MICHEL ‘AFLAQ: A BIOGRAPHIC OUTLINE

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In the shifting sands of Middle Eastern power politics it is all too easy to forget the origins and development of the phenomena under study. And, perhaps, it is this very insensibility to the past which makes the politics of the area appear chaotic. The following may be considered a first step toward the study of the political behavior of the Ba'th party as it focuses on Michel ‘Aflaq who stood at the origins of the party and participated in its early development. It is not meant to be a typical biography. It traces his life story in the perspective of his political work and only up to the union between Syria and Egypt. Relatively greater emphasis is placed upon his early formative years, which have been neglected. ‘Aflaq’s nationalist ideas were well formed before he became a significant political figure. Where the available biographical information is meager, it is expanded by reconstructing historical events and then portraying ‘Aflaq as a likely actor on the stage of history.

I

Information about ‘Aflaq’s family and his childhood is scanty. The family name, “‘Aflaq,’” is an Arabic word, indicating that the family was not of foreign origin. The very paucity of information about his family suggests that it was not of the traditional power circles nor of the learned aristocracy, either on the national or the communal level. ‘Aflaq’s father was a grain merchant whose income fluctuated with an unsteady market, providing no real security for the family. During an interview with a close friend of Michel ‘Aflaq, Abu Jaber was told that ‘Aflaq’s mother was ‘‘very much interested in politics and a firm believer in Arab nationalism.’’ The ‘Aflaqs were of the Greek Orthodox Church, a circumstance which placed Michel in a particular psychosocial situation. It may be

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noted that the qualification “Greek” is a misnomer since the members of this church in the Arab world celebrate their mass in Arabic and the hierarchy is more or less autonomous of the genuinely “Greek” church.3

According to one thesis, religious minorities rise to prominence in the lands of Islam whenever contact between the Christian West and the Islamic East necessitates communication and exchange. Thus, Christians and Jews served as transmitters of Greek knowledge during the early centuries of Islam and are serving a similar purpose in transmitting Western know-how to the Arab world today.4 This thesis explains certain aspects of Christian Arab behavior such as the preponderance of Christians (and Jews) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contacts between Europe and the Arab world. But it does not explain why some Christian Arabs ultimately reject the Christian West and identify with the Islamic East. Perhaps only a case-by-case study could shed some light on that question.

According to some commentators, ‘Aflaq was born in Damascus in 1912.5 Another source, which is more reliable since its information was obtained directly from ‘Aflaq himself, states that he was born in 1910.6 On the application presented to the Syrian government in 1945 to establish the Ba’th as an official party, ‘Aflaq is said to be thirty-five years old.7 The first date might be an official rather than the actual date as, at that time, it was usual for Christian families to defer registering a birth until the child was baptized.

‘Aflaq was a pupil at al-Thanawiyyah al-urthudusiyah (The Orthodox Secondary School)8 but graduated from the Tajhiz Dimashq (The Damascus Preparatory [to the university]), a public school.9 Having won a

8. Mustafa, Muhadarat, p. 301, n. 2.
government scholarship, he left directly upon graduation for Paris to study history. There is disagreement in the sources about the dates of ‘Aflaq’s departure for and stay in France, but 1928–1932 seem to be the most likely. Back in Syria, he was assigned to teach history in the public school system at the Madrasat al-tajhiz al-awwal (First Preparatory School).

Aside from these bare bits of information about ‘Aflaq’s early life, there is a lack of inquiry into the effects that the momentous events he lived through must have had on him and on his generation of angry young men.

Michel ‘Aflaq was born during the interlude between the Young Turk revolution of 1908 and the outbreak of World War I. And it was during those crucial years that an Arab national sentiment began to change into a nascent political movement. The Great Arab Revolt, the watershed of Arab nationalism, was initiated by Syrian (and Iraqi) Arabs. In January 1915, members of at least two secret societies addressed a letter to Husayn, the Sharif of Mecca, asking him to lead an Arab movement against Ottoman rule. In 1913, another group of Arab nationalists, centered in Baghdad, had sent a similar proposal to the Amir ‘Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa’ud, who controlled Najd; he could offer no help as he was strategically neutralized by his enemy, the pro-Ottoman Amir of the Jabal Shamar to the north. The Syrians’ letter was soon followed, in May 1915, by the Damascus Protocol, setting conditions for a possible Anglo-Arab agreement to secure the independence of Arab lands from the Ottomans. The Ottoman authorities were not blind to the growing political discontent and in July 1915, fifty-eight of the leading citizens of Syria were sentenced to death for treason; eleven were publicly executed in Beirut on 21 August. Early in 1916 another series of arrests was followed by the hanging of twenty-two more of the leading professional and learned men in the city squares of Damascus and Beirut.

The impact of these atrocities upon Michel ‘Aflaq is difficult to judge. He would have been too young, about five years old, to grasp what was

11. Ibid. and Abu Jaber, Arab Ba’th, p. 11.
really happening. But the filtered image he received would have been all the more horrifying for its very incomprehensibility.

Of all the Arab areas, greater Syria suffered the most during World War I. Jamal Pasha, the Ottoman military governor, imposed conscription; there were grave shortages in the most basic necessities, from grain for bread to wood for warmth; all resources were diverted to the Ottoman army. It is probable that ‘Aflaq’s father found himself under pressure from the authorities during this period. As a grain merchant, he must have been strictly supervised by the Ottomans who relied on Damascus as the entrepôt of the Homs-Hama grain-growing area. The father probably brought home the mounting Arab resentment against the Turks.

Meanwhile, the Arab revolt had broken out in the Hijaz in June 1916 and by early 1917, Faysal, son of Husayn, had obtained an oath of loyalty from the surviving leaders of the Arab opposition movement in Syria. While Faysal and the Arab army were sweeping the interior, French and British troops successfully marched through the coastal towns.

Let us then picture what the end of World War I must have been like for ten-year-old Michel ‘Aflaq in Damascus. Surely it was thrilling to watch when “on 3rd October, Faisal, riding a splendid Arab horse and followed by one thousand and five hundred Arab horsemen, made a triumphant entry into Damascus, in the midst of scenes of great enthusiasm and jubilation.” Parenthetically, the charismatic character of Damascus is important in the Arab nationalist reading of history; as the capital of the Banu Umayya, it is considered the center of the Islamic world while it retained its Arab characteristics.

Faysal’s kingdom of Syria did not last very long; in April 1920, the Supreme Allied Council partitioned the land into Mandates and French soldiers began marching from Beirut to Damascus. The contradictory negotiations and treaties undertaken by the Allies, particularly France and Britain, during the War and until the peace treaty of 1923 have been dealt with elsewhere in great detail. In the final analysis, military force was the decisive element when Arab resistance was crushed at the battle of Maysalun and on 25 July 1920, French troops entered Damascus. The

16. Ibid.
experience left not only bitterness against the West, but a deep-seated determination to reunite all Arab lands into one State.

The political events were accompanied by unhappy developments in the economic arena. The monetary policy promulgated by the Mandatory Power was disastrous for Syria. Paper currency was forced upon the Syrians who then had to give up their Ottoman, Egyptian and British gold coins—the gold reserve of the country—for paper tied to a franc fast being devalued. Moreover, France naturally favored the entry of French goods into Syrian markets, creating great dislocations in the local economy. Artisans and manufacturers, who had had almost no competition during the War, were wiped out in a short time. Any chance that a local industrial bourgeoisie had of eventually developing was eliminated. The role of the middle classes was thus effectively limited to bureaucratic and professional functions while the upper class remained a landed gentry.20

The most devastating effect of the Mandates was the partition of Greater Syria. All Arab lands which came under the control of European powers retained a semblance of their earlier geographic and political structures except Algeria and Syria. In Algeria, the French systematically destroyed economic, social and political structures by a policy of centralization. In Syria, the French and British agreed to follow a policy of fragmentation. Moreover, zealously pursuing its mission civilisatrice, secular France exploited religious symbols to disguise its techniques of division and control.21

The partition of Syria into separate zones exacerbated economic and social problems, bringing forth a series of revolts in the countryside and in the city suqs. It is ironic that the most violent expression of Arab nationalism was initiated by the Duruz, who had been considered by the French as outside the realm of a potential Arab State. News of the Duruz rebellion spread and ignited the spirit of revolt in most of Syria. The French, under General Sarrail, reacted with violence to the extent of bombarding Damascus.22 The immediate effects of the bombardment were demographic and economic dislocations. Refugees fled to the countryside and the network of economic transactions centered on Damascus broke down completely. The Maydan quarter where the 'Aflaq family lived23 was one

23. Khadduri, Arab Contemporaries, p. 213.
of the hardest hit. Fifteen-year-old Michel must have been passing
through an intellectual and spiritual puberty as tormenting as the physical.
It is no wonder then that ‘Aflaq asserted, “Before going to France I was
... a nationalist.”24

It took years for the French to reestablish a modicum of order. General
Sarrail was replaced by M. de Jouvenel and later by M. Ponset who aimed
at a political settlement of Syrian troubles. The modus vivendi worked out
in 1928 between French and Syrian political leaders came just in time for
‘Aflaq to accept a scholarship for university studies in France. The years
he spent in Europe were an eventful period for the whole world. The
depression of 1929 led to acute governmental instability; between the
resignation of Poincaré in 1929 and the Popular Front government of Léon
Blum in 1936, there were no fewer than twenty ministerial crises in France
alone. The Great Depression appeared to be proof enough that the West-
ern system was not invincible. In Syria, the period was overshadowed by
continuous economic trouble as there were no defenses against the de-
teriorating international conditions.

The bitter experience of Syria under French Mandate, with the bom-
bardment of Damascus practically at the family’s doorstep, must have
engendered some reservations in Michel ‘Aflaq preventing him from ever
becoming completely acculturated to France or the West in general. The
events of 1925 had been too recent to be easily forgotten; the alienation
of a Christian in an Islamic milieu translated into the alienation of an Eastern
Christian at sea in Latin Catholicism could easily have metamorphosed
into the alienation of an Arab at bay in Europe.

The political domination of France over Syria and Lebanon in the
Mashriq and over Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in the Maghrib gave it a
strong position of cultural influence. The French intellectual heritage
became a common ground for many Arab thinkers from various areas, a
factor which accelerated their mutual recognition.

‘Aflaq met many Arab students in France and, according to some
sources, he even founded an Arab students’ union which agitated for
the independence and unity of all Arab lands.25 He read Anatole France,
Romain Rolland, Bergson, Dostoevski, Tolstoi, Marx, Nietzsche and
Gandhi, but “his chief admiration was for Gide.”26 Surprisingly, Seale
chooses to ignore ‘Aflaq’s repeated references to the influence of Gide

213; Abu Jaber, Arab Ba’ith, p. 11; and Ali Y. el-Khalil, “The Socialist Parties in
while highlighting discredited "German theories of a romantic and idealistic nationalism." 27 The influence of Western writers on 'Aflaq's thought is to be weighed with caution in view of the assertion he is supposed to have made that he had not been influenced "by any Western philosopher or writer." 28 On the whole, Gide held sway over 'Aflaq both as creative writer and political thinker. 29 It is quite probable that 'Aflaq read classical and modern Arabic works, but this is more difficult to document as none of the interviewers thought it pertinent to ask him about intellectual influences other than Western.

Between 1932 and 1936, 'Aflaq was heading toward a literary career; he wrote several short stories, a novel, and a play. 30 His writing reflected Gide's impulse away from orthodox realism, classical psychology and conventional structure and toward somber and ironic distortions, psychological explorations and dislocations in form. Even during this early period, 'Aflaq's creative efforts were not simply literature for its own sake but rather expressed new moral and social attitudes which had been unknown in Syria, picturing universal themes in an Arab milieu. Unfortunately, 'Aflaq lacked the discipline necessary to the creative artist and his friends had to force him to write, always at the last instant. As the printing presses waited, he would dash off page after page; for him the story was spontaneous, the child of the moment. 31

At this stage of 'Aflaq's intellectual development, one could still distinguish the message from the medium; the message was revolt against the moral and social conditions in Syria while the medium was literature. The medium gradually changed to political action while the message remained substantially the same. And yet, political action did not overwhelm the creative in Aflaq. His later essays and speeches cannot be classified simply as political propaganda; they never lost the multi-level implications of literature.

II

'Aflaq's position as a teacher in the secondary school system led him to first address his message to his students, who eventually formed the core

30. Mustafa, Muhadarat.
of the Ba'th party.32 The earliest evidence of his attempts to establish rapport with the younger generation was organizing Nadwat al-Ma'mun,33 probably a literary club with political orientations. The choice of "al-Ma'mun" for a name is intriguing; it could refer to the Mu'tazilah who represent the philosophical and rationalist trends in Islam or it could be an echo to the movement of translating and absorbing Greek thought into Arabic which Caliph al-Ma'mun encouraged. There is some evidence that student groups in secondary schools and at the university in Damascus undertook the translation of modern Western writers.34

On the larger political scene, the years between 1933 and 1936 were highlighted by various attempts to reach an accord between the Syrians and the French, analogous to the treaty between the Iraqis and the British. But these attempts failed precisely on the point of the continued division of Syria. The rejection of the treaty by the Syrian Chamber and its consequent suspension by the High Commissioner were accompanied by strikes and riots in Damascus, again harshly suppressed by the French authorities. Events during the first few months of 1936, amid disorder and near anarchy, ushered in a new phase in the political life of Syria and of Michel 'Aflaq.

Political ferment had filtered down to the younger generation and various youth organizations sprang up. There are strong indications that 'Aflaq was involved with one of them, the League of National Action, whose main characteristic was its broad view of Arab nationalism encompassing the area from the Atlantic to the Gulf.35 Another group which came into prominence between 1935 and 1937 was the Communist party. 'Aflaq's relationship with communism has been judged differently by various observers; some maintain that he became a Marxist while in Paris;36 others assert that he remained a full-fledged Communist until 1943.37 'Aflaq denied he ever was a Communist although, at one time, he had sympathized with communism.38

The League of National Action retained some strength while the issue

33. Mustafa, Muhadarat, p. 301, n. 2.
34. Al-Jundi, al-Ba'th, p. 28.
35. Ibid., p. 31.
38. Seale, Struggle for Syria, pp. 149–51; Abu Jaber, Arab Ba'th. p. 11.
of Alexandretta was undecided, but, with the loss of the sanjaq, a faction broke away. ‘Aflaq and his colleague Salah al-Din Bitar founded a secret organization, Shabab al-ihya’ al-‘arabi (Youth for Arab Resurrection) also known as al-Ba’th al-‘arabi (The Arab Resurrection). Zaki al-Arsuzi formed al-Hizb al-qawmi al-‘arabi (The Arab Nationalist party) which, in 1940, also became al-Ba’th al-‘arabi. These two parallel formations were unknown to each other for about a year although their members held similar ideological attitudes. Al-Arsuzi’s group failed to develop but, when ‘Aflaq lost a great deal of his prestige after 1961, rival elements tried to ascribe the founding of the Ba’th party to al-Arsuzi.

The importance of these early groups is not to be denigrated since they were the arena in which ‘Aflaq ideas began to be translated into action. In January 1941, ‘Aflaq’s group issued a tract which was followed by six or seven others in February. The decisive event which served to launch the Ba’th was the “rebellion” in Iraq during World War II. Al-Arsuzi condemned the rebellion against the British as inopportune, while ‘Aflaq supported it wholeheartedly. Consequently, al-Arsuzi lost most of his followers, who enthusiastically joined ‘Aflaq and Bitar. In fact, the revolt in Iraq gave ‘Aflaq’s groups the occasion to demonstrate their devotion to the Arab cause in general, gaining public notice when they formed Shabab nasrat al-‘Iraq (Youth in Support of Iraq) and sent volunteers to Baghdad. ‘Aflaq’s link with the leader of the rebellion, Rashid ‘Ali al-Kaylani, who is thought to have had Nazi sympathies, led Eric Rouleau to assume that ‘Aflaq himself had Fascist tendencies. Rouleau quoted from a letter he received from an anonymous companion of ‘Aflaq who tells of ‘Aflaq’s admiration for Alfred Rosenberg’s The Myth of the Twentieth Century. Even if true, just as ‘Aflaq’s admiration for Marx did not make him a Communist, so his “admiration” for Rosenberg does not make him a Fascist. Rouleau’s incorrect observation that there existed in the Ba’th “an emphasis on the notion of the leader” is clearly unfounded and can only be explained by a biased perspective. According to another commentator, al-Arsuzi’s party did have some emphasis on the position of the leader, but the Ba’th of ‘Aflaq and Bitar always favored some form of collective leadership and actually attacked Nasser, after the dissolution of the United Arab Republic, for encouraging a personality cult.

41. Ibid., p. 21.
42. Seale, Struggle for Syria, p. 151.
43. Al-Jundi, al-Ba’th, p. 31; Mustafa, Muhadarat, p. 301, n. 2.
45. Ibid.
46. Al-Jundi, al-Ba’th, p. 17 ff.
To resume the historical account, the situation in Syria became even more confused with the Franco-German Armistice of 22 June 1940. The very concept of a French Mandate became rather ridiculous. How was a State in such obviously dire difficulties supposed to help another State achieve political maturity? So, in order to consolidate their position, the Free French proclaimed a promise of independence for Syria after the war.

Soon after the entry of the Free French in Syria, both ‘Aflaq and Bitar resigned, in 1942, from their teaching positions “in protest against governmental encroachment on academic freedom,” 47 never again to return to their teaching careers. From then on, neither of them had an obvious source of financial support and it is claimed that, over and above any financial resources they had saved, they depended on their families and on private tutoring for their livelihood. 48 They proceeded to build up the Ba’th organization in the last years of the war. Students “were mobilized for political agitation; clandestine sheets were published; a beginning was made at organizing the ‘street’ and suq for strike action.” 49

In the spring of 1943, the French permitted elections. Michel ‘Aflaq, alone of the Ba’th, presented himself as Greek Orthodox candidate for Damascus, 50 even though the Ba’th organization was not yet officially constituted a party but “represented the movement of the new generation toward the Arab Resurrection.” 51 He lost, mainly because his student base of support was inadequate in the Syrian electoral system as it was then drawn up.

With ‘Aflaq’s electoral defeat, there was no alternative for the Ba’th but to participate in the efforts of the National Bloc yet with reservations expressed in a series of statements published by the Arab Ba’th Office. 52 The earliest declaration which indicates the establishment of the Office is a letter to the American Consul about the Palestine problem, dated 10 August 1944. It can, therefore, be deduced that sometime between 14 November 1943, the date of the last statement without the phrase “‘from the Arab Ba’th Office,” and 10 August 1944, the date of the letter to the Consul, the Arab Ba’th Office was established. The first of the statements critical of the Bloc included in the collection Nidal al-Ba’th was also the first to be headed with the motto, “One Arab nation, with an eternal message.” The phrase had first appeared in ‘Aflaq’s candidacy

47. Khadduri, Arab Contemporaries, p. 215; Mustafa, Muhadarat, p. 301, n. 2; Abu Jaber, Arab Ba’th, p. 121.
48. Abu Jaber, Arab Ba’th, p. 12.
49. Seale, Struggle for Syria, p. 151.
51. Ibid., p. 29.
52. Ibid., p. 29 ff.
speech for the elections of 1943. The statement of 4 February 1945 is also distinctive in that it is preceded by a quotation from a previous essay, probably to highlight the continuity between the informal student group that had been the Ba'th and the more organized structure heralded by the establishment of the Office.

On 10 July 1945, Michel 'Aflaq, Salah al-Din Bitar and Midhat Bitar applied for a permit to officially constitute the Ba'th as a party. The permit was refused, but the Ba'th "was launched and no one could doubt its existence." The exact date for the establishment of the Ba'th party is a problem, because the Ba'th went through several stages: first an informal gathering, then a more structured organization, and finally a political party. The secondary sources give different dates simply because none went to the trouble of collating the evidence found in Nidal.

The basis of the Ba'th's membership was still the student population in Damascus but the events of 1945—the renewed bombardment of the capital, the student demonstrations and the consequent trial of Bitar—made the Ba'th known and popular, particularly for its virulently anti-Communist position, attacking the Syrian Communist party for its "servile imitation" of the French Communists. While its base continued to be Damascus, branches were established in other centers such as Homs, Latakia and Aleppo by students returning from Damascus to their home towns. Also, a new and separate type of organization, firaq al-jihad al-watani (Patriotic Battle Troops) was formed, essentially as an independent militia. This new organization expressed the readiness of the Ba'th to use violence and could be considered the concrete beginning of Ba'th interest in the military.

The Ba'th National Command, theoretically with jurisdiction covering all Arab areas, was composed of four members including 'Aflaq. The Ba'th held general meetings, as a party, for sometime before the first documented meeting, on 1 December 1945 at Ba'th "headquarters." Although 'Aflaq and Bitar had applied, in 1943, on behalf of the Arab Ba'th Office for a permit to publish a newspaper, it was only in 1946 that the permit was granted. The first issue of al-Ba'th appeared on 3 July 1946 with Bitar as chief editor and 'Aflaq as political editor. It is probable

53. Ibid., p. 35.
54. Ibid., pp. 103–105.
55. Ibid., p. 103.
56. Ibid., pp. 88, 193–226.
57. Al-Jundi, al-Ba'th, p. 41.
58. Nidal al-ba'th, 1:118.
59. Ibid., p. 138.
that a permit to officially constitute the Ba'th a political party was also granted at the same time.

In an interview published in al-Nidal on 16 September 1945, 'Aflaq explained the reasons for founding the Arab Resurrection party and outlined the main principles in its program. He felt that a new leadership had to emerge as a historical necessity for the incipient struggle and the Ba'th, representing the "essence, not the appearance of the people and its future, not its present," was that new leadership. The main principle of the Ba'th was "Faith in the eternal message of the Arabs, as the profound incentive for resurrection." Its sociological expression would be the elimination of traditional elements as well as artificial classes. Economically, the Resurrection would be embodied in the principles of Arab socialism which "derive from its great needs and its noble ethics." Its goal was to provide every Arab with all the opportunities and the means necessary to fulfill his Arabism. At this stage and, with respect to 'Aflaq, for a long time, the Ba'th organization was conceived of as an educational movement rather than a simple political party; clarifying the idea of Arabism and educating the people to it, was the goal of the Ba'th.

Meanwhile, the nationalist governments of Syria and Lebanon had not been idle. In February 1946, they had appealed to the Security Council of the United Nations for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from both countries. The petition was promptly granted and Syria was completely evacuated by April (Lebanon in December) of 1946. "France's 'civilizing mission' and the League's 'sacred trust of civilization' both passed into history." When French occupation came to an end, it was clear that the country for which the nationalists had fought was not the Syria which they had gained. Damascus was not the capital of an Arab empire but of a truncated province, since the dismemberment of Syria after World War I had not been repaired by the mere withdrawal of foreign control. The basic problem of post-independence Syria was whether or how to build a political community within the confines of these new artificial borders. Tension existed between the irredentist elements, symbolized in the Ba'th call for Arab unity, and the more locally oriented interest groups which became identified with the military. It is ironic that the Ba'th failed in its

60. Ibid., pp. 113–14.
61. Ibid., p. 114.
project for Arab unity but succeeded in creating a stable political order within present-day Syria.  

III

The years between independence and the Ba'th ascendance to power in 1963 saw the continuous weakening of the old elite under the challenge of a younger generation representing strata that, until then, had had little or no political power. During this period 'Aflaq played an active, but mostly behind-the-scenes, role in politics; so much so that, until the union of Syria with Egypt in 1958, his story and that of the party are one.

On 5 April 1947 the First Congress of the Arab Resurrection party was held; about two hundred members attended. The Congress produced the Party Constitution and the Party Internal Rules. The differing tendencies within the Ba'th were already apparent but not to the extent of forming separate wings. 'Aflaq was elected Dean ('amid) by general acclaim.

The colossal failure of the Arabs in the Palestine War had a profound effect throughout the Arab world but the reaction appeared first in Syria. Violent strikes and demonstrations, in which students took part, resulted in clashes with the police and in loss of life. The Ba'th took a position against the partition of Palestine, while the Syrian Communist party supported the partition and thus lost all credibility. Martial law was declared in Syria and the chief of staff, Colonel Husni Za'im, was asked to restore order. 'Aflaq was arrested in September 1948 for circulating tracts denouncing the government. (He had previously been imprisoned by the French in 1939 and later would be again arrested by Za'im in 1952 and by Shishakli in 1954.)

By the spring of 1949 it was clear that parliamentary government in Syria was in serious trouble and on 30 March 1949, Za'im staged a smooth and bloodless coup d'état. Governments and regimes were crumbling throughout the Arab world; King 'Abd Allah of Jordan and Lebanese Prime Minister Riyad al-Sulh were assassinated and soon the monarchies in Egypt and Iraq were to fall. The initial Ba'th reaction to the coup was to support Za'im, but this support was conditional upon several demands.

66. Ibid., pp. 224–44.
Twice the party was invited to participate in the Cabinet but refused as long as its demand for constitutional government was not guaranteed.\textsuperscript{69} Finally, the Ba’th came out in open opposition to Za’im, whereupon its paper was suspended and ‘Aflaq and several colleagues were again arrested.\textsuperscript{70} In prison, ‘Aflaq was either threatened with or actually exposed to torture; he himself never explained or denied the letter he supposedly wrote to Za’im in which he asks for pardon and promises to withdraw from politics. Some commentators consider the possibility that the letter was forged but conclude that forgery is improbable since ‘Aflaq never repudiated the letter.\textsuperscript{71} The incident left scars, for ‘Aflaq was never to become an uncontested leader.

On 14 August 1949, Colonel Sami Hinnawi staged another coup d’etat. There is some evidence that the Ba’th, as well as the Arab Socialist party led by Akram Hawrani, were involved in the maneuvers to overthrow Za’im.\textsuperscript{72} The new provisional government included ‘Aflaq as minister of education “in recognition of his increasing hold over the student body”\textsuperscript{73} and Akram Hawrani as minister of agriculture. The camaraderie of the two men in the provisional government gave them the opportunity to achieve some mutual understanding. It is at this time that the socialistic elements of the Ba’th, referred to in the Party Constitution of 1947, were increasingly emphasized,\textsuperscript{74} but unity of the Arab world still held first place. Whether the new emphasis was motivated by opportunism or by sincere ideological reorientation is difficult to judge.

As an expression of the inherent drive within Syria toward some form of union with another Arab State, ‘Aflaq continued to reiterate “unity, freedom, socialism” as the three complementary and inseparable principles of Ba’th doctrine. The weakness of vested interests in the Syria which had emerged from the Mandates and the existence of several strong competitive urban centers, such as Damascus and Alepppo, created push and pull forces within Syria toward union, generally with Egypt or Iraq. In reaction against the tendency for union with Iraq, General Adib Shishakli seized power in Damascus on 19 December 1949. It was the third coup in Syria within nine months. The political upheavals of 1949 were followed by two years of confusion, during which there was an attempt at a return

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., pp. 285, 287, 292–97.
\textsuperscript{70} Seale, \textit{Struggle for Syria}, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{71} Khadduri, \textit{Arab Contemporaries}, p. 216, n. 2; al-Jundi, \textit{al-Ba’th}, pp. 54–55.
\textsuperscript{73} Seale, \textit{Struggle for Syria}, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Nidal al-Ba’th}, 2:17, 21–24, 28–29.
to constitutional government until Shishakli’s second coup on 29 November 1951.

The coups d’etat of 1949 signalled the beginning of the end for the older ruling elite and initiated the gradual transfer of power to new elements. This transfer was gradual but not smooth. Although the Ba’th, through its connection with Hawrani, appeared to be in the good graces of Shishakli, it published a declaration on 8 December 1951 demanding a return to constitutional government.75 Shishakli’s answer was to increase repression. In December 1952, a number of officers were arrested; a few weeks later, Hawrani, ‘Aflaq and Bitar were also thrown into prison but they managed to escape and flee to Lebanon.76

During this period, the Ba’th made a concerted effort to woo the lower classes, urban and rural.77 In the vortex of events of the early 1950s, the Ba’th radicalized. From then on, it sought union only with ‘progressive’ forces in the expectation of the overthrow of ‘traditional’ regimes. It had earlier denounced the Fertile Crescent and the Greater Syria plans because either would have meant a return to some form of colonial relationship with Britain. By the early 1950s, the Ba’th was denouncing the two plans because they would have involved union with ‘traditional’ regimes.

Having been driven underground in Syria by Shishakli’s repressive policies, the Ba’th branches outside Syria gained importance while the National Command was relatively weakened.78 Nonetheless, the clampdown did not deter the leaders of the Arab Ba’th and Arab Socialist parties from meeting. Within a year of Shishakli’s second coup, the two parties merged to form Hizb al-ba’th al-arabi al-ishtiraki (the Socialist Arab Resurrection party). The first declaration of the new party to be included in Nidal is dated February 1953 and is headed with the motto ‘One Arab nation with an eternal message.’79 Underground organization was strong enough so that by early 1954 signs of political unrest began to reappear. There were prolonged and violent student strikes in the cities and serious incidents in the Jabal al-Duruz region. On 25 February 1954, the commanders of the army units in the north and in the east marched into Damascus and overturned Shishakli.

The 1954 coup was different from Syria’s previous experiences in that it was initiated in the provinces and not in the capital. Moreover, the leaders of the coup did not attempt to create a new political order but decided to

75. Ibid., pp. 162–66.
77. Nidal al-ba’th, 2:98–140.
78. Ibid., p. 207; al-Jundi, al-Ba’th, p. 66.
The period from 1954 to 1958 saw a slide to the left not only in Syria but throughout the Arab world. Four historic events completely changed the existing pattern of political relations: (1) the Baghdad Pact, (2) the arms deal between Czechoslovakia and Egypt, (3) the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, and (4) the union between Syria and Egypt.

As a result of the adherence of Iraq to the Baghdad Pact, which Syria rejected, and the radicalization of Egypt after the Nasser takeover in 1954, the Ba' th moved to promote union with Egypt. The party followed this course despite its initial distrust of Nasser's military background. The Ba' th, confident in its doctrine, was fatally attracted to Nasser, the Arab world's hero. It is possible that the core problem of the Ba' th lay precisely in this need for a charismatic leader who would be capable of actualizing its ideals. Perhaps 'Aflaq's tragedy is that he could not or would not fill that role. Moreover, in the late 1950s, there seemed to be an essential affinity between the philosophy of the Ba' th and Nasser's actions. Both wished to free the Arab world of foreign control; both wanted to follow a policy of nonalignment on the external scene and of social, political and economic reconstruction on the internal scene. Both believed that these objectives were closely interrelated and could be achieved only by revolutionary means. In fact, "So much has been said about the Ba' th aims of out-maneuvering other rival Syrian parties, and even more about an exaggerated Communist danger, that the fundamentally idealistic character of the move has been blurred." 'Aflaq himself was strongly in favor of union with Egypt, as a first step toward the greater union of all Arab areas.

80. Seale, Struggle for Syria, p. 182.
81. Al-Jundi, al-Ba' th, p. 73; Nidal al-ba' th, 3: 84 ff.
82. Tibawi, History of Syria, p. 401.
83. Michel 'Aflaq, Fi sabil al-ba' th [In the way of resurrection] (Beirut: Dar al-tali'a, 1963).
The union was approved by an overwhelming majority of the Egyptian and Syrian electorates, and was formally proclaimed on 22 February 1958. From its very inception, there were problems. Each of the two proponents, the Socialist Arab Resurrection party and Nasser, held varying expectations. Two aspects distinguished the political background of each: (1) Nasser was only beginning to experiment with constitutional life while the political experience of the Ba'ath had been almost exclusively within a constitutional political structure; (2) at the time the union was formed, explicitly socialist ideas and programs were only starting to be vaguely shaped in Egypt while the Ba'ath was avowedly socialist as early as its Charter of 1947 and strongly so after the amalgamation with the Arab Socialist party in 1953. Moreover, the Ba'ath had assented to Nasser's request to dissolve all political parties in the belief that it would be placed in charge of organizing a new common party; Nasser had other ideas. Again, as during the Shishakli period, the links between the National Command, now headquartered in Beirut under ‘Aflaq’s supervision, and the provincial branches of the party were weakened.

The experience of the Ba’ath with the union government was disillusioning. The elections to the single party, the National Union, brought decisive defeat to the Ba’ath; of the nearly ten thousand Syrians elected to the local committees of the National Union, only 245 were Ba’this.84 The defeat was a heavy blow, since it was clear that Cairo was involved. Whether the dissatisfaction of the Ba’ath was rooted in ideological differences with Nasser or in its failure to exert the influence and the power to which it aspired is controversial. In any case, Nasser’s moves to weaken the Ba’ath succeeded in splitting the party. In August 1959, the two leading Jordanian members, ‘Abd Allah Rimawi and Bahjat Abu Ghurayyibah organized a splinter Ba’ath with the blessings of Nasser. ‘Aflaq condemned the move. In protest, the Ba’thi members of the union government resigned. Henceforth, Nasser had to depend upon Colonel ‘Abd al-Hamid Sarraj, minister of the interior in Damascus in charge of military intelligence, and upon older elements in Syrian politics.85 And yet, Nasser’s conciliatory moves toward the Syrian right were too late and insufficient.

On 8 September 1961, a wing of the army in alliance with older elements in Syrian society staged the familiar coup d’etat, ending the union. The new regime was greatly strengthened when the secession was publicly

endorsed by Bitar and Hawrani who signed the "declaration of separation." At the time of the coup, 'Aflaq was in Europe and thus escaped the onus of responsibility for the dissolution of the union.

The effects of the union and the secession on the Ba'th party were multiple. The dissolution of the party in Syria during the union had served to destroy the party organization in Syria itself and to undermine 'Aflaq's hold on the Ba'th—even though he retained some measure of power as Secretary General of the national organization. Less clear but no less important was the impact of the union and its failure on second-generation Ba'thi members (al-saff al-thani); disillusioned, they openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the party leaders' primarily unionist ideology and retreated into a socialist orientation.

During the union period a secret and autonomous Military Committee (al-lajnah al-'askariyyah) was formed among the Syrian officers stationed in Egypt, in an attempt to revive the Ba'th structure within the armed ranks. The Military Committee was led by three 'Alawi officers: Muhammad 'Umran, Salah Jadid, and Hafiz al-Asad. 'Umran died prematurely but both Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad were destined to play important roles in Syria's history.

Perhaps the most profound and certainly the most immediate effect of the union and of its failure was to reopen the issue of Syria's national identity. The problem provoked three more coups d'état. The first, on 28 March 1962, threw out the traditional elements in an attempt at a qualified rapprochement with Nasser. The second, on 31 March 1962, called for re-union with Egypt on any terms. The third coup, on 8 March 1963, brought the Ba'th to power, in alliance with the army.

Until 1968, politics in Syria may be summarized as a series of squabbles within factions of the Ba'th party, leading to 'Aflaq's complete loss of influence in Syria. It is quite ironic that the Ba'th, standing as a symbol of the hoped-for union of Arab lands, succeeded only in creating two rival regimes in neighboring Syria and Iraq.

86. Abu Jaber, Arab Ba'th, p. 63.