eve of the first Palestinian conflict in 1948. The seismic effects of the second Palestinian war have yet to come. The Baath will have to renovate itself to survive.