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# EXAMINING STATE-BUILDING OF THE SYRIAN REPUBLIC AND THE LEGACY OF ITS COLONIAL PAST

*Abstract: This research tackles essential elements of Syrian state-building processes through a structural analysis incorporating several theories and concepts including but not limited to colonialism, nationalism, military interventions, institutional development, minority rule, and eventually neocolonialism. The article reveals how minority rule and different implications of military interventions shaped today's Syria, as well as addresses some of the current issues such as the absence of domestic political consolidation. The primary aim of this research is to contextualize the role of France—as a former colonizer, within the state-building process of Syria by examining different phases of Syria's historical past. An examination of Syria's political developments proved that having inherited a colonial past, the current state of Syria has also inherited an unavoidable legacy of political instability from its colonial past.*
*Keywords: Syria, Middle East, State-Building, Colonialism, Military Interventions.*

**Introduction**

As a modern country without pre-colonial history as an independent state, Syria began its first phase of state-building when it was colonized by France. It is important to note that three important phases have followed the abolishment of the French mandate, which are analyzed within the scope of this article. To explore each stage of Syria's development, the following phases are identified: the post-colonial period, the beginning of neo-colonialism, and the transition from escalations to civil war. Once established in Syria, the French mandate laid the foundations of state-building processes. This article attempts to uncover the roots of Syrian state-building by analyzing its colonial past and interpreting it from the theoretical perspectives of colonialism, military intervention, institutional development, minority rule, and neocolonialism.

**The link between State Failure and Colonial Heritage**

Scholars argue that in the long term, colonialism is closely associated with state failure. According to one perspective, the communities which have been

previously colonized by major powers are the most prone to becoming a failed state. The primary claim behind this argument is that colonizing powers impose their own models of government on colonized states, which significantly limits the colonized states' chances of adapting to governing practices other than the imposed one. However, this model is certainly not the only model of statecraft. Therefore, formerly colonized states tend to encounter state failure after the abolishment of the colony[1]. However, colonial heritage is not the only factor that establishes a causal mechanism for predicting state failure. According to one study, factors such as the lack of a prior history of state development and corrupt state authorities also factor into this and can serve as elements for predicting state failure[2]. These two factors can be further specified by referring to weak institutional development, social issues, newly emerging and weak party systems, etc. Altogether, these issues hinder the process of state development even further.

Another feature of a failing or weak state is the rise of political opposition, oftenthrough terrorism. Nevertheless, Edward Newman believes that it is not always the case. While weak states may create a suitable environment for the promotion of terrorism, there are additional factors that affect this tendency. Therefore, it is not justified to include terrorism among all the risks and threats that develop within the context of weak or failed states[3]. On the contrary, the rise of opposition in Syria is deeply rooted in its colonial history. As one evident instance of long-lasting French influence in Syria, the division of the Syrian state into smaller states exacerbated the divisions among different groups living in Syria. This policy of France came to be known as the fragmentation policy.

**The Fragmentation or "Divide-and-Rule" policy during the Mandate Period as yet another hallmark of post-WWI Syria**

There are two interpretations of the fragmentation politics of the French administration in Syria. Scholars seem to agree that France sought to increase its power and influence in the region through Syria's fragmentation. It is commonly argued that even in 1918, when the French mandate had not yet been officially established in the Middle East, France already had a blueprint of their administration of Syria. It was suggested to divide Syria into 8-10 autonomous

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[1] Helland Leonardo Figueroa and Stefan Borg, *The Lure of State Failure*, Interventions 16, no. 6 (2013), 877–97.

[2] Howard Tiffany O., *Revisiting State Failure: Developing a Causal Model of State Failure Based Upon Theoretical Insight*, Civil Wars 10, no. 2 (2008), 125–46.

[3] Newman Edward, *Weak States, State Failure, and Terrorism*, Terrorism and Political Violence 19, no. 4 (2007), 463–88.

regions, whichwould in turn have their own subdivisions[4]. There is also another perception that the French mandate gave a formal shape to divisions that had already existed in the Middle East. Due to the formalization of the divisions, the structure of international politics was and still is affected. Joseph Malone also supports the idea that the division of Syria into smaller states, with some exceptions, is rooted in history[5].

Fabrice Balanche argues that this fragmentation caused inequality in terms of territorial advancement. Alawites are well integrated into political networks and Sunnis in economic networks. Alawite territories have the support of the state for their development, other territories must rely more on relations with economic networks to ensure their development. Since the Baath party has come to power, all social and political crises in Syria are rapidly drifting into the community. In addition to repression, the regime has tried to better regulate Muslim culture through the Ministry of Culture, and it has even given notable clergymen honorary places. Finally, the liberalization of the economy offers opportunities for the traders who are less tempted to support Islamist movements. More Sunnis are suffering from underemployment, high cost of living and widespread corruption[6].

Additionally, the identity of small ethnic groups in Syria was used to serve the purpose of the colonizers. The French administrations have used this as an opportunity to introduce internal political changes within Syria. The most important one is the upward social mobility of the Alawite minority. This policy succeeded in establishing minority rule over the Sunni majority[7]. Building upon the concept of minority rule as a form of government, state-building practices in general and institutional development is considered within this analysis. Henceforth, the theory of neo-colonialism is applied to understand the current developments in Syria. With France as the former colonizer of the Syrian state, it has been expected to note an informal connection between the two states even decades after the abolishment of the French mandate.

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[4] Fomin Alexander, Voyna s prodoljeniyem. Velokobritaniyai i Frantsiya v borbe za "Osmanskoye nasledstviye" 1918-1923. [A War with Continuation: Great Britain and French in Competition for "Ottoman Heritage"]. 1918-1923, (University of Dmitriy Pojarskiy. Moscow), 2010.

[5] Bodman, Herbert L. and Joseph J. Malone, *The Arab Lands of Western Asia*, The American Historical Review 79, no. 4 (1974), 1226.

[6] Balanche Fabrice, *Clientélisme, Communautarisme Et Fragmentation Territoriale En Syrie*, A contrario n° 11, no. 1 (2009), 122.

[7] Haklai Oded, *A Minority Rule over a Hostile Majority: The Case of Syria*, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 6, no. 3 (2000), 19–50.

**Features of the Post-Colonial Period**

Declaring its independence in 1946, Syria entered a new phase of the post-colonial period. After the abolishment of the French mandate, Syria encountered a few significant challenges in terms of state development. Certainly, the Syrian people enjoyed considerable freedoms, but there were also several restrictions on basic liberties imposed by the French colonizers. This period is mainly characterized by continuous political instabilities, including a temporary unification with Egypt, tensions and wars with Israel, as well as consecutive military coups that have posed a serious challenge to the stability of the political landscape in Syria.

The role of the army increased following popular protests. Husni al-Za'im, chief of staff of the armed forces, the leader of the Syrian army, played a significant role in this process. Under his leadership, Syria experienced its first military coup as an independent state on March 30, 1949. This gave him a positive reputation, and Za'im was soon elected as the new president. He enforced military dictatorship in the country. Za'im's military career started during the years of the French mandate when he served in the French army. He also managed to establish a good relationship with the representatives of the American Embassy in Syria[8], which substantiated his image as a pro-western politician.

However, his leadership was interrupted by a second military coup. The snap parliamentary elections of 1949 allowed the National Bloc Party to come to power, which played a critical role in the second military coup and strongly supported the toppling of the government. Another concept, that of "Greater Syria", once again shook the state-building processes of Syria, which sought the unification of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. This did not become a reality because of a third military coup, which was yet another challenge to the newly independent state of Syria. Carried out by Colonel Adib Bin Hassan Al-Shishakli on 19 December 1949, this third military coup affected both the internal and foreign policies of Syria, since the new leaders took down the restrictions against French and American monopolies introduced by the previous nationalist leaders.

Only two years after the third military coup, starting 29 November 1951, Shishakli was ready to carry out a fourth one—aiming to overthrow Al-Atasi's government. This period, which lasted until 1957, has been characterized as another crisis phase for Syria[9]. As soon as Shishakli became the leader of the country, his policy of military dictatorship became even more evident. Eventually,

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[8] Mullenbach Mark, *Syria (1946-Present),* (University of Central Arkansas: UCA, 2013).

[9] Mullenbach, *Syria*, 2013.

many political parties and institutions were dissolved, and political involvement was forbidden for civil servants, members of trade unions, students, and representatives of other social groups. Nevertheless, Adib al-Shishakli's legitimacy decreased drastically. Major protests were being organized against him by both local groups such as the people of Jabal Druze, Aleppo and Latakia, and movements supported by international powers like America, France, and Britain. After almost four years of struggle, Shishakli had no choice but to resign and found asylum in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and France[10].

Syria achieved relative stability when Shukri al-Quwatli was elected president in August 1955. Quwatli focused on improving relations with neighboring countries by entering into several agreements with other Arab countries due to continuous pressure. Syria was able to finally establish relative sovereignty and ease external pressures[11].

Another important regional development that affected Syria's state-building was its unification with Egypt and the establishment of the United Arab Republic. This soon turned into an expansion of Egypt's control over Syria. Through unification, the government sought to help Syria stabilize its foreign policy and improve living conditions for Syrian citizens, but this did not last. As a result, the unification with Egypt was a major threat to the political stability of Syria, presenting yet another challenge for the independent state. In September 1961, Syria's military occupied Damascus, and intense demonstrations took place all across the country.

A milestone in Syria's political history was the revolution of 1963, also known as the Baath Revolution. Carried out by the Socialist Baath Party, the Baathists attempted to abolish class divisions. The revolution succeeded in overthrowing the former government and brought Hafez al Assad to power. The ideology behind the initiation of the movement and later the establishment of the party is rooted in the years of the French Mandate in Syria, when a considerable rise of nationalist tendencies could already be noted that is substantiated by the fact that Michel Aflaq, the founder of the party, studied at the University of Sorbonne, France. He had firm connections with active French leftist political members[12].

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[10] Voblikov Dmitrij, *Noveyshaya istoriya arabskikh stran* [Modern History of Arab States]. Glavnaya regaktsiya vostochnoy literaturi. Nauka. 9(I)7N72.1969. 260-265.

[11] Hovhannisyan Nikolay, *Arabakan yerkrneri patmutyun IV* [History of Arab States IV]. The National Academy of Sciences of the RA. Institute of Oriental Studies. "Zangak" 93/99 63.3 854. Yerevan, 2007. 480-482.

[12] Robert Benewick and Philip Green, *The Routledge Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Political Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1998).

One issue was the possibility of Alawites maintaining their dominance within the army. Daniel Pipes argues that the primary reason was general public perceptions for the following reasons. First, the Sunni bourgeoisie had perceived the army as the place of minorities and those who are less socially advanced. Using various corruption channels, Sunnis would attempt to avoid the military service, which was not an option for Alawites, who were generally living in worse economic conditions compared to Sunnis. Lastly, the Sunni elite viewed the army as a threat to political stability and minimized its budget. This fostered self-organization among Alawites, which was a valuable opportunity for them to appropriate the functions and operations of the army to their needs and interests[13]. Sunnis underestimated the importance of the army, which plays a critical role in maintaining control and ensuring the maintenance of political power. A consolidated power among Alawites within the army gave them the ability to dismiss many Sunni officers. Another institution that fostered Alawites' solidarity was the Ba'ath Party. A dynamic similar to the one that had occurred in the Syrian Army could also be noted within the party. There was an ongoing rivalry among different Sunni groups as to who should take ruling positions. Meanwhile, Alawites were rapidly achieving political progress[14].

It is commonly argued that political stability in Syria was generally due to the dominance of the religious minority over a majority since 1963. It is interesting to observe that the supporters of the Ba'ath Party were not only Alawites, but also representatives of other religious minorities such as the Druze. Since 1963, when political power became concentrated in the hands of the Baathists, it is important to consider the composition of the government and the military elite that attained power

### The Importance of Military Interventions

Military interventions have been discussed within different academic discourses. Brian Taylor argues that three forms of military involvement can be identified: the traditional understanding of military interventions focused solely on civil-military relations, military arbitration resulting in the resolution of a power dispute of civilian sovereignty, and "no military involvement" used to explain a situation when there is a regular sequence of events within the state. According to

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[13] Campbell John C. and Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition*, Foreign Affairs 69, no. 2 (1990), 185.

[14] Van Dusen, Michael, *Syria: Downfall of a Traditional Elite*, In Frank Tachau (ed.), Political Elites and Political Development in the Middle East. (Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman Publishing Company Inc).

Brian Taylor's analysis, internal divisions within the army lessen the possibility of coups because it weakens the overall cohesion and strength of the military[15].

For instance, if subordinates do not approve the decisions of the executive, they are less likely to fully support the operations of the executives in terms of implementing their decisions. This analysis creates a possibility for civilian groups to purposefully exacerbate any possible divisions that may exist within the military. Taylor's analysis goes hand in hand with Eric Nordlinger's penetration model[16]. According to this model, the weaknesses of the army and the divisions within the military allow strong civilian groups to seize control of the military relying on extensive use of influence, control, and punishment. The Syrian army, being one of the most influential and vital institutions for the stability and sustainability of the Syrian state, was still heavily dependent on the Alawites. This was due to their dominance in terms of numbers within the army. According to Pipes, Alawites constituted up to 70 percent of officers as of 1955[17]. As a minority, the military was one of the few professional arenas, perhaps the only one, where they were able to penetrate effectively.

Nevertheless, reasons and motives behind military interventions or coup d'états vary from one instance to another. To understand what some of the factors are that increase the possibility of performing coup d'états, Odner tests seven hypotheses in his analysis and explores the possibility of whether economic development, politically developed institutions, the centrality of military institutions, less politically developed institutions but high social mobilization, heterogeneous structures, and out-dependent economies increase the chances of coup d'états (2010). This research shows that socio-economic development and political institutionalization have the most critical impact in coup incidents[18]. Projecting this research to the case of Syria, it will be evident that during the first years of its independence, Syria could be classified as neither a socially nor economically developed state. In addition to it, political institutionalization was still an ongoing process that had been challenged by constant instability within Syria. Perhaps, these two variables are of utmost importance in understanding why

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[15] Taylor Brian D., *Politics and the Russian Army*, 2003.

[16] Fitch John Samuel and Eric A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments*, Political Science Quarterly 93, no. 1 (1978), 168.

[17] Pipes Daniel, *Greater Syria: the History of an Ambition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[18] Ödner Murat, *What Accounts for Military Interventions in Politics: A Cross-National Comparison*, (102nd ed.). 2010.

there was no consolidation among the Syrian political elite and thus no political stability in Syria.

Two other theories of military interventionrelevent to this topic are the theories of conflict and regional differences, which are closely related. According to the conflict theory, "ethnic antagonisms including cultural diversities, ethnic dominance and ethnic competitions are largely responsible for military interventions in politics"[19]. This draws attention to the heterogeneity of the population concerned, concluding that the more diverse it is within its internal structures, the higher the chances of military coups. On the other hand, the theory of regional differences suggests that the various factions of the ruling class attempt to establish their dominance via the military. Consequently, this analysis can also be situated within the Syrian context. Primarily, there was an ongoing conflict among different religious groups in Syria, particularly the Sunnis, who were the majority, and the Alawites, who were a minority but held key positions within the military. The ongoing conflict concerned the formation of the government and maintaining stability within the state of Syria. Additionally, as suggested in the theory of regional differences, it would be appropriate to note the territorial divisions of Syria into at least four divisions, each of which was populated mostly by a single religious group.

Therefore, the newly independent state encountered significant challenges in the post-colonial period and failed to achieve political stability during the early years of its independence. The traces of Western influence could still be noticed in the process of Syrian state-building in two ways. First, anti-western tendencies dominated the attitude of the Syrian people. The importance of the Syrian identity was continuously growing, and rising nationalist attitudes exacerbated the hatred towards former colonizers. On the other hand, Syrian state-building faced a series of difficulties while attempting to establish stability in all spheres of the Syrian reality. Creating an arena of prospective foreign engagement, Syria attracted Soviet and American interest in its domestic politics. A brief review of the developments in Syria in this stage shows how international communism penetrated Syrian political life. However, military coups prevented Syria from achieving stability and had continuously shaken the Syrian state. The most organized political group was that of minorities—the Alawites. This was primarily due to the fact that Alawites had the experience of ruling the state throughout the years of the French mandate. Being a minority and having limited opportunities to expand their influence over

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[19] Edeh Herbert C. and Michael I. Ugwueze, *Military and Politics: Understanding the Theoretical Underpinnings of Military Incursion in Third World Politics*, Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences.

the whole Syrian state, Alawites utilized institutional influence that they inherited from the period of the French mandate.


### Early Traces of Neo-Colonialism

The transition from the first phase of Syrian state-building into the second phase, which is characterized by the emerging traces of neo-colonialism. The beginning of the second phase is marked by the successful military coup of the Baath Party. It is essential to understand the ideology behind and explore the roots of the Baath Party. As a representative group for the Alawite minority, the domination of the Baath Party played a pivotal role in shaping domestic dynamics. These tendencies and other interstate developments are explored in the following chapter.

With Baath Party coming to power, Hafez al-Assad was elected president of Syria, and, being a representative of the Alawite minority group, put an end to constant instability and continuous military coups in Syria. Serving in the role of a political leader of a state with such a volatile political past, Assad introduced a number of changes within both domestic and foreign policies. As far as domestic policies are concerned, it should be noted that these policies have primarily served the interests of the Alawite community and did not provide solutions to tough economic conditions for non-Alawites. What exacerbated the selective policy-making politics of Assad was the ruling party's promotion of secularism and adherence to non-religious values, much to the chagrin of non-Alawi groups. Islamic Fundamentalism was established informally and continued to expand its sphere of influence, particularly among the Sunni majority. Eventually, it developed into a large-scale movement initiating and carrying out violent strikes against the regime. The supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood did not approve of Assad's decision to separate state from religion, which was officially recorded in the new constitution. Only after three years of Assad's presidency, in 1973, the activities of the Brotherhood took shape and were carried out in form of protests and demonstrations, which were contained temporarily when Islam was recognized as the official religion of the Syrian state. Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood did not come to a consensus with Assad's regime on several issues. This is why the violent acts of the Brotherhood became occasional and were expressed via rebellions, murders of Alawi soldiers, violent attacks against public officials, rallies, strikes, and mass demonstrations[20]. It should also be noted that Assad's government, despite the fact that it aimed to contain the opposition, did not tolerate

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[20] Haklai, *A Minority Rule over a Hostile Majority*, (2000), 35–40.

such uprisings. Occasionally, the government responded with equal or more extreme violence (e.g. Massacres of Hama, discussed later in this section).

As far as foreign policies implemented by the Assad regime are concerned, it should be noted that the top three priorities for Assad constituted avoiding possible escalations and tensions with Israel, major disagreements with conservative regimes of states within the Arabian Peninsula and moving towards greater socialization of society. In general, Hafez al-Assad did not spare his opponents. His opponents received house or in prison arrests until the end of their lives, depriving them of the opportunity to leave the country. It can be said that the military coup of November 1970 established the beginning of Assad's authoritarianism in Syria.

### Minority Rule: Privileges to Alawites

Starting from the early 1970s, Alawites were granted numerous privileges. Particularly, in contrast to other groups, Alawites had opportunities to advance in academia and hence get promoted to higher positions within the Syrian government. After the military coup, the Baath Party had established a single-party rule over the Syrian state. Therefore, it is justified to believe that with single-party rule of the minority over the majority, the Alawi population would benefit significantly. The Alawites' migration to urban areas and improvement of their economic conditions could easily be anticipated, which supported Hafez al-Assad in strengthening and developing public institutions and centralizing power in his hands.

The problem of the Alawite character of the Syrian government is unique. First, examining the separate components of the Alawite religious system, it should be noted that "it contains Christian, Islamic and Pagan elements. Although the Alawites consider themselves Shiites, they often violate Islamic law [] and sometimes deviate from it"[21]. The primary reason for its outstanding uniqueness also comes from the fact that a minority has managed to establish and maintain a dictatorship over a majority. There is no arguing that the Alawite leaders of Syria, the Syrian army and special services also dominate the economy of the country. In Syria, the Alawites were this minority, who, according to various estimates, accounted for 10 to 20% of the population, but in reality, most likely, one still needs to lean toward more conservative estimates, at 11-12%. And yet it was this group that began to dominate Syrian political life. Nevertheless, it is interesting

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[21] Vardanyan Grigor, *Alawineri kronakan hamakargi arandznahatkutyunnere*. [The Features of Alawite Religious System]. Merdzavor Arevelk [Middle East]. RA National Academy of Sciences.

that the dominance of these groups at a certain period contributed to stability within the state after 25 years of political instability and continuous military coups which had shaken the country. The minority could not absolutely suppress the majority in this case and constantly found compromises with the latter. This can be seen as the primary key to success for the Alawite government, i.e. the dominance of the minority who understood governance over the majority could not be carried out merely by suppressing their rights and freedoms, but rather a constructive dialogue should have been built with representatives of the majority. This has provided the regime with a sufficiently high level of stability[22].

### Secularism Introduced in Syria

Another way to interpret the stability brought by the Alawite rulers is by referring to the Syrian regime's orientation on secular values. It is commonly argued that a number of sects came into existence after Syria gained its independence, and it is only after Hafez al-Assad overthrew Jadid that the focus shifted from sectarianism towards secularism. This shift was embraced by the new constitution of the Ba'ath Party, which explicitly downplayed the importance of sectarian differences, aiming at totally abolishing them, stating thatsectarian differences are "unimportant" and will eventually "disappear"[23]. One of the strategic steps taken by Hafez al-Assad was the assignment of representatives from the Sunni majority to important government positions, including the positions of Minister of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and even Vice-President. The rivals of Assad's regime criticized it for being discriminatory towards some and for providing benefits to the Alawi community. It is true that some Alawites benefitted from Assad's regime because they enjoyed major economic benefits, but the main benefactors were particularly those who had family ties with the President himself[24]. However, it is also indisputable that there were Alawites for whom the ethnicity of the political leader did not make a difference. Additionally, a large number of Sunnis supported the Alawi president.

It is also important to consider the relationship that was built between the ruling minority and the subordinate majority of this state, i.e. Alawites and Sunnis.

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[22] Doroshenko Yelena, *Shiitskoye dukhovenstvo v dvukh revolyutsiyakh: 1905-1911 & 1978-1979.* [Shiite Spirituality in Two Revolutions: 1905-1911 and 1978-1979]. Russian Academy of Sciences. Institute of Oriental Studies. Moscow. IV RAN 63.3(5). 1998.

[23] Dam Nikolaos van, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[24] Neep Daniel, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, The RUSI Journal 159, no. 2 (2014), 97–98.

It seems that Hafez al-Assad gave much importance to the Sunni culture, and instead of highlighting differences, he attempted to find commonalities between the two groups aiming at integrating Alawites within the majority[25]. The feeling of Sunni superiority could be seen in several instances within the Syrian public discourse. For example, Sunni Islam was taught in public schools, orthodox Sunnism was the public Islam, etc. Certainly, it is quite challenging to state whether Assad's regime has alleviated or exacerbated the tensions between Sunnis and Alawites. If referring to Haklai's three indicators discussed below to evaluate such instances is justified, then a general conclusion is that there is a significant decline in tensions between those two groups. The first indicator is the existence and activities of an ethnic opposition to Assad's regime. After the Muslim Brotherhood's defeat, there seems to be neither internal political pressure on the Alawi government nor an alternative ruling power proposed by the opposition. It can indeed be claimed that if there was no threat to political stability under Assad's administration, then his government was at least tolerable for all domestic political players. Otherwise, it could have continuously challenged the power and status of the ruling elite.

The second indicator for measuring the tensions is the number of released political prisoners during Assad's administration period. In the early 1970s, when Assad had just come to power and aimed at weakening or abolishing the political opposition which could be a threat to the legitimacy of his government, the number of political prisoners increased drastically- many people were even detained without holding a proper trial. However, Assad changed his policy on imprisonment for political grounds after almost twenty years of his presidency. By December of 1995, he approved the release of more than 1200 Syrian political prisoners. Presumably, a dominant majority of the political prisoners who were set free had been members of the Muslim Brotherhood or supported the Brotherhood's activities in some way. The third indicator is the Sunni population's desire to take part in governance. This willingness includes not only the positions that give political power and influential roles but also those that are more symbolic and ceremonial. Assad allowed the inclusion of some Sunnis within governmental agencies, which has given them an opportunity to partake in some decision-making processes- particularly those related to the economy[26].

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[25] Phillips Christopher, *Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria*, Third World Quarterly 36, no. 2 (2015), 357–76.
[26] Haklai, *A Minority Rule over a Hostile Majority*, 2000, 43-45.

When considering Sunni involvement in the Alawite government, it is also essential to understand how this could affect the most powerful institutions in Syria, i.e. the Baath Party along with its internal structures and the army. Certainly, a shift of power in either of these institutions could cause instability of the political regime in Syria and pose a serious threat to the state. On the other hand, remembering that pan-Arabism was one of the founding ideologies of Baath, it would create controversy if Sunnis were totally left out of the government. As a result, Assad faced a serious dilemma and saw the possible solution of this issue in balancing the two: allowing some Sunnis to engage with the government on the one hand and limiting the scope of their operations and influence on the other to maintain the political power that seemed to be the key for stability in Syria.

As a result, it becomes evident that Hafez al-Assad succeeded in bringing stability to the Syrian political landscape due to his cautious domestic and foreign policies. He prioritized the stabilization of relations with Israel and other states of the Arabian Peninsula, but at the same time aimed at avoidinggreater socialization of society. Being a representative of the Alawite minority, Assad introduced privileged opportunities for Alawites and proposed confrontational ideas such as secularism and the ideology of pan-Arabism. It is essential to note that it is during the presidency of Assad that there were a significant rise of Islamist movements. However, Assad succeeded in containing the Islamist opposition via numerous means. Last but not least, Assad prioritized the development of two institutions, namely the Baath Party and the Syrian Army, which were both dominated by the Alawite minority and served as tools for maintaining control over the Syrian state.

### From Escalations to Civil War

The Syrian politics was heavily affected by the death of Hafez al-Assad, which marked the beginning of the third phase in Syria's development as a state. Bashar al-Assad, his son—the next president of Syria, was challenged by several actors in both domestic and international entities. In addition to those challenges, he inherited a legacy that included several unresolved issues in Syria, which have had negative impacts on Syrian politics and exacerbated the civil war.

Was there a way to avoid the civil war in Syria? It has been commonly argued that there would have been such a possibility if Hafez al-Assad had introduced more institutional reforms and structural improvements. However, as the continuity of Syrian state-building shows, there were a lot of disruptions in the process due to several factors that could not have been avoided[27].

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[27] Van Dam Nikolaos, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, 2017, 130-156

Hafez al-Assad died on 10 June 2000. Bashar al-Assad assumed his position as the president of Syria only a month after his father's death, on July 17, 2000. It is commonly observed that in spite of possessing the same last name, the policies of the two have vastly differed in the majority of fields, including economic, social, as well as international and foreign policies.

As far as the Baath Party's leadership in Syria is concerned, it is essential to point out that the party's leadership under Assad has become more focused on security, military, and intelligence services. The Regional Command, which used to be the highest organ within the party's structure, has now claimed more of a subordinate role. It used to have a number of core responsibilities aimed at fostering the functions of the Baath Party[28].

Therefore, the Baath Party's operations in present-day Syria are mostly initiated, executed, and supervised primarily via military and intelligent services. Other branches of the party, such as those operating on the lower levels of the government or within individual administrative districts of Syria, have failed to bring about valuable contributions to the conflict management process. Instead, all that can be observed within these branches is isolation from the core operations of the party and failure to oversee the administrations at the provincial level, where the criticality of the security situation has made it impossible to uphold and ensure effective governance.

**The Arab Spring in Syria**

The end of 2010 was marked by the Arab Spring, which has come to play an essential role in the political histories of a number of countries in the Middle East. In Syria, anti-government demonstrations began on 15 March 2011. Starting as peaceful rallies, these demonstrations escalated into fierce battles for a democratic regime and for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. Previous sections of this article have provided the background upon which this conflict has developed. However, considering modern-day Syria, it is essential to acknowledge that the Syrian conflict has been triggered by several problems including socio-economic causes, religious factors, intervention in the conflict by other actors, and the geopolitical location of Syria[29]. So far, the situation in Syria is improving with Assad's control of the vast majority of the state's territory.

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[28] Belhadj Souhaïl, *The Decline of Syria's Baath Party*, Carnegie Europe, 2012, https://carnegieeurope.eu/2012/12/05/decline-of-syria-s-baath-party-pub-50258.

[29] Mukhametov Rinat, *Vliyaniye protsessov globalizatsii na islamskiy mir* [The Influence of Globalization on the Islamic World]. Politicheskoye samoopredeleniye islamkogo mira v usloviyakh globalizatsii. "Medina" Publishing House. (2009).

Still, there are a number of obstacles that Syria has to overcome, the most critical one being active terrorist organizations. Three organizations can be identified as the most active ones: the Syrian Islamic Front, Al-Nusra Front, and the Islamic State of Syria (ISIS)[30]. The problem of terrorism in Syria greatly hinders the process of resolving the conflict. The operations of these groups affect multiple spheres in Syria. The reasons that have fueled the ongoing civil war in Syria have deepened much more and became some of the primary difficulties for resolving the conflict because these causes, in turn, lie in the fundamental nature of the contradictions that generated the conflict in the first place.

As a result, the dissatisfaction of the population with the authoritarian regime, the domination of Alawite representatives in power and military structures, corruption within the government, and religious contradictions became the causes of the civil war in Syria. As of March 2021, the number of people killed in the ongoing Syrian civil war has reached 598,100, and millions have either been injured or displaced[31]. The war has also left negative implications for the Syrian nation in terms of its development. According to the Human Development Index, Syria's ranking has worsened in recent years. It should be noted that starting from 1990, Syria was continuously achieving positive growth until the 2010s. In 20 years, the score 0.558 was improved until 0.644. However, due to civil war, the score has worsened to 0.539 by 2015, categorizing Syria as a state with "low human development." There is no major improvement until 2020[32]. Moreover, the Fragile States Index ranks Syria as the fourth most fragile state in the world. Within this Index, Syria achieved the best results in 2010, when it was ranked as the 48th most fragile state. However, immediately after the beginning of the civil war, the score has been worsening, taking Syria to the top of the chart[33].

Therefore, it should be noted that sincecoming to power, Bashar al-Assad fostered the mobilization of different segments of political opposition. Besides Islamists, the unresolved issue of the Kurdish population has hindered his successful presidency. Due to a number of reasons, Baath Party has also undergone significant transformations as a political party. The most important transformation

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[30] Lund Aron, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front*, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, #17, (2013), 22–24; Benotman, Noman, & Blake, *Roisin. Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing*, QUILLIAM, Center for International Security and Cooperation. (23 January 2015); *The Islamic State. Mapping Militant Organizations*, (Stanford University, 2019).

[31] The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. Syrian Revolution 120 months on: 594,000 persons killed and millions of Syrians displaced and injured (2021)

[32] United Nations' Development Program. Human Development Reports. (2020).

[33] Ibid

is its structural shift. As already discussed, military and intelligence services have taken control of other branches of the party. Thus, the party became more closely associated with the Syrian Army. Lastly, the most critical event in Syria's political reality is the Arab Spring, which was driven by multiple factors including westernization, religious conflicts, geopolitical issues, and terrorism. Combined together, these factors has fueled a civil war in Syria, which has lasted for almost a decade now.

*Conclusion*

This article examined three phases of Syria's state-building after the abolishment of the French mandate. Applying several theories and exploring relevant concepts, it also revealed how minority rule and different implications of military interventions shaped today's Syri.It also addressed some of the current issues such as the absence of domestic political consolidation. Ruled by the Alawite minority, equal simultaneous institutional development has become a serious obstacle for Syria as an independent state.

An examination of Syria's political developments proved that having inherited a colonial past, Syria has also inherited an unavoidable legacy of political instability.An examination of various political phases in Syria's state-building shows that Syria has constantly encountered major developmental obstacles that have affected the stable process of institutional and state development, particularly consecutive military interventions and different manifestations of post-colonialism. The Syrian Civil War has raged for over a decade now and the situation has not yet stabilized.

**JINGXIN PU**

# NEW INSPIRATION FROM CHINA'S PHILOSOPHY OF "UNITY OF MAN AND HEAVEN": CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Abstract:** *The danger of the novel coronavirus has not yet come to an end, and new variants have begun to attack the world. What philosophy should humankind's strategy be based on when human society as a group is fighting against Covid-19, as the pandemic ravages the world? Unfortunately, political leaders of various countries have failed to achieve the overall awareness of attacking the pandemic for a shared future for mankind so far. In the face of the pandemic, mankind as a whole urgently needs to break through the narrow nation-oriented ideology of seeking only self-protection. The International Community should establish a new type of international cooperation featuring the concept of harmony of "all things under heaven as a unity". The international relations system dominated by the power ofwestern discourse is now in a bottleneck. The main aim of this article is to study the ancient Chinese wisdom of "the Unity of Man and Heaven" philosophy and build a global harmonious community. The author argues that the "export" of the aforementioned wisdom must be a priority for Chinese scholars.*
***Keywords:*** *Tao; Unity of Man and Heaven; Novel Coronavirus; Anthropocentrism; Harmony.*

## Introduction

Covid-19 suddenly arrived and caught humanity off guard. In the face of the ravages of the disease, human beings have become so fragile and powerless. Every day, there are stories of illness and death. This microscopic organism has not only changed the pattern and rhythm of the world, but has also suddenly awakened our awareness of impermanence. Mankind has not been able to find the specific source of this virus or a radical effective cure. No matter where the virus originated, the culprit behind the global pandemic of novel coronavirus must be humans whose ignorance and fearlessness has caused the outbreak to spread. The pandemic has forced people, countries, and nature into a hopeless situation. People think they are the masters of nature. They do whatever they want and use all kinds of cruel means to kill wild animals to meet their own desires. They do not understand that the ecological chain is interlinked, and that once the chain breaks, causing ecological