**Arab Dictatorships:**
The Long and Winding Road Toward Democratic Reform in Baathist Syria and Iraq

**BY ELIE CHALALA**

Dictators often resort to wars to solve internal political and economic problems. Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Hafez al-Assad of Syria are no exceptions. Upon gaining full control in 1979, Hussein started a bloody campaign against the opposition, which then consisted mainly of the Kurds and the Communists. Taken by surprise by the Iranian revolution and its appeal to a sizable segment of Iraqi Shiites, who make up 60 percent of his population, he decided on war with Iran as a solution to his problems rather than forging a broad national front with the Iraqi secular opposition. After the war ended in 1988, Hussein found himself bankrupt and plagued by self-inflicted economic wounds. Once again, instead of introducing reforms and reducing the size and sophistication of his one million man army, he chose to invade and loot Kuwait to maintain a vast military machine.

Similarly, when Assad invaded Lebanon in 1976 he was more concerned with his own regime than “Israeli expansionism” or “Arab unity.” The cases of both Iraq and Syria demonstrate a complex link between authoritarianism and war, at the same time demystifying the assumption that all conflicts in the Middle East are influenced exclusively by religious and nationalist factors.

Both Syria and Iraq are currently ruled by military regimes. On July 14, 1958, the Iraqi military, led by Colonel Abdul Karim Kassem, overthrew the Hashemite monarchy which the British installed in power in the early 1920s. The Iraqi military has been in power ever since, with the Baathist officers in control briefly in 1963, then overthrown by a counter coup, only to return to power in 1968. In Syria, the military officers seized power in 1949, toppling a government dominated by merchants and large landowners. With the exception of two phases (1954-1958, 1961-1963), Syria spent most of its post-independence period ruled by military regimes, and by the Baathist military since 1963. The cycle of military coups, however, came to an end in 1968 in Iraq, while 1970 marked the last Syrian coup.

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Iraq and Syria are ruled by two different factions of the Baath [Rebirth] Party. The major ideological premise of this party lies in its famous trinity: Arab unity, socialism, and freedom. The two regimes share striking similarities, especially in the areas of economy, civil and political rights, and foreign policy.

Although their economies remain bureaucratically-centralized, they are essentially a mixture of capitalism and state socialism, more capitalism in the case of Iraq and less in Syria, at least since the early 1970’s. Both economies are marked by low productivity, inefficiency, corruption, and the prevalence of black markets.

Although the Iraqi regime scores higher in the area of political repression, both regimes violate basic human rights by using summary political executions, torture, imprisonment, arbitrary arrests, show trials, deportation, disappearance, persecution of non-Baathist political groups through multiple security systems, press censorship, limitations on travel, cultivation of a gross personality cult by dominating television airwaves and newspaper front-pages with Hussein and Assad’s pictures, along with the establishment of palaces at exorbitant costs (Assad had already built one, but chose to not move in after the Romanian revolution; Saddam Hussein has a $4 billion palace under construction).

In the area of foreign policy, both regimes have grand visions that go beyond their respective borders and which have led them to destroy their country’s resources: Hussein launched an eight-year war against Iran that cost more than a half million dead and over $142 billion in economic costs, and just a month ago invaded Kuwait, where, as of this writing, his forces remain entrenched; Assad invaded Lebanon in 1976 and is still unwilling to withdraw.

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Before the invasion of Kuwait, and more throughout the eight-year Gulf war, Hussein was favorably viewed by some Westerners as a force that has brought “stability” to Iraqi and regional politics. The same has been said about Assad when he invaded Lebanon in 1976; Henry Kissinger then described Syria’s intervention on behalf of the right-wing Lebanese Christian forces as “constructive” and the behavior of the Syrian president as “statesman-like.”

But the stability brought about by the Iraqi and the Syrian regimes stems from the development of a bureaucratic-authoritarian state, by far stronger than its predecessors. In fact, that stability and its accompanying realpolitik attitude, expressed in the willingness of Hussein and Assad to crush their radical opponents and accommodate the West is a function of a system of control employing all methods of repression, including even the Iraqi use of chemical weapons against internal opposition.

These methods, along with serious economic problems and international changes, have increasingly pushed the question of democratic reform in Iraq and Syria to the forefront. While a change is expected, there is no guarantee that it will be democratic. The road to democracy in Iraq and Syria is long and winding, hindered and facilitated by a multiplicity of factors, ranging from the legacies of colonialism, Baathist authoritarianism, and the impact of changes in the Arab world and the Eastern bloc.
Ideas like social justice, equality, and socialism have been extensively exploited by both the Iraqi and the Syrian regimes. It is true that in the early phase of Baathist rule measures, like land reform, nationalization of key industries and large property holdings were introduced. But the Iraqi and the Syrian states gradually slowed down their economic reforms and in many cases reversed some as they consolidated their grip on power.

It is no coincidence that the commitment to socialism was stronger during the early phase of the Baathist regimes, particularly most of the 1960’s. By all accounts, this strategy was dictated by the need for support among peasants and workers since they were the only social forces which supported the Baath Party against the ancien régime, which had relied on a combination of merchants, landlords and tribal sheikhs.

Yet a process of privatization swept Syria and Iraq throughout the 1970’s and the 1980’s. This Iraqi and Syrian Baathist disenchantment with the economic reforms of the 1960’s corresponded with a dramatic rise in oil prices and the influence of Saudi Arabia in Arab politics. The Saudis used their petro money to exercise a dominant role in Arab politics, financially rewarding Assad for distancing himself from the radicalism of his predecessors. For Iraqi Baathists, the boom in oil prices unclouded any confusion as to what the ruling elite meant by socialism: Hussein, for example, was quoted to define socialism as raising and improving productivity.

The Iraqi and Syrian Baathists justified economic liberalization and privatization as a necessary remedy for low productivity and inefficiency. In fact, at the heart of these economic crises, especially that of Iraq which is a major oil exporter, is the overwhelming presence of the authoritarian state. Because the authoritarian state rules through repression, it values power over incentives like economic reforms, full employment, and other social and economic benefits. Thus those at the helm of the state are likely to entrust economic resources to those who best service the state, rather than those who maximize the resources.

Baathist authoritarianism is dominated by a neo-capitalist class, despite socialist rhetoric. Syria, for example, is ruled by a new capitalist class stronger than its predecessor under the ancien régime. Its members consist of top state officials, mostly from the military, and merchants. The two developed mutual dependency: state officials need the private sector for bribes and commissions unlawfully earned, while the merchants need the state for connection and protection. In the words of one scholar, what dominates Syrian politics is a “merchant-military complex.” Iraq is not much different. The Iraqi military is a dominant partner in a class coalition with merchants and contractors. These two groups are dependent on the state for capital, machinery, raw materials, and licensing.

Many Syrians and Iraqis have discovered the shallowness of the earlier promises of economic recovery. Although recently Syria discovered oil reserves, the oil deposits fell short of expectations, and whatever earnings they bring are spent on imported wheat. Moreover, Syria is unable to pay two-thirds of its foreign debt ($15 billion) which is owed to the Soviet Union, despite the latter’s demand for quick repayment. Double-digit inflation, which has been widespread for quite some time, has meant a
poor Syrian family spends almost half its wages on bread.

Exacerbating Syria’s economic problems has been the end of an era where Syrian authoritarianism can be funded by the spoils of regional politics: economic aid from Arab conservative states. Syria received only one-third of its $1.8 billion share of Arab aid after the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty; the remainder has been cancelled due to dwindled oil revenues.

Iraq’s economic problems are of immense proportions. Perhaps the most crushing burden is Iraq’s $80 billion foreign debt, a result of its war with Iran, making Iraq the most indebted country in the Middle East. Chronic unemployment has led to the murder of Egyptian migrant workers, while inflation has reached 40 percent. The invasion of Kuwait illustrates the magnitude of Iraq’s economic crisis. According to most accounts, when the Iraqi regime found itself fiscally bankrupt it decided to invade and loot Kuwaiti foreign assets (bank deposits, portfolio assets, and direct investments) which exceed $120 billion, and control its oil reserves, which are estimated at 100 billion barrels.

These economic problems of the Iraqi and Syrian regimes set the stage for change. The Iraqis sought to solve their problems through war and pillage, while the Syrians wanted to buy time through implementing changes in their foreign policy, like restoring commercial and diplomatic ties with Egypt, and to gradually alleviate the costs of their intervention in Lebanon by agreeing to the Ta’if agreement, a new constitutional solution for the Lebanese Civil War worked out by the Arab League. The Iraqi solution appears to be running into insurmountable obstacles, with an immense American military buildup in the Gulf, while that of Syria is rather temporary.

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If Iraqi and Syrian dictatorships are in an economic crisis, what direction would the process of change take? To understand the possibility of transition to social democracy we must assess what little survives of the political forces interested in democratic reform. Baathist authoritarianism has denied the opportunity for any non-state sponsored political group to engage in political activity.

Ironically, the Iraqi and Syrian states have exercised more control in the political than the economic sphere. They have crushed not only liberal bourgeois and conservative rightist groups, but leftists, too. The Hussein regime, for example, is well-known for crushing both the Iraqi Communist Party – one of the two most powerful Arab Communist parties – as well as the Dawa [the Call] party, a Shiite Islamic movement.

The repressive methods used by Hussein go beyond the stretch of imagination. According to Iraqi dissidents, Baathist repression left one million Iraqis in exile. Among the groups most brutalized have been the Kurds. They had their houses bulldozed, villages almost wiped off the map, and were relocated in thousands. In 1988, the Iraqi regime used chemical weapons which killed about 5,000 Kurds, and according to one report, these same weapons were used this year against Arab tribes in Iraq’s southern marshes. Even members of Hussein’s own party and cabinet were not spared his atrocities. When he assumed the presidency in 1979, he celebrated his
tenure by executing 20 member of his cabinet; according to a press account, Hussein had a band of cabinet ministers and aides participate in murdering political prisoners.

Assad has as violent a record in dealing with the opposition. His security forces massacred tens of thousands of the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hamma in 1982. Equally atrocious was the reaction to an assassination attempt against him in 1980 at the hands of his Islamic opponents. The punishment was brutal, and was decided not by a judge but by a brother, Rifaat Assad, a flamboyant and corrupt character. Rifaat flew to Palmyra prison deep in the Syrian desert with a force of sixty men, whom he let loose into the dormitories of the prison killing everyone inside, a total of 500, some of whom were not members in the Muslim Brotherhood. Assad also incarcerated hundreds of his fellow Baathists, most of whom are supporters of the pre-1970 leadership, including the former President and the Assistant Secretary General of the Baath Party until 1970. His intimidation split the Syrian Communist Party into more than three factions: those supporting him were spared his wrath, those who did not were either exiled or imprisoned.

Baathist authoritarianism also dealt a blow to other layers of Iraqi and Syrian civil society. Whether it is workers’ or peasants’ federations, teachers’ unions or physicians’ associations, writers’ guilds or a press syndicate, all these organizations were tightly controlled by the state. Hussein liquidated the trade union movement while persecuting the Communist Party; Assad’s 1970’s “reform” laws actually resulted in depoliticizing all forms of mass organizations.

Baathist terror, to which many Western officials were silent as long as Hussein and Assad remained in line with U.S. policy, killed perhaps any ground for credible opposition, even in violent form. Syria was quite “peaceful” after the massacre of Hamma; Iraq was very “hospitable” and “modern” to Western businessmen after Kurdish women and children were gassed in Halabja.

But what about other layers in Iraqi and Syrian society, namely the professional and middle class? This class was nipped in the bud. Although it has a sizable presence in the two countries, it is weak and thus dependent on the state. Its weakness goes back to the colonial period, Ottoman, British and French; prior to the 1960’s most civil servants were recruited from the upper classes. When the Baath party came to power and the state expanded, it recruited from middle and lower classes, but only in return for their political loyalty. Lacking any form of organizations to protect their interests and needing to enhance their economic condition, they gave in to the military establishment. The position of this class, and how it was integrated in the state apparatus, will have serious implications on the movement for democratic reform.

If the change will not be coming from the outside, where would it come from and what shape will it take? After Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait there has been talk about coups and assassination plots to get rid of Hussein. These tactics reflect a degree of desperation and appear as a shortcut to avert war and destruction. In fact, while these methods may accomplish this goal in the short run, they are not likely to advance the cause of democracy.

Arab authoritarianism in its Iraqi and Syrian versions is well-guarded from being overthrown by coups or similar attempts, mainly because the senior layers of officer
corps consist of close relatives, co-religionists, and friends. Short of severe crises, one of which is an international pressure like the one we are now witnessing, the return of military coups is not likely, although there have been reports of failed military coups and assassination attempts in Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Syria.

The most likely prospect is that the change may have to come from the outside, through a popular and violent uprising waged by extremist and religious groups. In the absence of independent ideological structures in Iraqi and Syrian societies, the streets remain as the only avenues through which discontent can be expressed, as modern Iraqi and Syrian history show. The discourse on the street has been bloody and dominated by state police and extreme fundamentalist groups like the Dawa Party in Iraq and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. These groups play a more critical role than other reformist and progressive parties, largely because of centuries-old religious institutions which have enabled them to work effectively despite all forms of persecution.

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Whether progressive and reformist groups would fare better under an Islamic fundamentalist than under a Baathist authoritarian rule is perhaps the wrong question. In light of the disastrous conditions Syria and Iraq reached under the two Baathist regimes, the question may be better put as follows: under what conditions would Arab progressive and democratically oriented groups achieve their freedom, the freedom to form their own organizations free from state control? Whatever the fate of the current regimes, a long and complex evolution lies ahead for democratic reform in the Arab world.