



[DOI: 10.35549/HR.2025.2025.55.002](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2025.2025.55.002)

Original paper



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## **Syria: a Search for a Path of Development (1960s — Early 2000s)**

### **Abstract**

The article examines the experience of the socio-political development of Syrian society. The main focus is placed on an analysis of the policy of “socialist orientation” and on the attempt by the ruling party during the period under consideration — the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party — to implement a Syrian version of “Arab socialism”. The methodological framework of the study is based on the principles of historicism, scientific objectivity, and reliability. This research is aimed at filling a certain gap that exists in contemporary Arab studies concerning the scholarly analysis of the phenomenon of “socialist orientation”. In preparing the article, the author also drew upon personal experience gained during numerous missions to Syria, as well as conversations with representatives of the academic community, socio-political and religious institutions, and members of opposition organizations. The conclusion states that as a result of the reforms carried out by the Syrian leadership, significant achievements were made in the socio-economic, political,



and cultural development of Syrian society. These achievements were also confirmed in the works of well-known Western scholars. At the same time, the state-political system that took shape both in Syria and in other countries that implemented the socialist concept made it possible for the ruling political forces to remain in power for decades. This situation created conditions for the development of such negative phenomena as nepotism, corruption, and the inability or unwillingness of the ruling elite to resolve problems that had matured within society. On the other hand, as an alternative to Western liberalism – which, as historical experience confirms, has failed to demonstrate an ability to resolve the pressing problems of social development – the socialist concept may contribute to the formation of a new and more just world order advocated by Russia and the countries of the Global South.

**Keywords:**

Syria; Socialist orientation; Socio-economic development

**For citation:**

Boris V. Dolgov. *Syria: a Search for a Path of Development (1960s – Early 2000s)* // The Historical Reporter. 2025. Vol. 55. P. 204–225. [DOI: 10.35549/HR.2025.2025.55.002](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2025.2025.55.002)



After gaining independence and the withdrawal of foreign troops from its territory in 1946, Syria faced the choice of a further path of development. This stage was marked in Syrian society by the formation of political parties and movements of various ideological orientations, which actively struggled for power. This period in

the history of the Arab countries, including Syria, was defined by prominent Russian scholars of Oriental studies Vladimir Baranovsky and Vitaly Naumkin as a “period of harsh authoritarianism (1950–1960), when painful searches for an optimal path of development, fierce competition among political forces, the inclination of political leaders toward messianism, and military intervention... led to frequent changes of power”<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, ideas of pan-Arabism, which were widely disseminated in Arab public consciousness, became a stimulus for the creation in 1958 of a unified state by Syria and Egypt – the United Arab Republic (UAR). Nevertheless, the problems that arose in the process, along with the desire of the Egyptian leadership under Gamal Abdel Nasser to dominate this alliance, led to Syria’s withdrawal from the UAR in 1961.

At the same time, the USSR and the countries of the socialist camp demonstrated impressive successes in social and economic development. Thus, the well-known American scholar William Quandt noted that “Soviet Russia, despite the negative aspects of its development, set an example of solving many social problems and managed within the lifetime of one generation to carry out industrialization and transform itself from an agrarian country into a superpower possessing nuclear weapons and successfully mastering outer space”<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the USSR, which by right was the principal victor over fascism in the Second World War, significantly strengthened its role and importance in global politics, becoming the second world superpower. At the same time, the socialist camp, led at that period by the USSR and China, the world’s largest powers, comprised the countries of Eastern Europe, Cuba, the DPRK, and Vietnam. It was also supported by communist parties in Western Europe, which were increasing their influence, especially in France and Italy, as well as by the emerging

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<sup>1</sup> The Middle East in a Changing Global Context (collective monograph). Edited by V.G. Baranovsky, V.V. Naumkin. Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. Moscow, 2018, p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> *Quandt W.* Algeria: aux portes de la démocratie // Jeune Afrique. 1999. № 1996, 2002, 2023, 2024. C.43.

Non-Aligned Movement. Thus, in the eyes of many, the historical rivalry between capitalism and socialism during that period appeared to be tilting in favor of the latter.

This example of the successful implementation of the socialist concept contributed to the spread of socialist ideas in Arab countries, especially in those that gained independence as a result of national liberation struggles and experienced anti-monarchical revolutions, such as Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, and South Yemen. During this period, supporters of the socialist idea or socialist orientation in Arab countries advanced various versions of it – Arab, national, and Islamic socialism. At the same time, a number of ideologues of socialist orientation asserted that Islam did not contradict socialist doctrine, especially with regard to the proclamation of “Islamic social justice”. Some of its proponents even claimed that the first socialist was the Muslim historian, philosopher, and public figure Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who developed ideas of historical cycles and the creation of a “just society” headed by a philosopher-ruler. In turn, Algerian President Houari Boumédiène (1932–1978) emphasized the “correspondence of Algerian socialism to the spirit of Islam”, stating that “our revolution and social transformations are logically integrated into the historical retrospective of Islam, which is revolutionary in its essence”<sup>3</sup>.

A peculiar alliance between Islam and the doctrine of national socialism at this stage represented a historically conditioned phenomenon. As confirmed by the prominent Russian scholar Aleksey Malashenko, “the idea of socialism proved to be consonant with notions of equality and social justice at the level of traditional Arab-Muslim consciousness. They perceived socialism as something that did not contradict the value orientations of Islam, which proclaimed the priority of the collective over the individual”<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Franco A., *Sereni J.-P.* Un Algérien nommé Boumediène. Paris, 1976. C. 375.

<sup>4</sup> *Malashenko A.V., Muzikář J.* In Search of an Alternative: Arab Concepts of Development Paths. Institute of Oriental Studies, USSR Academy of Sciences. Moscow: Nauka, 1991, p. 68.

In Syria, such ideas were proclaimed by the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (ASRP), or Ba'ath Party (*ba'ath* meaning “renaissance” in Arabic)<sup>5</sup>, which came to power in 1963. Advocating Arab unity and the construction of “Arab socialism,” the ASRP advanced its doctrine on the basis of the ideas of pan-Arabism, elements of socialist theory, and Islam. This made it possible to implement in Syria a program of socio-economic and political transformations in accordance with the ideology of the ASRP.

In the course of internal party confrontation within the ASRP, a group headed by Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970<sup>6</sup>. The accession of al-Assad to power can be de-

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<sup>5</sup> The Arab Socialist Resurrection Party (Ba'ath) was founded in April 1947 in Damascus as a pan-Arab political party proclaiming the ideas of Arab socialism and pan-Arabism. Its slogan was “Unity, Freedom, Socialism”. The founders of Ba'ath were prominent Arab political figures: Michel Aflaq (an Orthodox Christian), the principal ideologue of Ba'athism; Salah ad-Din al-Bitar (a Sunni Muslim); and Zaki al-Arsuzi (an Alawite). Michel Aflaq supported many aspects of Marxism, believing that the Marxist concept of the “importance of economic conditions of life” was one of humanity’s major discoveries of the modern era. However, he disagreed with the Marxist view that dialectical materialism constituted the sole truth, arguing that Marxism had forgotten human spirituality. While convinced that Marxist concepts could successfully operate in other small and weak societies, he believed that dialectical materialism alone was not suitable for the Arab world. The party acquired its current name – the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party – after merging in 1954 with the Arab Socialist Party led by Akram al-Hourani (prior to 1954 it was known as the Arab Resurrection Party). The Ba'ath Party came to power in Iraq in February 1963 and in Syria in March 1963. In 1966, the unified party split into de facto independent Syrian and Iraqi branches; the Iraqi Ba'ath was removed from power in April 2003 as a result of the U.S.-led military intervention. In the 2000s, Ba'ath organizations operated in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen. See: *Pir-Budagova E.P. History of Syria. The Twentieth Century. Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS. Moscow, 2015, p. 81; Salem P. Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World. USA. Syracuse University Press, 1994. P.68.*

<sup>6</sup> *Hafez al-Assad* (1930–2000), during his rule (1970–2000), succeeded in transforming Syria from a “backward, poor, exploited country into a modernized and relatively prosperous state that stood at the forefront of Third World countries”. In the Arab press he was often called the “Arab Stalin”. U.S. President Richard Nixon referred to him as a genius. Arab League Secretary-General Chedli Klibi in the 1980s called Assad the “de Gaulle of the Arab world”. See: *Political Portraits of Leaders of the Middle and Near Eastern*



Hafez al-Assad  
*From open sources*

defined as the result of a struggle for leadership within the left wing of the ASRP. At the same time, al-Assad and his supporters declared that they were continuing the policy of the previous leadership while correcting, in their view, erroneous actions that did not correspond to the program of the ASRP. In Syrian political historiography, Hafez al-Assad's rise to power has been defined as the "Corrective Movement". At the same time, it was emphasized that "the ASRP, as a party of workers, peasants, artisans, and the revolutionary intelligentsia, has always expressed the aspiration of the Arab people to create a society whose goal would be unity, freedom, and socialism"<sup>7</sup>.

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Countries. Edited by V.V. Naumkin, V.V. Popov. Moscow: MGIMO University, 2015, pp. 78–79.

<sup>7</sup> Al-harakat at-tashihiyya min al-mu'tamar al-qawmi al-istithna'i al-ashir ila al-mu'tamar al-qawmi ath-thalith ashar (The Corrective Movement from the Tenth Extraordinary National Congress to the Thirteenth National Congress). 1901980. Damascus. P. 23–26.

In 1972, on the initiative of the ASRP leadership, the political coalition known as the National Progressive Front (NPF) was formed. It included the political parties that enjoyed the greatest influence in Syria: the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (ASRP), the Arab Socialist Union, the Arab Socialist Movement, the Socialist Unionists, and the Syrian Communist Party (SCP). The creation of the NPF significantly expanded the social base and support for al-Assad's leadership within Syrian society. The NPF adopted its programmatic documents — the Charter and the Statute — which corresponded to the ideological principles of the ASRP. The NPF defined the strategic goal of its activities as “contributing to the completion of the formation of a democratic, popular system, its constitutional institutions, and ultimately the construction of a unified Arab socialist society”<sup>8</sup>. In 1973, a constitution was adopted in Syria by a nationwide referendum, in which the Syrian Arab Republic was defined as a “sovereign, socialist, popular-democratic state”. It was affirmed that the state economy was planned and socialist, aimed at eliminating all forms of exploitation<sup>9</sup>. In accordance with the constitution, legislative power belonged to the People's Assembly (parliament), elected for a four-year term. At the same time, a special quota in the Assembly was allocated for representatives of workers and peasants. Executive power was vested in the president of the republic, elected for a seven-year term<sup>10</sup>. Following the referendum, the General Secretary of the ASRP, Hafez al-Assad, was elected President of the Syrian Arab Republic. At the same time, the ASRP, organized according to a territorial-production principle and having established its party committees in all Syrian provinces, continued to play a leading role in the

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<sup>8</sup> Charter of the National Progressive Front of the Syrian Arab Republic. In: *Modern Syria*. Moscow: Nauka, 1974. P. 349–350.

<sup>9</sup> *History of the East*, Vol. VI. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS; Eastern Literature Publishers, 2008, pp. 200–201.

<sup>10</sup> According to the 1973 Constitution, the candidacy of the President of the Republic was nominated by the Ba'ath Party and subsequently approved by a nationwide referendum.

implementation of the country's key development parameters and directions<sup>11</sup>.

However, this constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic did not contain an article defining Islam as the state religion (as was also the case in previous Syrian constitutions). This situation, together with the fact that the elected president was an Alawite<sup>12</sup>, provoked a series of anti-government protests in certain Sunni regions of the country. Most participants in these protests were members of the Islamist organization the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>13</sup>, who regarded the Alawites as a sect not belonging to the Muslim ummah (community)<sup>14</sup>. In order to resolve the conflict situation, Hafez al-Assad

<sup>11</sup> *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.S.* Syria: The Difficult Path from War to Peace. Multilateral Diplomacy of the Syrian Settlement. Moscow: Abris, 2019, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Alawites (Nusayris) are members of an ethno-confessional Muslim community that emerged in the 10th century among “extreme” Shi‘ites in northern Syria. Their doctrine is based on Ismailism with elements of Gnostic Christianity and astral cults. Alawites reject many Islamic prescriptions, venerate Jesus Christ and a number of Christian saints, and observe certain Christian holidays. See: Islam. Encyclopedic Dictionary. Moscow: Nauka, 1991, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood Association (banned in the Russian Federation) was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Sheikh Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), who promoted pan-Islamism, the concept of jihad, and the idea of an “Islamic state.” A key role in shaping the Brotherhood’s ideology was played by the works of Sayyid Qutb (above all Social Justice in Islam), Muhammad al-Ghazali, and Mustafa al-Siba‘i (whose writings articulated the principles of “Muslim socialism”). The ultimate goal of the Brotherhood was the creation, in Muslim countries, of a society built on the principles of “Islamic justice” through strict observance of Islamic norms set forth in the Qur’an and Sharia. According to the Brotherhood, this objective could be achieved through an “Islamic path of development” distinct from both capitalism and socialism. The Brotherhood became one of the most influential and mass-based Islamist organizations in the Arab-Muslim world, evolving from charitable and educational activities to active political participation, including the use of terror. In Syria, the Brotherhood became active from the 1960s onward, recruiting primarily through mosques among students and senior school pupils. See: Islam. Encyclopedic Dictionary. USSR Academy of Sciences. Moscow: Nauka, 1991, p. 117; *Pir-Budagova E.P.* History of Syria. The Twentieth Century. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, 2015, p. 239.

<sup>14</sup> The radical segment of Sunni theologians did not consider Alawites part of the Muslim ummah, relying on the views of the prominent Sunni thinker Ibn

initiated the inclusion in the constitution of an article stipulating that the president of the Syrian Arab Republic must profess Islam. At the same time, at al-Assad's request, the head of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council of Lebanon, Musa al-Sadr, issued a fatwa (religious ruling) defining the Alawites as a part of the Shiite branch of Islam and, accordingly, as belonging to the Muslim community<sup>15</sup>.

During this period, significant socio-economic transformations were carried out in Syria on the basis of the programmatic doctrine of the ASRP. In order to strengthen and develop the state sector of the economy, a number of enterprises were nationalized, and an agrarian reform was implemented, as a result of which peasants, who constituted the majority of the country's population, received land allotments and experienced a substantial improvement in their living standards. This was an important aspect of the social policy of the ASRP.

The significant achievements resulting from the policy of socialist orientation and the ideologically close doctrine of the Syrian Arab Republic's leadership stimulated the further expansion of political, economic, military-technical, and cultural cooperation between the SAR and the USSR, as well as the countries of the socialist bloc. As confirmed by the well-known Soviet/Russian scholar of Oriental studies and statesman Yevgeny M. Primakov, "Syria became the main pillar of Soviet policy in the Middle East"<sup>16</sup>. In 1980, the USSR and the SAR concluded a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Soviet specialists provided substantial assistance in the construction of energy complexes, the laying of railways, the development of the country's natural resources, and the strengthening of the defensive capabilities of the Syrian army. Within the framework of military-technical cooperation, a Soviet naval base was established in the Latakia–Baniyas area, as well as a military airfield for long-range aviation. Coordination between

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Taymiyyah (1263–1328), who defined Alawites as a "heretical sect" and called for struggle against them. See: *Guidère M. Le choc des révolutions arabes.* Editions Autrement. Paris, 2012. C. 182.

<sup>15</sup> *Seale P. Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East. L., 1988. P. 174.*

<sup>16</sup> *Seale P. Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East. L., 1988. P. 174.*



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the special services of the two countries in countering the actions of hostile actors was expanded<sup>17</sup>. A Syrian cosmonaut took part in scientific research by flying aboard a Soviet space station. Thousands of Syrian students studied at higher educational institutions in the USSR. Many of them formed mixed families, whose children spoke both Russian and Arabic and became bearers of two cultures, thereby strengthening humanitarian ties between the two countries. At the same time, an entire district formed in Damascus in which such mixed families lived, which came to be known as the “Russian” district. During repeated business and academic trips to Syria, the author had the opportunity to visit it and to communicate with members of such families and graduates of Soviet and Russian universities.

During this period, Syria made extensive use of the experience of the USSR, as well as Cuba, Yugoslavia, and China, both in

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<sup>17</sup> Veterans of Soviet intelligence services recalled in their memoirs that they could contact their Syrian counterparts to resolve specific tasks as easily as they could approach colleagues in the Soviet republics.

party–state construction and in the theoretical development of the doctrine of “socialist orientation”. At the same time, the ASRP leadership put forward its own original concept on this issue. For example, it took into account the role of Islam, professed by the majority of Syrian citizens and defined as the state religion. Nevertheless, Syria during the period of ASRP rule was essentially a secular state, characterized by equality of all confessions and the absence of religious fanaticism. At the same time, as noted by Russian researchers, “the Ba’athists as a whole showed little interest in religion, viewing it as a rudiment of a bygone era”<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, the thesis of the necessity of workers’ participation in enterprise management was implemented, along with their further professional and cultural–political development and the formation of active supporters of the political course pursued by the ASRP<sup>19</sup>.

Alongside significant achievements in socio-economic development and a substantial expansion of the social base of the ruling ASRP, Syria in the 1980s witnessed a certain activation of opposition forces. These consisted of segments of the population who considered themselves “victims” of the nationalization of part of the private sector and of agrarian reform, as well as radical representatives of Sunni Islam — primarily the Muslim Brotherhood — who were dissatisfied with what they regarded as the monopolistic position of Alawites within the structures of power.

The Muslim Brotherhood carried out terrorist acts against employees of state institutions, military personnel, representatives of the Alawite intelligentsia, and Syrians who had business or family contacts with the USSR — doctors, teachers, research-

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<sup>18</sup> Naumkin V.V., Kuznetsov V.A. Arab Kaleidoscope. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, 2025, p. 477.

<sup>19</sup> Members of a Syrian Ba’ath Party delegation, during a discussion with Russian party–trade union officials attended by the author, responded to the Russian argument that production efficiency required workers to remain at one workstation performing the same operation for years by stating that “promising workers should be given opportunities to raise their professional and cultural–political level and be helped to become the vanguard that will contribute to the creation of a truly socialist society”. Author’s archive. Moscow, 1988.



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ers, and entrepreneurs<sup>20</sup>. In 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood organized an armed uprising in the city of Hama<sup>21</sup>, which the prominent Russian scholar of Oriental studies Robert G. Landa characterized as “a dangerous outbreak of clerical obscurantism and extremism. Alongside bombings and assassinations,

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<sup>20</sup> In June 1979, a terrorist attack killed dozens of Alawite cadets at a military academy in Aleppo. In 1980–1981, several Soviet military advisers were killed in terrorist attacks. Syrian citizens working in organizations cooperating with the USSR in the economic and cultural spheres were also targeted. One acquaintance of the author, the head of a Syrian tourist company sending tourists to the USSR, was shot dead in Damascus by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Author’s archive. Damascus, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> The Islamist opposition, led primarily by the Muslim Brotherhood, formed in 1980 a united organization known as the Islamic Front of Syria, which articulated its goals and demands in the Declaration of the Islamic Revolution. Among other points, it proclaimed a struggle against the “despotism of the minority” and for the restoration of the sovereignty of the majority. The most radical Islamist group, the Fighting Vanguard, which advocated armed struggle against the regime, launched an armed uprising in the city of Hama in February 1982; it was brutally suppressed by government forces. See: History of the East, Vol. VI. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, 2008, p. 202.

the provocation of confrontation on confessional grounds, arson, and pogroms, the Muslim Brotherhood distributed leaflets demanding the return of land to landlords, the repeal of the constitution, the establishment of sharia as the basis of legislation, and the prohibition of women's education at universities"<sup>22</sup>. To suppress the uprising, the Syrian government army was deployed. In order to counter Islamist extremism, the Syrian parliament adopted legislative acts banning the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and establishing criminal liability, up to and including the death penalty, for membership in the organization. These effective measures undertaken by the leadership of the Syrian Arab Republic contributed to the suppression of terrorist groups and to a significant stabilization of the situation in the country. At the same time, the intensification of the struggle against extremist manifestations led to an increase in the size of law-enforcement structures, the expansion of their powers, and the enhancement of their role in the socio-political life of Syrian society as a whole. It should be noted that similar processes occurred in other countries pursuing policies of socialist orientation during their struggles against Islamist terrorism. Nevertheless, the actions of the Syrian authorities in this sphere were objectively necessary and justified, since they resulted in the suppression of terrorist activity by the Muslim Brotherhood, prevented the deaths of many Syrians, and stabilized the situation in the country at that time.

At the same time, the majority of Syrian citizens supported the political course pursued by the country's leadership. This was due primarily to the fact that the transformations implemented by the authorities led to an improvement in both the standard and quality of life. It should also be noted that in Syria, as in virtually all countries of socialist orientation, the Soviet experience of total nationalization of industrial enterprises, trade, and services, as well as agricultural collectivization, the creation of a one-par-

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<sup>22</sup> Landa R.G. History of the Arab Countries. Moscow: Oriental University, 2005, p. 246.

ty state system, and especially a struggle against religion, was not replicated.

A particularly significant rise in living standards affected the Syrian peasantry, whose lives in many respects changed for the better. Alongside the growth in material well-being, Syrian fellahin were given the opportunity to obtain education and raise their cultural level. For example, Professor of the Department of Economics at Damascus University, a prominent member of the ASRP and a deputy of the Syrian parliament, Bassam Abu Abdallah, told the author that “he was born into a poor, large peasant family. Only thanks to the socio-economic reforms of the ASRP, which changed life in Syria, did he make the journey from peasant to professor and parliamentarian”<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, the successful results of this social policy served as clear confirmation — among other groups, including Syrian peasants professing Sunni Islam — that the leadership of the Syrian Arab Republic was acting in the interests of all Syrian citizens. Alongside this, a system of partially free education and free medical care was introduced. The Syrian leadership also supported the trade union movement. In accordance with adopted laws, the participation of workers’ representatives in enterprise management was envisaged. Trade union organizations were created in both the public and private sectors, as well as within the agricultural sector. Thus, during the implementation of the policy of socialist orientation in this period, Syrian society achieved significant results. This was also confirmed by prominent Western researchers, who noted that in the 2000s the economy of the Syrian Arab Republic was “the most dynamically developing in the region, with annual GDP growth of 5–6%”<sup>24</sup>.

At the same time, the cultural and educational level of Syrian society rose substantially and compared favorably with that of other Arab countries. Thus, by the 2000s, literacy among those

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<sup>23</sup> Conversation with Professor Bassam Abu Abdallah, January 6, 2012. Damascus. Author’s archive.

<sup>24</sup> *Rimbaud M.* Tempête sur le Grand Moyen-Orient. Paris: Editions Ellipses, 2015. P. 359.

over the age of 15 reached 86% for men and 73.6% for women. Life expectancy stood at 70 years. For comparison, in the Russian Federation during the same period, according to the UN quality-of-life ranking (HDI), this figure was 66.5 years<sup>25</sup>.

The defeat of socialism in the 1990s in the countries of Eastern Europe and the USSR was negatively perceived in Syria<sup>26</sup>, as in all countries of socialist orientation. For their part, Western ideologues proclaimed the complete victory of the capitalist system and liberal democracy as the optimal form of state and political governance for human society, and accordingly announced the “end of history” and the establishment of a unipolar world system led by the United States. Nevertheless, China continued along the path of building “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, becoming the world’s second great power. Cuba, the DPRK, and a number of Latin American countries also continued to develop on the principles of the socialist concept. In turn, from the 2000s onward Russia restored its status as a world power and has pursued a nationally oriented policy.

In the 2000s, following the accession to power of President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian leadership took steps to adapt its political course both to the changed international situation and to the need to address problems existing within society. These issues were largely addressed at the 10th Congress of the ASRP held in 2005, at which important decisions were adopted for the further socio-economic and political development of Syrian society. During the Congress, which was held under the slogan “New Thinking for the Sake of Progress”, a law on political parties was approved that allowed for the activities of opposition organizations. At the same time, parties not included in the Progressive National Front were

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.cbssyr.org> in Central Bureau of Statistics. Bulletin of labor force 2010 (accessed 29.01.2025).

<sup>26</sup> In 1992, in Damascus, a Syrian trade-union official, upon learning that after the collapse of the USSR the “Cosmos” pavilion at VDNKh in Moscow had been turned into a foreign car showroom and that all exhibits — including Yuri Gagarin’s space suit — had been sold off, bitterly remarked to the author that “the Russians have lazy blood, like the flow of the Volga River”. March 12, 1992. Damascus. Author’s archive.



Hafez al-Assad (left) and Bashar al-Assad  
*From open sources*

granted the right to participate in discussions and submit proposals on the most important issues of national development. At the same time, the creation of political organizations on a religious or ethnic basis was prohibited. Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish nationalist organizations were excluded from socio-political life. At the same time, the issue of amending Article 8 of the constitution – according to which the ASRP was proclaimed the leading party – was not raised, despite attempts by the opposition to do so<sup>27</sup>.

The Congress also adopted a decision to develop a socially oriented market economy and the financial and banking sector. At the same time, as the historical experience of capitalist develop-

<sup>27</sup> This article was abolished in the new Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic adopted and approved by parliament in 2012 following broad discussions within the National Progressive Front, in which the Syrian Communist Party actively participated.

See: Ad-Dustur ad-Dimuqrati Fi'l-ian. Siyasatuna 2011–2012. At-Tali'a, Nos. 92–93, pp. 138–139. Damascus, 2017.



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ment has shown, the free market system, alongside certain macro-economic effects, provokes rising unemployment, inflation, social stratification, an increase in the number of impoverished people, and heightened social tension. These processes were to some extent present in Syria.

As a result of political democratization, independent public associations began to form in the country, known as “forums of national dialogue”. In total, more than twenty such forums were created in Syria in the 2000s, involving mainly representatives of the Syrian creative and humanitarian intelligentsia. For example, the “Forum of Culture and Human Rights” was established by a group of adherents of leftist ideology led by Khalil Maatouk, a member of the Syrian Communist Party. In turn, representatives of the Kurdish community advocating greater rights also created their own forums. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which was in exile, held its congress in London in 2002 and published a call to continue political struggle. At the same time, one of the radical leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, who was also in exile in London, issued an appeal to Syrian army servicemen to “come

out in support of the Muslim Brotherhood in the cause of the peaceful transformation of Syria”<sup>28</sup>.

Syrian émigrés who were supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in France created the group “Avant-Garde”, which published its own journal *ar-Rā'id* (Arabic for “the one who shows the way”). Members of the Avant-Garde were part of the French Muslim organization Union of Islamic Organizations of France (*Union des organisations islamiques de France* – UOIF)<sup>29</sup>. In the United States, Syrian émigré businessmen Farid al-Ghadry and Abdel Aziz Mouflat in the early 2000s established, as foreign opposition to the Syrian authorities, two parties of a liberal-democratic orientation – the Reform Party of Syria and the National Democratic Renaissance Party<sup>30</sup>.

However, these opposition organizations were small in number and did not enjoy any broad support either outside Syria or, even more so, within Syria itself, since their liberal-democratic and Islamist doctrines did not have significant influence in Syrian society.

At the same time, the measures undertaken by the leadership of the Syrian Arab Republic aimed at democratizing socio-political life provided Syrian opposition forces with the opportunity to openly put forward their proposals for resolving problems that had matured within society. However, within opposition organizations, leaders advocating harsh and often biased criticism of the period of President Hafez al-Assad’s rule, as well as of the existing regime, came to dominate, which did not facilitate the continuation of dialogue with the authorities. In this regard, Ali Abdallah al-Ahmad, a member of the leadership of one opposition group headed by the well-known figure of the liberal opposition

<sup>28</sup> *Guidère M.* Le choc des révolutions arabes. Paris: Editions Autrement, 2012. P. 188.

<sup>29</sup> *Dolgov B.V.* The Arab-Muslim Community in France: Islamic Identity and Secular Democracy (1980–2016). Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS. Moscow: LENAND, 2017, p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> *Zisser E.* Commanding Syria. Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power. London, 2007. P. 95.

Michel Kilo, stated in a conversation with the author that “the Syrian opposition missed its opportunity when it was possible to carry out reforms to democratize the state system by political means. The oppositionists became absorbed in harsh criticism of the regime; internal struggles related to personal ambitions took place within their ranks. At present, no one will listen to them, and Syria’s fate will be decided on the battlefield”<sup>31</sup>. For his part, President Bashar al-Assad, responding to opposition demands for greater democratization, stated that Syria would continue gradual reforms but would not comply with the demands of irresponsible individuals who did not represent the majority of the people. The Syrian leadership also reasonably believed that further reform of the state-political system could lead to its disorganization, the destabilization of society, and the disintegration of the country — an outcome demonstrated at that time by the negative experience of the former USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

## Conclusion

During the period from the 1960s to the early 2000s, Syria demonstrated a model of development based on the concept of “socialist orientation,” the ultimate goal of which was the construction of a Syrian variant of a “socialist society.” It should be noted that in its socio-economic development along this path, Syria achieved significant successes with the support of friendly states.

At the same time, a state-political system in which the ruling political force enjoys power privileges for decades is capable of provoking such negative phenomena as nepotism, corruption, and abuse by power structures. Such a situation may also lead to the detachment of those in power from the pressing problems of society and to their inability or unwillingness to resolve them and

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<sup>31</sup> Conversation with Ali Abdallah al-Ahmed, November 20, 2015. Damascus. Author’s archive.

to act in the interests of the majority of citizens. In addition, the lack of interest on the part of the ruling elite in addressing socially demanded and long-overdue problems leads to stagnation in the further necessary development of the socialist concept, both in theoretical and practical terms. Western states made use of these negative phenomena, increasing pressure in order to discredit and change the leadership both in Syria and in other countries pursuing policies of socialist construction. At the same time, as an alternative to Western liberalism – which has failed to demonstrate an ability to resolve the urgent problems of societal development – elements of the socialist concept may become an integral part of a new, more just world order being advanced by Russia and the countries of the Global South.

### **Conflict of interests**

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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Received  
10.09.2025

Revised  
12.11.2025

Accepted  
15.12.2025