

BETWEEN PAN-ARABISM AND REGIONALISM:  
MAPPING NATIONALIST DISCOURSES DURING HAFEZ AL ASSAD'S  
ERA IN SYRIA

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## ABSTRACT

### **BETWEEN PAN-ARABISM AND REGIONALISM: MAPPING NATIONAL DISCOURSES DURING HAFEZ AL ASSAD ERA IN SYRIA**

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The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the oscillation between different identities and nationalist discourses during Hafez Al Assad era in Syria. Syrian Arab Republic has been facing with an identity crisis ever since its independence due to several dynamics. Throughout the decades, there emerged several different self-images of Syrians. The major clash subsists between loyalty to Arabness and Syrianness. In order to find out the perceptions of politically relevant elites concerning this clash and the roots of identity crisis, a fieldwork was conducted during the spring 2006 in Damascus.

An exploration of the nationalist ideologies – Arab nationalism, Greater Syrian nationalism, Pan-Islamic nationalism and liberal nationalism – during the Hafez Al Assad's era in Syria gives us the clues of the identity crisis. Moreover, the insights of Syrian politically relevant intellectuals exemplify and explain the current debate on the identity crisis in Syria.

**Key words:** Syria, nationalist ideologies, national identity, colonialism.

## ÖZ

### **PAN-ARAPÇILIK VE BÖLGESELÇİLİK ARASINDA SURİYE: HAFIZ ESAD DÖNEMİNDE MİLLİYETÇİ İDEOLOJİLER**

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Bu tezin amacı, Hafız Esad döneminde Suriye'deki milliyetçi ideolojiler ve alternatif kimlikler arasındaki gelgitleri incelemektir. Geçen on yıllar içinde Suriyeliliğe dair çok sayıda farklı kimlik temsilleri belirmiştir. Bu çerçevede, en temel çatışma, Suriyelilik ve Araplık arasında olmuştur. Bu doğrultuda, siyasi elitlerin bu farklı aidiyet biçimlerine ve mevcut kimlik bunalımına dair algı ve düşüncelerini araştırmak amacıyla 2006 baharında Şam'da derinlemesine mülakatları içeren bir alan araştırması yapılmıştır.

Hafız Esad dönemindeki Arap milliyetçiliği, Büyük Suriye milliyetçiliği, Pan-İslamcı milliyetçilik ve liberal milliyetçilik gibi farklı milliyetçi ideolojilerin incelenmesi, Suriye'deki mevcut kimlik bunalımı hakkında ipuçları vermektedir. Bununla beraber, Suriyeli siyasi elit ve entelektüellerin kimlik bunalımı ile ilgili güncel tartışmaya dair görüşleri açıklayıcı olmuştur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Suriye, milliyetçi ideolojiler, milli kimlik, sömürgecilik.

***To My Father***

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## CHAPTER I

### 1. INTRODUCTION

My academic curiosity towards Syrian society and politics began to develop in May, 2005 when I was in Lebanon in order to observe the so-called Cedar revolution. It was a few months after Hariri's death that not only Lebanon but also Syria was at the crossroads, as we still witness the repercussions of Hariri's assassination in the region. During my short stay in Beirut, the most significant event was to observe the meetings and protests of diverse political groups, all of which raised their voices for '*Lebanon first*'; thus a united Lebanon and asked for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. The nationalist sentiments and people's loyalty to their ethnic, religious or national identities attracted me so much. Hence, in order to better understand the phenomena of nationalist ideologies, I started to read major theories of nationalism. My initial aim was to study and learn about the nation-state formation in the region as a whole; specifically in Eastern Mediterranean countries.

In January, 2006, I traveled to Syria in order to start to a preliminary research. During my first visit to Damascus, I met Mr. Amr Al Azm, who is one of the well-known intellectual elites in Syria. There were a significant number of flags in the balconies and in the avenues that it was, in a kind, a

manifest sign of rise in nationalist sentiments of Syrians, at least Damascene people. Therefore, I wondered the roots of this nationalist uprising and decided to study the nationalist ideologies during Hafez Al Assad era. The long-lasting rule of Assad's power and the Baathist regime carved out the tension between available identities, albeit Assad was successful in introducing a *fragile balance* between various ethnic and religious groups in Syria.

In spite of the fact that Syria has been ruled with an iron fist and there has not been many discussions concerning different opinions on nationalism, this does not circumvent the emergence of several different self-images of Syria. It is my aim in this thesis to map out these different images. This will be done by tracing the major nationalist ideologies during the Hafez Al Assad era. I will try to demonstrate the oscillation between Arabness and Syrianness through a deep-going analysis of Arab nationalism, Greater Syrian nationalism, Pan-Islamic nationalism and liberal Syrian nationalism between 1970 and 2000. My attempt is to trace a bridge between sociological approaches to the Middle East and possible theoretical frameworks to the subject matter of this thesis.

In the theoretical part of the thesis, the mainstream theories of nationalism will be analyzed through a critical eye. The phenomena of nation and nationalism are indeed the focus of a very elaborate theoretical debate. In

this thesis, I will take the debate between modern origins of nations (modernism) and ethnic origins of nations (primordialism and ethno-symbolism) and this will inform our understanding of nationalism in the modern history of the Middle East as well as where it stands in the colonial story of the region. In the first section, the general theoretical approach to nationalism will be set out to be used through the sections on the history of Syria and on the findings of the field research and the importance of post-colonial condition will be emphasized.

In the second section on the history of the modern Syria, I will use the following periodization; the late Ottoman era, the epoch of French colonial rule, the years of early independence and finally, the era of Hafez Al Assad. The discussion of the Ottoman and the French colonial periods are indeed necessary to understand the conditions on which the national identity was founded. The issues around the artificiality of the borders, for example, is a theme that haunts Syria even now when there is a fresh discussion on what it means to be a Syrian. The years of early independence and especially the era of Hafez Al Assad will bring us to the subject matter of this thesis, which is the oscillation among available identities / nationalist ideologies. The shifting territorial imaginings partly due to the unsettled borders, which result in turn in a crisis of identity, will be examined. The tension between being an Arab and a Syrian and how that has its repercussions on the policies of the Hafez Al-Assad era will be dealt with. In conformity with my theoretical approach, it will be observed a

close link between the establishment of a modern state and the rather frustrated emergence of a nation.

The last section will cover the field research, which I conducted in Damascus, Syria, during April and May 2006. It consists of in-depth interviews with politically relevant intellectual elites in Syria. As a country where most of the political developments were initiated and pursued from above, to which ideologies were to some extent 'imported' from outside, intellectuals stand out almost naturally in any debate on nationalism and national identity. Some of those interviews were conducted by intellectual elites very close to the Baath party, whereas some others were from the liberal faction, which has a rather critical outlook on the Hafez Al-Assad era. Interviewees also include Greater Syrian nationalists and Islamists. The main themes of the interviews were the national identity, the state, colonialism and the issue of the conflict with Israel. As disseminators of various versions of nationalism, no informed discussion can be done without a thorough grasp of the various respective positions of the intellectuals.

This thesis will attempt to illuminate the complex linkages among the fluctuating themes in Syrian nationalisms with the help of the theories of nationalism as well as with the veins of social development to be inferred from the history of Syria. Though, most importantly, it will seek to fulfill its task through the insights from the intellectuals themselves. The main

contribution of this thesis will lie in the intersection area of these three chapters, which will be more elaborately drawn out in the concluding section

## **CHAPTER II**

### **2. DISCUSSING NATIONALISM**

In order to explore the nationalist ideologies in Syria, I shall first start with situating this study into the core debates on nationalism studies, and to the fundamental questions on which theories of nationalism have been trying to find answers. Tracing the debates in the field, this study aims to explore the very relation between nationalism and national identity. Before having a voyage to the blurred and deep waters of nationalism studies, I should first acknowledge that this chapter does not aspire to cover all aspects of the field. It rather aims to develop a critical gaze to the mainstream theories of nationalism with the intention to emphasize the importance of post-colonial condition for the development of national identity in the colonized states.

For the sake of brevity and coherence with the main argument of the thesis, in the first part, the problem of definition within the field will be discussed. Then, the influential debate on the nature of phenomena of 'nation' and 'nationalism' will be assessed. In the last part of the chapter, my aim will be to explore the phenomena of nation and nationalism in the Middle East, principally by focusing on the emergence and development of Arab nationalism.



## 2.1. The Problem of Definition

'What is a nation?' has been one of the main issues that theorists of nationalism have been focusing on. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there emerged a conjectural richness concerning the initiations to theorize the notions of 'nation' and 'nationalism' in the continental Europe.

In the West, Renaissance and Reformation created a new society in which the middle classes and secular learning gained a growing preponderance, and the universal and imperial Roman concept of the medieval world was abandoned not only in fact, but also in theory.<sup>1</sup>

After the French Revolution, "by the term nation there began to be understood all the citizens of a state ... or those who belonged to a language community."<sup>2</sup> With this mass concept, there begins a new sense of the word 'nation'. In his seminal lecture, Ernest Renan states that "the existence of a nation ... is an everyday plebiscite; it is, like the very existence of the individual, a perpetual affirmation of life."<sup>3</sup> This metaphor emphasizes the incipient rational towards an inescapable rise of the nationalist ideologies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Kohn, "Western and Eastern Nationalisms" in eds. J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 165.

<sup>2</sup> Guido Zernatto, "Nation: The History of a Word", *The Review of Politics*, Vol.6, No.3 (1944), 351-366.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" in eds. J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17.

The rise of nationalist ideologies was far from being homogenous. The term nation, which was almost meaning the simple solidarity of the people, turned gradually to a civic term throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century in France. In Germany, on the other hand, it was to be rewritten by thinkers such as Fichte and Herder and to be associated with more perennial features of a population, such as language and ethnicity. This difference in identifying who is allowed to become a member of the nation was reflected in the dichotomy of the civic versus ethnic nationalism, which was then symbolized as the French and German varieties. To be accurate, this division was not only the result of the brainstorming of German or French theorists, but was corresponding to the different paths that these two countries undertook in their process of modern state formation. It was then, to be reflected in their imperial attitudes, with French imperialism always having a huge emphasis on culture and language, a theme that we will return in the section on Syrian history. However, to return to our discussion on the definition of nation, the writings of a historian in mapping the modern usages of the term are quite useful.

Hobsbawm draws attention to the problem of definition for the obscure nature of the notion of nation and he states that “defining nation by its members’ consciousness of belonging to it is tautological and provides only an a posteriori guide to what a nation is.”<sup>4</sup> While reminding us the

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<sup>4</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1990]), 7-8.

ominous character of the concept of nation, by this standpoint, Hobsbawm manifestly objects to Renan's definition of nation; moreover, as a matter of fact, he remonstrates any given definition of nation.

It is necessary to consider that any theory of politics inherently entails a politics of theory as well. A politics of theory, here will be taken as the political assumptions and positions that the theory rests upon, explicitly or otherwise. Clearly, any sound definition of nation should take into account the history of the nation formation, which would then include a consideration for the 'late' nations, such as my case study and early nation formations, examples of which are usually drawn from the European history.

In this regard, Breuilly's arguments concerning the political features of nations and nationalisms are very useful for understanding the emergence of modern nation-state. In the search for the close relationship between nation and state, he develops invaluable insights to examine the complex phenomenon of nationalism. Firstly, his analysis is an elaborate one of the political developments that led to the formation of nationalism as a form of politics. Secondly, it combines the theoretical framework with the many cases it examines and produces a comparative analysis.

Before going onto the details of the explanations of nationalism, it must be noted that these explanations are not clear-cut, nor very precise when

giving the causes of the emergence of nationalism, even as a political doctrine (as the proponents of this approach claim). Especially, John Breuille is very careful in not presenting his argument as a general theory of nationalism, and denies the possibility to do so for any argument on nationalism.

Nationalism can refer to arguments of intellectuals, ways people feel and talk political movements and organizations, state policy, and much else. (...) It is a fantasy to suppose one could develop an argument which covered them all to produce 'a theory of nationalism as a whole.'<sup>5</sup>

Hence, Breuille limits his study to explain only one aspect of nationalism that is its politics. However, there is a choice made here, namely the explanation comes after the assumption that "nationalism is a form of politics". Within Breuille's paradigm, we are confined to see nationalism as emerging out of the space between state and society, and mostly out of the opposition to the state, which is of course shaped to some extent by the state. Nationalism becomes a concomitant of the modern state formation and a struggle to shape the state through the presence of which nationalism had become evocative.

To understand how nationalism as an ideology and self-image was formed and became attractive for communities, the analysis has to focus on the initial process of modern state formation in Western Europe, more specifically in France and England. Breuille's efforts in presenting a

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<sup>5</sup> John Breuille, "The State and Nationalism", in eds. M. Guibernau and J. Hutchinson, *Understanding Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 49.

comparative investigation on that period are insightful. First, a picture of the state politics is drawn and nationalism is somewhat installed in that context. He interprets the phenomenon of political nationalism in the light of the failures and successes; needs and functions of the absolutist monarchies.

It is generally agreed that the roots of modern nationalisms are to be found in the territorial and monarchical states of Western Europe in the early modern period. As these states extended their authority over their subjects and diminished that of other institutions such as churches, estates and guilds, and as they came into increasing and more intensive conflict with one another, so they took on the character of nation-states. That is to say, the idea of the 'nation' achieved a limited political relevance.<sup>6</sup>

If there is any causal relationship in the story of nationalism, that is between the process of modern state formation, with its many side effects on the division of labor among and political status of the individuals in the society and nationalism as a political movement. Nationalism can only make sense in this arena of modern politics and nationalism can only be understood as "a parasitic movement and ideology, shaped by what it opposes. A distinctively 'private' society which nationalists can identify as a cultural group, and a public state which nationalists can claim in the name of that cultural group, are necessary conditions for the development of nationalism as a specific and effective form of political practice and

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<sup>6</sup> John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 75.

ideology.”<sup>7</sup> As Özkırımlı notes about Breuilly when annotating his approach, it is the modern political arena (with its institutions, wars, transformations) that is capable of giving us clues about nationalism, rather than nationalism itself: “We need to find out what it is about modern politics that makes nationalism so important”.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Anderson has characterized nation as the creation of “an imagined political community”. He affirms that “communities are to be distinguished not only by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”<sup>9</sup> The nation is “an imagined community” because “even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of communion”<sup>10</sup>. Through imagining the whole of the nation that they belong, they develop a kind of national loyalty towards their community and a consciousness of being of a part of a larger unit, which is nation. Moreover, Anderson emphasizes the limited character of nation. In his words, “the nation is imagined as limited because even the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>8</sup> Umut Özkırımlı, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 105.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and the Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991[1983]), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.

largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries which lay other nations.”<sup>11</sup>

Anderson places the emergence of print capitalism at the very heart of his theory, claiming that it was the print capitalism that allowed the development of new national cultures and created the specific formations that the new nations would eventually take. In his words, what made the new communities imaginable was “a half-fortuitous interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print) and the fatality of human diversity”.<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing the importance of print capitalism, he highlights the growth of mass culture during the time of industrialization.

Hobsbawm is, along with Breuilly and Anderson, one of the most established scholars of the modernist approach in nationalism studies. Hobsbawm’s insights regarding the phenomenon of nation and nationalism facilitate one’s perception towards this complex issue. He argues the reinvention of traditions in the modern era. Accordingly, traditions do not necessarily have to be old, as a matter of fact; they may be lately invented for social engineering. He defines ‘invented traditions’ as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 42-44.

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.<sup>13</sup>

He differentiates three types of 'invented traditions' each of which has a diverse role: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities; b) those establishing legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior.<sup>14</sup> The significance of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with the past is generally fictional. In order to cope with 'inhabituall contingencies' societies replenish their so-called old traditions according to the needs of society. In Hobsbawm's words, "inventing traditions ... is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition."<sup>15</sup>

In this respect, societies aim to maintain a 'historic continuity' with the past by devising a set of practices such as national saluting or celebration of national days. Hobsbawm's major contribution to the field of nationalism

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<sup>13</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", in eds. E. J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 (Canto edition) [1983]), 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



studies is that he attracts one's attention to the constructed nature of nation. In the following part, it is necessary to explore the debate between modernist and perennialists on the origins of nations.

## **2.2. Nation: Whether an ancient form or a modern construct?**

Against modernism stands primordialism. This debate has been the main poles of orthodoxy in nationalism studies. Primordialism is the oldest paradigm that has been developed in order to examine the phenomena of nation and nationalism. "A nation, according to primordialists, is a naturally occurring social grouping, often marked by cultural features such as a shared language, shared customs and traditions, and shared history."<sup>16</sup> The most extreme version of primordialism is the naturalist approach, which claims that national identities are natural. According to this view, one is born to a nation likewise being born to a family. "It [Primordialism] is an umbrella term used to describe scholars who hold that nationality is a natural part of human beings, as natural as speech, sight or smell, and that nations have existed since time immemorial."<sup>17</sup> For a primordialist, nations have no difference from ethnicities, and this argument brings about a nationalist position.

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<sup>16</sup> Atsuko Ichijo and Gordana Uzelac, "Primordialism: Introduction", in eds. A. Ichijo and G. Uzelac, *When is the Nation? Towards an Understanding of Theories of Nationalism* (London, Routledge, 2005), 51.

<sup>17</sup> Umut Özkırımlı, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, 64.

Primordialism seems very straight forward and unitarian in its claims. Modernism on the other hand, as a term in the field, covers a variety approaches that actually underline different aspects of nation formation. Some may give more weight to the role of industrialization (Gellner), some to the emergence of the nation state (Breuille), and some to the reinvention of traditions in the modern era (Hobsbawm). However, they all share one common premise. Nations are modern phenomenon and nationalism is a modern ideology.

Ernest Gellner has been one of the founding fathers of the modernist approach and it is in reaction to him that theories of ethno-symbolism, for example, have been formulated. Gellner defines nationalism as “primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”<sup>18</sup> He thinks that nations, likewise states, are result of a ‘contingency’, and in fact, they are not ‘universal necessity’. According to Gellner, different from primordialists, nationalist ideologies construct nations. To repeat that nations and nationalisms are modern phenomena; not only because their emergence is to be seen in the modern period, but more importantly, because the basic premises of the modern society require nations and nationalisms. In this respect, industrial development, social mobility, the need for mass literacy, public education and other characteristics of the modern times, for modernists, especially for Gellner, produced the phenomenon called nation.

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<sup>18</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1.

Gellner observes three fundamental stages in the history of humankind; which are the pre-agrarian, the agrarian and the industrial phases.<sup>19</sup> Following, the state emerges in the agrarian era, and is transformed into a modern nation state in the industrial era. At this point, Gellner paraphrases Hegel “once none had the state, then some had it, finally all have it.”<sup>20</sup> Without the modern state, there is no problem of nations. Put it simply, states were before nations, whereas in its modern sense, the nation ‘presuppose the prior existence of state.’ Or else, Hobsbawm lays it nationalism comes before nations. This is the difference between primordialists and modernists in a nutshell.

In this regard, this premise alone contradicts the main tenants of primordialism and raises multiple research agendas. If a paradigm is to be measured by the plurality of the substantial research it may engender, modernism as a paradigm in nationalism studies surely passes that test. The modernist paradigm better explains the linkages between different aspects of modernity to the nation formation, may it be culture, relations of production, political organization of the state, etc. This thesis will stay within the limits of the modernist paradigm, albeit with the freedom to underline different merits of the paradigm according to the main purpose of the thesis.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 4-7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5.

As modernist paradigm engendered multiple research agendas in the field of nationalism studies, it, in a way, gave way to the birth of a different paradigm which is now weakening the premises of modernism, i.e. cultural studies. Scholars, who put the primary emphasis on culture, are not primordialists of course, but they also don't possess the modernist reflexes, which can be summoned up as prioritizing the material processes. However, one should not stay silent to the growing impact of cultural studies in the field of nationalism studies. "The growing cultural studies literature made use of a wide range of theories, from Gramsci to psychoanalytic approaches, and incorporated the insights provided by alternative epistemological perspectives, notably feminism, postcolonialism and postmodernism"<sup>21</sup> The influence of cultural studies has two broad influences upon the field of nationalism theories.

- First, the gender-blind, Eurocentric character of the mainstream literature was criticized; greater emphasis was put on internal and external hierarchies of power.
- Second, the interaction of the studies of nationalism with such developing fields as migration, race, multiculturalism, diasporas and the like increased.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> G. Eley and R. G. Sunny, "Introduction: From the Moment of Social History to the Work of Cultural Presentation", in eds. G. Eley and R. G. Sunny, *Becoming National: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3–38, cited in U. Özkırmılı, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, 192.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

If one examines the prominent theories in the field of nationalism, it is going to be obvious that “none of these theories took account of the ‘subordinated’, i.e., the former European colonies and their postcolonial successors, or women, ethnic minorities and the oppressed classes”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, theorists from the Subaltern studies group particularly Partha Chatterjee attempted to reinterpret the Third World nationalism from the vantage point of the subordinated. Chatterjee differentiates two senses of nationalism which are nationalism as a political movement and nationalism as a cultural construct.

It is necessary to keep in mind that the prominent theories of nationalism are mostly Eurocentric and can not wholly grasp the postcolonial/anti-colonial nationalism, which emerged mainly in the Third World countries. In this respect, I believe that Chatterjee’s arguments are significant. For Chatterjee, anti/postcolonial nationalism, although a derivative discourse, was never totally dominated by Western models of nationhood, which I have tried to underline some basic arguments of these models above. “It could not imitate the West in every aspect of life, for then the very distinction between the West and the East would vanish and the self identity of national culture would itself be threatened.”<sup>24</sup> The nationalist

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”, in eds. K. Sangari and S. Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 237.

resolution of this dilemma was to separate the domain of culture into two spheres; the material/world/gahir and the spiritual/home/bahir.

Partha Chatterjee elaborates on the Abdel-Malek's distinction between the problematic and the thematic.<sup>25</sup> He demonstrates that this distinction traces back the phenomenological writings of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. According to Chatterjee, this distinction is salutary in analyzing the Third world nationalisms, which seem to oppose the dominating implications of the Post-Enlightenment, and which also contradictorily accept the domination of Europe. His concern is to differentiate the 'social ideology'. Chatterjee asserts that the first component of the ideology assumes the existence of the certain possibilities and the second component of it seeks to justify the claims by appealing the epistemic and moral principles. He thinks that the former part is the problematic of the nationalist thought and the latter part is its thematic. He elaborates on this distinction and states that the problematic in the nationalist thought is the reverse of Orientalism. At the level of problematic, the object in nationalist thought is the essentialist-Oriental character. At the level of thematic, Chatterjee puts that nationalist thought adopts the very distinction made between the East and the West by the Orientalist discourse. Since the nationalist texts are located in the field of political/ideological, Chatterjee offers to study the nationalist thought by conducting the method of discourse analysis. He

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<sup>25</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1986), 36.

demonstrates the fact that although the nationalist thought opposes the discourse of colonialism, it is still a component of the nationalist thought. He asserts that the nationalist thought uses the theoretical principles and the language derived from the modern Western rational thought. Therefore, the nationalist thought concerning its problematic is a derivative discourse. It is through the thematic that nationalism succeeds to produce a different discourse.

Any theory is ideologically innocent. Chatterjee explores this issue in his critique to Anderson, and his definition of nation as an imagined community. Chatterjee accurately objects Anderson's argument and he states that

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we, in the postcolonial world, shall only perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the spirit of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.<sup>26</sup>

In the last two sections, the definitions of nations and nationalisms together with the leading approaches, which attempt to understand and explain them, were discussed. The quote from Chatterjee takes us to the

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<sup>26</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

heart of the subject matter of this thesis, namely nations and nationalisms in the colonized territories.

### **2.3. The Formation of Nation-State in the Middle East**

Nationalism, the construction of nation-state and the post-colonial condition are interrelated phenomena. In the context of the Middle East, post-colonial condition is a decisive element in the course of nationalist ideologies. Despite its imported roots, nationalism in the Middle East accompanied the flow of the political developments in the region throughout the 20th century. It has played a role, albeit in varying degrees, in all major events. Nationalism was instrumentalised as a way of expanding and consolidating the modern state.

Different from several scholars, who analyze the region in terms of constant cultural or religious identities, Halliday endeavors to demonstrate that what is defined as the national or religious is subject to change. Concerning the nationalist ideologies in the region, he states that

What is today presented as the 'true' representation of a past tradition is in fact a contemporary, modern creation designed to meet contemporary needs, thus, ideology is in the sense, instrumental, for those in power - states, elites, classes, religious authorities - and for those challenging power.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fred Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2000), 41.



Nationalist ideologies, as if existing for centuries, represent and create a past tradition in order to build a nation state and to unify a group of people in a territory defined. In this respect, one of 'the contemporary needs' that Halliday refers is the necessity to form an independent nation-state in the region.

Starting from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region has been the locus of nationalist ideologies, which were employed instrumentally by the power-holders, mainly by the states, in a from-above manner, to consolidate the nation state. The process of nation-state formation in the Middle East exemplifies the idea that nationalism comes prior to nation. Moreover, nationalist ideologies and the model of nation-state are imported to the Middle East from Europe. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed the rise of nationalist ideologies and movements in the region. Zubaida rightly points out that "... the nation-state has been a 'compulsory model' at independence of former colonies and dependencies, partly for lack of any other respectable models of statehood."<sup>28</sup>

The lack of any other respectable forms for state formation implies a lot in the Middle Eastern context. When most of the Middle Eastern states had gained independence, the modern state system as we know it now – the sovereign states, based on claims to nationhood and respecting each

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<sup>28</sup> Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989 [1993]), 121.

others' territories – was already formed, and not without blood and tears. The Middle East and its fate as a region was a concern of the European powers which in turn composed this state system. It was them, maybe even more than the Ottomans, who brainstormed on the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. It was the inter-imperialist rivalry that kept Ottoman territories together in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And again it was the First World War that united the knot. As European imperial powers were turning to nation states and Russia to Soviet Union, the fate of the Middle Eastern borders and peoples was deduced from this struggle. During this post-First World War era, “it was generally the dominant colonial power that first created the essential features of a state by giving it a capital, a legal system, a flag and internationally recognized boundaries.”<sup>29</sup>

Nationalism in the Middle East is both an answer to the European determinism, but at the same time it is the acceptance of the very paradigm of the nation-state, a system to whose constitution Middle East could not contribute. Hence, nation state was the only frame in which the actors in the Middle East could respond to the 20<sup>th</sup> century political, economic and social transformations. Establishing a modern state based on an ancient nation became the requirement for achieving the survival. It was first and foremost, the remnant of the Ottoman Empire which was engaged in the process. However, although very much entangled in the

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<sup>29</sup> Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 13.

relations of imperialism, Anatolia was never formally colonized. We should be case-specific in terms of state-nation formation and recognize the differences between colonized and non-colonized Middle Eastern countries. Iran was another example of not formally colonized country, yet with even higher levels of foreign intervention. Again in Iran, around the same period (1920s) we see Reza Shah, gathering the bits and pieces of the Persian Empire and melting them in the new idea of great Iranian nation. The fact that the Iranian nation was postulated as existent for the last 2000 years and the Turkish nation as having its roots in Central Asia is very much the example of Halliday's modern creations according to contemporary needs, as explained above. As well as the Iranian nationalism, the Turkish nationalism has also been employed instrumentally to create a homogeneous nation. These nationalisms provide us the examples of modern conceptualizations of nation-state in the Middle East by molding "available history, language and culture...as they needed."<sup>30</sup>

In the colonized Arab territories, however, the situation was not as forward as finding a national history and applying it alongside the state formation, since there was the colonial rule. The colonial rule was not only exercised through strategic and economic means but there was also a cultural element in it, more so in French colonialism perhaps. This element should be taken into consideration when, for example, the nation formation and

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<sup>30</sup> Fred Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East*, 41.

the emergence of nationalist ideologies in the colonized Arab territories are analyzed. Apart from cultural input from colonizers, there is another difference between Iran and Turkey and the colonized territories and that is the issue of borders. Unlike Iran and Turkey who had international borders through war or through historical treaties<sup>31</sup>, these colonies were very much demarcated by the European Men – those who had a notion of a nation and a territorial border that comes with it – unlike the very population they were trying to rule. However, the impact of imperialism was there long before the nation-state formation and the emergence of modern state was more or less the extension and development of imperialist policies. Imperialism is itself a contested term and it may say nothing without a definition. As Gallagher and Robinson argue extensively, imperialism is not only about territorial expansion and it is rather about the linking of the relevant parts of the world to the world economy as operating in the capitals of Europe. Again it is their claim that “formal or informal rule matters less at this point as there is a means to the end, rather than ends in themselves.”<sup>32</sup> Looked from this angle, the nation-state formation and imperialism can be linked, not only in the formal colonies but also in the rest of the region. In the words of Bromley;

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<sup>31</sup> Kasr-ı Şirin treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Iran dates back to 1638 and it is one of the oldest borders in the international history.

<sup>32</sup> John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, *Economic History Review*, Vol. 6, No 1, 1953 cited in Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 85.

At root, from the standpoint of the West, the project of post-war state-building is best understood as a further element in the development of the imperialist construction of the capitalist world market and its linked sovereign state system.<sup>33</sup>

To sum up, nationalism and the concept of the nation state is an imposition on the region, firstly because the international stage at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was requiring it. Secondly, it was a colonial imposition. However, as it was argued above, it was the very mechanism to conform or to challenge the international system. In the case of Iran and Turkey, it provided the very mechanism to integrate to the rest of the world after the war. In the case of Egypt, especially after 1952, it was a means to rebel. National self-determination was a two edged sword, and its use could be determined by various factors, involving both agency and structure, by several variables but the ancient claims themselves.

According to Owen, the common characteristics to be observed in the modernization projects of the Middle Eastern countries that are developed for the building of a nation state are as follows:

A design/plan regarding the state and the people, namely the need for transforming the population into a homogenous people, nationalist projects that stem from xenophobia and creating the material versus spiritual distinction by the hands of elites and support for spiritual development.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 85.

<sup>34</sup> Roger Owen, "Orta Doğu Perspektifinde Modernleşirmeci Projeler", in eds. S. Bozdoğan and R. Kasaba, *Türkiye'de Modernleşme ve Ulusal Kimlik* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı, 1998), 200–206.

The development of nationalist ideologies during the modernization period in the colonized Arab territories exemplifies the point of view concerning the need to import technology and science from the West, while preserving the cultural features of the society. This basic premise is crystallized in the intellectual tradition at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A new class consisting of European educated intellectuals began to contemplate on the notion of modernization and attempted to initiate social transformations. “They had all been influenced by the European idea that there is a sphere of religion and a sphere of secular life, and the principles that they appealed to for the reform of secular life were human, rational ones...”<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, “these principles that they appealed to were those of national unity and independence.”<sup>36</sup> In this respect, it is observed that the development of nationalist ideologies aiming to create an independent state in the Arab Middle East. These nationalisms were not only against mainly the ideas of Ottomanism alongside with the Turkish nationalism, but also against the European colonialism and nationalisms. In the following part, my aim will be explore these nationalist emergences.

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<sup>35</sup> Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Middle East* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 185.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## 2.4. Tracing Nationalist Ideologies in the Middle East

Before scrutinizing the development of nationalist ideologies in the Arab Middle East, mainly in Syria, it would be apposite to assert that the nationalist ideologies in this region are not very different from the rest of the world. These ideologies are not immune from alteration, plus, they are not solid. In this respect, “[t]he appearance of nationalisms in the Arab Middle East can be traced to the same preconditions that foreshadowed the appearance of nationalisms in other regions of the globe.”<sup>37</sup>

In spite of this general observation, there are also some basic premises of nationalisms in the Arab Middle East. In their political agenda these nationalisms were anti-Ottoman and anti-colonial. The issues of artificial borders, the resentment adjacent to the Turkish nationalism along with the policies of Turkification of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and the revulsion against colonialism become relevant in the context of the Arab Middle East, especially in Syria and Lebanon. In the 19<sup>th</sup> cc, the intellectual cradle of Arab nationalism was in Damascus and Beirut. Such themes will be important considerations throughout this part as they are the themes around which the debate on Middle Eastern nationalisms occurred.

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<sup>37</sup> James Gelvin, “Modernity and Its Discontents: On the Durability of Nationalism in the Arab Middle East”, *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 5, No.1, 1999, pp. 71-89, p. 74.

Among these themes, the issue of the artificiality of the borders seems to be commonly acknowledged by local politicians, intellectuals and scholars alike. Hence, I will start with this issue of territoriality in my attempt to



map the discussion on nationalisms in the region. In the case of the Middle Eastern nationalisms due to the nature of artificial borders, which were drawn by the colonial powers in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, there is shifting national imaginations vis-à-vis shifting territorial boundaries. Hourani asserts that

[o]n one side stood the nationalism which was linked with a specific piece of land, and on the other that which was linked with a group possessing some kind of cultural, ethnic and racial unity.<sup>38</sup>

This duality is crystallized with the emergence of the opposing ideologies such as Pan-Arabism versus Pan-Syrianism, Arab nationalism versus Greater Syrian nationalism, thus qawmiyya versus wataniyya. These opposing nationalist ideologies construct different self-views of antagonistic national identities. This multiplicity of identities has clearly links to the demarcation of the borders. The historical fact that the borders, which divided the Arab peoples, were not chosen nor fought by the Arabs themselves attracted the attention of those who wanted to understand the dynamic behind this antagonism. This division led to the emergence of a modern ideology (Pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism and qawmiyya<sup>39</sup>) that

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<sup>38</sup> Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 186.

<sup>39</sup> These are the academic buzzwords, which are highly political and ideological. Although these concepts are used interchangeably in several scholarly researches, there are differences between them. For instance, whereas Pan-Arabism has an ultimate aim which is to maintain an Arab unity, the ideology of Arab nationalism does not allocate all its ideological resources to a unity among different Arab peoples as a final destination. On the other hand, the concept qawmiyya (etymologically coming from the root qawm

transcended these borders and 'imagined' a nation regardless of the politics of territory. These ideologies, in general, emphasize the importance of supra-national loyalty to the Arab identity, although they have their own differences among themselves.

If the supranational understanding of Arab identity is one answer of the Arab intellectuals to the emerging modern Middle East, more particularistic approaches are the second part of the Arab response. Instead of 'imagining' the identity beyond the borders, some chose to 'discover' it exactly where they are, namely the newly emerging nation-state (Regionalism, Syrian nationalism, Wataniyya). However, due to the ambiguities and arbitrariness of the borders of the nation state, not rigidity but rather flexibility in terms of defining the local Arab identity is observed. The fact that 'Syria' may or may not include Iraq or 'Greater Syria' is evidence of this fluctuation within the emergence of Syrianness. After the war, there emerged a group of elite whose "concerns were specifically Syrian, aimed at the creation of an independent Syrian state with a parliamentary monarchy".<sup>40</sup>

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and q'am meaning to reside on a defined territory), which has been employed by both Arab nationalists and Pan-Arabists, emphasize the unity of Arab peoples via referring cultural, linguistic and historical uniqueness of them.

<sup>40</sup> Amin Sa'id, 'al-Thawra al-'arabiyya al kubra', Vol.2, No:42, cited in Muhammad Muslih, "The Rise of Local Nationalism in the Arab East", in eds. R. Khalidi, L. Anderson, M. Muslih and R.S. Simon, *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 167-185, p. 173.

While stating the reasons of this concern with the locality Muslih mentions anti-colonialism as among the chief factors, which led elites think that claiming the state rather than the bigger nation can be a more realistic road to real independence. This brings us to our second theme in our debate: the legacy of colonialism in the region and anti-colonialist struggles. As the Middle Eastern peoples' lives were being transformed by the new forces of the modern age, through the commercialization of the agriculture, through the economic exploitation by the European powers, through the modernization of the social life in line with new ideologies, imperialism<sup>41</sup> hit the region especially after the First World War. As Gallagher and Robinson<sup>42</sup> argue, imperialism did not need to be in the formal form of colonialism as we know it from British role in India or French in North Africa. In other words, the formal hegemony of the foreign powers over a territory was not the end but rather one of the means, the means which served the process of integration of the region to the capitalist world

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<sup>41</sup> Here, it would be salutary to recall Lenin's definition of imperialism. Lenin defines imperialism as the monopoly stage of capitalism. *In this respect, Britain and France as being capitalist states were imperial powers in the Middle East.* However, the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the Arab Middle East more than four centuries, was neither an imperial power (simply because of not being a capitalist state), nor a colonial power, since the Ottomans did not exploit the markets of the Arabs and they did not impose their socio-cultural practices. Although colonialism and imperialism are used interchangeably in social sciences; they differ from each other. Colonialism requires a formal political control over a country, whereas imperialism may be formal or informal; thus, it is a more broad term.

<sup>42</sup> John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade" *Economic History Review* Vol.6, No.1, 1953 cited in Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 85.

economy. Especially, in the case of the Middle East, anti-colonial struggles can be categorized under the broader anti-imperialist struggles. It was indeed this imperialism and the reaction it caused that went hand in hand with the nationalist struggles and served both as a cause and as justification / legitimation for the defense of the newly emerging 'nation'. In the case of Arabs, many of whom belonged to states that were formerly colonized, such as Syria and Egypt, it was the very presence of the 'foreigner' that made it easier to construct the 'nation.' As the issue of colonialism will be examined more in detail in the following chapter on Syrian history, we now turn to the impact of Turkish nationalism in the emergence of the Arab nationalism.

The third theme, which lies in the heart of the emergence of Arab nationalisms, is the impact of another nationalism: the Turkish one. As the modernization of the Ottoman Empire was coupled by the political developments in the Balkans and elsewhere, the Ottoman elites were divided among themselves – just as the Arab intellectuals would be in the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – as to how to rule the territories that remained. Nationalism in Ottoman and Turkish version was among the answers in hand at that time. Young Turks as they evolved into the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and as the news from Balkans left them with fewer choices, started to launch a cultural and political program that was to be called Turkification. This involved teaching the Arab subjects more

and more Turkish and replacing the Arab notables with Turkish bureaucrats who spoke no Arabic. There are disputes as to how provoked the Arab revolt was against the Ottomans. The level of involvement by the British in this revolt will not be speculated here. Suffice it to say that “the Arab Revolt of June 1916 was itself a relatively trivial affair, “a side-show within a side-show’ as one official described Colonel Lawrence’s operations more generally”<sup>43</sup>. However, it was the development of a more and more exclusionary Turkish nationalism that contributed to the atmosphere in which the British could act in the manner they did and in which Hussain, the Sherif of Mecca, although with not nationalist but more pragmatist motivations oppose the policies of the Ottomans. In this, the role of Turkish nationalism in the emergence of the causes of Arab nationalism can be established, even though it was only a contribution rather than an efficient cause.

I have attempted to explore the themes concerning the nationalist ideologies in the Arab Middle East as emerged in the modernization process in the region. Now, I will turn to the literature and observe how these themes were handled by different camps within the historiography of these developments. Concerning the origins of the Arab nationalism, I

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<sup>43</sup> Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 75.

concentrate on two different historiographies in the literature; albeit there is more than two.

One group of researchers explains the reasons behind the emergence and development of the Arab nationalism on the basis of social transformations that occurred at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gelvin rightly asserts that "...the study of nationalism in the Arab Middle East should begin with an exploration of the transition from a social system that was not conducive to nationalism to a social system that was apposite to it."<sup>44</sup> At this point, the systemic change at the beginning of the twentieth century in this region should not be disregarded. The Ottoman Empire ruled the Arab Middle East except Saudi Arabia and Morocco nearly for four centuries. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire had a tremendous effect on the initiation of several nationalist ideologies in the greater region such as Turkish, Greek and Arab nationalisms. For this group of scholars, it was the Young Turks' policies of reorganization and Turkification toward the Arab population of the Ottoman Empire which triggered the emergence of Arab nationalism. Hence it is observed that there exists a tendency to perceive the Arab nationalism primarily as an anti-Ottoman ideology. The Turk becomes the 'other' for the newly emerging Arab national identity, in politics and in emotions the Turk becomes the enemy. The weakness of

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<sup>44</sup> Gelvin, 1999, p. 75.

this approach is apparent in its exclusion of the other inputs to Arab nationalism than its multilayered yet single relation to the Turks. Arab intellectuals were not only reacting to and interacting with the Ottoman framework. In some respects, the Ottomans can be seen falling under the bigger framework of the 'foreigner', which included very much the Europeans. Especially, if we remember that the Ottomans lost any of their decision-making powers over Arab territories after the World War 1, we can see why a historiography solely relying on the provocation of the Young Turks as the *explanant* can be partially working to say the most. Of course, it is not the only explanation in the literature.

The second one is stressing another aspect of the history of Arab peoples, their specific relation to Islam. Islamic modernism is exemplified in the works of C. Ernest Dawn. He points out to the tension between Islam as a world view and nationalism as its rival and tells the uneasy fit that had arisen with the coming of nationalism for the Muslim people of the region, though the competing or complementing concepts of nation and religion is difficult to relate for any monotheist religion.<sup>45</sup> In this picture as drawn by Dawn, the story of nationalism goes hand in hand with the modernism that occurred in Islamist thinking and politics. Islamic modernism, as an approach, stems from the reformist understanding of some of the Ottoman

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<sup>45</sup> C. Ernest Dawn, "From Ottomanism to Arabism: The Origins of an Ideology", *The Review of Politics*, Vol.23, No.3, (Jul., 1961), 378-400.

and Middle Eastern intellectuals (Turk, Arab or Iranian, as it is the case in al-Afghani) who argued that 'primitive Islam' was the true version, yet it was degenerated. Therefore, "The remedy was simply to restore Islam to its pristine purity so that the Moslems, by adopting and adapting the necessary elements of modern civilization, might regain their former greatness."<sup>46</sup> This kind of historiography claims that it was this Islamic modernism from which the earliest Arab nationalists emerged, such as Ibrahim Al-Yaziji, who claimed that "the Arabs had declined after the non-Arab (Turk) came to dominate them and reduced learning to the religious sciences and religion to bigotry and fanaticism".<sup>47</sup>

As Islamist ideologies were forming part of the various responses of the region to the new conditions of the new centuries (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>), the themes that were discussed above, anti-Turkism, anti-colonialism and the loss of territorial control and artificial borders that followed it were intermingled in the rhetoric of Arab nationalists as it can be seen above. The enemy, Turks, the Europeans, the modernity itself was as shifting as the national identities. The Islamic modernism approach highlights one aspect of this complex situation in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and relates it to the rise of Arab nationalism: "The return to primitive Islam

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 387.



inevitably stressed an Arab revival.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, an Arab revival necessitated a return to Islam, as it is the case with Arab Christians, who were ready to call themselves Muslim, if that was to pave the way for the success of Arab nationalism. If to observe and account for these seemingly contradictory discourses is Islamic modernist approach’s success than to ignore the more material developments that lie behind Arab nationalism is its weakness. It is true that patriotism and then nationalism had a lot to do with the inferiority felt by the Eastern Muslims towards the West and that a re-embrace of Islam was seen as the solution which then became crucial in the justification of Turkish as well as Arab nationalism. However, it is insufficient to explain the rest of the themes that are crucial for any sound investigation of the matter.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide an overview of the general discussion in the theories of nationalism as well as to give a brief summary of the main arguments involved in the nation-state formation in the Arab Middle East. Before diving into the details of the complex history of Syria, it will be useful to reiterate what to understand from the broad concepts,

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<sup>48</sup> “It is necessary to spread the Arabic language rather than Turkish since it is the language of religion so its revivification is the revivification of it [religion]” see Rashid Rida, *Al-Manār*, I, No. 40 (1 Sha bān 1316/Dec. 24, 1898, 2<sup>nd</sup> printing A.H. 1327 / [A.D.1909], 764-771, 788-793. cited in Dawn, 1961, 391.

which were employed in this chapter and which will be frequently used throughout the thesis.

This thesis is committed to a modernist approach in the field of nationalism studies. Hence, nations will be assumed as modern phenomenon from which it follows that the antiquity of any nation including the Arab and Syrian nations will be approached by suspicion and will be employed only if these claims on the perennial character of nations is illuminating any political process. In short, this thesis will regard the antiquity of nations as rhetoric of the ideologues rather than as a historical phenomenon.

Nationalism in this framework refers to the ideology and/or political movements, which have the aim of promoting one nation and these are as modern as the phenomenon of nation itself. Nationalism can be an attribute of the politically dominant group or of the opposition. It can be cultural, linguistic, or political. From the first two propositions, it follows that nations and nationalisms will be treated as any other aspect of modern politics, despite the fact that they might claim otherwise. Secondly, they will be treated as tools in modern politics which have very strong links to state formation. This will be crucial in mapping out the nationalist discourses during the Hafez Al Assad's era in Syria.

In the last section of the chapter, I tried to give a very brief mapping of the common debates in the Arab Middle East and some ways to approach it. As it is seen, major approaches, which rely on the rhetoric of the nationalists themselves such as the Islamism or the anti-Turkism of the nationalists, are born with a defect and fail to understand the politics of this rhetoric. In the next section, I will try to give the main elements of the history of modern Syria so that I can locate the rhetoric within it, which will be then supportive to conclude the data of the field research. In order to assess Syrian national identity vis-à-vis the other identities and assess the Syrian nationalism as a political movement in comparison with Arab nationalism, it is needed, first, to analyze the major events and official state discourse. Failure to do so would result in a partial explanation, as the above summarized historiographies are accused.

## CHAPTER III

*We shall not cease from  
exploration  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we  
started  
and know the place for the first  
time.*

*T. S. Eliot (Little Gidding)*

### 3. SYRIA UNDER HAFEZ AL ASSAD: EXPLORING THE NATIONALIST IDEOLOGIES DURING 1970-2000

#### 3.1 Introduction

In the chapter above, I have briefly examined the debates in theories of nationalism. I have also tried to give a general account of the nationalisms in the Arab Middle East with the mentioned theoretical antagonisms in mind. The previous chapter was mostly structured around the idea of the ‘modern origins’ of nations and nationalisms as opposed to the ‘ethnic origins’.<sup>49</sup> In this chapter, I will deal with the political history of Syria from 1970 to 2000, and as a background to that I will also include a short overview of the Ottoman rule, the colonial era, and the period of early independence. However that inclusion will remain at the level of providing

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<sup>49</sup> For a detailed exploration on the issue of ethnic origins of nations and persistence of ‘ethnies’ in the modern era please see Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)

a sense of background rather than establishing the center for this study. The idea with emphasizing the 1970-2000 periods is that it marks a period of relative stability under the authoritarian rule of Hafez Al Assad. The objective of this study is to analyze how nationalist ideologies were transformed during this period.

For the sake of conciseness and clearness, I will, in this chapter, employ Khoury's periodization of the Syrian history. Expanding on Hourani's works, Khoury argues that there was no rupture after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the political culture of Syria; rather, "the exercise of political power followed what can be called the Ottoman model for nearly four decades after the demise of the empire."<sup>50</sup> In this respect, by pondering around the evolution of politically relevant elite groups not only during the Ottoman rule, but also during the colonial times, Khoury formulates a useful periodization of the Syrian history for a snapshot exploration of Syrian politics. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century up to 1970, Khoury divides Syrian history into three periods. The first starts in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and lasts until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main feature of this period is the emergence of "single political elite, namely... 'urban notables"<sup>51</sup> /

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<sup>50</sup> Philip S. Khoury, "Continuity and Change in Syrian Political Life: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 5, (December, 1991), 1374-1395, p. 1374.

<sup>51</sup> 'Urban notable' is a term coined by Albert Hourani in his seminal essay titled as "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Urban Notables" (1966). Urban notables are "those who can play a certain political role as intermediaries between the government and

elites' who developed a distinct social and political role."<sup>52</sup> The second period is "the colonial period starting with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and with the introduction of the colonial rule and ends with the Second World War."The third period is "the early years of Syrian independence, which corresponds to 1946 to 1970."<sup>53</sup> Before 1970, Syria passed through an extreme chaos due to several coup d'états. Beginning from the early 1970s, Syria achieved relative stability in the fields of social, economic and political life compare to the previous decades. Prior to 1920, Syria had never been a separate political entity. It was a wilayet (province) of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. During the Ottoman rule, "several groups or regions developed into socio-political autonomies and/or maintained their communal-religious identities, notably Alawites, Druze, and Christians."<sup>54</sup> In this respect, Syrian society, composed of several ethnic and religious groups has been a '*fragile mosaic of power*'. Ever since the formation of the modern, independent Syrian Arab Republic in 1946, constructing a modern nation out of this mélange of various groups, has been the priority for politically powerful elites as well as party

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people, and as leaders of the urban population." These urban notables are example of status groups in Weberian terms.

<sup>52</sup> Khoury, "Continuity and Change in Syrian Political Life: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", 1991.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Moshe Ma'oz, Joseph Ginat, Onn Winckler, "Introduction: The Emergence of Modern Syria", in eds. M. Ma'oz, J. Ginat and O. Winckler, *Modern Syria: From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East*, (UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 1.

ideologues or politicians. The difficulty is due to the fact that these groups have been loyal to their sub-national identities whether religious, tribal or ethnic. However, as it can be easily understood from the name of the country (Syrian Arab Republic), the feeling of Arabness and loyalty to the supra-national Arab identity has always been anathema of social and political life in Syria.

Not only internal dynamics of Syria (its character of being a poly-ethnic and poly-religious society) - but also external developments (in this thesis, limited to the following: colonialism, the artificiality of her borders and everlasting wars with Israel) have prepared the ground for identity problems in Syria. Shifting territories, which is an upshot of the arbitrary and artificial nature of the borders drawn by France on the basis of the ethnic concentration of different wilayets of Greater Syria in 1920 alongside with the problem of settling borders with Turkey and Israel have complicated the construction of Syrian national identity ever since the independence. Moreover, failure to settle the borders with the neighboring countries has resulted in shifting territorial perception, something which is closely intermingled with the problem of identification with and loyalty to the nation state<sup>55</sup>. Through an examination of the major events and the turning points that modern Syria passed through in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in this

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<sup>55</sup> For instance, Lebanon or Palestine is not accepted as different political entities. This kind of imagining, which is latent in every domain of social and political life in Syria ever since its creation in 1920, is an impediment to the development of feeling of Syrianness.

chapter, I will try to clarify the construction of a national identity has been the main locus of political life. By focusing on the major events, especially during Hafez Al-Assad's era, I will illustrate the shifting character of the national identity, and how the official rhetoric moves like a pendulum between supra-national (Arab) identity and national (Syrian) identity. This is the general idea that I will pursue in this chapter. In order to understand the antagonistic nationalist ideologies during the period between 1970 and 2000, I will first very briefly describe some basic features of the Syrian social structure, which is characterized by the existence of different ethnic and religious sects.

### **3.2. A Nation of Sectarian Groups**

The presence of ethnic, sectarian and tribal identities are believed to be one of the main obstacles on the way to the consolidation of national identity. Expressed differently, being a Sunni Muslim, Alawite or a Kurd has been overshadowed being a Syrian. People's identification with these communitarian identities at the sub-national level makes the development of a national identity and consciousness rather difficult. During the past few years, there is an incipient tendency towards *wataniyya*; people have started to identify themselves with Syrian nationality. I, therefore, want to start this chapter by giving a general picture of the various ethnic groups and religious sects in Syria.



For centuries, Bilad al-Sham has been the home of various ethnic and religious groups. After the creation of modern Syria, this picture did not change dramatically. However, the change in the territories of the newly created Syria and the bid for becoming a modern nation state required the promotion of a national identity. In fact, modern Syria emerged as one of the world's poly-ethnic and poly-religious countries.<sup>56</sup> According to recent statistics, the major religious groups in Syria are the Sunni Muslims 74%, the Alawites, the Druzes and other Muslim sects 16%, the Christians (various sects such as Greek Orthodox Christians, Syriacs, or Catholics) 10% and the Jews (a very tiny community about 250 people). The major ethnic groups in Syria consist of the Arabs 90.3%, the Kurds, Armenians and other 9.7%. Arabic is the official language, albeit, Kurdish, Armenian, Circassian and Aramaic are spoken.<sup>57</sup>

These statistics of course are far from forming an accurate picture of the inter-community relations. For a sound understanding of these relations, it is necessary to look at the transformations through historical developments, rather than sheer numbers. In terms of the relationship between the community's subordinate position and its economic and/or social status of the community members, it is observed a higher level of

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<sup>56</sup> I employ Eriksen's terms polyethnic and polyreligious. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

<sup>57</sup> [www.nationmaster.com/country/sy-syria](http://www.nationmaster.com/country/sy-syria) Sunday January, 21 19:00 2006

solidarity among the Alawites and Druzes in comparison to the Sunnis who are the main group in Syria. “While Sunnis and Christians live scattered throughout the country, the Alawites, Druze and Ismailis concentrate in particular districts, forming local majorities.”<sup>58</sup> This kind of communal concentration of particular ethnic and religious groups, to a great extent, is a result of the long-lasting decentralized Ottoman rule, which allowed relative autonomy to the minority groups. Also effective was the French colonial divide and rule policy, which separated Bilad-al-Sham into five provinces on the basis of ethnic and religious concentration in the region. Both the Ottoman rule and the French colonial presence carved out the already existing regional divisions more deeply. These divisions then seem to be conforming to the class division, class being understood in the loosest sense, such as lower, middle and upper classes. As Kessler argues, there was a parallelism between the socio-economic disparities and sectarian divisions in Syria. She rightly points out that “class tensions – stimulated as a result of modernization – have reinforced religious and ethnic identities and made the business of implementing economic and social policy particularly hazardous.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Martha Neff Kessler, *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power*, (Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2002 [1987]), 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

### 3.3 The Ottoman Rule in Syria

I now turn to the general characteristics of the Ottoman rule. The Ottoman period was long and left deep marks on the social structure of what was to be called Syria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From state institutions to the emergence of politically relevant elites' culture, the traces of the Ottomans can be followed. As seen in the first chapter, the Ottoman rule and the Turkification process at the end of that period was very influential both in the discourses of the nationalists and in the works of scholars and researchers. In this chapter, I will only touch upon a very limited section of the vast history of the interaction between the Ottomans and the "Syrian" locals, but while doing so, I will pay special attention to the impact of the policies of Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) on the development of nationalist ideologies in Syria.

Concerning the policies of the CUP, I refer to the gradual alienation of the Arabs from the modernization process in the Ottoman Empire. As the leaders of the CUP turned into the government officials, the Westernization, modernization and the aimed independence of the Empire became the internal matter of the Turkish leaders. Arabs were more and more excluded from the decision making mechanisms in the wilayets. "It was only after the seizure of power by the Young Turks in 1909 that it became clear that Ottomanism, interpreted as a multi-national

constitutional monarchy, contained the seeds of the legitimation of the Turkish supremacy.”<sup>60</sup> Turkish supremacy was exhibited in different forms. One illustration is provided by the proportion of the Arab representatives in the parliament of late 1908. As the Turks in the parliament outnumbered the Arabs by 140 to 60, “the Arabs, who believed that their numbers in the Empire were greater than those of Turks, saw this as acute discrimination.”<sup>61</sup>

“The systematic suppression” of the Arab people through the Turkification policies was one of the widespread arguments of the Arab nationalists in Syria. As Abou-Al-Haj summarizes, “Turkification policies – a nationalist hallmark of essentially conservative Young Turks – occasioned the final disassociation of the Arab from the Ottoman-Islamic identity.”<sup>62</sup> This disassociation in turn became one of the cornerstones in the identity debates in Syria. However, the relation between the Ottomans, who were more and more eager to keep a distance to the Arabs, and the locals who were in the dawn of their ‘national rising’, were far from being the only external influence on the identity debate. The French rule with its own cultural policies and dilemmas of identity formation was yet to come.

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<sup>60</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997[3rd edition]), 108.

<sup>61</sup> Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of Arab Movements* (London: Frank Cass Press, 1993), 56.

<sup>62</sup> Abou Al-Haj cited in Tibi, 1997, 186.

### 3.4 The Colonial Era: 1920-1946

As the First World War led to the opening of the region to the direct influence of the European powers, the region that was called the Greater Syria was to take its share from this, especially from the British and French colonialist expansion. The Anglo-French agreement, the work of Sykes and Picot, and the following Balfour Declaration by the British Empire became the framework in which the events thereafter were to conform or contradict. The Sykes-Picot agreement<sup>63</sup> divided the Middle East as follows: Northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon were given to the French, while Jordan, Palestine and Southern Iraq (including Baghdad) came under the British rule. The following Arab Revolt and the coming of Faisal to Damascus was in a way defeated as the French took over the Greater Syria by military force and divided the territories into what was to become Lebanon and Syria. Meanwhile, due to the Balfour declaration, the Jewish immigration intensified which gradually resulted in the creation of the Israeli state and the subsequent Palestinian conflict. In Syria, on the other hand, France pursued a divide and rule policy in the name of 'bringing liberty' to the emerging Syrian nation. The territory was divided

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<sup>63</sup> The Sykes-Picot was a secret agreement between France and Britain in order to control the lands of the Ottoman Empire. After the Bolschevik Revolution, Lenin released a copy of this secret treaty. French wanted to extend their colonial influence to Northern Iraq; however, later on, "... since the high administrative costs would have outweighed oil revenues, so France abandoned its claims to Greater Syria." For a detailed analysis, please see Henry Louens, "Collateral Damage from an Illegal War: Ottoman Empire, the Division of Spoils", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English edition, <http://mondediplo.com/2003/04/07ottomanempire>.

into five districts on the basis of ethnic composition, namely Lattakia, Aleppo, Damascus, Jebel Druze and Alexandretta (which later became the territory of the Turkish Republic). Through this, France induced a long-lasting alienation in the social, political and economic fields between Damascus and Aleppo. However, the justification of this policy and the way how it was introduced to the local notables is another matter. General Gouraud addressed the locals as follows:

Gentlemen: The first step taken by France for the establishment of harmony and national liberty in your midst was the creation of autonomous States with the object and result of satisfying particularist desires and providing a framework for the harmonious of all.<sup>64</sup>

The inherent dichotomy between fostering the local identities and the goal of creating a new, harmonious Syrian nation is apparent in the General's speech. That dichotomy persisted in these territories up until the present day. As I pointed out in this section, the inter-community relations among the religious and ethnic groups, whose 'particularistic desires' were first created and then used for their purposes by the French. "Instead of encouraging the formation of indigenous administrative institutions to

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<sup>64</sup> General Gouraud, "Creating an Independent Syria", *Current History*, (New York), Vol. 14, No. 6, (September, 1921), 986-988, p.986.

prepare Syria for independence, the French created conditions that would prolong their rule.”<sup>65</sup>

The French rule extended beyond the territorial division of the country and moved to the cultural sphere. As the young people of Syria were sent to France to study, they were exposed to the modern ideologies of socialism, nationalism, republicanism and returned home as ‘the marginal elites’<sup>66</sup> and preached nationalism.<sup>67</sup> Marginalized at home due to their French education, yet never an honorable member of French society, these young students turned out to be fierce advocates of nationalism. As the central focus of my analysis is the examination of shifting national identities in Syria, I will be especially concerned with the effects of French cultural imperialism and the subsequent Western orientated modernization of the local elites. The impact of this is noted by Watenpaugh in brief as follows: “The establishment of a French colonial presence in Syria had empowered men..., who could translate, formulate or adapt modern conceptions of the nation and citizen into that moment’s epistemic lingua franca.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Malcolm Yapp, *The Near East since the First World War: A History to 1995* (London: Longman, 1996), 203.

<sup>66</sup> I borrowed the term ‘the marginal elites’ from Kedourie. See Elie Kedourie, “Introduction” in ed. E. Kedourie, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London: 1971).

<sup>67</sup> Monte Palmer, *The Politics of the Middle East* (Canada: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 148.

<sup>68</sup> Keith D. Watenpaugh, “Middle Class Modernity and the Persistence of the Politics of Notables in Inter-War Syria”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 35, (2003), 257- 286, p.277.

Watenpaugh points out the peculiarity concerning the reactions of the different generations of the Aleppine and Damascene urban notables' to the French colonial rule of the 1920s, by contending that

[The urban notables] would experience the critical ambivalence of the colonial encounter as a simultaneous belief in both the vitality and modernity of the emancipatory, republican, and universalist impulses of the French "civilizing mission" and the historical necessity of opposition to French imperialism.<sup>69</sup>

This duality of thinking led some of the intellectuals of the Orient to coin the term, "cultural schizophrenia".<sup>70</sup>

### **3.5. The Years of Independence 1946-1970: An Era of Contestation**

There is an irony in the cultural imperialism. Those, who were colonized by the very same process, were exposed to ideas of nationalism, self-governance and Republicanism of the colonizers. While imperialism penetrates to another country, it provides at the same time the very means for resistance, the most powerful being raising the level of political consciousness and the import of modern ideologies. Learned as they were, Syrian activists formed their own resistance organizations, such as

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<sup>69</sup> Watenpaugh, "Middle Class Modernity and the Persistence of the Politics of Notables in Inter-War Syria", 261.

<sup>70</sup> See Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997 [1992]).



the National Bloc.<sup>71</sup> The independence was a result of many determinants, resistance being among them. The resolutions of the League of Nations and the general context of decolonization should be also mentioned. France agreed upon the independence of Syria in 1941; however, the full independence from the French colonial rule came only in 1946. The new leaders of the independent Syria faced the problem of consolidating a political and social stability in the country, because France had not prepared the young Republic for independence at all. Yapp rightly asserts that “the destructive political instability that came to characterize Syria after independence in 1946 must be traced, in part, to the institutionalized fragmentation practiced by the French mandate authorities.”<sup>72</sup>

The years following the Second World War, i.e. early independence, can also be considered an era of political contestation among different groups in Syria. During these years, the National Bloc renamed itself as the National Party, whose support mainly came from Damascus. In opposition to this party, an Aleppo based party, called the People’s Party, which had been already formed under the leadership of Shahbandar in 1925, reemerged as an important force alongside other parties during the years of independence. However, the most important political development in

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<sup>71</sup> The National Bloc was a loose alliance originally formed in 1928 by the members of upper-class and well-educated families, which would become the most prominent political organization in 1946.

<sup>72</sup> Yapp, *The Near East since the First World War: A History to 1995*, 204.

the new Republic was the emergence of the Baath Party in the midst of 1950s. Different from other parties, “its [Baath’s] ideas of nationalism and secularism attracted members of minorities, who saw it as a way of gaining entrance into the hoped-for-non-sectarian national community.”<sup>73</sup> It is important to note that the ideological antagonism concerning the national imaginings between the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP)<sup>74</sup> and the Baath Party<sup>75</sup> would shape the political scene and carve out the issue of identity crisis in the subsequent years in Syria.

The establishment of the Baath Party was a turning point in the modern history of Syria, in the sense that it provided a kind of firm and stable structure to the political scene in deep turmoil. “Before the adoption of Baathism as the official ideology of the state in 1963, politics in Syria followed no fixed path.”<sup>76</sup> The Syrian politics was dominated by the military and several coup d’états interrupted the parliamentary democracy.

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<sup>73</sup> Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986: Politics and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 54.

<sup>74</sup> The Syrian Social Nationalist Party was founded by Anton Saadeh in 1932. The party advocated the idea of Syrianism based on the unification of Greater Syria.

<sup>75</sup> The Baath (Resurrection) Party was founded by Michel Aflaq and Salah Al-Din Bitar. Although there is not an exact date for the foundation year, but its founding congress was held in 1947 please see, Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999). The slogan of the party is ‘Unity, Socialism and Freedom.’

<sup>76</sup> Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986: Politics and Society*, 80.

In the last 50 years of modern state formation in Syria, the mergence with Egypt can be singled out as a case of partial surrender of state sovereignty in exchange of political stability. In February 1958, Egypt and Syria agreed upon the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR). In order to introduce to Syria a kind of stability, political figures were very eager to accomplish this unification with Egypt. The significance of the UAR lies at the issue of Arab nationalism. The bid for an Arab unity was finally realized by the embodiment of the UAR. However, this union with Egypt was dissolved by a Syrian army coup in September, 1961. Although there were several reasons behind the split-up (infisal), a more deep-going analysis of the UAR goes beyond the scope of this chapter. However, Hopwood explains the grounds of the split-up very succinctly. In his words, “There was no possibility of merging the two political systems – Syria with its instability and fragmentation, Egypt with its one leader and party.”<sup>77</sup>

In the aftermath of this split, there occurred yet another split, this time within the Baath. While, Michel Aflaq<sup>78</sup> and other Baathists wanted to remain faithful to the original Baath ideology and Arab nationalism as the political aim, there emerged a group of radicals with socialist tendencies

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>78</sup> Michel Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox Christian Arab, was born in Damascus in 1910. He was the ideological founder of the Baathism. Since he did not have close relations with the governments, he was forced to flee to Iraq after the Baath Party coup d'état in 1963. He died in 1989.

and Leninist-like methods as to how to reorganize the country from above. As a reunion with Egypt could not be realized and as the radicals became more and more successful in attracting the army officials and promising land reform and modernization to the masses, the process resulted in the March, 1963 coup, also called “the Baathist revolution” after this Syria drew closer to the Soviet sphere and introduced the path of Five Year Plans and planned economy.<sup>79</sup> The new Baathist leadership believed in Syria’s solidarity with the Palestinians and in order to support the Palestinians’ rights, Syria entered the war with Israel. The subsequent war with Israel in 1967 had tremendous effects on Syrian politics.

The years 1967-70 represented a dramatic turn in Arab history: after the June *naksa*, leaders had to comply with a very new situation and adopt a lower path. They shifted from the nationalist, socializing and triumphant rhetoric which prevailed for a decade or more, to pragmatism and a withdrawal towards more limited state interests.<sup>80</sup>

By the 1967 war, Israel became more and more a locus of Syrian politics. In this respect, it would not be exaggerating to argue that in the case of the construction of national identity, Israel has been the most important *other* of the Syrian Arab identity. Moreover, the modern Syrian identity is established vis-à-vis the existence of the Jewish state. In the following

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<sup>79</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (Taylor and Francis: E-Library, 2005 [2001]), 44- 54.

<sup>80</sup> Elisabeth Picard, “Arab Military in Politics: From Revolutionary Plot to Authoritarian State” in eds. A. Dawisha and I. W. Zartman, *Beyond Coercion: The Durability of the Arab State* (New York: Croom Helm, 1988), 116- 146, 117- 118.

part, I will examine how Hafez Al Assad employed a pragmatic discourse against Israel in order to maintain internal order, albeit in an authoritarian way. The need for stability came to region over the particular ideological goals at the time. In the next chapter, I will discuss this correlation between the political order and the preferences for identity with the help of my own field work. This correlation is pregnant with various conclusions, as the 'political stability' is affected by several factors, the international context being among the most influential ones. But, before coming to that discussion, I now turn to the last part of my historical expose of modern Syria related to the key events of the Al Assad era.

### **3.6 Politics and Society under Hafez Al Assad: 1970-2000**

After this attempt to draw up the basic lines of the social and historical developments in Syria during pre-Hafez Al Assad era, I now turn to an analysis of the shifting character of the official discourse concerning nationalist ideologies and national identity by pondering around the major developments between 1970 and 2000. It should be admitted that this brief history will be far from being exhaustive as the period entails many social, political and economic issues which have roots in the past and stretch beyond 2000. Due to these limitations, I will try to focus on those events, which are most relevant from the point of view of the problematic of my thesis - the formation of national identity.

Ever since its independence, Syria has not possessed a stable political atmosphere. Kessler identifies major dynamics behind the regime's instability in Syria as "the fragmented nature of Syrian society, the absence of strong national identification and purpose, and the debilitating conflict with Israel."<sup>81</sup>

Baath's regime was a response to the above stated tensions. After a harsh political and ideological contestation within the Baath Party, Hafez Al Assad was able to eliminate the rival fractions of the party and come to the power by a bloodless coup d'état in November, 1970. "Al-Assad also believed in Ba'athist ideology, albeit a Ba'athist ideology tempered with pragmatism and a strong dose of Syrian nationalism."<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Assad claimed to provide a nationalist ideology, namely Arab nationalism despite the borders of the official Syrian state. In his rhetoric, he justified Arab nationalism and he ignored the international borders of Syria in a populist manner. He was able to reconcile diverse nationalist ideologies through a populist discourse, which was shaped by internal and external developments. The 30 years that followed the coup d'état did pass with at least a formal order in the political scene.

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<sup>81</sup> Kessler, *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power*, 20–21.

<sup>82</sup> Palmer, *The Politics of the Middle East*, 153.

As I mentioned above, the radical groups with socialist tendencies were gaining power within the Baath. Hinnebusch summarizes the Hafez Al Assad period, pointing out that he eliminated the radical groups within the party by the help of his links to the army and the bourgeoisie. As the intellectuals were losing their power, so was the socialist revolution fading away. According to Hinnebusch, "Assad's aim was to consolidate the unstable Ba'ath state and mobilize Syria for a war to recover the lost territories. In the process, he turned the Ba'ath state from an instrument of class revolution into a machinery of power in the service *raison d'état*."<sup>83</sup>

This machinery could only work in an atmosphere with as little tension and fragmentation as possible. Assad's solution to that problem is commonly called "the pragmatist policy" whereby he attempted to establish two things: an internal union and harmony within Syria; and a joined Arab front against Israel.

In 1972, Assad formed a National Progressive Front (NPF), an umbrella organization composed of several parties. Although the NPF was a coalition organization, the Baath Party dominated the front and eliminated the opponent parties' voices slowly. "The system was meant to confer legitimacy on Assad and his regime, and to guarantee for the regime the

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<sup>83</sup> Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, 6.

support various sectors of the population who for the first time were represented in these institutions.”<sup>84</sup> In this respect, Assad introduced the Front as if all the ethnic and religious groups would be represented under this institution. Internally this meant a balance among various ethnic and religious minority groups by allowing them a chance to conform to the regime and the constitution of the Baath party which became the official ideology of the Syrian state and became the permanent constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1973. In the Middle Eastern context the same policy meant a softening, yet also strengthening of relation with the neighboring Arab countries.

At issue were the future of the Golan Heights which Israel captured in June 1967, but also where Assad was concerned, the future of Syria itself and indeed of the entire Arab nation. He believed Israel to be an enduring threat not only to his country but to all Arabs.<sup>85</sup>

In previous parts of this chapter, I dealt with the fragmented nature of the society and the phenomenon of the shifting loyalties both at the sub-national and supra-national level. Now, as Zisser underlines, the issue of Israel was of paramount importance. Hence, a brief examination of Israel’s significance on Syrian political and social life will shed a light to the issue of the construction of national identity.

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<sup>84</sup> Eyal Zisser, *Syria in Transition: Assad’s Legacy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), 9.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*



The bid for a Pan-Arab unification, which was time to time latent, and sometimes manifest, kept on reemerging periodically in subsequent years. Assad employed an anti-Israeli rhetoric especially, in regard of unifying the Arab states around the ideal of Arab unity. The idea of defeating Israel had been the priority of many Arab states after the 1967 war. Therefore, under the leadership of Egypt and Syria, Arab states attacked Israel in September, 1973 in order to take back the territories that Israel had occupied in 1967. Although Syria was not able to regain all of its territories, which were occupied by Israel in 1967, the war was appraised like a victory for Assad in Syria.<sup>86</sup> For a while, the so-called 'victory' was sufficient for calming the social unrest, which had emerged after the 1967 defeat.

The regional events, once more, outside Syria had effects on its external and internal politics. Although most of the Arab countries – especially the members of the SSNP and other Syrian nationalists- believed that Lebanon is geographically contingent to Syria and an inseparable part of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Baathist regime did not involve into the internal politics of Lebanon prior to the Lebanese Civil War, which started in 1975. In 1976, Syria decided to intervene in Lebanon in order to prevent further deterioration, and to prevent a possible Israeli involvement.

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<sup>86</sup> Syria regained only a tiny part of Golan Heights in 1973 war.

Hopwood asserts the motive behind the Syrian interference as “the belief in the indivisibility of two countries.”<sup>87</sup> Syria’s stance against the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) based in Lebanon at the time, had tremendous effects on different political groups, especially on the Sunni majority. As a consequence, “the 1976 intervention against the Palestinians so damaged the regime’s legitimacy that it was much more vulnerable to the Islamic rebellions of 1977-1982.”<sup>88</sup> During the following years, radical Sunni groups started to assassinate Alawite officers and they began to unite under the Muslim Brotherhood. The secularist Baath regime became more authoritarian than before and attempted to pacify these radical religious groups, whether Sunni, Druze or Alawite, in order to prevent a sectarian civil war.

Although the Assad regime is frequently identified with the Alawite minority and events such as the Aleppo and Hama<sup>89</sup> massacres are cases in point, there are also doubts as to how much the Assad regime in reality has pursued discriminatory policies. Van Dam claims that sectarian, if not to say discriminatory, rhetoric is actually performed by the anti-Baathists, non-Alawites and even some Alawites alike.

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<sup>87</sup> Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986: Politics and Society*, 61.

<sup>88</sup> Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, 143.

<sup>89</sup> Generally, the Sunni Muslims were killed in Aleppo and Hama.

By deliberately provoking sectarian polarization, they tried to portray the regime as being purely sectarian with the aim of winning wide support among the non-Alawi majority of the population against the Alawi dominated Ba'th regime.<sup>90</sup>

Van Dam also argues that the discriminatory policies of the regime were actually favoring the tribal and family members close to Al Assad, rather than covering the whole of Alawite community. Hence, there existed of the Alawite and even the Baathist opposition to some of Assad's policies. Here, it is observed the cracks in the social texture and government of Syria in terms of the lack of progress in the rationalization of political institutions. As a late comer in the process of independent statehood, Syria suffered from political instability. Moreover, stability came only with the price of favoritism towards those close to the president and the deterioration of democratic rights. This surely had an impact on the success of any state-initiated nationalist propaganda, the details of which will be examined in the third chapter.

Syria's stance in the Iran-Iraq war revealed many of the tensions between Arab nationalism and Syrianness, as well as Assad's commitment to the *raison d'être* of the Baath regime. Syria's position towards the Iran-Iraq war was in a way surprising because of its support to Iran. From the vantage point of Arab nationalism, Syria was expected to give support to

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<sup>90</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: The Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba'th Party* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), 97.

Iraq on the grounds of Arab solidarity and unity, on the contrary, the Baath regime and Assad chose to side with Iran against Iraq. However, failure to ignore the long-lasting hostility between Iraq and Syria and expect their collaboration during this war was, in a sense, the dream of naïve and melancholic Arab nationalists. All in all, the Iran-Iraq war was a turning point for Syrian domestic politics. In order to justify Syria's support to Iran, a non-Arab country, the Syrian regime stated that

We support Iran because it is anti-Israeli as the Shah was not. We have a pact of unity with Iraq. Let Iraq announce its commitment to this pact and the war will stop immediately because Iran can not fight Syria and Iraq combined.<sup>91</sup>

More interestingly, the emphasis of official discourse shifted from Arab nationalism to Syrian nationalism. Assad also underlined the priority of Syrian national interests in order to legitimize Syria's support to Iran. Assad, a secular Baathist, surprisingly, even gave emphasis to "the Iran's Islamic identity and its heritage which binds the Arab nation."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with Tlas, *Al-Sayyad*, 19 September 1984, cited in Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986: Politics and Society*, 64.

<sup>92</sup> Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 283.

### 3.7 Conclusion

*Is Assad a pan-Arab? Or is he a pan-Syrian? Or are pan-Arabism and pan-Syrianism coupled together in his mind? Or are they to him mere phrases and unreflective of his real sentiments? (...) It is indeed tempting to say that on the whole his motives do not stem from an ideological foundation, and that pragmatism forms the warp and woof of his mind and conduct.<sup>93</sup>*

Hroch argues that “nationalism arose from the activities of cultural elites seeking histories and constituted the identities of the nations without necessarily giving those identities any immediate political purpose; once established such nationalist claims were available for the politicization of cross-class groups.”<sup>94</sup> This is in confirmation with the modernist approach to the nationalism phenomenon that I outlined in the first chapter. Now, the issue is whether the Syrian history is consistent with such an approach. Modernism does not deny the existence of myths, symbols, memories, or ethnicity for that matter. However, central to any modernist argument is the assertion that nationalism does not follow necessarily or logically from those ‘national’ characteristics; rather it is a political phenomenon responding to a political context and that is only after the coming of the modern era. Hence, if it is insisted that any of the Assad’s policies on the formation of national identity were not the direct result of an essence

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>94</sup> M. Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) cited in Craig Calhoun, “Nationalism and Ethnicity”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 19, (1993), 211-239, p.219.

called Arabism, it becomes clear; it is first and foremost the modern story of Syria that should be looked at rather than the ancient stories on the Arab people. It is often argued, as I have done here, that the nature of the state-society relations in Syria, Syria's 'foreign' policy to 'Arab states' and the state's actions towards to the diverse ethnic and religious groups were influenced by the traces of the Ottoman rule and the impact of the French colonial era, including the very formative affect of the First World War. This is the modern political context that any modernist would refer to.

However, this does not mean an adherence to strict determinism and a neglect of actors' choices. Actually, conceiving Lebanon as a part of Syria or attempting to unite with Egypt or with Libya was deliberate choices of the governments. What is important is that the Assad regime used the available pool of national sentiments to mobilize the population or silence them when there was a need for that. In the Iran-Iraq war, on the other hand, the justification had to be organized around the Islamic sentiments alongside the argument that the Syrian state in its small and modern form was worth to take care for, when the other choice was to support an Arab state perceived as being hostile. This choice, though, came from a regime which banned the political party that called for the promotion of Greater Syrian nationalism (SSNP). In terms of domestic policies, it is observed that providing stability and order for the smooth operations of the Syrian regime was the priority rather than pursuing a nationalist policy.

On the other hand, the state was not enough rationally organized in the Weberian sense of the term and was based on favoritism as preferred by Assad. In turn, Syria, as noticed by the regime and opponents alike, remained a country very susceptible to sectarianism. At this point, once again I want to quote Fred Halliday so that the pattern in the emergence and development of Middle Eastern nationalisms will be clearer. It is in the background of this that we will start to make sense of the oscillating justifications and manipulations of the identity choices in the last 30 years of Syrian political scene.

What is today presented as the 'true' representation of a past tradition is in fact a contemporary, modern creation designed to meet contemporary needs, thus, ideology is in the sense, instrumental, for those in power – states, elites, classes, religious authorities - and for those challenging power.<sup>95</sup>

And indeed, the opposition's propaganda on the Alawite character of the regime is clearly confirming Halliday's observation that this cherry-picking among the available identities and available 'others' is also performed by those 'challenging' power. The realm of myths, symbols and memories is open to any actors who wish to respond to the modern politics. There remain the specific mechanisms and operations of this identity choice and the issue of their relative success. In the following chapter, I will analyze the opinions of Syrian intellectual elites that I have collected during my field work in Syria on how this process (whether from the opposition or the state) was actually carried out.

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<sup>95</sup> Fred Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2000).

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **4. SYRIAN INTELLECTUALS ON NATION, NATIONALISM AND STATE DURING HAFEZ AL ASSAD ERA**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In order to better understand the evolution of nationalist ideologies in the era of Hafez Al Assad, I conducted a field research in Damascus, in May, 2006. My primary aim was to gather information about the prominent opinion makers' perceptions on the subject matter of this thesis. This chapter will harvest the results of that field research which was conducted through in-depth interviews with the politically relevant elites of Syria. The interviews focused on their perception regarding the foundation, transformation and success of nationalist ideologies, especially in the Hafez Al Assad era. In what follows, these interviews will be analyzed under the themes of the construction of the nationhood, perceptions on official state ideology, self-determination, and colonialism.

Among the general conditions of the field research, it is worth mentioning that due to the martial law, which has been exercised since the Baath Revolution, 1963, Syrian intellectuals face serious difficulties. Even one of my interviews was canceled due to an unexpected arrest of the interviewee, who is one of the leading opposition figures to the regime.



Hence, it goes without saying that the repressive structure of the political system in Syria is persistent and affective.

This field research was initiated with the contention that for a proper analysis of the subject matter, the Weberian status groups, like urban notables and later on new elites were crucial in the formulation and dissemination of the nationalist ideologies in the history of modern Syria.

Elites in Syria are indeed part of the ruling power rather than an exception within the Middle East. Rather than through grass-root movements, the social transformations and assessment of nationalist ideologies initiated by politically relevant elites<sup>96</sup> whether politicians in the sense of imposing changes from above or journalists and academicians at the level of dispersing the diverse ideologies through mass media. However, their importance do not make them exempt from critical analysis. Intellectuals are surrounded by the realities of the society to which they belong. Their relationship to the institutions, government or state is a crucial issue. The autonomy of the intellectuals is under threat. On this very point, Edward

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<sup>96</sup> I borrow the Volker Perthes' term 'politically relevant elites'. Perthes explains that "this stratum comprises those people in a given country who wield political influence and power in that they make strategic decisions or participate decision-making on a national level, contribute to defining political norms and values ..., and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues." "The PREs ... use their political influence to set or influence political agendas and define the themes of national discourse." For more, see Volker Perthes (ed.) *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2004), 5.

Said asks whether there can be any independent intellectuals (from universities, from political parties or mass media) and whether the intellectuals represent themselves or represent such institutions.<sup>97</sup> For Said, the intellectual is exposed to the pressures of professionalism, which is one dimension of contemporary society surrounding him / her. The first of these pressures is specialization, which means technical formalism, the destroying of the intellectuals' personal decisions, constructions and making the intellectual tame and dependent on leaders in the field.<sup>98</sup> The second pressure is the cult of the expertise which leads to speaking the language of the related authorities. The third pressure is working for the requirements of the authority, making academic researches for the government, political parties or commercial foundations. Said's remarks on the pressures toward the intellectual's capacity to generate his / her ideas are very significant. Syrian intellectuals are not exempt from these pressures. Moreover, the esoteric nature of the Syrian political structure and the implementation of ever-lasting martial law in the country since 1963 make the life difficult for Syrian intellectuals.

A crucial determinant in my analysis of the role of intellectual elites in the nationalist ideology in Syria will be by taking into account their relative

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<sup>97</sup> Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: the 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

position towards the state. The influence of the intellectual<sup>99</sup> elites in the production and promotion of ideologies is limited to their relations with the state and with the borders of their privileged status. This is not only because of the centralized, autocratic nature of the modern Middle Eastern states, but also because of the Ottoman heritage and the specific state structure in the former territories of the Empire. This is true in the case of Turkey as in Syria. To be able to be heard is a privilege of those traditional intellectuals, who have symbiotic relations with the state as opposed to the marginal, isolated ones. This centralist character of the state and the resulting political structure is also linked with the formation of the nation state in the first place, as it was explored in the first chapter. The fact that Middle Eastern states were late comers to the modern nation state paradigm<sup>100</sup> and the urgency of development and modernization enforced the centralist tendencies that were already there. All these, had their impacts on the positioning of intellectuals. As the nationalism was from above, so it seems to be the case for intellectuals. Those who could make their voices heard were from the elite and those who speak up within the elite were intellectuals. Hence, the dissemination of the

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<sup>99</sup> I use the term 'intellectual' in a Gramscian fashion. Gramsci describes the intellectual within the context of 20th century realities: The new professions such as academic professionals, organizers, management consultants, mass media journalists, who are all needed by the knowledge industry. Gramsci's intellectuals are those who take part in the knowledge industry, forming a large group of people. For Gramsci's analysis on the intellectuals, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (NY: International Publications, 1989, c1971).

<sup>100</sup> In the social sciences literature, there is vast source on the phenomenon of *belated modernism*.

nationalist ideologies had to first convince them, if it was not initiated by them in the first place. As we will see below in the findings of the field research, some of the interviewees were from the state bureaucracy, some from academia, and some from media. Their high level of involvement in the issue of nationalist ideologies is indeed the reason for the interviews. On a passing note, this should not mean, histories from below would be unnecessary and inconclusive. On the contrary, even when the mass politics/politics from below does not seem to be explicit, there is more than the surface to be explored in the daily dealings of 'man on the street'.<sup>101</sup> There one traces the concrete workings of an ideology. However, it is in the words of the elites we find the establishment and upkeep of that ideology, albeit in various forms. That is the reason why the chapter classifies nationalist ideologies in Syria in four major camps and traces Syrian intellectual elites' different perceptions on the themes of the chapter, their divisions with regards to what and who constitutes and should constitute Syria.

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<sup>101</sup> For a new Middle Eastern historiography based on a meticulous analysis of from-below nationalist movements see James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and the Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

## 4.2. The Imaginative Construction of Nation

Today's modern Syria was governed by the millet system<sup>102</sup> under the Ottoman Empire until 1920s. This system was based on the relative autonomy of diverse social groups whose loyalty was towards their community's ethnic or sectarian identities. Nationalist ideologies came to Syria only in the midst of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the necessity to create a modern nation state with a homogeneous population, party ideologues and politically relevant intellectual elites began to employ nationalist discourses. Syrian intellectuals' long-lasting contemplation on the phenomena of nation and nationalism crystallized after the Baath Revolution in 1963.

From the 1970s to the beginning of twenty-first century, four main nationalist ideologies were at play in Syrian intellectual elite culture<sup>103</sup>. The first one is the Arab nationalist ideology (mainly the Baathist ideology) which employed the theme of *national survival* in an exaggerated manner. It was also reactionary to the West and defended the need for the Arab unity. This ideology has dominated the army, state elites and bureaucracy

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<sup>102</sup> The Ottoman Empire had what was called millet system; to differentiate between communities. The criterion of this differentiation was religion rather than ethnicity.

<sup>103</sup> It goes without saying that it would sound deficient to talk about a single, unitary Syrian intellectual culture. However, for the sake of brevity, I exclude the marginal elites in Syrian society. My analysis is limited with the traditional opinion makers' and intellectuals' ideological tendencies.

since Hafez Al Assad's consolidation of his power. A new elite class, including the media elites (Syrian state-owned), the new middle class, which prospered thanks to the Assad rule and partly the professional middle class, whose members have close relations with the state, is the main social basis of the repressive state Arab nationalist ideology.

A prominent state elite and at the same time, an intellectual figure Georges Jabbour is one of the ideologues of this reactionary Arab nationalism. He defines nation on the basis of common culture, language and history. Likewise other Arab nationalists, his ideological stand overlaps with the German school of nationalism. For him, "the indispensable glue of a nation is to speak the same language."<sup>104</sup>

The second one is the Greater Syrian nationalism, also known as regionalism. This ideology blossomed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in today's Lebanon. Its main argument is that Bilad-Al Sham is a regional, cultural and political integrity, which is divided by the French colonial rule into artificial small states. Greater Syrian nationalism, which was previously a cultural doctrine and a school of thought turned into a political project during the bid for independence in the 1930s and institutionalized under the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. The founding ideologue and the party leader of the SSNP was Antoun Saadeh, who never accepted the present-day borders. As a rival ideology and political projection, the

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<sup>104</sup> Interview, Damascus, 4 May 2006.

Greater Syrian nationalism opposes the Arab nationalism and do not accept the Arabness as the main identifier of Syrians; rather, they argue that Syrian peoples' history goes beyond Arabness and they are the Arabized descendants of Levantines. This nationalist ideology became the leading opposition to the Baathist Arab nationalism especially during Hafez Al Assad rule. Samer Ladkany, who is the ex-head of the SSNP's politburo and a prominent intellectual figure devoted to the Greater Syrian nationalism, defines nation "as an interaction between people and land. It is the interaction between people living in a very confined and defined area."<sup>105</sup> Not only for him, but also for the majority of the SSNP members and their supporters, people living in Bilad-al Sham region compose the Syrian nation. This nationalist ideological siding usually uses a retrospective discourse, which mostly refers to the pre-colonial territories including Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The idea of strengthening regional politics and the promotion of a common Levantine culture are the sources of Greater Syrian nationalism.

The third one of the co-existing nationalist ideologies in Syria is Pan-Islamic nationalism, which developed against Nasserist revolutionarism, and secular, radical Baathism in 1960s and gained strength in 1970s by the rise of radical Islamic politics in the Middle East. Both national and international dynamics were at play for the evolution of this nationalist ideology. In Syria, an incipient rise of Sunni opposition to the Baathist

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<sup>105</sup> Interview, Damascus, 16 May 2006.

regime and the Israeli threat in the region towards not only Arab states but also the non-Arab ones laid a fertile ground for the development of an Islamic nationalism, which defined nation on the basis of Islamic umma, and aimed a unity among Muslim states. Syrian intellectuals, who are sympathetic towards Pan-Islamic nationalism, assert that people in Syria are part of a larger circle, which is the Islamic umma. It is self-evident that religion is an indispensable constituent of a nation for them. As opposed to secular definitions of Baathist Arab nationalists and Greater Syrian nationalist, Professor Mohammad Habbash, who is an independent MP at the Syrian Parliament and General Director of Islamic Studies Center in Damascus, affirms that “nation is founded on a common culture and religion”.

The last one of nationalist ideologies is a newly emergent liberal Syrian nationalism.<sup>106</sup> This group of intellectual elites manifestly argues the death of the utopian Arab nationalism and the failure of the initiations for a Pan-Arab unity. Rather, they emphasize the need for economic, social and

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<sup>106</sup> I borrow Tanıl Bora’s definition of ‘liberal nationalism’. In mapping out the Nationalist ideologies in Turkey, Bora tries to categorize a newly emergent Turkish nationalism, which is pro-Western and which emphasize the civilizational aspect of Nationalism. For his group, the priority is the national interest and to serve to the maximization of national interest in the field of economics, the creation of a national market is crucial. In his words, “[liberal nationalism] is a discourse that interprets modernization using the ideology of economics, and that emphasizes the progressivist - developmentalist aspect of the process of modernization.” This definition is also relevant in the case of a newly emergent liberal nationalist ideology in Syria. If we compare the characteristics of liberal Turkish nationalism and liberal Syrian nationalism, many similarities would be traced. However, this would be purely a problematic of another research. For a detailed analysis of liberal Turkish nationalism, please see Tanıl Bora, “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102: 2 / 3, Spring Summer 2003, 433-451.



political reform in contemporary Syria. As Tanıl Bora exemplifies the liberal nationalists' case in Turkey as enthusiastic supporters of modernization in accordance to the Western ideals and policies, it would not be wrong to assert that liberal Syrian nationalists ponder around the similar objectives. For instance, Ibrahim Hamidi, Al Hayat's Bureau Chief in Damascus, defines nation on the basis of "national interest rather than ethnicity, common history\_or culture".<sup>107</sup> He gives the example of European states by emphasizing the importance of the existence of a common interest makes people a nation even they have different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Another well-known journalist, Ziyad Haidar, the Representative of Al Arabiyya in Damascus, characterizes nation as "a group of people, which has unified goals and bases."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Interview, Damascus, 7 May 2006.

<sup>108</sup> Interview, Damascus, 15 May 2006.

#### 4.2.1. Civic Nationalism versus Ethnic Nationalism: Does Arab nationalism lie in the purgatory?

The ideas of ethnic origins of nations obscure more than it explains the phenomenon of nationalism; and, it is needed to admit the idea of the modernity of nations and nationalist ideologies; thus, their constructed and artificial nature in the Middle Eastern context to start any research.

...members of these groups [*westernizing elites in the Arab middle east*] advocated a civic form of nationalism as opposed to an ethnic or religious nationalism for a variety of reasons: territorial structures imposed by the international community, the large number of minorities resident in the Arab Middle East, the participation of these minorities in nationalist organizations, and the acceptance by nationalist intellectuals of Comtean evolutionism.<sup>109</sup>

Many of the people I interviewed seemed to be aware of this issue. The insights of Syrian intellectual elites concerning the debate between modernists and perennialists in the field of nationalism studies are worth to be explored. Rather than defending the idea of a nation based on common blood ties (Asabiyya)<sup>110</sup>, they emphasize the importance of common language and culture. However, a clear-cut opposition exists among

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<sup>109</sup> Fatma Müge Göçek, "The Decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Emergence of Greek, Armenian, Turkish and Arab Nationalisms", in ed. Fatma Müge Göçek, *Social Constructions of Nationalism in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 15-83, p. 77.

<sup>110</sup> Ibn Khaldun's concept of Asabiyya means 'spirit of kinship' whether blood ties or other social groupings. In this thesis, when I refer to Asabiyya, I limit its connotations to the blood ties.

Syrian intellectuals, who define a nation on the basis of a common history, culture and language; and, who develop a more inclusive perception of nation based primarily on the condition of being loyal to a particular nation-state; hence, on the ground of modern idea of citizenship. The intellectuals, who point out common specific features of a nation, mostly are the Baathist Arab nationalists. They have close relations with the Baathist regime and the power holders in Syrian society. Dr. Nizar Mihoub, who is a hardliner Baathist and state elite in the Ministry of Information, delineates nation “as a group of people who have common factors such as language and history.”<sup>111</sup> He also argues that ethnic diversity may be handled with a common language, Arabic.

Another prominent opinion maker, Ayman Abdel Nour, who is a moderate Baathist, a leading political figure in reform process and the political and economic consultant of President Bashar Assad, states that “the Baath Party constitution defines a nation as consisting of people who speak Arabic, sharing the same history, feeling Arab; moreover, to act and to defend the Arab causes is very vital.”<sup>112</sup> Abdel Nour asserts that this very definition of nation is an inclusive one since it is above sectarian differences.

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<sup>111</sup> Interview, Damascus, 3 May 2006.

<sup>112</sup> Interview, Damascus, 3 May 2006.

Although the Baathist way of definition of nation, which also overlaps with the Arab nationalism's imaginings concerning a unitary Arab nation - especially during the last two decades-, there is a debate about who constitutes Syria and how Syria can overcome the economic, social and political crisis and uprisings that she faces dramatically. Therefore, not only internal but also external dynamics makes Syrian intellectual elites contemplate on the notion of nation and nationhood. This conjectural recontemplation is a fruitful process. Liberal nationalists try to profit from it and asses more liberal and inclusive definition of nation and citizenship. The ever-existing priority of the notion of national interest, the persistence of the world nation-states system and the lack of an alternative unity with other regional states contributes to their search for revised designation of Syrian nation. Marwan Kabalan asserts that

For us in Syria, nation is in our minds something cultural rather than political. We think about language, common interest, history. But international community cannot understand this united one nation since it does not exist.<sup>113</sup>

At this very point, a submerged problem lies behind the identity crisis; which is a lack of political citizenship in the modern sense of the notion. Imagining a cultural community rather than a political one contributes to the problem of the construction of Syrianness, since Syrians still imagine themselves as part of a larger Arab culture instead of perceiving themselves as citizens of Syrian Arab Republic.

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<sup>113</sup> Interview, Damascus, 8 May 2006.

In this respect, Ziyad Haidar's point on this issue becomes relevant. He states that "there has not been any transparency concerning the common destiny of Syrian nation" and he adds that "it should be traced, the bases of nationalist feelings whether religious, secular or ethnic"<sup>114</sup>. As I mentioned before, there is a kind of evolution towards a different understanding of nation and citizenship among the Syrian intellectuals; especially among the liberal nationalists. Marwan Kabalan avows that

Citizenship is the key factor to build a modern state. This is the main problem in Syria. The rule of law does not exist. This is why we have failed in establishing a modern state because we still think in terms of ethnic and religious concerns/backgrounds. A kind of civic culture should be developed.<sup>115</sup>

On the other hand, Syrian intellectuals assert that the features of a common cause and interest should become sine quo non elements of Syrian nation, instead of emphasizing a common Arab culture and its glue effect on the peoples of Syria. They avow that this kind of perception may unravel the problem of national identity and citizenship. They have a desire for the constitutional citizenship in order to resolve the inequalities and feelings of deficiency among different minority groups and to create an inclusive perception evolving towards a supra-ethnic and non-sectarian society. Most of the intellectuals point out the lack of a civic culture in Syrian society. Failure to fall into the trap of the conventional explanations on nation and nationalism in the Middle East and to over-emphasize

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<sup>114</sup> Interview, Damascus, 15 May 2006.

<sup>115</sup> Interview, Damascus, 8 May 2006.

people's loyalty to ethnic and religious backgrounds makes the analysis problematic. By keeping in mind the ever-existing difficulties relating to the construction of identity, I believe that full analysis should take into account all these newly emergent initiations of the politically relevant intellectual elites, who are capable of manipulating public opinion.

#### **4.2.2. Perceptions on the Tension between Greater Syrian and Arab**

##### **Nationalisms: Wataniyya versus Qawmiyya**

*It is nationalism which engenders nations, not the other way around. Admittedly, nationalism uses the pre-existing, historically inherited proliferation of cultures or cultural wealth, though it uses them very selectively, and it most often transforms them radically<sup>116</sup>*

In the previous parts, I tried to mention the diversity of nationalist ideologies and their development in Syrian lands at the beginning of the twentieth century and the pendulum-wise axis on which they lay during Hafez Al Assad era. Thus, tracing the oscillation between two rival ideologies; Arab nationalism and Greater Syrian nationalism not only in the official state discourse but also in civil social and political milieu of Syria becomes relevant and necessary in this part. Syrian intellectuals' insights, with whom I have conducted in-depth interviews, illustrate this ideological confrontation. In the ideological confrontation among the nationalist intellectual elites of different position, that is relative to their

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<sup>116</sup> Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, 55.

relation to the official state ideology, which is a rigid Arab nationalism of the Baath regime at least at the rhetoric level, it is observed that the conventional debate is between the Arab nationalists and the Greater Syrian nationalists. Albeit, the debate is multi-layered and multi-dimensional with regards to the idealization of nation, the closeness to the Baath regime and the foreign policy. Also, there is a clash of ideological stand-points of these very intellectuals in the field of defining territorial boundaries of the modern Syrian state. The existence of the concepts of *wataniyya* and *qawmiyya* is the reflection of this very ideological antagonism in Syrian intellectual milieu. At this very point, Eyal Zisser's analysis concerning the nationalist camping in Syria is worth to be mentioned. In his words;

Arabism and 'Syrianism' signify the two poles between which Syrian identity oscillated throughout the twentieth century. Pan-Arabism, at the one pole, represented a total commitment to the idea of Arab unity, to the extent of negating a separate or independent Syrian entity. At the other pole, pan-Syrianism implied a total commitment to Syrian identity and the idea of a greater Syrian state (Bilad al-Sham) within Syrian natural geographic borders, while ignoring, negating or repressing the Arab and Islamic elements in this identity.<sup>117</sup>

At this very point, it is difficult to demarcate the Arab, Syrian or Islamic elements in a particular nationalist ideology whether Greater Syrian, Arab or Pan-Islamic nationalism. It is necessary to approach these ideologies

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<sup>117</sup> Eyal Zisser, "Who is afraid of Syrian nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No.2, (March, 2006), 179-198 , p. 183.

as a *mélange* of diverse elements and ideals. This would not mean to ignore the 'poles', on the contrary this kind of understanding, which accepts the intermingled elements in all these three opposing ideologies, provide us with the necessary attention to the subject matter. Failure to analyze the alternation among discourses of these ideologies and evaluate them as if they are compact and immutable ideologies will leave the analysis defective. In this regard, by keeping on mind the interplay among these ideologies, it should also be analyzed the tension, which is conjecturally submerged or transpired.

A prominent intellectual figure in Syrian political milieu, Professor Marwan Kabalan's assertion exemplifies the issue quite well. In his words, "there has always been a tension between pan-Arabism and regionalism during the modern history of Syria. In order to resolve this tension, Syria has used double standard; rhetoric was Arab nationalism, but the action was Syrianism."<sup>118</sup>

On the other hand, according to another well-known Syrian intellectual, Mohammad Aziz-Shukri, there does not exist an identity crisis in Syria or a dilemma between Syrianness and Arabness due to the fact that loyalty to Arab identity still predominates people's national feelings. In this respect, he succinctly acknowledges that

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<sup>118</sup> Interview, Damascus, 8 May 2006



In Syria, there is no conflict. Because no Syrians would say that they are Syrians. They are a part of Arab nation. The so-called struggle exists somewhere else. In the Gulf, there is semi-nationalism. They try to establish a council of the Gulf States and construct a Khaliji identity.<sup>119</sup>

It goes without saying that the ones who are closer to the Baathist regime and still defend the ideals of Arab nationalism, in a way, ignore the clash between Syrianism and Arabism; thus, the problem of identity. Mohammad Aziz-Shukri is an example of this group of intellectual elites and emphasizes the importance of being a part of Arab nation as it is stated in the Syrian Arab Republic's constitution.

On the other hand, another intellectual political figure, Ayman Abdel Nour points out the ever-existing identity crisis in Syria. Abdel Nour as being a reformist opinion maker points out the necessity to contemplate on what Syrianness means for the citizens of Syria.

In the constitution, it is written who is a Syrian. It says that the Arab people who live in Syria. There are no Syrians. Now, it is a problem of identity. In any document, there is not any single document referring to being a Syrian. Syria is not a nation; it is a tauto part of the Arab world.<sup>120</sup>

As well as the ideological confrontation, there exists a terminological severance for the expression of nationalist feelings; the ones who defend Arab nationalism (Pan-Arabism) prefer to employ the word *qawmiyya* and / or *qutriyya* and the ones who believe to the ideal of a unitary Bilad al-

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<sup>119</sup> Interview, Damascus, 5 May 2006.

<sup>120</sup> Interview, Damascus, 3 May 2006.

Sham region; thus Greater Syrian nationalism (regionalism) prefer to use the word *wataniyya* and / or *iqlimiyya*. The ideological confrontation is also reflected to the rhetoric of politically relevant elites. Similar to the Arabic language, there are two terms for nationalism in Turkish; *milliyetçilik* and *ulusçuluk*. “*Milliyetçilik* derives from the Ottoman word for “nation” (and also for the religious community) millet; it is a more common equivalent. *Ulusçuluk* derives from the modern Turkish word for the “nation”, and is preferred by the left-wing nationalists.”<sup>121</sup> Likewise there are the different translations of nationalism into the Arabic language; there exists different denominations for Syrian territories which is not ideologically free. At this very point, Valter asserts that “the selective usage of Bilad al-Sham and Syria..., which is encountered in the actual Syrian historical discourse, indicates that the same territory may be *binary* imagined.”<sup>122</sup>

The Greater Syrian nationalists prefer to use the word *iqlimiyya* or *wataniyya* for the nationalist expressions. Samer Ladkany, who acknowledges he feels himself closer to the Syrianism, states that

The Greater Syrian nationalism (Syrianism) to what the SSNP believed asserts that there is not only one homogeneous Arab nation. There are four big groups; North Africa, Nile, the Arabic Peninsula and Bilad al-Sham. Of course, there is one cultural heritage through Islam. But, it does not mean that there is one nation. These four groups should

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<sup>121</sup> Tanil Bora, “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey”, 451.

<sup>122</sup> Stéphane Valter, *La construction nationale syrienne: Légitimation de la nature communautaire du pouvoir par le discours historique* (Paris : CNRS éditions, 2002), 77.

cooperate, but first of all these four should unite in themselves.<sup>123</sup>

Another significant figure, Ayman Abdel Nour points out that it is written qutriyya<sup>124</sup> (qutr-al arabi al Suriyya) in the Syrian Constitution meaning that Syria is a part of the Arab world. He argues that alongside the articles emphasizing Arabness prior to Syrianness in the constitution, the existence of the National Command of the Baath Party contributes to the identity crisis and the deficiency in the modern sense of the national state in Syria. In his words, “we [Syrian people] do not think about the sovereignty of Syria and Syria is not a complete country.”

On the other hand, Mohammad Aziz Shukri criticizes the recent nationalist movements in several Arab countries such as Kuwait, Lebanon, and Jordan. He has a kind of resentment towards regional nationalisms. He expresses that “nowadays, unfortunately, we have a more restricted feeling of nationalism; Kuwaiti belonging, Jordanian belonging, Syrian belonging. That bothers me. I was raised up only by Arab nationalism from the Persian Gulf to the Atlantic; the Arab country is my nation.”

A liberal nationalist, Al Azm points out that “the pan-Arabism is abused so badly by so many political parties and groups.”<sup>125</sup> He adds that before the

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<sup>123</sup> Interview, Damascus, 16 May 2006.

<sup>124</sup> It is generally used as a synonym of the Arabic word qawmiyya.

<sup>125</sup> Interview, Damascus, 6 May 2006.

last events (Hariri's assassination and the UN's investigation of it), nobody contemplated on the tension between Arabism and Syrianism. Al Azm emphasizes the recent events, which forced people to think about their loyalties and their national identity, albeit not all classes have been affected by this impetus. Similar to Al Azm's analysis, Hamidi thinks that there was not a tension between Arab nationalism and Greater Syrian nationalism; "since Syrian nationalism was not existing and Pan-Arab nationalism was the only dominant ideology".<sup>126</sup> Syrian intellectuals from the opposition to the Baath regime sometimes are not capable of evaluating the hidden balance between Arab nationalism and Greater Syrian nationalism in Assad's official discourse. Although the regime focused on the ideals of Arab nationalism, it would not be wrong to argue that Assad's submerged policy maneuvers consolidated a sort of balance between these two contender ideologies.

As I endeavored to demonstrate in the previous chapter, there existed a sort of oscillating justifications and manipulations of the identity choices in the political milieu during Hafez Al Assad era. By giving examples from Syrian foreign policy<sup>127</sup>, Marwan Kabalan illustrates alternating strategies during Hafez Al Assad era. In his words;

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<sup>126</sup> Interview, Damascus, 7 May 2006.

<sup>127</sup> He refers to Syria's support to the USA during Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Most of the time, Syrian foreign policy acts in a way that it does not serve to the interests of this country. I feel like there is a contradiction between self-interest and interests of the other Arab countries. There is a conflict between two ideologies. There is a huge tension when Syria tries to conduct its foreign policy based on the Arab nationalism, because at the end of the day most Syrians would wonder what we are doing. Are we trying to serve to our national interests or are we serving to the interests of the others i.e. Palestinians?<sup>128</sup>

On the other hand, the Baathist intellectuals are not eager to talk about a tension between these two ideologies. Nizar Mihoub, a hardliner Baathist states that “there has not been a problem between Arab nationalism and regionalism. “ Rather he points out the effects of colonialism on the Arab people and expresses that “European colonial policy of divide and rule changed all the dynamics in the Arab world and we are still paying the bill of this division.”<sup>129</sup> Another Arab nationalist, Nabil Sukkar utters that “There are now several Arab countries living in the banners of Lebanon first, Iraq first or Jordan first”<sup>130</sup>. He thinks that there will be a tension between Arab nationalism and Syrian liberal nationalism from now on.

Not only Syrian intellectuals but also the members of the Baath Party started to pay attention to the issues of Arab nationalism, regionalism and patriotism few years ago. Although the Baath Party and the still-existing

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<sup>128</sup> Interview, Damascus, 8 May 2006.

<sup>129</sup> Interview, Damascus, 3 May 2006.

<sup>130</sup> Interview, Damascus, 14 May 2006.

National Command defend the priority and importance of Arab nationalist policies, they are aware of the need of employing a new rhetoric in order to tackle with Syrians' identity confusion. Georges Jabbour, member of the National Command, affirms that "The party seems to continue to be loyal to the concept of Arab unity, Arab nationalism. It deals with Arabs as being part of Arab nation theoretically. But, practically, they deal with the country within the Arab countries."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Interview, Damascus, 4 May 2006.

### 4.3. Perceptions on State Ideology and Socio-economic Policies

As I have indicated in the previous parts of this chapter, Syrian intellectuals' position vis-à-vis the state determines their perception of the Assad era; as well as their capacity to affect the public opinion. The limitation of this chapter; especially, of this sub-section is that the intellectual elites with whom I have conducted field research, in a way, tried to present themselves as being more liberal and open-minded than they politically were able to be. Plus, at times, they were hesitant to spell out their opinions on the state ideology and social policies during the Hafez Al Assad era.

It goes without saying that an Arab nationalist or a Baathist is more prone to perceive the policies of the epoch as just and necessary than a Greater Syrian nationalist or a liberal Syrian nationalist, who is capable of approaching the epoch and social & economic policies in question in a more critical way. In this respect, it is significant to analyze their perceptions on major issues concerning the Assad regime and governance in order to trace what or who constitutes Syria since 1970s. Syrian intellectuals from the opposition are unanimous concerning Assad's formation of a *surveillance society*.

Relating to Assad's socio-economic policies Nabil Sukkar, a believer to the Arab nationalism and Assad's leadership, emphasizes the economic

reforms carried by Hafez Al Assad and according to him, the most important breakthrough during Assad era is the rectification of rural areas, alongside the policies of education and free health system. He thinks that thanks to the Assad regime, a kind of economic and political stability was introduced to the country. Nizar Mihoub, a hardliner Baathists, asserts concerning the Assad's thirty years long rule that "Hafez Al Assad made everything and he created modern Syria like Atatürk as well the state craft." As it can be inferred from the above quote, it is extremely difficult to unravel the cult of Hafez Al Assad just like other nation-building leaders in the Third World. Therefore, in my interviews with the intellectuals, it was extremely hard to go the details of the policies of Assad era as there is a lot to talk already on the man himself. However, below is an example from the liberal faction which through their criticisms is at least capable of evaluating the actual operations of thirty years.

Al Azm, a liberal nationalist argues that Assad's regime employed all the necessary means to create a control society. He asserts that economic and political stability was achieved in the country only at the expense of democratic rights. Albeit, this kind of repressive stability has faded away the necessary ground for the development of a democratic political and social milieu in Syria.



#### **4.4. Perceptions on Self-Determination: The Imaginative Geographies of the Syrian Nation**

In Syria, there exists a problem of self-determination both in the minds of Syrian politically relevant intellectuals and man on the street due to the availability of different territorial imaginings and the existence of alternative identities. As a late comer to the modern nation-state system, Syria has undergone through unrest experiences during the last century. The long-lasting Ottoman rule and the French colonial rule were imposed from above. Foreign rule was decisive in establishing modern Syria. In this respect, perceptions on colonialism and Israel are worth to be taken into account in order to understand better the tension between existing nationalist ideologies.

##### **4.4.1. The Fatal Experience of Colonialism**

In order to understand the development of nationalist ideologies in Hafez Al-Assad era, one had better to trace the effects of the French colonialism on intellectual tradition in Syria. After the First World War, the Middle East became the locus of colonial partitioning of the European powers. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire laid the grounds for the expansion of colonial rules in the region. Syria was not exempt from European colonial desires. The French colonial rule, which lasted more than two decades,

had tremendous effects on the development of the nationalist ideologies in the region and in Syria. Nationalism was the only available instrumental ideology for the achievement of independence during the colonial era. Thus, these years were very significant for the evolution of the idea of an independent Syrian nation state. Alongside the mass rebellions, the politically relevant elites and intellectuals contemplated on the European ideas of nation and nationalism. It goes without saying that Syrian intellectuals' encounter with these ideas precede the colonial rule; however, the experience of colonialism contributed to the consciousness of Syrian people and to their identity search.

Relating to the experiences of colonialism, Syrian intellectual elites have different positions, albeit they all argue that the colonial rule was undesirable at the beginning. Their differing positions stem from colonialism's long-term effects on Syrian social texture and political structure. While a group of intellectuals think that the French colonial rule contributed to today's modern Syrian political and institutional structure, others perceive that not only French but also the Ottoman rule caused inoperable consequences especially for the formation of independent Syria.

From the former group of intellectual elites, Ayman Abdel Nour asserts that "The colonialism is not always bad. It gave us law, bureaucracy and they taught us how to build a country." On the other hand, Al Azm states

that “There is not such a thing as benevolent colonialism. People had tried in the past. I mean colonialism by definition is exploitation.” Most of the Syrian intellectual elites with whom I interviewed, avow that it should be given some credit to the colonial powers in respect to their contributions to Syrian political infrastructure. In this regard, their position vis-à-vis the West is ambiguous. While they are keen of preserving their cultural *essence*, they also desire to import the Western type of governance, which necessitates rule of law, democratic rights and a clear-cut definition of citizenship. As being opinion makers of a post-colonial country, Syrian intellectuals are in a sense in the purgatory. Samer Ladkany’s insights illustrate this issue quite well. In his words;

Till now, the official discourse said that colonialism is very bad and destructive. I think that there are some good things. We should not forget that the whole administrative system was built after the French colonial rule in Syria. For instance, the education has been implemented during their stay in Syria. There are positive effects of colonialism and also we should not forget that the Arabs were the first colonialist power in the world. We are not allowed to talk about when the Arabs were colonial power. Even Syria had a colony, Carthage. We are hypocrite when we talk about others were colonial, but the Arabs or Syria were also colonial powers.<sup>132</sup>

Different from these intellectuals’ hesitant arguments relating to the colonial era, the Baathists and ardent Arab nationalists are more concrete on the long-term outcomes of the French colonial rule. For instance, a

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<sup>132</sup> Interview, Damascus, 16 May 2006.

Syrian intellectual points out that “the French occupation and the colonial rule damaged the social texture of Syria dramatically, since they discriminated the ethnic and religious minorities.”<sup>133</sup> Another important figure, Mohammad Aziz-Shukri is very clear on this issue and just states that “colonialism is the white man’s burden.” Not only Syrian intellectual elites but also masses have different imaginings concerning the colonial era. The frustrations of colonialism have not really faded away and it is clearly present in the social memory of the Syrians.

#### **4.4.2 Perceptions on Israel as the ‘Other’ of Syrian National Identity**

Ever since the creation of Israel, Syria has been the most ardent Arab state to defend the Palestinian rights and even manipulate her domestic policies and public opinion in the axis of Arab-Israel conflict. In this regard, the state of Israel and every single development concerning the conflict has been at the locus of social and political milieu of Syria. During Hafez Al Assad era, the fight against Israel became an integral part of the official state discourse He called for a unity against Israel, time to time in order to suppress the opposition to his regime; plus, to consolidate his power in the eyes of Syrian people.

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<sup>133</sup> He requested from me that his name should not be acknowledged in this thesis.

Nearly all Syrian intellectual elites with whom I talked think that 1973 war with Israel was a turning point in Syrian history. Although the war was lost in military terms, Hafez Al Assad was successful enough to demonstrate it as a great victory for Syrian people. Abdel Nour states that “the 1973 war gave us self-confidence”. On the other hand, Assad’s ambition to be recognized as Salahadin of the Arab world and as the leading supporter of Palestinians was on the scene. Samir Altaqi asserts that by the 1973 ‘victory’, “the nation felt more secure, less humiliated and much more confident to the leadership. Assad built up his complete loyalty system and proved to be a smart player in the region.”<sup>134</sup>

Syrian intellectuals all agree that Israel has been causing predicaments not only for the Arab world but also for Syria since her foundation. However some of them, especially the ones who I call as liberal nationalists become hesitant on Syria’s policies towards the conflict. Behind their discourse, there is a kind of submerged resentment concerning Assad’s policies against Israel. For instance, Ibrahim Hamidi argues that “The regime kept on saying Israel is a foreign enemy and a foreign threat; albeit the Arab world was defeated, Israel became a foreign threat that unifies people.”<sup>135</sup> Likewise Hamidi, Kabalan asserts that

If Israel ceases to exist, if the conflict with Israel ceases to exist, that would remove one reason for

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<sup>134</sup> Interview, Damascus, 14 May 2006.

<sup>135</sup> Interview, Damascus, 7 May 2006.

uniting Syrians. The key factor in creating Syrian or Arab nationalism is the existence of Israel. Because when you have an enemy, you identify yourself against the enemy.<sup>136</sup>

Different from liberal Syrian nationalists, Aziz Shukri avows that Israel is the enemy for all the Arabs, all the Muslims. He supports Hafez Assad's emphasis to the Arab-Israel conflict and his Israel-oriented policies. On the other hand, majority of Syrian people perceive the existence of Israel as a threat to the Muslim people. A pan-Islamist nationalist and MP, Mohammed Habash recapitulates the significance of Israel for Syrian people as follows;

Hafez Al Assad reflected Syrian people's feelings. It is real to tell you that every Syrian person has a desire to attack Israel. Because everyone believes that this is occupation / colonization. This is a European problem which was moved to our country. This is not our problem. So, Hafez al Assad reflected what people in Syria felt about this. This is same with Bashar Assad. He has bad relations with a lot of Arab regimes, but not he has good relations with all Arab people. Because we believe that the situation in Palestine and in Iraq are colonization. We have to put an end to this occupation. We have to struggle against colonization. I believe this is exactly what Hafez Assad and Bashar Assad reflected for our people.<sup>137</sup>

The ex-advisor of Hafez Al Assad, Georges Jabbour admits that Israel has been a catalyzer for the national unity in Syria. In this respect, the existence of Israel and the Arab-Israel conflict contributed to the construction of national identity during Hafez Al Assad era. Albeit, Israel

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<sup>136</sup> Interview, Damascus, 8 May 2006.

<sup>137</sup> Interview, Damascus, 8 May 2006.

continues to be the major enemy and the other of Syrian people, Syrian intellectual elites seem to attempt to examine last decades of Syrian politics concerning the conflict in a more liberal manner since Assad's death.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I attempted to trace who and what constitutes Syrian nation through a concise analysis of intellectuals' perceptions on nation and nationalism in Syria. It goes without saying that there exists an identity crisis in Syria ever since her independence. Syrian intellectuals from different ideological orientations have been contemplating on the issue. Whereas the Arab nationalist intellectuals are not very eager to talk about a national identity crisis and the tension among rival ideologies; Greater Syrian nationalists, Pan-Islamic nationalists and recently liberal nationalists are aware of the acute problem; albeit they have all different positions, which depend on the closeness of their relationship vis-à-vis the regime. The insights of Syrian intellectual elites from these four major nationalist ideologies well illustrate the subject-matter of this thesis. It is self-evident that they have a privileged position in Syrian society; thus, they have the necessary means – although this depends on their relations vis-à-vis the regime - to carve out the public opinion. On the other hand, the pressures towards Syrian intellectuals should be taken into account. In this regard, failure to ignore their role as opinion makers of Syrian society and to analyze their perceptions concerning both internal and external

dynamics that Syria faced during Hafez Al Assad era would result in a deficient analysis. It is quite appropriate to assert that Syrian intellectual elites, like other Third World countries' elites, face with the difficulties stemming from authoritarian regimes, albeit they endeavor to settle accounts relating to social, political and cultural developments in their country. Liberal nationalists' initiations for economic, social and political reforms and for re-reading of Syrian history can be regarded as a fresh opening for a stable establishment of the Syrian nation, though the real impact and success of this initiation is yet unknown.

This chapter on the findings of the field research confirmed the conclusions of the sections on theory of nationalism and on the modern history of Syria. The ambiguous nature of national identity is by now evident and so are the multiplicity of the determinants on that identity. It can be traced the modernity of the phenomenon of nation even in the interviews of Baath officials and in their linkage of Syria to modern political axis. But that link is of course more obvious in the rhetoric of the intellectuals from the opposition, whether liberals, Islamists or Greater Syrian nationalists. The sections on colonialism and on the impact of the mere existence of Israel also bolster this theoretical conclusion that nationalism and the subsequent establishment of national identity can only be properly understood in a modern political context. Nationalists are not one united front for the continuation of a primordial national identity; rather they are competitors in the modern political game. The interviews with the



politically relevant elites from different factions in Syrian society helped to prove this point.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **5. CONCLUSION**

In this thesis, I attempted to explore the nationalist ideologies during Hafez Al Assad era and to map out the oscillation among the offered identities in Syrian society. In the search of the development of major nationalist ideologies, which are Arab nationalism, Greater Syrian nationalism, Pan-Islamic nationalism and liberal Syrian nationalism, my theoretical approach concerning the phenomena of nation and nationalism, which is based on a modernist view, has provided me with necessary tools of analysis. Throughout the thesis, I attempted to demonstrate that nationalism is a modern phenomenon and comes prior to nations. I employed a modernist approach for explaining the subject matter of this thesis, as the two other theories of nationalism (primordialism and ethno-symbolism), as discussed in the first chapter, are not capable of providing an accurate analysis of the evolution of nationalist ideologies in a post-colonial state.

Modernism stands out among other alternatives not necessarily for purely theoretical reasons but mostly because the course of history prevents us from approaching the nationhood and nationalism from the angle of ethnicity. As it is seen in the case of Syria, both historically and from the point of view of the current political discussions, ethnicity seems to matter last and then only depending how relevant it is to the issues of modernity,

such as modern nation state building. However, modernism is not one parsimonious theory but rather a theoretical umbrella for various explanations based on the modernity of nations. Here, I have employed a political theory of nations and nationalism and have tried to show the intrinsic links between the formation of national identity and the necessities of the modern political context, whether that is the centralization of the state or the wars with Israel. This political context provides the platform within which the previously mentioned oscillation of possible identities for Syrians occurs.

Even when it is prioritized the political dynamics behind the emergence and constant rebuilding of the national identity, there is still the need to show precisely how this process happens. It is the contention of this thesis that the political modernist approach should hesitate to base itself purely on structuralist grounds. This thesis has touched upon the relevant structures in the case of Syria, such as colonialism, the pressures of the era of modern nation state and alike. However, with the field research, it was intended to reveal the ongoing debates available within the current structures. The thesis was inspired by the historical sociological research and hence resorted to the actors available within its reach for their opinions and perceptions of an already written history. The interviews have demonstrated that the closed decisions that have risen to the surface of official history have behind themselves the indecisions, oscillations and

other still open possibilities. My theoretical approach has only provided me the lens to observe, however as it is seen in the case of the critical ideas of the liberal wing among the Syrian intellectuals, the actors continue to surprise the researcher.

The thesis overall attempted to contribute to the academic struggle to eliminate a specific way of seeing the Middle Eastern societies, that is the Middle Eastern exceptionalism. With its employment of universal theories of nationalism, it tried to demonstrate that even the seemingly 'strange' nations of the Middle East can be subject to a universal academic method. The more subtle ways of this exceptionalism is precisely seen in the rejection of exposing Middle Eastern history to theoretical examinations. This creates the illusion that this region is only to be understood in terms of its own. However, an expected continuation of this thesis could be a comparison of the nation formation in Syria with a country outside the region. There, one could measure the relative importance of the intellectuals in the dissemination of the nationalist ideologies as well as showing similarities and differences in nation building among different regions. As it is, this thesis attempted to open an alternative angle of seeing the Syrian people, through examining the different identities they have related themselves to and the conditions within which this happened, as well as through interviewing a group of actors which were indeed influential in this process.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH- INTERVIEW

#### I. Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewee

- Age
- Sex
- Family: father's / mother's occupation
- Place of Birth
- Educational level
  - a) Primary school
  - b) Secondary school
  - c) High school
  - d) University
  - e) Post-graduate
- Marital status
  - a) Single
  - b) Married
  - c) Widow(er)
  - d) Divorced
  - e) Married, but the couple lives separately
- What kind of marriage is yours? Civil or religious?
- Place of residence City... Town... Village...
- In which type of place of residence you have lived for the most time in your life?
  - a) metropolis
  - b) city
  - c) town

d) village

- Could you comment on the signs of nationalism (if exists) in your neighborhood?  
What is your view?

## II. Search for a Syrian National Identity

- (In your opinion) how 'nation' could be defined?  
Among your professional group, is this something that most people agree in Syria?  
For Syrian people?
- Who are the nationalists in Syria?  
Which among those do you feel closest to?
- How do you evaluate the tension between Pan-Arabism and regionalism; thus the distinction between the notion of qawmi and watani?  
Can you illustrate your views with the examples from the Syrian modern history?
- In 1973 Syrian Arab Republic's Constitution in article 1.3 it is written that 'the people in the Syrian Arab region are a part of the Arab nation. They work and struggle to achieve the Arab nation's comprehensive unity.'  
Do you approve it?  
What does it mean?  
Are there any non-Arab groups?
- What kind of political and/or socio-economic events has served to the search for unity in Syria after 1970s?
- Which cultural attributes matter in the development of national identity?  
French or German model?
- What do you think about the program and ideals of 'the Corrective Movement'?  
Do you think that the National Progressive Front has been successful in helping the development of a Syrian national identity distinct from Arab identity since 1972?  
Is it something that separates Syrian identity from other Arab identities?  
Do you know anybody who was involved in the movement?

- What kind of instruments did Hafez Al-Asad employ in order to emphasize the cultural distinctiveness of Syrian people vis-à-vis other Arab nations?  
What is the significance of Israel for the Syrian people?  
For the national unity?  
What can you say about the 1973 War?
- What do you think about secession of Antioch to Turkey in 1939?  
What is the general opinion about this event in Syria?
- What kind of cultural symbols like national days has the regime utilized in order to create loyalty and a feeling of belongingness?  
Can you illustrate it?  
Where do we come across with these symbols? In education, mass media or literature?  
Which are the most effective?  
Are there any controversial demands?
- What do you think about colonialism?  
Are there good or bad coup d'états? Can you make such a classification?  
How has the Baath regime achieved the unity of the nation after the experiences of colonialism and several coup d'états until 1970?
- For instance official Kemalist ideology claimed that Turkish nation is a classless and non-privileged nation. As far as I know, the Baath party has a similar kind of argument for the Arab nation.  
Which are the socio-economic groups in Syria pressing for this?  
What happened to that project?
- In the development of Syrian nationalism, to what degree have the state institutions played a role?  
Have religion, tradition and custom, which are out of the state control, had any inputs in the development of nationalism in Syria?  
Is there an escalation?  
Are there any civil initiations groups?
- What do you think about Syria's multiethnic and multi-religious structure?  
Is it an obstacle or a favorable situation for the development of the country?  
Does it pose a problem for the national unity?

- For instance, Iranian nationalism has been very thriving in integrating the Azerbaijani minority. In this respect, could you evaluate the condition of Syrian nationalism?
- How do you assess the Arabification policies in 1962?  
Was it necessary for the consolidation of national unity?
- Do you believe in 'one Arab nation with an eternal mission'?  
What do you think about the notion of citizenship based on the non-ethnic nationalism?  
Is it possible for Syria?  
Do you think that there should be a non-ethnic and neutral constitution?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF THE INTERVIEWEES\***

#### **Ayman Abdel Nour**

He was born in Damascus in 1965. He is married, and son of a Medicine and ex-vice minister of Health and a poet mother. He is a Syriac Orthodox Christian Arab. He studied engineering and holds a master degree in economics. He is a member of the Baath Party and he is an advisor of President Bashar Al-Assad. He is also a free lance consultant for the UNDP, UNIDO, EU, JAICA and GOV. He is the editor-in-chief of an online bulletin All for Syria.

#### **Dr. Amr Al-Azm**

He was born in Beirut in 1964. He is married, and son of a professor of philosophy and a professor of English literature mother. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He studied archeology at the American University of Beirut and he holds a Ph.D. in Archeology from the UK. He teaches at the University of Damascus and he is the head of the Center for Archeological Research and Scientific Laboratories in Damascus.

#### **Rehab M. Al-Bitar**

She was born in Damascus in 1959. She is married, and daughter of an art manager and a housewife. She is a Sunni Muslim Arab. She studied law and practiced attorneyship for 22 years. She lived in the USA, in the Gulf States and currently she lives in Damascus. She is the Secretary General of the Liberal Democratic Gathering Party.

### **Dr. Mohammed Al-Habash**

He was born in Damascus in 1962. He is married, and son of a cleric and a housewife. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He has four undergraduate degrees on Arabic literature, philosophy and Islamic studies from Lebanese and Syrian universities. He holds a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from Khartoum, Sudan. Currently, he is an independent Member of Parliament and General Director of Islamic Studies Center in Damascus.

### **Professor Dr. Mohammed Aziz Shukri**

He was born in Damascus in 1937. He is married, and son of a government employee at the Ministry of Finance and a housewife. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He studied law in the University of Damascus. He holds a Doctorat degree in Law from the University of Colombia, the USA. He taught law in Kuwait and in Syria. He was an advisor of President Hafez Al Assad. After his retirement from the University of Damascus, he became the head of the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy at the University of Kalamoon in Syria. Currently, he is the director general of the Arab Encyclopedia and member of Arab Academy of Damascus.

### **Dr. Ahmad Samir Altaqi**

He was born in Aleppo in 1951. He is married, son of a judge at the High Court and a high school teacher mother. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He is a cardio surgeon. Plus, he took several courses on political science in the UK. He was a member of the politburo of Syrian Communist Party. Currently, he is an advisor to the Syrian government and the general manager of Al-Sharq Center for International Affairs.

### **George Baghdadi**

He was born in Damascus in 1965. He is married, and son of a cook and a housewife. He is a Greek Orthodox Christian Arab. He studied English literature in the University of Damascus. He is the general manager of Cham Press Center. He also writes for Time, USA Today, CBS News, Asia Times and several other journals.

### **Ziyad Haidar**

He was born in Moscow in 1972. He is married, and son of a retired diplomat and a housewife. He is an Alawite Arab. He studied journalism in the University of Damascus and he holds a master degree in film studied from the UK. He is the representative of Al-Arabiyya in Damascus.

### **Ibrahim Hamidi**

He was born in Idlib in 1969. He is married, and a son of truck driver and a housewife. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He studied journalism in the University of Damascus. Currently, he is the Bureau Chief of Al Hayat in Damascus. His political analyses are published in national and international journals.

### **Professor Dr. Georges Jabbour**

He was born in Safita in 1938. He is married, and son of a high ranking government official and a housewife mother. He is a Greek Orthodox Christian Arab. He studied law in the University of Damascus. He holds a Ph.D. in Law from the USA. He taught at the Georgetown University in the USA. He was an advisor of President Hafez Al Assad. He also taught international law at the University of Damascus. Currently, he is a Member

of Parliament from the Baath Party and member of the U.N. Human Rights Commission.

**Dr. Marwan Kabalan**

He was born in Damascus in 1971. He is single and a son of retired government civil servant and a housewife. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He holds a PhD in International Relations & Political Science from the UK. He has been living in Damascus and he lived in the UK for 7 years. He is an associate professor at the University of Damascus, and a member of Center for Strategic Studies at the same University. He writes in national and international media.

**Dr. Samer Ladkany**

He was born in Damascus in 1954. He is married, and son of retired bank director and a housewife. He is a Greek Orthodox Christian Arab. He is a general surgeon. He holds a Ph.D. in Medicine from Germany. He is a member of the German Association of Surgeons and he is the ex-head of the politburo of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP).

**Dr. Nizar Mihoub**

He was born in Lattakia in 1967. He is single, and son of government employee and a housewife. He is an Alawite Arab. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from Belarus. Currently, he is a high ranking official at the Ministry of Information and director of the Syrian Public Relations Association.



### **Dr. Sami Moubayed**

He was born in London in 1978. He is single, and son of a businessman and a housewife. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He studied political science in the American University of Beirut and obtained his Ph.D. in the Middle Eastern Studies from the UK. He is a political analyst. He extensively writes on Syrian politics as well as the regional politics for several national and international journals. He is the author of four books; *The Politics of Damascus 1920-1946* (Syria, 1998), *Damascus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship* (Maryland, 2000), *The George Washington of Syria* (Beirut, 2005), *Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria* (Seattle, 2006).

### **Dr. Nabil Sukkar**

He was born in Damascus in 1939. He is married, and son of a merchant and a housewife. He is a Sunni Muslim Arab. He holds a Ph.D. in economics from the USA. He worked as Senior Projects Economist in the Middle East region at the World Bank in Washington D.C. He conducted, under Middle East Development Consultants (MEDEC), a major study on the Syrian economy assisted by a team of international consultants. The study was in six volumes. He is the founder and manager director of the Syrian Consulting Bureau for Development and Investment. He writes economy articles for several national and international newspapers and journals.

\* The short biographies are given according to the surnames of the interviewees.

## APPENDIX C

### A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF SYRIA\*

1516 The Ottoman Empire adds Syria to its lands.

1913 Paris Congress

1908 Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire and the initiation of the Turkification policies / Deterioration of the relations between the Ottomans and Arabs

1914 Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire

1915 Repressions of Jamal Pasha against the Arab Nationalists in Syria and Lebanon

1916 The Sykes – Picot Agreement between England and France

1917 The Balfour Declaration, Grant of a Jewish homeland in Palestine

1918 French soldiers arrive to Lattakia

1920 France gets Syria as a League of Nations mandate

1925 -27 The Arab nationalist rebellion mainly Druze uprising against France

1932 Foundation of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) in Beirut

1932 First Syrian President Hashem al Atassi was elected.

1936 Franco-Syrian Treaty

1946 Syria became independent.

1948 Foundation of the State of Israel

1948 First Arab-Israeli War

March, 1949 Coup d'état by Colonel Husni Az-Zaim

August, 1949 Coup d'état by Colonel Adib As-Shishakli

1949-1954 Shishakli Dictatorship

- 1958-1961 United Arab Republic (Egypt and Syria)
- 1961-1970 Coups and countercoups
- March, 1963 The Baath Party Coup D'état
- 1967 Six Days War with Israel. Israel defeats Syria, Egypt and Jordan.
- 1967 Syria loses the Golan Heights to Israel
- 1966-1970 The Baath redirections; struggle between Hafez Al-Assad and Salah Jadid
- 1970 Hafez Al-Assad becomes President of Syria
- 1971 Assad initiates the Corrective Movement
- 1972 Foundation of the National Progressive Front
- 1973 War against Israel
- 1978 Implementation of New Formula
- 1982 Muslim Brotherhood Uprising in Hama and the suppression of the uprising
- 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon
- 1984 The departure of the multinational force from Lebanon
- 1990 Assad's first visit to Tehran
- 1998 Syrian-Turkish Accord
- 2000 Death of Hafez Al Assad
- 2000 -.... Presidency of Bashar Al Assad

\* This chronologie has been prepared on the basis of Stéphane Valter, *La construction nationale syrienne: Légitimation de la nature communautaire du pouvoir par le discours historique* (Paris : CNRS éditions, 2002).