Problems of Confessionalism in Syria *

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The term confessionalism as used in this paper calls for an explanation. It originated as a recent construct introduced into English usage by students of Lebanon’s history and politics. In that context the term denotes a political system which recognizes and acknowledges the power and importance of communal loyalties and seeks to regulate communal conflict by distributing political power and administrative positions according to an accepted formula. (1)

Like Lebanon Syria is a heterogeneous and fragmented polity. During the French mandate and in the early years of independence, representation in parliament to minority groups existed as a marginal political phenomenon. But as a rule, no mechanism was sought or developed in independent Syria in order to accommodate the needs of a heterogeneous society. Rather, the sway held by the doctrine of Arab nationalism in Syria militated against the formation of a pluralistic political system. According to that doctrine Syria and the (true) Syrians are Arab. Communal solidarity and identification are seen as divisive and therefore inimical to the cause of Arab nationalism. The term confessionalism in the context of Syrian politics does not, thus, denote a set of institutions and mechanisms but refers to political behaviour determined or influenced by communal solidarity and/or conflict. As such it seems preferable to two other terms current in contemporary academic writing. “Sectarianism” seems to carry prejorative overtones while “ethnicity” implies that the differences and barriers between the constituent communities are ethnic rather than religious and political.

Confessionalism appeared as a major political issue in Syria after the establishment of the Ba’th regime in 1963, though communal tensions had surfaced during the early years of Syrian independence. The process of integrating the Druze and Alawi areas into the Syrian state involved violent conflict and Christian communities effectively resisted the designation of Islam as the religion of the state in 1950. (2) These episodes were of short duration and limited impact. But the establishment of the Ba’th regime had a far reaching and durable impact on intercommunal relations in Syria.

For reasons that have been fully explained elsewhere (3) both the Syrian army and the Ba’th Party had attracted in the 1940s and 1950s large numbers of recruits from various minority groups: Christian, Alawi, Druze and Isma’ili. The emergence of a regime based on a coalition of Ba’thi officers and politicians therefore catapulted into the center of Syrian politics an unproportionate number of minoritarians. The consequences of this development were felt in two spheres: a. The relationship between the

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Ba'th regime and the Syrian population; b. Inter and intra-communal relations within the ranks of the Ba'th regime.

The high proportion of civilian and military leaders from minority communities was one of the important factors in making the Ba'th regime illegitimate and unacceptable to sizeable sections of Syria's urban populations. These sections felt dispossessed and disenfranchised by the rise to power of a new elite. They resented and feared several characteristics which they perceived in the new ruling elite or parts of it: minoritarian and rural origins, secularist approach and social and political radicalism. Three times during the 1960s, in 1964, 1965 and 1967 these groups revolted against the government by staging strikes and demonstrations. But as long as the regime's hold over the army remained unshaken, all efforts to topple it were bound to fail.

The appearance of factions — primarily military ones — based at least to some extent on communal solidarity or hostility was one of the innovations introduced into Syria's political life after March 1963. It was a spontaneous uncontrolled development which drew from a number of sources: a. The overlapping of a number of primordial loyalties and ties: family, regional and communal. It was common for Ba'thi leaders to develop personal factions and to rely on personal ties, which in most cases acquired a confessional aspect as well. b. A deliberate conscious effort by some Ba'thi leaders to exploit communal loyalties and fears for their private ends. (4) The perception or misperception of the activities of other Ba'this as being of the same nature.

The result of this was to make confessionalism one of the important elements in the dynamics of power in Syria in the mid 1960s. (5) During the sustained conflict which led to the February 1966 coup Sunni officers organized against the minorities — Alawis, Druze and Isma'ilis. (6) The latter groups rallied in turn around Salah Jadid and his victory endorsed the new regime with a distinct confessional character. Within that regime the Druze faction of Salim Hatum and the Isma'ili faction of the Jundis were eliminated in struggles that had clear confessional overtones. Consequently, the Alawis remained the only community with an unproportionate representation in the upper echelons of the regime and in the ranks of the officers corps.

These developments have also had their effect on relations between members of the same community. This could hardly be the case with regard to the diffuse and incoherent Sunni majority. But the more tightly knit minorities, particularly, the Alawis, have been restrained in their conduct by a feeling of common danger. In other words, once, due to the spontaneous development described above, members of the Alawi community came to have a decisive role in Syrian politics, an irreversible fact was established. It became clear that the Alawi community as such became politicized and that the whole community could pay a dear price if a change of regime occurred. Consequently, members of the community felt that they should be restrained in their internecine conflicts so as not to bring about their collective downfall. This has undoubtedly been a factor in Syrian politics since 1966 but its importance should not be overrated. After all, the cardinal issue in Ba'thi politics from 1968 to 1970 was the struggle for power between two Alawis — Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Asad.

Asad's final victory and the establishment of his regime in November 1970 signified also important changes in the development of the confessional issue in Syrian politics. Confessionalism as an aspect of factional struggle became a marginal phenomenon with the formation of a relatively coherent regime and the virtual disappearance of factional conflicts within it (at least during its first years). (7) It was only occasionally that the issue resurfaced as in the assassination in Lebanon in 1972 of the exiled Alawi General Muhammad Umran, probably because he tried to conspire against the regime with members of the Alawi community.