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Editors

Histories of Nationalism beyond Europe

Myths, Elitism and Transnational Connections

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Antoun Saadeh and the Concept of the Syrian Nation

Péter Ákos Ferwagner

INTRODUCTION

If we read some of Hafez al-Assad's speeches from the end of the 1970s, it may appear through some obscure allusions that the Syrian president cherished a long-term and coherent plan for foreign policy. It is obvious that his most important aim was to defeat Israel and to make his country a decisive regional power in the Middle East (Le Gac 1991: 147). To achieve this, however, in his view it seemed indispensable to recreate Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*¹) in the medieval sense of the term. This

¹ Literally "land on the left hand side": in the holy cities of the Islam, Mecca and Medina to someone facing east Syria lay opposite Yemen, the "land on the right-hand side" (*Bilad al-Yamin*).

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state, which was held “virtual” by certain people—the idea of which was not new and the creation of which, naturally under the rule of his own dynasty, was already raised in 1943 and 1945 by Abdullah I, Emir of Transjordan (Carré 1971: 362–381)—would have included all Arab lands between Iraq and the Mediterranean Sea. Some historians think that the vehemently anti-Israeli Assad was prepared to restrain the war against the Jewish State even for a longer period in order to devote all his energy to the creation of a Greater Syria (Bianquis 1991: 64–70). It is telling that in the 1970s the boundary between Syria and Lebanon was marked only as a regional border on the official Syrian maps, and the border with Alexandretta (Hatay), detached in 1939, and with Palestine (and not with Israel!) was also marked in the same way (Pipes 1990: 3). The nostalgia towards a Greater Syria and the official policy in connection with it is shown by the fact that—as a Damascene researcher has recently drawn our attention to at an international conference in Montpellier—the concept of a Greater Syria “which was dismembered by the 1916 Sykes-Picot treaty and the Europeans” occupies an important place in the Syrian consciousness as well as in the school-books of different levels of education.²

All this indicates that the leaders of the Syrian state did not want to accept the actual size and extension of their country. They never forgot for a moment that before 1920 the region called Syria extended to much bigger areas: in addition to the present-day Syrian Arab Republic, it included Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sanjak of Alexandretta. After 1864, the Ottomans created three vilayets in this area (Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut) and the Sanjak of Jerusalem. In the nineteenth century on the basis of its cultural, geographical and climatic conditions, and even considering its social composition, many looked at this region as one. On the other hand, historians, including the most resolute followers of the Syrian union, unanimously share the view that apart from the Umayyad century (661–750) Syria has never been a unified nation. The famous Lebanese social scientist, Georges Corm worded it in this way:

² Khanom Al Yazigi, “La Syrie: ‘Arabe’ et/ou ‘Méditerranéenne?’” (Paper Presented at the Colloque Manuels et Méditerranée (Mamed 2009): Échanges humains et culturels en Méditerranée dans les manuels scolaires, Montpellier, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, November 12–14, 2009). See the written version: Alyazigi (2012: 205–216).

In the last one thousand years the area that we know as Syria today, was only comprised of provinces, which were governed in Damascus, Tripoli, Aleppo, Saida and Saint-Jean-d'Acre by the Mamlukes, and later by the officials appointed by the Ottomans. (Corm 1986: 75)

According to most authors, the society living there was far from being unified, and they did not have a sense of belonging together at all.³ It only changed with the 1916 anti-Turkish Arab revolt, the ephemeral Syrian kingdom of Emir Feisal (Ferwagner 2015: 5–14) and the French occupation of Syria in 1920. Feisal's claim in 1918 to create a government in the area of the former Ottoman Syria may be considered the first manifestation of the pan-Syrian or greater Syrian ambitions. In compliance with it, the Damascene resolutions of the Syrian General Congress, adopted on 2 July 1919 assigned the borders of this state:

We ask absolutely complete political independence for Syria within these boundaries: the Taurus System in the North; Rafah in the South and a line running from Al Jauf along the Syrian and the Hejazian line to Akaba in the south; the Euphrates and Khabur Rivers in the East and a line extending from Abu Kamal to Al Jauf; and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. (Hurewitz 1972: 63)

All this, however, came to nothing. The pre-World War I Greater Syria possessed an area of 335,000 km², but the Peace Treaty of Sèvres concluded with the Turks on 10 August 1920 deprived the Arab province of 150,000 km² (Bitterlien 1996: 19).

The decade between 1914 and 1924 was determining in terms of the future of the Middle East. It was during this period that the Greater Syria plan was formulated, too, and henceforth independence and unification became the principal topics of all future claims. The Ottoman Empire collapsed, the Europeans got a foothold through the mandate system, the borders were redrawn, and new, never seen states were born. Between September 1920 and March 1923, the French founded six new states: Lebanon, the State of Damascus, the State of Aleppo, the State

³ For example, David Roberts is very clear about it and denies that the Greater Syria had had any kind of historical (Ottoman) antecedents. Roberts (1987: 13–14).

of Alawites surrounding Latakia, Djabal Druz and the Sanjak of Alexandria (Picaudou 1989: 66).⁴ At the same time, the British divided their mandate in the southern part of Syria province into two along the Jordan River in March 1921. Palestine was created in the west, where they allowed the immigration of the Jews, and Transjordan in the east, at the head of which, on the instigation of Churchill, they placed Feisal's older brother, Abdullah, and where the settlement of the Jews was prohibited. Due to European penetration, the word "Syria" became saturated with a new semantic content, and from this time on, it only referred to the French mandate territories ("Little Syria"), except for Lebanon, of course, which within the mandate system became an independent state in 1926.

The different political movements, including pan-Syrianism, also started during the decade between 1914 and 1924, although I would like to make it perfectly clear that nationalism was imported to the Middle East from Europe by local Christians in the middle of the nineteenth century, because they considered it as an instrument to improve their situation. Thereafter, it was adopted by Sunni Muslims in the following decades creating Arab nationalism. The territorial changes resulted in the development of three types of nationalism by the Christians before World War I, Lebanese separatism, the pan-Syrian idea and pan-Arabism (Pipes 1990: 21–22, 33).

THE BIRTH OF THE PAN-SYRIAN IDEA

Although there are indications that the Arab "national consciousness" in the Middle East dates back to the sixteenth-seventeenth century, as the locals were aware of their separate linguistic and cultural identities, accompanied by their own historical memory, this was far from any concept of an independent Arab or Syrian state, and of course not accompanied by a desire to break with the Turks (Tamari 2017). Modern Syrian society was quite fragmented. In addition to the Sunni Muslim majority, dozens of non-Muslim and non-Sunni communities lived side by side. These communities were grouped around their own churches and religious leaders and each was characterized by different strengths of internal

⁴ Later France gradually merged these states. In January 1925, Aleppo and Damascus were united; in June 1942, Latakia was attached to them; then in December 1944 Djabal Druz, too. The last French soldier left the country in April 1946.

solidarity. However, the Syrian communities still had a common cohesion factor, their mother tongue, Arabic. In the middle of the nineteenth century, due to various factors (Ottoman centralization efforts, Western penetration, Egyptian occupation), a new image of Syria was formed in the local political elite. Syria emerged as a separate entity, which was also the common fatherland of its peoples.

Pan-Syrianism first gained supporters in the political elite and the intelligentsia, later attracted followers from all levels of society. Its origin dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when a Maronite Christian intellectual, Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883), started to emphasize that the object of loyalty of the local inhabitants must be Syria, which he considered a separate historical and geographical unit. He saw sectarianism and religious fanaticism as a threat to his homeland and urged the fullest integration of Syrian society. He sought to create unifying myths and emphasized the common features of patriotism: “O sons of the fatherland, you drink the same water, breathe the same air, and speak the same language. The land upon which you walk, your common interests and your customs are one. [...] Syria [...] is our fatherland [...] and the population of Syria, whatever their creed, community, racial origin or groups are the sons of our fatherland” (Abu-Manneh 1980). It is owing to him that the old-established idea of Syria was connected with the notion of European nation, although he did not get to the separation of Syria from the Ottoman Empire yet. Bustani was probably the first Syrian nationalist to see the Syrians as a nation.

Due to his work, several political attempts were made in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1877, Sunni Muslim leaders tried to persuade the former Algerian resistance fighter, Abdel Kader El Djezairi (1808–1883), living in Damascus, to become the leader of the movement demanding the independence of Greater Syria, which he was to be the king of, but he refused the offer. The pan-Syrian idea gained new impetus after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, when the organizations and groups supporting the idea quickly proliferated. However, pan-Syrianism only spread widely after World War I (Pipes 1990: 36–37).

Following the birth of the mandate system, the Syrian nationalists did not recognize the Lebanese and Palestinian political entities, and they considered the whole region the western part of Greater Syria (Eshel 2008: 6). From among these nationalists, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) stood out as a real, modern political organization, also

known as the Syrian People's Party, which was founded at the American University of Beirut in September 1932 by an orthodox Christian, Antoun Saadeh (1904–1949), born in Lebanon, but living for a long time in Brasil (Lawson 1994). In the well-organized, totalitarian party, the president's (*saim*) word was the law, and in the 1930s, he had followers in Lebanon and Syria as well. His popularity culminated in 1938–1939. The membership reached fifty thousand during World War II, it contained mainly, but not exclusively Christians (in Lebanon a fair number of Shias also joined), and from the members, they formed a para-military militia (Guingamp 1996: 45–46). According to a Hungarian researcher, Ilona Ács, the membership increased even further after gaining independence, “primarily among the Druze urban petty bourgeoisie and the Alawite peasantry” (Ács 1984: 158). From the French mandatory authorities' harassments (imprisonment, the dissolution of the party on several occasions), Saadeh fled in 1938, returned to Brasil, from where he moved on to Argentina.⁵ He returned to his mother country, Lebanon in 1947, where in 1949 he got involved in a conspiracy, which he was arrested for, sentenced to death and executed (Beshara 2012). As a response, members of the SSNP assassinated the Lebanese ex-Premier Minister, Riyadh al-Solh (1943–1945, 1946–1951), because they held him responsible for the death of their party leader.

Saadeh and the SSNP drew a lot from the theory of the Flemish Jesuit and orientalist, Henri Lammens (1862–1937), who strived for proving the existence of the natural and historical links of Syrian unity, which extended to most parts of the Middle East, and eagerly proposed “the racial unity of the Syrians”.⁶ In the centre of the party leader's ideology can be found the idea that in the geographical Syria the Syrian nation took shape a long time ago, which was not identical with the Arab nation.⁷ According to the British journalist and Middle East expert, Patrick Seale: “In accordance with the prophet of the greater Syrian nationalism [Saadeh], it's geography rather than history that bequeathed special identity to the inhabitants of natural Syria, which is different from the Arab identity” (Seale 1988: 26). Thus, the leader of the SSNP rejected

⁵ For his activity among the Latin-American Syrian diaspora see: Schumann (2004).

⁶ Henri Lammens, 1921. *La Syrie, précis historique*. Vol. 2 (Beyrouth), 278–280. Cited by Picaudou (1989: 75, fn. 14). For Lammens's theory concerning Lebanon see: Páll (2008).

⁷ For various aspects of Antun Saadeh's ideology, see Beshara (2007).

Arab nationalism (he didn't consider the Arab a unified nation), instead of which he emphasized Syrian nationalism. Unlike Arabism, he ruled out ethnicity, religion and language as nation-building factors, and instead, he accentuated the diversity of the Syrian people and the historical ties that bind it to their homeland. According to him, the Syrian people should lead the Arab world, because their aptitude is superior to other Arab nations. He deeply believed in the superiority of Syrian identity to Arab. Therefore, the merging of Syria into a kind of unified Arab state would mean a socially "retrograde" step to him: economically and politically, the country would lose more by such a step, than it would gain. This Syrian nation has to preserve its own identity against the imperialism of the Western powers as well as against the Arab nationalists' endeavours. It cannot be entirely European, but it cannot be entirely Arab either: it must be a bridge, a boundary between the two worlds, which, on the other hand, possesses its own psyche and civilization (Hourani 1954: 119).

Saadeh promoted the creation of the state of the "United Syrian Nation" or of "Natural Syria", which would have included the Sinai Peninsula in addition to the Fertile Crescent, and even Cyprus. In other words, based on these myths, he rejected the Middle East borders drawn by Britain and France after World War I. (Decades later, party members were convinced that these artificial borders were the main cause of the violence and conflict in the region.) As the German researcher Eberhard Kienle (1996) said: "As the cantor of Syrian nationalism, he [Saadeh] redefined the borders of Syria including all the Mashreq, and even the island of Cyprus". His concept of a nation differed from the European one. According to him, language or religion does not play a role in the nation's development (he was a Christian in a Muslim environment), but the common development of the people who live in a particular geographical area does practically; he interpreted nation as a biological community. Once he wrote:

The unity of the language does not make a group of people a nation yet, maybe it helps it maintain his cohesion. [...] The world of the Arab language does not mean one single nation, and it is the same case with the English and the Spanish. [...] Certain communities do not even need a unity of the language to create one nation, the Swiss are such an example. Religion – because of its origins – is not a national factor either, it is harmful to the formulation of a nation as it is a human creation with a global appearance. Religion can only become a nation forming factor, if

the peoples make changes in it according to their national aims. (Sa'adah 1970: 145–146)

This is why he rejected pan-Islamism besides Arab nationalism. Later, in 1958, when from the union of Egypt and Syria the United Arab Republic came into existence, and pan-Arabism flourished, the party opposed ardently the creation of the UAR and Nasserism. He defined the notion of a nation the following way:

Nation is a human community, which has identical interests, a common historical past, homogeneous psychic and material characteristics in a given territory, and whose interaction with this territory during its whole history endowed it with characteristics and qualities distinctive from the other human communities. (Sa'adah 1970: 145–146)

According to Saadeh, Syria was historically, culturally and geographically separate from the Arab world (“Syrian personality”), and its development happened through distinct phases, through the Phoenicians, the Canaanites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, etc.⁸ Thus, Syrianism (some people use the term “Syrian chauvinism” or “irredentism”) exceeded the religious differences. The SSNP made the eagle, the king of birds, living in the mountains of Syria its symbol, a clear indication of the party’s political ambitions. For the entirely laic and secular SSNP loyalty to the nation was above all, in this respect it may remind us of the European fascist parties of the era. The emblem that appeared in its black, red, white flag resembled the swastika. This emblem forms a vortex or whirlwind (Zawba’a) which is a glyph combining the Muslim crescent and the Christian cross, derived from Sumerian art, and it symbolizes that Syrian (Muslim and Christian) martyrs had shed their blood in a disciplined and dutiful manner in order for the whirlwind to sweep away the dark age (representing sectarianism and Ottoman occupation and the colonial oppression which followed) and lead to the rebirth of the nation. The party’s organizational structure imitated the fascist parties’ model as did its practice. Their marches, political rallies and activity in organizing and mobilizing youth served not only to spread their ideology and political goals, but also to demonstrate their power and ability to recruit new members and supporters. Sports events, regular lectures at the party’s headquarters and the publication

⁸ Saadeh. The Maronites are Syriac Syrians.

of the party newspaper played an important role. The affection appeared in other formalities, too: the party's anthem was written on the tune of *Deutschland über Alles*, the members saluted each other with raising the right arm in a Nazi-style, and Saadeh was said to admire Hitler (Johnson 2001: 150). There were some who addressed him as "Führer". At the same time, the suggestive party leader himself rejected this kind of identification before the public. During one of his speeches in June 1935, he declared:

I also want to use this opportunity to say that the system of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party is neither a Hitlerite nor a Fascist one, but a pure social nationalist one. It is not based on useless imitations, but is [instead] the result of an authentic invention – [an ability] which is a virtue of our people. (Nordbruch 2009: 45)

He intended for the SSNP an Italian type "Risorgimento" engine role. However, according to a scholar, "Saadeh's doctrines were explicitly anti-Islamic, if not antireligious, anti-Arab, and antidemocratic – in an area with a predominantly Muslim population strongly in favor of Arab unity and traditionally inclined to individual freedom!" (Glazer 1967) Saadeh identified the eight basic principles of the party's policy as follows:

1. Syria for the Syrians.
2. The Syrian question is an independent national problem, which is necessary to solve leaving other national questions out of consideration.
3. The Syrian question is the Syrian nation's and the Syrian motherland's question.
4. The Syrian question means the unity of the Syrian people existing already since the times before the history.
5. The Syrian motherland is the physical environment where the Syrian nation developed; it includes Greater Syria, Mesopotamia and the Sinai Peninsula, that is the Fertile Crescent and its star, Cyprus.
6. The Syrian nation is an indivisible society.
7. The energy of the national and social renaissance of Syria is nourished by the Syrian nation's talent and its political and cultural history.
8. The general interests of Syria are superior to all other interests (Tibi 1997: 194).

Saadeh disapproved of the French's divisive politics in the region (the separation of Lebanon, the dismemberment of Syria) and colonization in general, which cut Greater Syria into minor nations and peoples. The Iraqi Sati al-Husri, called "one of the biggest thinker and propagandist of the Arab nationalism" by the Hungarian researcher Péter Wagner (2009), and who disputed Saadeh's views in more than one respect, wrote about the SSNP in 1948:

There is no party in the Arab world which can compete with the SSNP for the quality of its propaganda that influences reason as well as emotions, and for the strength of its organisation, which is as efficient on the surface as it is underground. (Tibi 1997: 196)

The party (in the words of Baun (2017): "popular organization") remained a decisive factor in Syrian domestic politics even after the founder's death (the colonel Adib Shishakli who was of Kurdish ancestry and who got into power by a coup in December 1949 himself sympathized with the greater Syrian ideology), but it lost a lot from its popularity enjoyed earlier. In the early 1950s, it became extremely radical, as Ilona Ács wrote "it provided a refuge for the ultra-nationalist elements which could be driven into acts of terrorism, it trained its followers for street fights, armed insurrections, assassinations, and coups d'état" (Ács 1984: 192, fn. 280). During the autumn elections of 1954, two members of it were elected to the parliament. Soon the authorities started to persecute it under the pressure of its principal rivals, the communist party and the Baath. After a political murder, they accused it of "regionalism", hundreds of its members were arrested, and its activity was banned (Hopwood 1988: 82).⁹ The principal reason behind the conflicts most probably was that the SSNP as a pro-Western, anti-communist and as a

⁹The murder was committed at a football match in April 1955. The victim was the popular colonel Adnan al-Malki, the highest-ranking Baathist officer in the army, and the fatal shot was fired by the Alawite sergeant Yusuf Abd al-Rahim who belonged to the military police's effective force, about whom it was discovered that he was a member of the SSNP. The persecution and the prohibition of the party had important consequences in domestic politics: in the armed forces, the Baath became the country's most powerful political force. Later, some information came to light about the murder according to which the Egyptian secret service also had its hand in it, because Cairo, setting pan-Arabism as an aim, wanted to destroy the most significant Syrian rival of the pan-Arab ideology in this way. Cf. Seale (1988: 50). Others suspected western intelligence services in contact with the SSNP in the background. Roberts (1987: 41; Ács 1984: 201).

matter of fact anti-Arab nationalist party rejected the effort of the Baath aimed at the unification of the Arab peoples and the abolishment of Western influence in the region.

Despite this, the Syrian national idea still had a powerful effect on the Syrian political elite, even within the Baath, which in principle had a pan-Arab commitment.¹⁰ According to David Roberts, the greater Syrian idea exerted direct influence already in the 1930s and 1940s on the future Baathists (Roberts 1987: 11), while Eyal Zisser (2007) thinks that the Baath accepted many basic principles of its rival, the SSNP.¹¹ The common features of the two organizations can really be enumerated for long: both professed secular ideologies (the separation of state and church), possessed a well-structured organizational background and wished to increase their influence on the middle class. Both of them were inclined to conspiracy and they had similar thoughts about the role of a powerful state. Both of them promoted industrialization which was the principal antidote to the underdevelopment of the overwhelmingly agrarian country, and fought against the remnants of feudalism. Both of them recognized the important role of Islam in the Arab world, but they did not assign a political role to it in the state's life (Roberts 1987: 11). However, despite the common features, there were serious contradictions between them in their ideologies. The founder of the Baath, Michel Aflak (1910–1989) who lived in Iraq and broke the relations with Damascus earlier, in his speech delivered in 1977 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the party scoured Arab (Egyptian and Syrian) “regional nationalisms” which were concepts invented by “imperialism and Zionism” to torpedo the Arab unity.¹²

¹⁰ Mustafa Tlass who was the Minister of Defence for a long time, and one of President Assad's nearest colleagues, in the early 2000s called Antoun Saadeh one of his main inspirations, and considered Greater Syria as the first step on the road to Arab unity. Zisser (2007).

¹¹ In full harmony with this, Daniel Pipes writes that the SSNP “incubated virtually every radical group in those two countries; it had, in particular, great impact on the Ba’th Party”. Pipes (1988).

¹² “In fact this new nationalism is only the nationalism of the clans and the ruling classes who have backed off from real unity”. Aflak (1977: 17).

THE GREATER SYRIA IDEA AFTER 1970

Some people think that the greater Syrian idea had its greatest influence during Hafez al-Assad's era (1970–2000) who raised the pan-Syrian thought to the rank of official state policy (Pipes 1990: 5). However, “the Arabs’ Bismarck”—as certain political analysts called him (*Le Monde*, 20–21 November 1983)—did not accept entirely Antoun Saadeh’s concept of the pan-Syrian idea. He encountered very early with the heated rivalry between the pan-Arab Baath that he preferred and the greater Syrian nationalist SSNP. The ideological gap between them deeply divided even those who surrounded the young Assad in the early 1950s. There were some among the future president’s relatives who felt attracted by the SSNP and looked suspiciously, indeed adversely at the Baath (Seale 1988: 49). All this obviously affected him and influenced his political views. As President of the Republic, in contrast to the “rough” pan-Syrianism, Assad professed the pragmatists’ opinion: Greater Syria was certainly part of the Arab nation, and its creation was not the ultimate goal but only a step towards the formation of a wider Arab unity. In tune with this, in his speech delivered in April 1975 at the 6th Regional Congress of the Baath he didn’t see any contradictions between the unity of natural Syria and the strife for Arab unity (Seale 1988: 349). By all accounts, similarly to the pan-Syrian nationalists the president also rejected the borders of Little Syria, and he was characterized by a militant anti-Zionism as well. It is not accidental that the most important ambition of Syrian foreign policy became the recuperation of the Golan Heights lost in 1967, because without this strategically important territory the reconstruction of Greater Syria would not be possible.¹³ The defiant Assad declared after the fourth Arab–Israeli war that his country would continue the fight as long as Israel withdraws from all the Arab territories (Hopwood 1988: 58). When the Israelis withdrew from Kuneitra, the capital of the Golan that had been destroyed by bulldozers, and Assad could again hoist up the Syrian national flag, he made the following address to his audience:

¹³ According to certain people, it was because of the recuperation of the Golan and “the realization of the dream of Greater Syria” that Assad tried by all means to stabilize the internal political situation, so that nothing could hinder the achievement of this foreign aims. Kaminsky and Kruk (1987: 7).

It is not possible to describe the events we are experiencing now. That's why I simply say that the will of our people is unwavering, that our fatherland is above all, and that we must continue to be ready to expel the enemy from our Arab land. Regarding the victory and the future, I am optimistic, and I'm sure there is no force on Earth to prevent us from enforcing our rights. (Bitterlien 1986: 142–144)

He also tried to gain political influence among Israeli Arabs pushing their autonomy that fit perfectly into the Greater Syria plan. He held a radical, intransigent position vis-a-vis the Jewish State and criticized sharply the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat who in 1975 signed an army separation agreement and subsequently concluded a peace treaty with Tel Aviv (the “traitor” of the Arab issue).

CONCLUSION

There is no consensus in the literature on the pan-Syrian characteristics of the foreign policy of President Hafez al-Assad, and indirectly on the validity of the Saadeh's ideology in the 1970–1980s. According to Daniel Pipes, Assad did indeed pursue a pan-Syrian foreign policy for internal political reasons, since he could legitimize his authoritative power at home by doing so. In addition, he also argued that the pan-Arabism was discredited as a result of the break-up of the UAR resulting from the unification of Syria and Egypt, the unsuccessful Yemeni war of Egypt and the serious defeat suffered from Israel in 1967; it opened up the way for new ideologies. The Arab leaders were a disappointment, above all Sadat, so Syria needed a “regional axis”, and to achieve this, the greater Syrian thought seemed to be a “useful paradigm”. And ultimately, Assad's personnel commitment to Greater Syria is not negligible either (Pipes 1990: 149–150). Raymond Hinnebusch, a prominent American historian, however, debates Pipes's view that the pan-Syrian idea was decisive in the Syrian political elite of the 1970s. He thinks that for most Syrians the content of national identity is primarily Arab, not Syrian. Accordingly, Greater Syria is a component of the broader Arab nation, and although the majority of Syrians no longer believes in the establishment of a united Arab state, he still considers Syria's unique identity among the Arab states as the “most Arabic”. Hinnebusch thinks that for the description of Syrian identity it is more adequate to use the concept of “pragmatic Arabism” than “pan-Syrianism”. Unlike Pipes, he believes that the primary cause

of Syrian foreign policy is not ideology, but the intention to create a regional bloc against the Jewish State (Hinnebusch 1991: 1589). In line with this, Daniel Le Gac does not attribute any role to ideology in Syrian foreign affairs. It is typical that he does not even mention the concept of Greater Syria, apart from a glimpse in the historical introduction (Le Gac 1991: 19). Eberhard Kienle says that in the 1970s the definition of Syrian collective identity remained mainly Arabic, he argues that Assad began to emphasize the specific Syrian interests only in the early 1990s (Kienle 1996). According to Pipes, however, the president insisted even seventy years after the Paris Peace Conference on the 1919 definition of Syria, and Syria in his eyes meant in fact Greater Syria. At the same time, he does not deny that in his declarations Arab unity occupied at least the same prominent and significant role, which referred to the “combination” of pan-Arabism and pan-Syrianism (Pipes 1990: 191–192). David Roberts very clearly writes that “Greater Syria is the best explanation for the twists and turns of Syria’s policy towards the Arab world”. In his view, this plan is nothing more than Damascus’s aspiration to play a dominant role in the Levante. He claims that “the doctrine of Greater Syria is a powerful and politically active myth” (Roberts 1987: 141, 152). On the other hand, Hinnebusch agrees with Patrick Seale who describes Assad above all as an Arab nationalist, saying he defends the Arabs against Israel and its Western supporters. In his influential book, he asks: under cover of Baathism did not he cherish pan-Syrian ambitions? His answer is a clear no to the question asked by himself. He states that, despite all appearances, Assad, the convinced Arab nationalist since his childhood, never became a “pan-Syrian romantic”. In his view, he got disappointed in the pan-Arab idea, and against Israel—for lack of something better—he returned to his “Syrian environment”. Although he declared on several occasions that he was the “owner” of the neighbouring countries, he did not do that with the intention of annexation. Seale’s view is that he did not have such aspirations even concerning Lebanon, whose “sovereignty, independence and unity” was explicitly acknowledged in December 1985. “It’s true, we are one people but two states”. The final conclusion of the British journalist is that for Assad Greater Syria was merely a strategic necessity, not an ideological conviction (Seale 1988: 349–350). Itamar Rabinovich completely agrees with him and argues that Assad’s Lebanese ambition was only “political dominance” rather than annexation (Laurent 1984). On the other hand, Eyal Zisser says that Assad used Arabism only as “an adequate cover”, through which “he promoted himself, his class,

his ethnic and regional interests” (Zisser 2007). The renowned German Syria expert, Volker Perthes, focuses on Assad’s pragmatism, which has prevailed in Damascus’s regional and international relations since 1970 (other authors also share the view that with Assad pragmatism gained over ideology). According to the Syrian geopolitical concept, only two great powers existed in the Middle East: Syria and Israel. Consequently, all Arab countries in the region had to tie their fate to Syria for the sake of regional equilibrium and to prevent the dominance of the Jewish State in the Mashreq (Perthes 2000). In other words, Perthes attributes no role to Greater Syria in the formation of foreign policy. The debate about the interpretation of Syria’s foreign policy in the 1970s and the plan of Greater Syria will certainly continue. All the more because the SSNP, the second largest legal party in the government-held areas, remained an active player in Syrian domestic politics even after Hafez al-Assad’s death. The loyalist militia of the party (“Eagles of Whirlwind”) provided significant support to the regime’s army after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war (2011), in return for which he gained ministerial portfolios (Solomon et al. 2019).

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