

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL  
SYNDICATES AND THE STATE IN SYRIA AT  
PROFESSIONAL AND POLITICAL LEVELS

by  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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The state-civil society relationship in Syria has long been a controversial issue. The prevailing literature tends to overestimate the strength of the Syrian state, and at the same time underestimate the strength of civil society. Through my analysis of a significant sector of civil society, that is, the professional syndicates, I shall explore the nature of the Syrian state and how it shapes this sector. My thesis will show how this sector reacts towards the state, and, in turn, how this reaction shapes the state's ability to penetrate civil society and change it.

I shall explore the interaction between three professional syndicates: the Engineers' Syndicate, the Teachers' Syndicate and the Doctors' Syndicate, and the state in Syria, both at professional and political levels. My thesis illustrates how professional syndicates in Syria enjoy just enough autonomy to realize the interests of their members and defend their cases at a professional level, despite the fact that they struggle with the state's apparatus to achieve further autonomy. At the political level, however, they follow the state's orientation completely.

During the current crisis, professional syndicates have supported the regime. In all Syrian cities they are rallying in favor of the regime, and are regarded as solid allies of the regime. My thesis demonstrates the motives behind this solid supportive stand.

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*To My  
Beloved Family*

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Civil society has been long praised for its progressive role in the process of development and democratic transformation. However, under authoritarian rule, in many instances its role remains ambivalent. For instance in Syria, professional syndicates, which are regarded as a vital part of civil society, are not part of the state's apparatus, and yet they don't enjoy complete autonomy.

Civil society is varied in its nature and composition, and hence definitions differ considerably, based on differing conceptual paradigms, historical origins, and country context. The term "civil society" has become a very stretched term with many meanings, depending in what context the two words are used, and in what ways they can be utilized. It also denotes a variety of political objectives.

Perhaps the most useful way of looking at civil society is to see it as a "third sector," distinct from both government and the private sector. Taking this view, civil society is seen essentially as the "intermediary institutions," such as professional associations and syndicates, religious groups, and labor unions, which give voice to various sectors of society and enrich public participation in democracies.

In her paper "Introduction: Civil Society and the Study of Middle East Politics," Jillian Schwedler (1995) suggests that the way the term "civil society" emerged originally in political theory differs from the way it is employed today in modern debates. The term first emerged in Europe during the Enlightenment during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the work of John Locke, an English philosopher and physician, civil society played a significant role at the level of social

activity through men who were concerned to protect their individual property rights (Schwedler 1995, 3). German philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx further advanced the conception of civil society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the period of widening industrialization and market capitalism, whereby organizations such as trade unions and professional associations were identified as part of civil society (Schwedler 1995, 3).

According to Schwedler, Hegel distinguishes between civil society and political society. The latter comprises political parties and government institutions, and involves political activity. He asserts that civil society evolved as a means through which individuals could protect their rights and privilege, and to ensure freedom in economic, social, and cultural spheres (Schwedler 1995, 3). The main aim of civil society is to protect the interests of its members, who mainly comprise part of the privileged bourgeoisie, from the state's interference. As Schwedler (1995) states, Hegel attributes the ability of civil society to function outside the state's coercive apparatus because of the collaboration of associations, syndicates, other organizations, and different groups within them.

Karl Marx, according to Schwedler, considered that civil society not only facilitated capitalist expansion but also expanded alongside it. He associated civil society with shifting modes of production within society (Schwedler 1995, 4). Antonio Gramsci, as stated by Schwedler, further developed the term when he advanced the idea of civil society as a system of control and exclusion. Society is subject to the power of both the state and civil society. The state exercises its power over society through coercive methods of control, physical force, or merely the threat of it, whereas civil society exercises its power over society through control of its organizations, and enables capitalists to exercise control over economic and social practices through non-violent

means (Schwedler 1995, 4).

In contemporary debates, the notion that civil society is a product of capitalist growth has been replaced by the idea that it comprises part of democratic social interaction. The role of civil society has now been seen to shift from solely protecting the interests of the bourgeoisie from the violation of the state, to enabling all citizens to ensure government accountability. Participation, tolerance, equality and political inclusion characterize action within civil society. For Philippe Schmitter and Guillermo O'Donnell, as suggested by Schwedler, civil society expands with the resurgence of the public sphere (Schwedler 1995, 5).

In an authoritarian state, civil society is the sphere where individuals challenge the arbitrary use of the state's power, and where their rights are to some extent defended against coercive government policies. Thus when individuals gather within civil society organizations, these organizations may be strong enough to put pressure on the government to achieve their demands. It is a realm of activity outside the state that involves a set of regulations and rules, entailing democratic behavior and pluralistic composition. Civil society thus becomes vital for the transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Schwedler 1995, 5).

Schwedler states that:

In this way, the modern, liberal conception of civil society is fundamentally different from that of the classical theorists. Instead of the rights of individuals to amass property and pursue individual interests, civil society represents two ideals: first, the right of each member of a community or nation to interact with a representative government; and, second, the establishment of a set of rules of acceptable, tolerant behavior between civil society and the state as well as within civil society (Schwedler 1995, 6).

In this thesis, I will employ the definition of civil society given by Augustus Richard Norton in his paper "Associational Life: Civil Society in Authoritarian Political

Systems.” He defines civil society as:

the *mélange* of associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties, and groups that provide a buffer between state and citizens. Civil society not only refers to associability, the coming together of individuals on the basis of shared goals and interests, but also to the acceptance of two norms—civility and citizenship (Norton 1995, 39).

Central to the concept of civil society is the link between the rise of civil society and democratic transformation. Philippe Schmitter and Guillermo O’Donnell stress that democratization involves the growth and/or resurgence of civil society (Schwedler 1995, 19). Strong, authoritarian regimes can successfully distance their citizens from issues of public interest. It is only when the drive for political reform originates outside the realm of government, mainly from groups who gradually pressure the state to agree to a limited space for political debate, that civil society can start to emerge (Schwedler 1995, 19-20). However, the existence of a vibrant civil society, according to Norton, is a “necessary though not sufficient condition for the development of democracy” (Norton 1993, 211-12). The existence of a strong and mature state, that is, a state that enforces the rule of law and regulations within civil society organizations and between civil society and the state, is as essential as is the existence of an active civil society. A reliable state is required to guarantee the required accommodation between groups within civil society, and between civil society and the state, as according to Norton, “Unless government plays a controlling or intermediary role, the result is likely to be chaos” (Norton 1993, 215). Hence, cooperation between the state and civil society is required, something which is stressed by Neera Chandhoke (2007) in her paper “Civil Society,” where she highlights the role of the state in institutionalizing the fundamental conditions of civil society, such as the rule of law that regulates the public sphere.

## **A. Civil Society and Authoritarianism**

Nicola Pratt (2007), in her book *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, states that civil society continues to exist under authoritarianism, but that it operates in different ways to that within liberal democratic systems. She claims that government control of civil society cannot destroy it completely.

In an attempt to address the issue of political reform in the Middle East, Schwedler highlights the importance of looking further than the western stereotypical representation of the authoritarian nature of several ruling regimes in the Middle East, since this provides an incomplete vision of reality. According to Schwedler, in most cases the significant role of non-state actors in the Middle East, such as trade unions, newspapers, radio stations, professional syndicates and other organizations that operate outside the realm of government, is overlooked by the West. Schwedler, who defines civil society as, “this network of independent, voluntary organizations” (Schwedler 1995, 2), rejects the persistent stereotypical portrayal of Middle Eastern countries as backward and traditional, as well as the belief that they are destined to remain as such. The existence of vibrant civil societies dispels this notion. She states that:

The instances of civil society in the Middle East are not few. Every day, from Iran to Morocco and from Yemen to Turkey, citizens meet formally and informally to discuss issues ranging from health and social services to economic policy and political reform. Some Middle East governments tolerate these gatherings; in other countries, nongovernmental associations are strictly forbidden and harshly repressed (Schwedler 1995, 2).

She says that despite the fact that the viability of such associations is a contested concern; this nevertheless does not deny the importance of civil society in the Middle East as a significant issue of debate among scholars, activists, policy-makers and citizens.

In her paper “Civil Society: Effective Tool of Analysis for Middle East

Politics?” Eva Bellin underlines the growing popularity of the term “civil society” in the Middle East among politicians, activists and intellectuals, where each group utilizes the term to satisfy its own agenda. She states that:

State officials in the Middle East use the term “civil society” to promote their projects of mobilization and “modernization”; Islamists use it to angle for a legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty (Bellin 1994, 509).

August Richard Norton (1993), in his paper “The Future of Civil Society in the Middle East”, claims that civil society in the Middle East comprises a wide range of social organizations, such as trade unions, professional syndicates, human rights groups, women’s associations, and minority right groups. He maintains that it acts as a buffer between the state and its citizens.

Norton, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Eva Bellin and other scholars, agree that the civil society paradigm is an effective tool to employ for the study of the contemporary Middle East. If it is employed, people will focus on a large number of interest-based, voluntary, non-governmental organizations that are frequently overlooked in the analyses of political reform in this area. They state that current studies of authoritarianism or religious fundamentalism fall short in providing a realistic image of the Middle East because they do not take into account the civil society extant in this region. They claim that if the quality, strength and weaknesses of voluntary associations were to be explored, a more accurate representation of the Middle East would be achieved.

## **B. Political Participation and Arab Authoritarian Regimes**

While trying to explore political participation in an authoritarian setting, Holger Albercht, in his paper “The Nature of Political Participation,” states that the



prevailing notion that merely associates political participation with democratic regimes is too narrow. He argues that political participation exists in every political system, regardless of whether it is authoritarian or democratic. Hence, when analyzing authoritarian regimes, the existence of political participation should not be the main issue on the agenda; rather, it should be the nature, form and implications of state-society relations. Moreover, he states that political participation presents a challenge for both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Regarding authoritarian regimes, he says that they don't agree with political participation because they fear that if they did agree to such participation, this might limit their power. Similarly, in democratic regimes, politicians do not always agree with political participation since they perceive this to be the means by which they are driven out of office.

Albercht addresses several significant features concerning political participation, such as the quality of participatory activity, and what should be considered as political and non-political participation, and the distinction between mobilized and autonomous political participation. He says that addressing these features while analyzing political participation in an authoritarian regime is vital, to ensure against falling into the trap of conceptual stretching of the term "political participation." In addition, he claims that the means of political participation has to be carefully considered.

He distinguishes between two types of institutions through which political participation takes place in most authoritarian systems. There are the formal institutions, such as political parties, parliaments, professional syndicates and trade unions, and informal institutions that are based mainly on kinship, family or tribe. He states that in authoritarian settings, "the method of political participation may be informal rather than formal, and thus culturally embedded rather than politically apparent" (Albercht, 25).

But this, however, is not to underestimate the potential, or even sometimes actual, impact of formal institutions on politics. He further states that although authoritarian elites often establish and improve institutions such as trade unions and professional syndicates in order to control society, in many instances these institutions develop in a way that contradicts the initial purpose of their being established, since they become significant channels for political participation. Moreover:

Labor unions and professional syndicates are also state-fostered institutions that have become important channels for political participation. State elites originally created these institutions in an attempt to control society through corporatist means, but they have also at times served as important institutions for societal contention. This was the case for labor unions in Morocco, Tunisia, the revolutionary movements of South Yemen, and in the Iraqi communist movement. Professional syndicates became a scourge, particularly for the authoritarian regime in Egypt. Thus, where political participation is restricted and controlled, statist institutions, designed for different purpose, are vulnerable to being seized as platforms for political participation, both elitist and societal (Albercht, 26).

The author also states that authoritarian regimes try to restrict political participation, especially when this is opposed to the regimes concerned, praising it only when it is state-sponsored. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that authoritarian regimes should be more open to political participation, as sooner or later they will be coerced by the states' citizens to provide concessions.

### **C. The Historical Evolution of Civil Society in the Arab World**

It is widely agreed that civil society in its functional sense has had a longstanding history in the Middle East. For instance, there has been a long history of civil and private law, and trade associations that were efficient, interest-based organizations. Ellis Goldberg, in his paper "Private Goods, Public Wrongs, and Civil Society in some Medieval Arab Theory and Practice", emphasizes the lively and rich associational life in the Arab world during medieval times that bears a resemblance to

modern civil society.

Schwedler presents the point of view of Serif Mardin, who states that:

The emergence of the “idea” of civil society, as Mardin argues, must be seen in the context of a gradual incorporation of the Middle East into the capitalist world economy dominated by Western nations. The organizations that existed earlier filled the function of civil society but were not viewed as a sphere of social activity in the way civil society is under the modern nation-state system (Schwedler 1995, 17).

Some Arab intellectuals argue that Western colonialism ended the existing Arab civil society rather than introducing the social mobilization that is characteristic of civil society. In his book *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Hanna Batatu makes it clear that social institutions of civil society in Iraq were completely shattered by European colonizers and replaced by colonialist institutions. Others, however, have argued that it is new government regulations that have limited the quality and efficacy of political parties and interest-based organizations, and that these government regulations have eventually led to the silencing of interest-based organizations (Schwedler 1995, 18).

Nicola Pratt (2007) analyzes the role of civil society in consolidating authoritarian regimes in a number of Arab countries, mainly Algeria, Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia. She claims that authoritarianism does not merely classify the type of regime, and the political relations that prevail within that regime, but that it encompasses multifaceted social relations that have long been entrenched in class, gender, religious, and ethnic differences. These relations are the result of both the economic and institutional arrangements, such as the arrangement of state-society relations, and the interaction of individuals and groups engaging in social and political life.

Pratt (2007) asserts that scholars should look beyond certain features when classifying Arab political regimes, whether single party or family-rule regimes. They

should try to understand the nature of the state, that is, the “infrastructure that sustains these different regimes.” Moreover, she states that “authoritarianism is not the product of certain types of regime but rather emerges from the nature of the states over which these regimes rule.” Here she posits the point of view of several scholars, such as Roger Owen, Simon Bromley, and Nazih Ayubi, who claim that “the process of state formation in the Arab world plays a significant role in explaining the nature of politics within Arab states” (Pratt 2007, 5).

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the states that are controlled by authoritarian Arab regimes, the author starts by analyzing the emergence of Arab regimes in the colonial period. This is because it was during the colonial period when the current system of nation-states was created in the way they exist in the Middle East today.

She states that colonialism is one of two factors that formed politics in the Middle East, the second being the social arrangement of Middle East societies (Pratt 2007, 6).

She argues that colonialism motivated the new capitalist mode of production, and that this resulted in a weak arrangement of classes. Since no one class achieved hegemony, the post-independence regimes that came to power had to develop coalitions to preserve their power through procedures of co-optation. Moreover, she states:

This has created states where political relations are structured through corporatist arrangements. Corporatism represents a type of state-society relationship that is based on the linking of groups, classes, and individuals to the state through various means (such as patronage, clientalism, welfare, measures, etc.), and through various “organizational” modalities (including trade unions and other “mass” organizations) (Pratt 2007, 6-7).

The author considers that such populist, single-party regimes, that initiated corporatist structures, excluded the social groups that sustained the pre-colonial

structures, such as landowners. At the same time, these regimes employed corporatist structures as a venue for mass organizations to rally certain sectors of society that are vital for the state's economic development, such as the working class, parts of the middle classes, and the peasantry. However, this process of socioeconomic inclusion was accompanied by a process of subordination and limitation on political participation of those social groups, through the regime's control of the recruitment of the leadership of the corporatist organizations, and by the limitation of their activities. Hence, the policy of inclusion of certain sectors of society that was adopted by the post-colonial Arab regimes was achieved with the subordination of these groups that were guided by executive powers. This process of subordination was further legitimized by a populist-nationalist discourse that stressed the significance of national unity as a method of state development. Pratt (2007) also significantly states that state building should be viewed from a bottom-up approach, which clarifies the foundation for the social relations underpinning the state. So apart from the actions of regime elites, the compliance of non-elites, based on reasons of self-interest, played a major role in the emergence of authoritarianism.

Pratt (2007) essentially agrees with Nazih Ayubi, who asserts that socioeconomic benefits that were provided by the state, such as education, universal healthcare and work-place benefits, gave credibility to the populist-nationalist discourse of authoritarian regimes, which constitute a vital reason for the consent of citizens to building an authoritarian regime. According to Pratt (2007), authoritarian Arab regimes survived with the support of civil society, which carried out the process of building the state through the assimilation of individuals into the state as citizens. Trade unions, peasant unions and many other popular and professional organizations, such as teachers' and lawyers' syndicates, have institutionally associated individuals to the state

and have operated as agents for the state's provision of socioeconomic benefits. Civil society has also played a critical role in supporting and sustaining the project of national modernization.

Furthermore, as Pratt (2007) stresses, it was while consolidating the national modernization project that authoritarianism was normalized in the Arab world. Civil society "contributed to consolidating the authority of post-independence regimes and, hence, the normalization of authoritarian rule." In sum, she clarifies the role played by civil society in authoritarian regimes:

In supporting the objectives of national modernization, civil society actors have found it difficult to resist becoming subsumed within corporatist structures. Moreover, the discourse of national modernization, diffused by civil society, has normalized these inequalities of power. In this regard, civil society has been essential to the reproduction of authoritarian rule (Pratt 2007, 25).

In addition, although certain civil society actors may have opposed, and were dissatisfied about, the authoritarian manner in which national modernization was carried out, nevertheless, the majority remained dedicated and committed to this project, and accepted authoritarian rule without complaint.

Albercht states that authoritarian governments started to strengthen their presence in the Middle East prior to the 1980s, by introducing emergency rule, suspending political liberties, and consolidating power through one-party rule. The resurgence of civil society didn't take place until the late 1980s and early 1990s, and in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon the number of civil society organizations rose from fewer than 20,000 in the mid 1960s, to 70,000 in the late 1980s.

Nonetheless, even after the resurgence of civil society, as Laila Alhamad (2008) argues in her paper "Formal and Informal Venues of Engagement," authoritarian states continued to constrain the activities of civil society organizations through various

tactics, whether through intimidation, co-optation, or loading them with a set of bureaucratic requirements. She further states that, “The introduction of strict regulatory frameworks governing associations and the media is seen as one of the main tools to control these groups and curtail their maneuverability margin” (Alhamad 2008, 39), which therefore reduces their ability to challenge the state.

## **D. Syria: An Example of the Importance of Civil Society within an Authoritarian Regime**

### ***1. Civil Society under French Colonialism***

Alhamad states that in Syria several civil society organizations emerged during the French colonial period supporting anti-colonial struggle. She says that:

In the 1920s in Syria, organizations were established to protect the vulnerable populations against the massive inflow of European goods. This inflow had destabilized the local economy and created hardship for the local populations. Headed by artisans and merchants, these organizations were used as platforms to make demands on the government to create alternate ways of pursuing personal and community interests for those associated with the political notables upon whom the people had traditionally relied (Alhamad 2008, 37).

Trade unions, political parties, professional syndicates, and other organizations emerged during the independence era, with the rise of education and an urban middle class. The consolidation of the modern nation-state was accompanied with the development of these organizations and the development of modern constitutions and political institutions.

Pratt (2007) states that although French colonialism in Syria introduced liberal institutions and notions such as citizenship, rule of law and rational administration, the actual practices of these institutions contradicted these liberal notions. The parliamentary system that the French established in Syria is one example, since it enjoyed little decision-making power. In fact decisions concerning Syria were made in

Paris to adhere to France's political objectives. And when, in 1933, Syrian parliamentarians raised their voices against the interests of the French colonizers, the Syrian parliament was suspended.

Colonial domination was further consolidated by the local oligarchy of landowners. Colonial economic policies denied economic independence in Syria while favoring France and other colonial powers. Socioeconomic inequalities were created in Syria during the French colonial period, based on certain benefits that colonial power delivered to their allies, mainly access to land, and finance. Education, health and public works were left underdeveloped, and without investment. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of economic development, and political domination gave rise to a national civil society that was "motivated by the objective of ending colonialism and [was] framed by discourse of nationalism" (Pratt 2007, 30).

Here the author states that the rise of national civil society was both the product of, and the response to, socioeconomic inequalities and political domination of colonial rule. The discourse, strategies and objectives of civil-society actors were formed by the intrinsic link between civil society and anti-colonialism. So that the nationalists could mobilize civil society to aim for national independence and modernization, national leaders addressed the social inequalities that workers and women were suffering from; however, at the same time they subordinated their needs and requests to the supreme objective of realizing national independence. This fact helps to show why "The inequalities inherent within nationalist discourse are significant in understanding civil society's contribution to the construction of authoritarianism in the post-independence era" (Pratt 2007, 37).



## ***2. Civil Society under the Ba'ath Rule***

In his paper “State, Civil Society, and Political Change in Syria”, Raymond A. Hinnebusch (1995) states that political pluralization, implying a liberal state, took place in Syria in the late 1950s because civil society expanded. This was because there was a degree of modernization that generated new classes and occupational groups, such as the small agro-industrial bourgeoisie and trade unions. Modernization also stimulated traditional civil society, and, as a result, political parties, the press, and interest groups flourished. Hinnebusch illustrates how the Ba'ath party succeeded in stabilizing its rule for many years. It achieved this by advancing the lives of peasants, workers and women, who formed the regime's broad social base and who were the regime's great supporters.

This enlargement of civil society, however, created class conflict that terminated the consolidation of the liberal state, and the state failed to integrate the middle classes successfully into its system. In the late 1950s, the first indication of the failure of Syria's capitalist system appeared when the weak commitment of the middle classes to a liberal ideology ended because of economic stagnation. Hinnebusch says that:

Capitalist agriculture unleashed landlord-peasant conflict, while unions challenged employers. It fell to the middle class to initiate the mobilization of peasants and workers into politics, but given the oligarchic domination of society, it could make no democratic breakthrough and turned to nationalist-socialist movements like the Ba'ath which were prepared to overthrow the regime (Hinnebusch 1995, 218).

Pratt (2007) states that the establishment of the “General Federation of Peasants”, which she should have called the Peasants' Union, in 1964 helped the Ba'ath party to strengthen its rule and broaden its mass support in rural areas. Pratt (2007) cites Raymond Hinnebusch, who states that in most Syrian villages a branch of the Peasant's Union existed, together with the assistance of already existing village party activists.

Ba'athist ideas and principles, such as anti-feudalism and nationalism, as well as material incentives such as land distribution and access to cheap credit, were attractive enough for peasants who didn't hesitate to join the union. The regime's modernization plans were carried out more easily after its creation. Moreover, its establishment, together with the implementation of land reform and other modernizing policies, destroyed the power of the traditional landlords and urban merchants, and put an end to peasant exploitation. Here the Peasant's Union played a significant role in shifting power to the poorer and younger members of village communities, which helped to improve the living conditions of these groups.

According to Hinnebusch, as asserted by Pratt, the Ba'ath policies helped to abolish the material bases for sectarian and other social cleavages within villages, by replacing reliance on powerful families with reliance upon the state's institutions, which further advanced the process of state building and its power (Pratt 2007, 50-51). By exploring the histories of a number of Syrian villages in different parts of Syria, Hinnebusch concludes that new modes of cross-sectarian or cross-family association were produced by the political activism of local Ba'ath members at the village level. This acted against the advantages of the existing powerful families who usually drew on sect-based allegiance to further their authority. In other words the Peasant's Union, with its members strengthened by concrete advancement in their rural lives, did not merely exist at the populist-nationalist rhetorical level of the regime, but also contributed significantly to the building of the nation-state, which sequentially helped to consolidate Ba'ath rule.

In sum, Pratt concludes that:

In Syria, the building of mass-based organizations not only enabled the state to penetrate the countryside and, thereby, to dominate it. These organizations were an important agent in facilitating the

implementation of modernization policies and contributing to the construction of universal ... civil society, albeit created by regimes [which] played a crucial role in these processes (Pratt 2007, 53).

A significant period of economic growth took place in the 1960s and the 1970s that speeded up social mobility. Hinnebusch asserts that under the rule of the Ba'ath party the state expanded education and state employment, both of which encouraged the growth of the state-employed middle class. This resulted in widening the regime's social base, which included peasants, workers, teachers, students, and state employees. About 60 percent of the social base membership came from the lower class, whereas only 2 percent derived from the upper class. However, despite this solid social base that the Ba'ath state enjoyed, most associations lacked autonomy.

Hinnebusch further elaborates his theory by saying that:

Ba'athists created and led "popular organizations" (*munazzamat sha'biyah*) which incorporated peasants, youth, and women and they dominated the leadership of the trade unions. The professional associations (*niqabat mihaniyah*) of doctors, lawyers, and engineers in which the Ba'ath was lightly represented retained a certain independence until the Islamic rebellion (1978-82), during which their leaders were replaced by state appointees. The teachers' and agronomists' unions were Ba'ath dominated. Even associations which escaped Ba'ath control were, by law, approved and regulated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (Hinnebusch 1995, 220-1).

Hinnebusch (1995) highlights the fact that the Ba'ath Party dominated popular organizations and professional associations, and that both the state and the population as a whole benefited from this domination, owing to the significant populist character of Ba'ath corporatism, which operated a policy of inclusion rather than exclusion. The author sets out the case of the Peasant's Union as an example of populist corporatism. On the one hand, the union lacks autonomy at the political level; hence challenging the state was, and is, never an option. On the other hand, it has forced the implementation of much desired legislation, as it "enjoys institutionalized channels of access: its leaders

sit in party and state committees which make decisions affecting peasants” (221-2).

Thus, although the Peasant’s Union eases the state’s control of peasants, it nevertheless promotes peasant association.

The Ba’athist policies of redistribution of wealth and modernization threatened the traditional strata of Syrian civil society, that is, the bourgeois. In 1971, so that Hafez al-Assad could win the support of the bourgeoisie, “trade was partially liberalized, a role for the private sector legitimized, and the previous effort to totally control the economy, abandoned” (Hinnebusch 1995, 223).

However, an autonomous bourgeoisie ready to start capitalist development has as yet not been encouraged in Syria. According to Hinnebusch, the bourgeoisie can only press for liberalization according to the limits that the state decrees. Greater autonomy is required for restructuring bourgeois civil society and for promoting economic investment (It should perhaps be noted here that when Hinnebusch’s article was first published in 1995, he asserted that the regime was following a policy of planned political decompression that might broaden the space for civil society). Social demands for fuller democratization remain shallow. Hinnebusch (1995) states that the bourgeoisie remains powerless, since its control of the means of production is still restricted and fragmented. This is because Ba’ath corporatism has thwarted most alliances with other classes.

Hinnebusch (1995) asserts that the Syrian regime under Hafez al-Assad was by nature populist-authoritarian, and had developed out of revolts against the bourgeoisie without destroying this class completely. If the state were to allow a policy of liberalization, the bourgeoisie would comprise a major threat to the Syrian regime. It would also be the main beneficiary of the new state system, whereas the popular class, the state’s main constituents, would be the victims since they wouldn’t be protected by

the state anymore. Having said this, however, it should be noted that liberalization relies heavily on the Syrian regime shifting its social base.

In addition, Hinnebusch (1995) highlights the fact that the influence of the authoritarian-populist state on civil society may be ambivalent, as it is in Syria. On the one hand an authoritarian state oppresses the origins of civil society before it can be consolidated, leaving it far too underdeveloped, but on the other hand an authoritarian-populist and modernizing state controls civil society and motivates its potential constituents in certain ways.

Pratt (2007) presents a compatible viewpoint as she classifies the current political regime in Syria as a populist, single-party regime dominated by the Ba'ath party that has co-opted a number of organizations, such as the Peasant's Union, professional associations and syndicates, and trade unions, into corporatist structures. They have been utilized to rally support for the regime, and also to carry out the regime's policies. Pratt states that:

Within this system, there has been little room for political or civil-society activity independent of the regime, thereby concentrating formal political power in the hands of the regime. In sum, these regimes have demonstrated the characteristics associated with a common definition of authoritarianism (Pratt 2007, 3).

Overall, while the regime seeks control, it has never destroyed civil society.

After finishing my research, however, I realized that studying the political space of professional syndicates using the paradigm of civil society under authoritarianism was perhaps not the most appropriate paradigm to approach the political interaction between the professional syndicates and the state in Syria. I realized that I could have adopted other paradigms, such as participation and autonomy, which might have been more appropriate options.

## **E. Research Objectives and Questions**

Professional syndicates in Syria are part of civil society. They try to ensure the rights of their social sectors and negotiate with the state to improve the status, position and role of their sectors in society. Exploring professional syndicates and their interaction with the state is extremely important for understanding the inner dynamics of the political structure in Syria, and also helps to address power relations in Syria, and to unpack a broad variety of questions. For example, where have the professional syndicates been successful? Where have they failed? Is the inefficiency of the professional syndicates owing to the state's coercive rule or because of the lack of activity on the part of their members? How do state policies regulate professional syndicates? And, perhaps most importantly, to what extent is the state involved in the process of recruiting the leading members of professional syndicates? How are these professional syndicates governed? How much autonomy do they have to direct their own internal affairs? What is the political role of the syndicates? How do they affect the political system and how are they affected by it? Have there been any attempts to influence the agenda or decisions of the syndicates by the Ba'ath Party? And to what extent do state and professional syndicates interact with tolerance and civility?

Many claim that the ruling system in Syria is Alawite. My thesis investigates the validity of such a claim in by exploring whether sectarian affiliation plays a significant role within three professional syndicates. I have therefore made sure, if at all possible, to include the sect of all the interviewees whose words appear throughout the thesis, to help the reader form as accurate a picture as possible of the syndicates in question.

In 1981, after the events of the Muslim Brotherhood had taken place, the state took control over the professional syndicates. My thesis illustrates how this affected the

syndicates' performance.

By exploring these and other issues, my thesis seeks to uncover a better understanding of state-society relations in Syria, which might offer significant insights into the motives behind the current Syrian crisis.

## **F. Methodology**

The scope of the research is limited to three syndicates: the Doctors' Syndicate, the Engineers' Syndicate, and the Teachers' Syndicate. Popular unions, such as the Workers' Union, the Peasants' Union and the Women's Union, have not been included in my thesis as they are unions rather than syndicates, and their membership is solidly working class rather than a mixture of working class and middle class. In addition, unions have been, and are now, staunch allies of the Ba'ath Party and do not enjoy much, if any, autonomy.

As there is only a minimal amount of published work that covers the issues I am dealing with in my thesis, interviews constitute the main method of gathering data. Apart from relevant texts, such as documents related to the electoral law, internal systems, bylaws and regulations of the syndicates, conducting interviews was vital in order to establish the actual practices that operate behind and beyond the prescribed laws.

Interviews were conducted with the current presidents of the three professional syndicates. They were approached officially, by my contacting secretaries of the syndicates and making appointments with them. Former presidents and active members in the syndicates were also approached, through family and friends' connections. In order to gain adequate information and data, more than twelve interviews were conducted for each syndicate. The selection of interviewees was based on their

experience and level of activity in the syndicate. Diversifying the criteria for selecting interviewees was taken into consideration. Thus, for example, interviewees were selected from Damascus, as well as from other cities in Syria, from different sectarian affiliations, and from different political backgrounds (Ba'athist, Progressive National Front, and independent).

The interviewees were granted a week before their consent was requested for the interviews to be conducted. Their identities remained anonymous, except for the presidents of the syndicates, who, since they are public figures, and giving interviews is part of their brief, were therefore named. Their consent was, of course, requested. It is suggested that the research does not pose any risk for the participants.

In the interviews conducted I interviewed people from different political orientations, and sometimes asked different people the same questions so that I could compare answers and assess which were closer to the reality explored in the particular syndicate. All this required a thorough knowledge of the history, process, achievement, and weaknesses of the syndicates over the time period specified for my research.

Many of the Ba'athists I interviewed talked loudly and, contrary to my expectations, didn't mind my taking notes while they were talking. I didn't have any problem with getting them to talk as they were all so frustrated with the performance of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party. Most of my interviewees asked me not to mention their names, but felt free to voice their opinions, provided they were documented anonymously. Also, I was aware that there were Ba'athists who were not telling the truth about the real situation in the syndicates. Many of the interviews that were conducted were not viable as interviewees were faking facts and providing false information. Their comments are not included in this thesis as they do not fit the reality of either the syndicates or the country. In this connection, it should be noted that the



number of interviews that were conducted is many more than the number that appear in this thesis.

When I conducted my research, which was at a time of crisis in Syria, there were many constraints. For example, there were a number of people, around 20 percent of the total number of my interviewees, who did not dare talk and were afraid to come forward. I therefore had to seek others who were willing to be interviewed and who felt free to answer my questions. Some were not interested in sitting for any interview, while others were reluctant because, I assume, they didn't believe that I was a researcher; it is possible they thought I belonged to the state's intelligence branch. In view of the crisis, it is understandable that people might refuse to sit for an interview that questions the political interaction between the state and the syndicates; they probably feared that this might threaten them personally.

I was ready to meet with the respondents at any time and at any place they wanted, whether in the syndicate, a café, or in their homes. I took all precautions to ensure they could talk freely, and therefore did not record anything electronically. Sometimes I took notes; otherwise I relied on my memory before I transcribed the interviews at home. There were, however, challenges when setting appointments. For example, it happened many times that while travelling to meet a respondent, a bombing would take place in Damascus and I would therefore have to cancel and reschedule the appointment for later. Also, several times my appointments were canceled as my interviewees were participating in pro-regime marches on the same day.

It was extremely embarrassing to ask about the sectarian affiliation of the interviewees. In Syrian culture, such a question is not deemed to be appropriate, and it is rarely, if ever, asked. I had to use various indirect methods of learning about my interviewees' sectarian affiliations, such as asking other people who knew them about

it, because I could not ask such a question directly face to face.

I attempted to determine the truth about the role of the syndicates, their inner mechanisms, their actual role within the ruling system, the development of this role over the last twenty years and the implications of my findings for the state and for Syrian political life. As no research has previously been undertaken in this field, I relied on extensive interviews. I only used the points made and verified by interviewees from many different political standpoints. I also interviewed independent members of the syndicates who have nothing to do with the political hierarchy of the particular syndicate concerned, and obtained their assessments of the professional performance of these syndicates and the impact, whether positive or negative, they had on their careers and lives.

## **G. Data Collection**

For each syndicate the following data were collected:

- The number of members of the syndicate.
- The percentage of women/men membership.
- The percentage of Ba'athist membership.
- Whether the president of the syndicate was Ba'athist or independent.<sup>1</sup>
- Whether members of the executive council were Ba'athist or independent.
- Whether there was informal, sectarian affiliation. (This would clarify

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the syndicates either belong to a party of the Progressive National Front, which comprises nine political parties, such as The Ba'ath Party, The Communist Party and the Arab Socialists Party. Or they are Ba'athists, that is, they belong to the Ba'ath Party, which is both the ruling party and also one of the parties within the Progressive National Front. Members, who do not belong to the Ba'ath Party, or to any political party in the Progressive National Front, are independent members.

whether or not there was informal sectarian distribution of official posts within the syndicate).

The data covers the previous twenty years, from 1990-2010, that is, the last ten years of the presidency of Hafaz al-Assad, and the first ten years of the rule of President Bashar al-Assad. Gathering data was extremely difficult from both the Doctors' and Engineers' syndicates as neither syndicates archived past material. With the Teachers' Syndicate, however, it was much easier to obtain access to information and data because it is a front organization of the Ba'ath Party, and the Party makes sure the archives of its organizations are well organized and accessible.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ENGINEERS' SYNDICATE

#### **A. Introduction**

In this chapter, I will investigate the role that *Nqābat al-Muhandisīn* (The Engineers' Syndicate) plays in the political life of Syria. The Syndicate enjoys a distinctive and notable presence in comparison with other syndicates, because of its large membership, which, aside from the teachers' syndicate, equals the membership of the rest of the professional syndicates combined. Also, several previous Prime Ministers of Syria have been engineers, such as Nājy al-'try and 'ādil Safar, respectively, and engineers usually hold important ministries, such as that of the Ministry of Irrigation, Ministry of Housing and Construction, Ministry of Communication, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Industry. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to study the Engineers' Syndicate.

By setting out the Engineers' Syndicate's structure, the procedures through which leaders of the syndicate are recruited, and the process of elections, I will show how far the government and the Ba'ath Party are involved in the procedures and decisions of the Syndicate at both political and professional levels. I will also show to what extent the Syndicate remains independent of both these institutions. In addition, I will attempt to find out if there is any informal sectarian distribution of the leadership positions within the Syndicate.

#### **B. Historical Background**

In 1950, *Nqābat al-Muhandisīn* (the Engineers' Syndicate) was established,

with its headquarters in Damascus. There were branches in the following provinces: Damascus, Homs, Hamah, Horan and Siwāidā'. In 1951, another two syndicates were established. One of these was in Aleppo and covered the following provinces: Aleppo, Dir-al Zour, and al-Jazeera, while the second was in the coastal region with its headquarters in Lattakia that covered the province of Lattakia. The three syndicates were established based on the provisions of Legislative Decree No. 19 on January 18, 1950, which stated that the Engineers' Syndicate was established to defend the rights of its members, improve their living conditions and advance their scientific knowledge. However, the three syndicates were not involved with any political agenda.

On November 16, 1970, al-Haraka al-Taṣḥīḥiyya (the Corrective Movement<sup>2</sup>) took place in Syria. This was a bloodless coup within the Ba'ath party, led by Hafez al-Assad, who at that time was the minister of defense, and through which he took power, becoming the president of the Syrian Arab Republic.

In 1973, twenty-three years after the establishment of the three syndicates, Law No. 17 was issued. This stated that the three engineering syndicates should unite to form one syndicate to cover all engineers in Syria, with branches in all provinces of Syria where the number of engineers exceeded fifty, and that its center would be located in Damascus. Following this, the Syndicate issued a declaration of its internal system, which included the practice of the profession, and its financial system, and also ratified all systems decreed by the Minister of Public Works, which at that time was responsible

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<sup>2</sup> It was called the "Corrective Movement" because it was considered that it changed the course of, and ended the internal conflicts within, the Ba'ath Party. These conflicts were mainly between Salah Jdid, who represented the extreme left wing, and Hafez al-Assad who represented the moderate wing. The Movement is praised because it established the stability of the state and ended a time of coups in Syria. Subsequently, the Syrian authorities named a number of achievements in Syria as "achievements of the Corrective Movement". For example, the building of the Euphrates dam and organizing professional syndicates are considered to be some of its achievements.

for the Engineers' Syndicate.

Law No. 17 was amended and reissued as Law No. 26 in 1981, which further organized the engineering profession in Syria. It changed the period of the electoral term within the Syndicate from four to five years, and carried out major changes within its structure as well as the process of elections. According to one of my interviewees, when I asked him why this change took place, and what difference the change would make, he said that the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party carried out this change. This was mainly because it was considered that five years would be enough time for the Ba'ath Party to prepare for the elections and to rally its members. My interviewee also complained that five years is a long period of time, and that in some countries elections within associations take place every two years.

In 1974, another law, No. 49, was issued, whereby the state was obliged to appoint all graduate engineers to work in the public sector within sixty days from the day they graduated for a period of five years. Following this five-year period, engineers would then be free to continue with their present job, leave to work for a private company, or be allowed to continue with postgraduate studies. The state then became responsible for granting graduate engineers compensation for undertaking specialist work or studies, and was also responsible for other compensations such as that relating to the difficulty of accommodation, whereby money is paid to engineers who live under difficult circumstances on account of their job. Compensation is also paid as an incentive to engineers who deliver a good product or who manage their firm or contract well.

This law benefited both engineers and the state, since the state lacked a sufficient number of engineers to carry out engineering work in state institutions, such as housing and public waterworks, and in its production sectors such as the agricultural

and industrial sectors. This law continued to function until the early 1990s, when a decree was issued stating that an engineer had the right to choose either to work in the public or in the private sector, and this was effective until 2005. In 2010, decree<sup>3</sup> No. 80 was issued, whereby the state absolved itself from the obligation to appoint graduate engineers to work in public institutions, although it continued to appoint them if there was a need to do so. At the present time, appointing graduate engineers to work in the state sector is restricted to those with an average of 60 percent on graduation, a grade achieved partly on account of their examinations and partly on account of their course work.

Appointments are effected after a decision is reached and issued by the Council of Ministers, once the ministries concerned have stated their needs. However, the state has continued with its commitment to appoint all graduate engineers with certain limited specializations to jobs within these fields, such as nuclear and petroleum engineers.

Although the two laws Nos. 17 and 49 were further amended by several laws and decrees that were issued subsequently, nevertheless they have been, and still are, praised in most booklets of the Engineers' Syndicate, as well as in literature relating to the accomplishments of the Ba'ath party. They are regarded as an historic achievement of the Corrective Movement.

In 2012, the Syndicate comprises 113,888 members, 39<sup>4</sup> percent of which are

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<sup>3</sup> Laws are issued by Parliament, whereas the President of the Republic issues decrees when Parliament is in recess. Decrees enjoy the power of law, but should be presented to Parliament once it is in session. All decrees should be established on executive instructions, such as internal system, which should be issued by the General Congress, and are only valid when the Minister of Construction ratifies them.

<sup>4</sup> The percentage of Ba'athists members in the three syndicates is obtained from the professional syndicates' office in the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party.

Ba'athists. The rest either independents or belong to political parties of the Progressive National Front. Women constitute 23 percent of the membership.

### C. Structure of the Engineers' Syndicate

There are fourteen branches of the Syndicate in all fourteen Syrian provinces. The electoral term is five years.

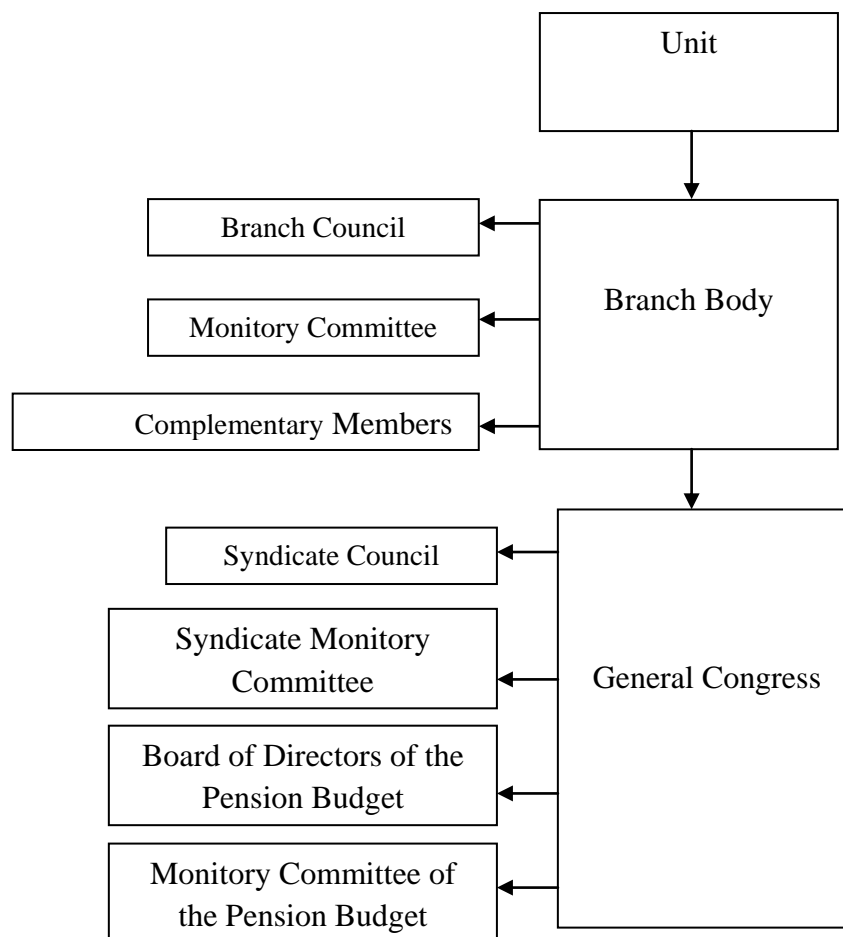


Fig. 1. The Structure of the Engineers' Syndicate

#### 1. *al-Wiḥda (The Unit)*

Every engineers' gathering, where the number of engineers is no less than fifty, and providing they have been registered in the Syndicate for a period of no less than



two years, is considered a Unit, such as an oil factory. It is also possible to unite several adjacent engineers' gatherings to form one Unit.

The engineers in the Unit meet and elect their representatives to the Branch Body within a percentage decided by the General Congress, which is proportional to the size of the province where the branch is located. Thus, in the province of Homs, for example, one engineer represents fifty engineers, whereas in the province of Damascus, one engineer represents a hundred engineers. This is because the province of Homs comprises 13,000 engineers, whereas Damascus province comprises 30,000 engineers.

## ***2. Hay'at al-Firi' (The Branch Body)***

The Branch Body comprises all the elected representatives of the Units in the province. The Body meets shortly after being elected, and elects:

- Majlis al-Firi' (The Branch Council), which consists of seven members, who are also members of the General Congress. The president of the Branch Council is the president of the branch of the syndicate in the province. It meets at least once every two weeks, and usually once a week. The Branch Council meets and elects from its members the president, General Secretary and a Treasurer.

- Lajnat Murāqaba (The Monitory Committee), which consists of three members. They are not members of the General Congress.

- A'daā' Mutammimūn (Complementary Members<sup>5</sup>), which consists of ten members who are also members of the General Congress. Complementary members are members who are merely elected to represent members of the branch at the General

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<sup>5</sup> Complementary Members are only elected to represent the branch at the General Congress. They are known as "complementary" because they "complement" the members of the branch office who are the representatives of the branch. Their only duty is to represent the branch at the General Congress.

Congress. They are not members of any committee of the branch.

In each branch, the Branch Body elects seventeen members who represent the branch of the province at the General Congress. So all provinces are represented in the General Congress by a fixed number of representatives, that is, seventeen representatives, regardless of the size of the province. Representation of the branches in the General Congress is not proportional with the size of the branch, and this could be considered as a flaw in the organizational structure of the syndicate.

The president of the branch heads the meetings of the Branch Body. The Branch Body is the highest authority within the branch. It has the right to hold the Branch Council accountable and to indicate a lack of confidence in the president of the branch, or any member in the branch council, or the whole board, or the supervision committee. The Branch Body meets annually to discuss the report of the Branch Council and the budget of the branch of the previous year, as well as to approve this budget after examining the report of the accounting inspector. It also puts forward a new plan and a new budget for the branch for the following year.

At the request of the president of the Branch Body, the latter can arrange an exceptional meeting, based on a request from the Branch Council, or on a written request of at least 60 percent of the Branch Body members. If this is the case, the meeting should be held within thirty days from the day of the request.

### ***3. al- Mū ḡamar al- ūm (The General Congress)***

The General Congress consists of:

- Seventeen representatives of each branch of the Syndicate, which include seven members of the Branch Council and ten Complementary Members from all the Syrian provinces.

- Members of the Syndicate Council of the previous electoral term.
- Members of the Monitory Committee of the previous electoral term.
- Members of the Board of Directors of the Pension Budget of the previous electoral term.

- Members of the Monitory Committee of the Pension Budget of the previous electoral term.

The General Congress meets each electoral term, after the elections of the branches take place. The General Congress elects:

- Majlis al-Nqāba (The Syndicate Council). This consists of eleven members, who elect the president of the Syndicate Council, who is also the president of the General Congress as well as the president of the Syndicate, the General Secretary, and a Treasurer. The Syndicate Council meets at least monthly, usually once every two weeks, and executes the decisions of the General Congress, follows up the performance of all the Branch Councils, and supervises engineering work in Syria.

- Lajnat Murāqaba (The Syndicate Monitory Committee) that consists of three members, who elect a president.

- Lajnat idārat sandūq al-taqā'ud (The Board of Directors of the Pension Budget) that consists of six members. They, together with the president of the Syndicate, who is assigned as the president of the board, elect a General Secretary and a Treasurer.

- Lajnat Murāqaba sandūq al-taqā'ud (The Monitory Committee of the Pension Budget) that consists of three members, who themselves elect a president.

The General Congress is the highest authority of the Syndicate. It meets annually and sets the policy of the Syndicate, the annual work plan, and the annual budget. It approves the budgets, names the accounting inspector, and discusses the

report of the Syndicate Council. Also, it can indicate a lack of confidence in the president or any member of any committee.

It is stated in the Syndicate's bylaw that the mechanisms of decision-making within the General Congress, the Branch Body, the Syndicate Council and the Branch Council is by voting only, and that the decision of the absolute majority prevails. In the case of the votes being equal, the decision of the party that the president belongs to prevails.

#### **D. The Interaction between the Engineers' Syndicate and the State**

##### ***1. Rules and Regulations***

I interviewed Mr. Sa'id 'Ahmad, an Alawit from the province of Tartūs and the current General Secretary of the Engineers' Syndicate, who was previously a member in the Syndicate Council for ten years from 2000 to 2010. He is an independent, and a well-known active member in the syndicate. He started by stating that "The Engineers' Syndicate is a professional, scientific, associational, non-governmental organization. It has its own legal personality that is independent, both financially and administratively, from the state. Registration is compulsory; every engineer has to be registered in the Syndicate before starting to work, whether in the private or public sector."

In answer to my question, *What are the mechanisms for issuing laws and regulations concerning the Engineers' Syndicate?* he said, "Usually what happens is that suggestions flow in from all the branches of the Syndicate in all provinces in Syria. They get discussed at the General Congress that meets annually, and a voting process takes place. Any decision has to be approved by the majority of the members of the General Congress. Afterwards, the Syndicate Council executes the decisions that have been approved by the General Congress. If there are decisions that need to be further

ratified by the Minister of Construction, it is the Syndicate Council that sends them to be ratified. If there are changes in the laws and regulations of the Syndicate, the Syndicate sends its proposal to the Council of Ministers. Once it has been approved, it is issued through a legislative instrument, that is, a decree by the President of the Syrian Arab Republic, or by a law created by Parliament.”

When answering the question: *How can the Syndicate achieve financial independence from the state?* Mr. 'Aḥmad stated that the Syndicate's financial resources originate mainly from fees and permits that the Syndicate issues, such as building or working permits, fees for opening engineering offices, registration fees, in addition to the monthly fees that every member has to pay. All these sums of money add to the resources of the Syndicate, which means that it is completely financially independent from the state.

*What is the main target of the Syndicate? Where have you been successful and where have you failed?* “The main aim of the Syndicate is to achieve the well-being of engineers, both at professional and social levels. We have been successful as regards various issues, such as the establishment of the Fund Subsidy of Aging and Death, which provides a subsidy amounting to one million Syrian pounds (\$20,000)<sup>6</sup>; a Cooperative Fund for Engineers that provides a subsidy amounting to 150000 Syrian pounds (\$3,000); and a Health Insurance Fund that provides 50 percent of the value of the medicines and 75 percent of the value of the medical tests and X-ray images. In addition, there is the monthly pension that each member receives from the Syndicate, and in many cases it is higher than the one member receive from the state if they were workers in any of the state's apparatus. Furthermore, the Syndicate has its own clubs in

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<sup>6</sup> The rate that is used throughout the thesis is the rate that used to be before the crisis; that is 1\$ to 50 Syrian pounds. After the crisis took place in Syria the rate became 1\$ to 70 Syrian pounds.

most of the provinces in Syria, where engineers can take their families and friends and have a good time. Also the Syndicate provides scientific seminars and training courses to advance the professional level of engineers and provide them with the necessary information and skills.”

I asked an active member of the syndicate, a Sunni independent from Damascus, *Are there any vital changes that Law no.17, issued in 1973 after President Hafez al-Assad came to power, brought to the performance of the Syndicate?* He stressed that prior to 1973, the three engineers’ syndicates located in Damascus, Aleppo and Lattakia, only included the owners of private engineering works, who at that time controlled both the syndicates and their resources. Law No. 17, however, initiated a section that comprises all engineers who work within the apparatus of the state and in public sector institutions. It was only after this law was issued that employees were included within the Syndicate and had the chance to become members and enjoy the privileges enjoyed by the employers.

## ***2. Elections***

I asked an active member in the syndicate, an Alawit Ba’athist from the province of Tartūs about the elections of the Syndicate Council, and to what extent the Ba’ath party was involved in the process of these elections. He replied that the Engineers’ Syndicate performs its elections independently of the Party because it has its own buildings and the necessary infrastructure for carrying out the process of elections in all the Syrian provinces. He stated that the Ba’ath Party, prior to the elections of the Syndicate Council, performs what is known as “consultative elections” that are mainly effected by the Ba’athist members of the Engineers’ Syndicate.

Subsequently, the Ba'ath party and the Progressive National Front<sup>7</sup> prepare an agreed list called "The Front List", that is not necessarily dictated by the results of the consultative elections. This includes eight names, usually five Ba'athist, and three candidates who belong to any party within the Progressive National Front. Independent members run for the other three seats. When I asked him why independent members are only allowed to run for only three seats, he said that although it is not stated in any law or in the internal system of the Syndicate, this has been an unwritten rule since Law No. 26 was issued in 1981. This law brought about new mechanisms to the election process. It created what are known as "units" that hadn't existed previously which granted the majority presence of Ba'athists in the Branch Body, and hence within the General Congress and the Syndicate Council.

I asked a former active member of the Syndicate, now retired, a Sunni and Ba'athist from the countryside of Damascus, *How far does the Ba'ath Party influence the results of the elections?* He replied saying, "The Ba'ath Party can only influence the Front List, since it selects the candidates to run for the Syndicate's elections from those who have already won the consultative elections, but who have not necessarily gained the highest number of votes. Thus a candidate who has gained the highest votes during the consultative elections might not be selected by the Front List, and vice versa. That is, a candidate who won with the lowest number of votes might be selected, and moreover might be "recommended" by the Regional Leadership to be elected as

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<sup>7</sup> The Progressive National Front is the ruling political coalition in Damascus under the leadership of the Ba'ath Party. The Front currently comprises a coalition of nine political parties, and was founded when the late President Hafez al-Assad was president of Syria. On March 7, 1972, the Charter of the National Progressive Front was signed. Article no.8 of the Constitution establishes its constitutional presence, which states that, "The Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party [...] leads the National Progressive Front, and is working to unite the energies of the people to place them in the service of the Arab Nation."

president. All this is decided by members of the Regional Leadership. But the Regional Leadership can never influence the results of the elections of the Syndicate Council. When we elect people there is no one standing over our heads; we choose the people we want from the list, and don't choose those we don't want. This has happened many times in the past. For example, in the elections of the branches of the Syndicate in 2005, in the branch of the countryside of Damascus, the Ba'ath Party insisted that the name of one particular engineer should be included in the Front List. This was despite the fact that all the Ba'athists were against him on account of the man's bad professional reputation. But because he was a close relative of Abū Salīm's (the popular name of Mr. Mhd Da'būl, the office manager of both the late president Hafez al-Assad and the current president Bashar al-Assad) the regional leader of the Ba'ath Party insisted his name should be included in the Front List. However, most people didn't vote for him, including me, and I'm a Ba'athist who belongs to the same province that he belongs to. Many other Ba'athists also didn't vote for him, as they were not convinced he would be any good, so he failed to be elected."

A similar story was told by an active member in the syndicate's branch in Homs, an Alawit Ba'athist. He said that in the elections of the Syndicate Council in 2004/2005, Mhd Iyyād Ghazāl, a Ba'athist Sunni from Aleppo and formerly the General Manager of Railways in Syria, at that time the Vice President of the Syndicate Council from 2000–2004—and backed by the highest authority—personally composed the Front List. This was without consulting his fellow Ba'athist members in the Syndicate. To top that, Salām Yāssīn, who is a member of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party and President of the Professional Syndicates office in the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, recommended that the Ba'athists should elect two independent candidates. The same person continued by saying, "So overall, eight candidates were put forward



by Mhd Iyyād Ghazāl, while another two independent candidates were recommended by the Ba’ath Party, which means that the independents had only one seat to compete for! However, none of the Ba’athists was happy with any of the names that had been put forward by either Mhd Iyyād Ghazāl or Salām Yāssīn. What happened was that we, the Ba’athist members, agreed to fail the Front List in the consultative elections—and we did! We also failed the two independent candidates that Salām Yāssīn had recommended. Mhd Iyyād Ghazāl failed with his list and got nothing, despite his strong connections with highest authorities, simply because we didn’t want the people he’d recommended. He is an arrogant man, a liar, an opportunist, and corrupt, to say the least. But look what happened next! Although his candidates had failed to win the elections, which provide great evidence of his unpopularity, he was “rewarded” soon afterwards by being appointed as Mayor of Homs in 2005, where he did not deliver a good service. He did nothing but promise people projects that never happened, such as “The Dream of Homs” which remained a dream! What he did do was to steal people’s money, through various sly means, and adopt divisive sectarian policies, which intensified sectarian tension, and sometimes hatred, between various sects that live in Homs, and which became very apparent in a way that had never existed before. I believe all this played a major role in the crisis that Homs is witnessing nowadays. Mhd Iyyād Ghazāl was the Mayor of Homs for six years, from 2005 until 2011, and look what he brought us. Can you explain to me how all those tunnels were dug by terrorists, and how they were able to smuggle weapons and armaments into the city with the mayor turning a blind eye? It is he who is responsible for these terrible days that Homs is currently experiencing. He is responsible for the current sectarian fights and awful terrorism, because the roots of this crisis are based in his days when he was the mayor. Although the highest authority in Damascus was aware that the people were not happy

with his sectarian policies and were fed up with his blunt corruption, they nevertheless insisted on him remaining in office. He was only dismissed in March 2011, when signs of the crisis became more evident and serious, but this was already too late!”

An independent Sunni, and an active member in the Lattakia branch of the Syndicate, described the election process by saying that, “Well, it is tough to be independent. The independents face fierce competition. Usually 70 to 75 percent of the members of the General Congress are Ba’athists, and there are only three seats available in which the independents can compete. It was the Regional Leadership that determined this informal percentage, which is not mentioned in the bylaws of the Syndicate. Usually ten to fifteen independents compete to fill these seats. For example, when there are a hundred people, with thirty of them belonging to one party, this means that thirty voices are united in one direction, while the other seventy voices are scattered, with no link between them and no sense of belonging to a group. When Ba’athists run for elections they are guaranteed thirty votes, while the seventy independent votes are scattered amongst the rest of the candidates, hence the Front List always wins! Take another example: the elections of the Parliament. Here, the Front List always win, because the Ba’ath Party has people in all provinces, while independent candidates are only known in their own province. Independents can’t compete with the Ba’athists because they are neither organized nor united.”

Another story was told by an active member in the branch of Hama, who was Sunni and Ba’athist. “The conflicts within the Ba’athists are worst than the conflicts outside them. In the consultative elections of the Syndicate’s Hama branch in 2010, Rā’ida āqūlī, the first female Syndicate branch president in Syria, a much-respected woman from a conservative family who did a great job when president of the Hama branch in 2008, won the consultative elections with a large majority of the votes.

However, her name was removed from the Front List by the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, and therefore she was unable to run for the Syndicate branch elections of 2010.”

Overall, the Regional Leadership plays a major role during the elections by arranging the Front List, which is not necessarily in accordance with the results of the consultative elections. As illustrated, however, Ba'athists can challenge what the Regional Leadership wants and change the results of the elections if they choose to do so. Although this has happened many times, it does not happen regularly; it is not the norm.

### ***3. The Engineers' Syndicate's Relationship with the State***

The Engineers' Syndicate prepares and provides the government with engineering codes that the government has to follow when carrying out any engineering work, such as the codes for thermal insulation and for earthquakes. In addition, the Syndicate puts forward its point of view regarding any engineering project that the government is about to initiate.

For example, as related by an active member of the Syndicate in Damascus, a Sunni independent, five years ago the government decided to build residential towers in the middle of Damascus. The Engineers' Syndicate informed the Ministry of Local management that it did not agree with this project, as these towers would cause several problems with the infrastructure and services of that area. Accordingly, the project was cancelled. However, the man continued, it is not always the case that the Engineers' Syndicate wins an argument with the government. “The Syndicate disagreed with Mhd Nājy al-ṭry's government, when the latter decided to hire two private monitoring companies to check Syrian imports of technical equipment, to ensure their efficiency

and validity. The Syndicate's point of view was that this was not necessary, because it would cost the Syrian economy a fortune, and the Engineer's Syndicate had enough experts who could perform the work of these two companies, maybe better than they could. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister paid no attention to the Syndicate's opinion, and went ahead with this deal which had a negative effect on Syrian citizens. This was because what used to cost them 100 Syrian pounds, for example, subsequently cost them 150 Syrian pounds, simply for no reason!" The point here being made is that the government had to pay costly fees to these private companies, when it could have relied upon the Engineers' Syndicate who would have offered the same service at a lower fee. This would have benefited Syrian citizens, as the price of goods wouldn't have increased so much on account of the reasonable fees of the Syndicate.

He illustrated the relationship between the state and the Syndicate by stating that all internal decisions within the Syndicate are issued by the General Congress and need no ratification from the Minister of Infrastructure. However, all the Syndicate's systems, such as the internal system and the financial and accounting systems that are issued by the Syndicate's General Congress are not valid until they have been ratified by the Minister of Infrastructure. This is mainly because the system only becomes legally valid when ratified by the Ministry. Also, because the government oversees all state sectors, it has to check systems that are concerned with rights and obligations to their members, to ensure there are no contradictions or injustices. However, the system of practicing the profession previously used to be issued by the General Congress of the syndicate and then ratified by the Minister of Infrastructure, according to Law No. 26 issued in 1981, but decree No. 80, issued in 2010, changed this. It also changed the way the profession is practiced, whereby the role of the engineer in engineering work is determined, as regards executing, supervising and auditing engineering studies, and the

method by which the projects are received after they have been constructed. Decree No. 80 determines everything concerning the relationship between engineers and the state. It has now been decreed that all rules and regulations are not valid unless they are ratified by the Minister of Construction, based on a proposal issued by the General Congress. However the Syndicate strongly disagrees with this, and is working to reinstate the previous law concerning this issue. At the present time (February 2012) the executive instructions of the decree have not been published, although they are ready, because the General Congress didn't meet in 2011, as it was supposed to, due to the current events. Hence the syndicate is still operating according to the previous systems.

*How did the decree come to be issued if the Syndicate did not agree to it?*

“Well, the decree was issued at the time when Nājy al-‘try was Prime Minister, and, as you know, the general position that his government adopted was that what is in the interest of society does not fall within the remit of the government. Hence the minister wanted to ensure that the Ministry of Construction controlled the Syndicate. There had been long discussions between the Syndicate and the state regarding this decree, and eventually the decree was declared.

Even so, the decree did carry out some great achievements for the Syndicate. For example, previously The Central Body of Control and Inspection had previously monitored the work of the Syndicate, but now the General Congress elects a monitoring committee from amongst its members that monitors the performance of the Syndicate. Also, previously judicial bodies had investigated engineers who had supposedly perpetrated misconduct without asking any members of the Syndicate to attend the investigation. Now, however, the decree requires that judicial bodies inform the Syndicate prior to the investigations and doesn't start investigations without a member of the Syndicate being present with the engineer under investigation. Furthermore,

previously, when Law no. 26 established the “engineering unit”, it was merely an electoral unit that had only one task which was to elect, and this had remained the same for thirty years. Decree no. 80, however, made the “engineering unit” a Syndicate unit that enjoys all the advantages of the Syndicate. The representatives of the units are not now concerned only with the process of elections; they now have the right to discuss the management where the unit is located and defend the rights of the members of the unit. In case they don’t reach agreement, they can get back to the Syndicate to defend their rights. This helps members of the Syndicate to deal with issues, papers and documents in their units without having to come to the Syndicate, which might be far from their place of residence, to follow up their matters in person.

Nevertheless, the Syndicate was against the part of the decree concerning the way the profession was practiced, so after the decree is published, it should be followed by executive instructions that specify all the necessary details to explain the decree and how to operate according to its dictates. Owing to current events, however, the General Congress was unable to meet in 2011 and couldn’t issue the executive instructions. We are now, however, struggling to get back to the way things were previously.”

I asked an active member in Damascus, a Sunni Ba’athist, to describe the relationship between the Syndicate and the state. He said with a smile on his face, “The Syndicate has a bitter friendship with the state. Mostly we are not in agreement, especially with the monitoring apparatus, which mainly comprises the Central Body of Control and Inspection, and sometimes the judiciary. The trouble that we usually have with the Central Body is that often while conducting investigations they don’t accept the engineers’ expertise recommended by the Syndicate. Rather, they choose experts who are not listed in the experts’ lists of the Syndicate, which results in the unfair representation of engineers during investigations. In addition, the Body of Control does

not inform the Syndicate about the investigations and does not ask the Syndicate's representatives to attend the investigative sessions. Even though decree No. 80 has been put into effect, which obliges the Body of Control to conduct an investigation only when a representative of the Syndicate is present, the decree tends to be followed only in the case of engineers who work within private sector. What we usually do is that every time the Body of Control is engaged in nefarious practices we complain to the Council of Ministers, which in most cases responds positively. Take the case of the judiciary, for example. If a building collapses, the judge should use an engineering expert to help him with the case, but what sometimes happens is that the case is handled by a corrupt judge, who uses corrupt experts who give false reports on the case and do the engineer concerned an injustice.”

Concerning the Syndicate's interaction with the state, that is, mainly the government apparatus, it is true that the main aim of the Syndicate is to promote the well being of its members. However, it is widely acknowledged among members of the Syndicate that they have a national duty to serve their country in the best way possible, ensure its security and welfare, and defend its causes, and they believe that the Syndicate should sometimes interfere to correct mistakes made by the government. All this, however, depends on the response of the government. Sometimes the government responds, but sometimes it does not, and in other cases it is already too late for the Syndicate to interfere. As one of my interviewees, a Christian Ba'athist and an active member of the Syndicate in Damascus, stressed, “The state never consults with the Syndicate; it is always the Syndicate that approaches the appropriate ministry, or the government, when it spots an error. For example, during the current crisis, Germany participated in the European sanctions on Syria. Shortly after the sanctions were out, the Syrian government signed a contract with Siemens, a German company, worth 305

million Euros, to expand the Syrian al-Nasserya power station. The government took this strategic decision without bothering to consult with the Engineers' Syndicate and seek its opinion on such a matter of national importance. The Syndicate could have undertaken a study, and might have recommended that the government contract a deal with other companies in Iran or in Russia. The government shouldn't have paid 305 million Euros to those who had inflicted terrible economic sanctions on the Syrian people."

As illustrated, the Syndicate enjoys sufficient autonomy with regard to running its internal issues. However, it is sometimes subject to the interference of various ministries that wish to dominate the Syndicate on account of their own interests. In addition, members of the Syndicate aim to gain a more active role and influence the decisions of the state's apparatus on any subject that falls within the Syndicate's competence.

#### ***4. The Engineers' Syndicate's Relationship with the Ba'ath Party***

An active member in the Syndicate's branch of Aleppo, a Sunni Ba'athist, while attempting to clarify the interaction between the Syndicate and the Ba'ath party, mentioned that the president of the Professional Syndicate's office in the Regional Leadership always attends the General Congress meeting. Also that the president of the Syndicate should always inform the Regional Leadership of Syndicate Council meetings.

I interviewed Dr Ghassān Taiyyāra, a Sunni Ba'athist, from the province of Tartūs, and president of the Engineers' Syndicate for twenty years from 1981 to 2000. Later he became the Minister of Industry from 2004 to 2006.

He said that previously, and prior to the events of the Muslim Brotherhood in



Syria, the Ba'ath Party had not paid attention to the professional syndicates and had not interfered in their work. This, however, had changed after 1979/1980, when the Muslim Brotherhood had attacked syndicates and their branches, and had assassinated many of their members. At that point the Ba'ath party took control of the syndicates and issued Law No. 26 in 1981. This had created units of engineer employees to enable them to participate in the elections that had formerly been available only to private employers of engineers. This law guaranteed a majority presence of Ba'athists in the General Congress. It also permitted the branches to form, join and distribute units, which ensured the majority presence of Ba'athists in each unit. He continued, "I disagree with those people who say that the Ba'ath Party has politicized the professional syndicates; to those people I say, please study history! In 1973, after the late President Hafez al-Assad came to power, Law No. 17 that regulated the engineering profession and the work of the Engineering Syndicate was decreed. It was a law that worked well and the Syndicate was working freely with no problems whatsoever. It was free to run its activities, which in those days were merely related to scientific matters. In 1979, the General Congress numbered 110 members, only 17 of whom were Ba'athists, and most presidents of the Syndicate, and Syndicate Council members, were mostly independents. Furthermore, in 1979, the General Congress, of which I was a member, issued a harsh statement criticizing the performance of the Ba'ath party and the regime in the way that they dealt with the terrorist attacks that were taking place in Aleppo and Hamah and other Syrian provinces. Nobody did anything about these criticisms. It was the Muslim Brotherhood that politicized the syndicate; it was they who targeted the Engineers' Syndicate, the Doctors' Syndicate and the Lawyers' Syndicate throughout Syria, on account of their solid presence in these syndicates. Once in Aleppo, during a meeting of Aleppo's Branch Council, members received a threat from the Muslim

Brotherhood, and were told that if the meeting were not canceled they would bombard them at the meeting, so everyone had to leave. There were also assassinations of innocent members, injuries of others, and the horror that people experienced at that period. At that time, the Ba'ath Party did what any ruling party in the world would have done. It took control and protected its citizens from those terrorist attacks and threats.”

Then Dr. Taiyyāra said, “The Ba'ath Party dissolved the Engineers' Syndicate,<sup>8</sup> as well as the Doctors' Syndicate and the Lawyers' Syndicate, and formed the Syndicate Board, the members of which were Ba'athists. I was appointed as the president of the Syndicate in 1980, and in 1981 Law no. 26 was issued. Since then, elections have been carried out to ensure that the Syndicate council comprises eleven members. Eight of them are either Ba'athists or belong to the Progressive National Front, and three are independent.”

I asked Dr. Taiyyāra, *During your presidency of the Syndicate, which lasted for twenty years, did anyone in the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party try to influence the decisions of the Syndicate?* “Oh, always!” he said as he laughed and continued, “But I never listened! Don't think that because I am a Ba'athist that that made my life easier with the members of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party. Not at all. Negotiations, disagreements, and sometimes loud discussions always took place. But I never listened, and in the end I always did what I believed was for the benefit of the Syndicate and the engineers, and you know what helped me in doing that? It was the support of the late President Hafez al-Assad. Every time I reached a dead end with any of the members of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, I would notify him about the disagreement through the office of the presidency, which always replied

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<sup>8</sup> The Engineers' Syndicate was briefly dissolved from April until June 1980 following the Muslim Brotherhood events that took place in Syria in 1980, on account of the Muslim Brotherhood's strong presence within the Syndicate.

promptly. It would set up an appointment with the president that included the member concerned and me, and every time he met with us he would end the meeting standing by my side. He is the one who granted me the space in which to work. He was a great leader.”

While trying to describe the interaction between the Syndicate and the Regional Leadership, an interviewee, a Sunni Ba’athist and an active member in the Engineers’ Syndicate’s branch in Damascus, said the following. “In the Engineers’ Syndicate, there is no system that functions by itself and which constrains the relationship of the Syndicate with the state or with the Ba’ath Party; it is always personalized. It all depends on the president of the Syndicate. He or she will have a powerful personality, and thus will push forward the demands of the Syndicate, or else he or she will settle for whatever opinion he or she receives from the Construction Ministry or the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath party. For example, look at the previous president of the Syndicate, Dr. Ghassān Taiyyāra. Why do you think he remained president for twenty years? Not because he is a Ba’athist, but because he did a great job and he achieved much for the engineers. If he hadn’t, we wouldn’t have elected him for four consecutive terms. He used his position as a Member of Parliament to defend engineers’ demands and advance their position in society. Much depends on the president. There are those who do not hesitate to use their position to help the Syndicate and speak out for what it wants, and there are those who do not. For example, the General Congress was supposed to meet in March 2011, when the current events were starting to take place in Syria, but the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party considered postponing the meeting. This, even though it was extremely important that the General Congress should meet at that time, and help its members to exercise a political and responsible role in the crisis that our country is going through. However,

the president of the Syndicate at that time, Mrs. Hāla al-Naṣir, a Sunni Ba'athist from the province of Raqqa, who was elected as president of the Syndicate for the term 2010-2014, didn't challenge the Regional Leadership. She listened to them and ignored our objections, although the opposite should have been the case. In fact, she only served as president from 2010-2011. In April 2011, she was appointed as the Minister of Construction in Syria<sup>9</sup>. The Regional Leadership of the Ba'th party couldn't have found a better minister to follow its wishes and has no intention of challenging its precepts, right?"

A Sunni independent and an active member of the syndicate from the province of the Countryside of Damascus tried to clarify the interaction between the Syndicate and the Ba'ath Party. He said, "The Regional Leadership never gets bored with interfering in the business of the Syndicate. For example, every time members of the Syndicate have to travel to attend certain scientific or professional conferences abroad, they have to obtain approval from the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party. Approval is usually granted, but sometimes it takes so long that the date of the conference has passed before permission to attend has been agreed. Once, although permission to attend had not been granted, I traveled nevertheless, because otherwise I would have missed the conference. After I got back, they sent people asking me how come I had left without approval being granted, and I said they were late! That bothered them a bit, but then it was all over. There is nothing they can do; at the end of the day I'm not even a Ba'athist!" When I asked him, *If a Ba'athist was in your position, what do you think they would have done?* he replied, "I don't think in the first place a Ba'athist would go without the approval [of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath

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<sup>9</sup> Later, on 23 June 2012, she was appointed as the Minister of Tourism in Syria, and she is still in office.

Party]. No matter how inconvenient, Ba'athists always commit to their leadership. If, say, hypothetically a Ba'athist ignored the necessary request for approval, the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party would certainly send him/her a warning, or maybe dismiss him." He continued, "Other little incidents happen every now and then, such as sometimes the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party asks the Syndicate to ask its members to subscribe to a certain newspaper or journal, or asks the Syndicate's council to disburse a certain amount of money, things like that. I always refuse to follow any of this, but Ba'athists usually follow the instructions and wishes of their leadership."

Overall, it is clear that the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party does not spare any effort in interfering in matters of the Syndicate. On the other hand, this interference can be challenged and Syndicate members can change the way they behave, if they decide to do so.

## **E. Conclusion**

Article No. 3 in Law No. 26 states, "The Engineers' Syndicate is a professional social organization, and believes in the goals of the Arab nation, in unity, freedom, and socialism, and is obliged to achieve them according to the decisions of the Ba'ath Party and its guidance". Although this statement did not appear in the recent decree No. 80, reality nevertheless tells a different story.

Clearly members of the Syndicate are frustrated with the policy of the government and the Ministry of Construction, and with the fact that they take decisions concerning members of the Syndicate and their work without reference to the Syndicate. Members of the Syndicate hope that in future the Syndicate will be able to influence the decisions and policies of the executive power, which they consider will benefit both engineers and the state. However, with the absence of the greatest guaranteed supporter

of their demands, the Ba'ath Party, there is a little hope that the executive power will ever grant the Syndicate such an effective role.

In addition, the Syndicate suffers the domination of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party together with that of the Progressive National Front during the process of elections, since they both control the Front List, regardless of the results of the consultative elections. Nonetheless, Ba'athist members of the Syndicate do challenge the Regional Leadership by failing candidates that don't adhere to what they want during the consultative elections and sometimes during the Syndicate elections. But this challenge is not conducted systematically every time Ba'athist members are unhappy with the "recommendations" of the Regional Leadership.

Despite their objections and frustrations, in following what the Regional Leadership wants and voting for the Front List, Ba'athist members of the Syndicate allow the Regional Leadership to exercise its power over the Syndicate. In simply following the "recommendations" of the Regional Leadership without challenging them, Ba'athist members of the Syndicate ensure that the authority of the Regional Leadership is retained over the Syndicate. They are also currently wasting an existing valuable opportunity that could ensure significant changes that fit their aspirations by not voting for the person they want at the Syndicate's elections. If they did so, they might turn the Syndicate into a force to be reckoned with that the Regional Leadership would have to take into consideration.

## CHAPTER III

### THE TEACHERS' SYNDICATE

#### **A. Introduction**

In this chapter, I will investigate the role that *Nqābat al-Mu'allimīn* (Teachers' Syndicate) plays in the political life of Syria. The Syndicate has enjoyed a long history of political struggle since the French colonial period, and has played a vital role in establishing the rule of the Ba'ath Party. It enjoys a strong presence because of its large membership, and hence is regarded as a front organization of the Ba'ath Party. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to study the Teachers' Syndicate.

By setting out the structure of the Teachers' Syndicate, the procedures through which leaders of the Syndicate are recruited, and the process of elections, I will show how far the government and the Ba'ath Party are involved in the procedures and decisions of the Syndicate at both political and professional levels. I will also show to what extent the Syndicate remains independent of both these institutions. In addition, I will attempt to find out if there is any informal sectarian distribution of the leadership positions within the Syndicate.

#### **B. Historical Background**

In the early 1930s, teachers in Syria realized the importance of organizing themselves so that they could come to terms with their political, social, educational and financial situation, and to enable them to participate in the national liberation movement against French colonialism. However, their many attempts to unite and organize failed as French colonialists made sure that no such organizations were allowed to form unless

they were entirely non-political.

In 1935, teachers met in Damascus and formed a body to manage their affairs, and defend prosecutions against their members. Several attempts to meet and organize in any form of association followed this one in several Syrian provinces such as Hims, Hamāa, Aleppo, Siwaīdā and Dir al-Zwr. In 1937, the first teachers' congress was held in Aleppo, but the second congress failed to meet until as late as 1944 because of French colonial pressure on all unions and organizations. The second congress discussed various issues, such as modifying the curriculum, advancing the teachers' standard of living, and trying to prepare and issue an internal system for educational bodies. In 1945, the third congress was held in the province of Hamāa. This was regarded as a turning point in the history of the Teachers' Syndicate, since both the basic law and the internal system were issued during this congress.<sup>10</sup>

One important article of the internal law is Article No. 3 that says, "This association will never interfere in political issues", which is a manifestation of French colonial policy that deprived all unions and other organizations from participating in political matters. Another significant article is Article No. 5, which stipulated that one third of the elected Administrative Committee, consisting of fourteen members, should be women.

The 1940s and 1950s were very active and productive periods in the history of the Teachers' Syndicate, which witnessed an increasing number of unions and associations. They all enjoyed similar features, such as free membership, and called for similar demands, such as compulsory, free primary education for boys and girls, and the replacement of the French history course with an Arab history course. They also all

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<sup>10</sup> The basic law sets the general rules and regulations of the Syndicate, while the internal system specifies all the detailed internal rules and regulations of the syndicate.



struggled for liberation from foreign colonial rule, omitting any course that was not oriented towards Arab nationalism, and not mentioning any religious or partisan conflict in the history of the Arab nation. However, there was no one single body and all the associations were independent of each other.

After independence in 1951, the Association of the House of Teachers' Graduates, led a strike, promulgated the slogans of the Ba'ath Party, and advocated its principles and goals. Several strikes led by educational bodies followed in 1953 and 1956. The 1953 strike lasted seven days, and protested against a play being put on at the theater of the American College in Aleppo, which insulted Arab national sentiments. It also covertly protested against the military rule of Adib al-Shishakly.

In 1958, after Syria and Egypt had united to form one state, The United Arab Republic, teachers in Syria refused insistent calls to form one organization together with the Teachers' Syndicate in Egypt, since they were afraid of the control of the organized majority. They requested the establishment of their own syndicate, and after considerable pressure succeeded in their demand. Law No.187 was issued in 1960 by the president of the United Arab Republic, Gamāl Abd al-Nāṣir, and a Teachers' Syndicate was established in Syrian territory with its center in Damascus. According to the law, enrollment in the Syndicate became compulsory for all working teachers. After the Ba'ath Party came to power, following the revolution of 8 March 1963, the Teachers' Syndicate achieved further gains, such as that the government had to seek the Syndicate's opinion with regards to the school curriculum.<sup>11</sup> It also gained a political presence, as it officially participated in the Popular Committee for Supporting

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<sup>11</sup> It was also mentioned among the recommendations of the Teachers' Syndicate's General Congress, held in 1966, that it was necessary to "ensur[e] the unity of the people in the religious curriculum, and move away from all that develops or raises the sectarian spirit."

Palestinian Resistance, and it mobilized teachers in troops that followed the Popular Army.

The Teachers' Syndicate flourished during the period following the revolution as it enjoyed the support of government. This helped it to achieve many of its goals in a very short period of time, such as the establishment of a Social Solidarity Fund, which provided health care and social services to its members. Decree No. 131, issued on 22 December 1964, included the establishment of the Teachers Housing Credit Fund, which secures loans for members of the Teachers' Syndicate. This helps members to buy a house, which can be paid in installments without interest. Furthermore, the government supported this fund and provided a loan of two million Syrian pounds, which at that time amounted to \$500,000. In addition, the government issued a decision, based on a proposal of the Teachers' Syndicate, to make an exception for the sons and daughters of teachers relating to many conditions of admission to primary, elementary and secondary schools. During that period, teachers played a vital role in establishing the rules of the Ba'ath Party, as they were represented on the National Board of the Revolution Leadership.

On 12 March 1970, decree No. 82, was issued, comprising the current basic law of the Teachers' Syndicate. This decree enabled employees in both the Ministries of Education and Higher Education,<sup>12</sup> as well as their institutions, to be enrolled as members in the Teachers' Syndicate. The basic law of the Syndicate was further amended in 1982, and the amendments issued as Law No. 10. When I asked one of my interviewees, a Christian Ba'athist from the province of the countryside of Damascus, who had been a previous member of the Syndicate, about the changes that decree No.

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<sup>12</sup> On 24 October 1966, a legislative decree No. 134 was issued, which established the Ministry of Higher Education in Syria.

82 had made to the work of the Syndicate, he said the following. “Prior to this decree, the Teachers’ Syndicate was considered to be merely a professional organization that looked after professional matters that only concerned teacher. It was not concerned with teachers’ social concerns, nor had it the right to interfere with political issues of the state. Decree No.82, however, gave the Teachers’ Syndicate due consideration, and acknowledged its vital political role in Syria. It considered the Teachers’ Syndicate to be a popular organization, that is, an organization that looks after teachers’ well-being at both professional and social levels. It has the right to interfere in national issues and has a say in the politics of the state.” What my interviewee says here is what appears regularly in most Syndicate booklets and literature relating to the achievements of the Ba’ath Party, where decree No. 82 is praised.

In 2012, the Syndicate comprises 362,525 members, 69 percent of which are Ba’thists. The rest are either independents or belong to political parties of the Progressive National Front. Women constitute 58 percent of the membership.

### **C. Structure of the Teachers’ Syndicate**

#### ***1. al-Wiḥda (The Unit)***

Every teachers’ gathering, where the number of teachers is no less than thirty, is considered to be a Unit. This might comprise a school, several schools, a department, a college, or an institution. The teachers of each unit meet and elect three members who comprise the Unit Office. They are responsible for everything that concerns the Unit, such as performing the instructions of the Syndicate’s higher authorities, set plans that fit in with the goals of the Syndicate, and ensuring that members of the Unit conform to their duties and achieve their rights.

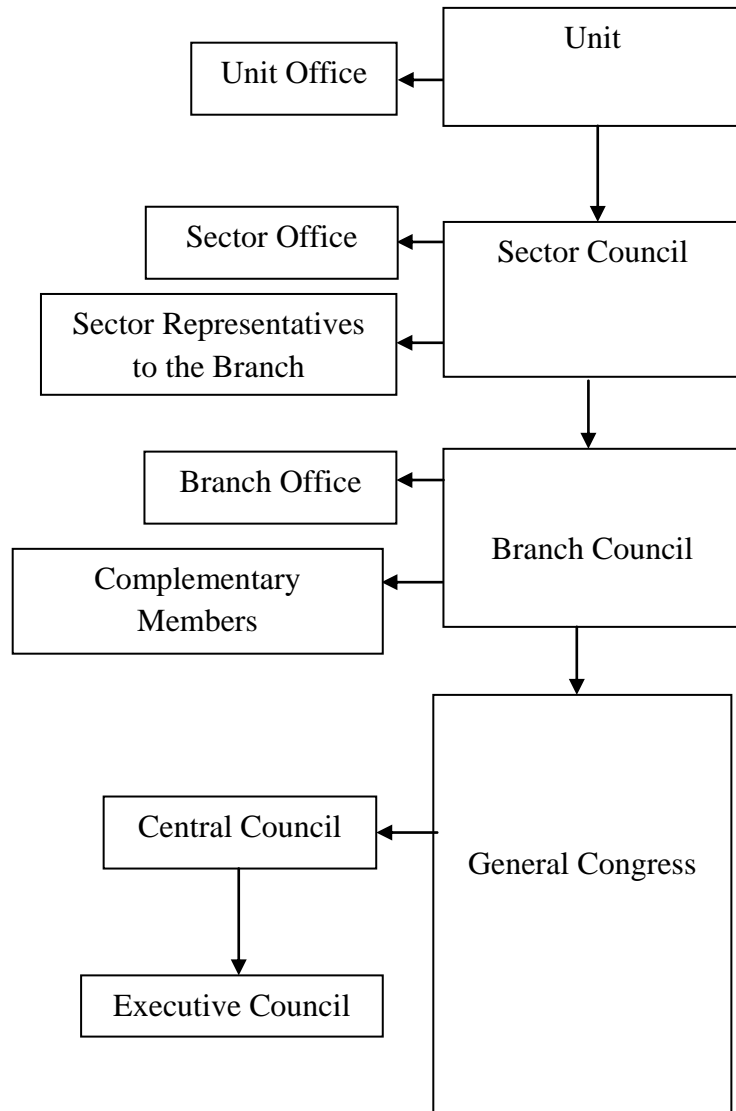


Fig. 2. The Structure of the Teachers' Syndicate

## 2. *Majlis al-Shi'ba* (The Sector Council)

The Sector Council comprises the leaders of all Units that follow that sector.

The Sector Council meets shortly after being elected, and elects:

- Representatives of the Sector Council to the Branch Council in the province.

Their number will be no less than ten and no more than twenty.

- Representatives of the sector meet and elect five members among them who comprise *Maktab al-Shi'ba* (Sector Office). The Sector Office is responsible for

overseeing the activities of its Unit/Units, providing the Syndicate with the necessary information regarding the educational status of the sector area, and setting a work plan to fit in with the goals of the Syndicate within the sector area. Members of the Sector Office meet once a year to discuss issues concerning the sectors, and send their recommendations to the Branch Office.

The Sector Council is considered to be a higher authority than the Sector Office. It meets once or twice a year, and discusses the Sector Office reports. It addresses issues related to various aspects of the activities of the sector, and sends their recommendations to the Branch Office.

### ***3. Majlis al-Firi' (The Branch Council)***

The Branch Council comprises all the elected representatives of the divisions within the province. The Branch Council meets shortly after being elected, and elects:

- **Maktab al-Firi' (The Branch Office).** This consists of seven members, who are also members of the General Congress. The president of the Branch Office is also the president of the branch of the Syndicate in the province. The Branch Office is responsible, together with the Directorate of Education, or university administration, for drawing up and accomplishing the plans for spreading education and culture. It is also responsible for discussing issues related to education and teachers in the area where the branch is located, and monitoring the administrative bodies working in the field of education, as well as contributing to their development.

- **Adaā Mutammimūn (Complementary Members).** Complementary members are also members of the General Congress. They are only elected to represent branch members at the General Congress. They are not members of any committee, council or office.

The Branch Council is considered to be a higher authority than the Branch Office. It meets once a year, discusses the reports of the Branch office, and votes on the decisions that are included in the report.

#### ***4. al- Mū ṭamar al- ūm (The General Congress)***

The General Congress consists of:

- Members of Branch Offices in all provinces.
- Complementary Members.

The General Congress is the highest authority in the Syndicate. It meets every year, and discusses the recommendations of the Syndicate branches, their activities, and issues decisions concerning them. It also discusses financial issues, and the need for any amendments to the Syndicate's laws or internal system. The General Congress elects:

- *Al-Majlis al-Markazy* (The Central Council). This consists of sixty-five members. It meets once every six months, and among other issues discusses and approves the annual budget, supervises the work of the Executive Office and its activities, sets a work plan, and sees to its implementation.
- *Al-Maktab al-Tanfīzy* (The Executive Office). This is elected by the members of the Central Council, and consists of nine members, who elect the president of the Executive Office, who is also the president of the General Congress as well as the president of the Teachers' Syndicate. It meets once a week. Part of its brief is to issue instructions to the Branch and Sector Offices, monitor their work and activities, consider the branches' proposals, and make decisions regarding these proposals. Also they have to implement the decisions of the General Congress as approved by the Central Council, express its opinion on draft laws of education referred to it by competent authorities, and participate with ministries and relevant institutions to discuss

issues related to education and workers in this area.

## **D. Interaction between the Teachers' Syndicate and the State**

### ***1. Rules and Regulations***

The basic current law of the Teachers' Syndicate was issued in decree No. 82. The official version justifies these amendments stating the following: that after starting to apply the provisions of the law, it was shown that it needed some adjustments according to suggestions made by the Syndicate's Council at that time. One of my interviewees, a Sunni Ba'athist from Damascus, however, asserts that the real reason for the changes was rather different. He claims that after the events of the Muslim Brotherhood that took place 1979/1980, the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, in order to spread its control over the Teachers' Syndicate's, put pressure on the Syndicate to amend its basic laws. This has modified the structure and organization of the Syndicate in a way that guarantees the majority presence of Ba'athists in most elected councils and forms of the Syndicate.

Some of the main amendments carried out in Law No. 10 were as follows. The base of the organization was narrowed by the creation of "units", which can be a school or a group of schools where the number of teachers is no less than thirty. Branches of the Syndicate were established in all universities in Syria, which at that time were all public universities (even now there are private universities without a branch of the Syndicate). The number of members of the Branches' Congresses was expanded from five and above to ten to twenty members, and the number of members of the Central Council of the Syndicate from twenty-seven to fifty-one members.

The major decisions of the Syndicate, for example, financial decisions, are not valid until the Ministry of Education has ratified them. According to an interviewee, a

Sunni Ba'athist and an active member in the Syndicate branch of Aleppo, decisions within the Syndicate are taken by voting on the decisions in the General Congress, Central Council and even the Executive Office. Decisions are only approved if they obtain an absolute majority of votes. In the event of major decisions, the Syndicate prepares draft decisions and sends them to the relevant ministry, who, after approving the decisions, sends them to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers to ratify them. All decisions that contain financial adjustments, however, need to be ratified by the president in person through a decree.

## ***2. Elections***

Elections take place every five years. The Progressive National Front together with the Ba'ath Party arrange their list, that is, the Front List, and Ba'athist teachers usually elect all names in it. Every electoral term, the General Congress elects the Central Council, which usually consists of sixty-five members; independents run for only ten seats. Subsequently they elect the Executive Office, which consists of nine members, and independents can run for only two seats. These informal percentages are set by the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party.

## ***3. The Teachers' Syndicate's Relationship with the State***

Specifying and clarifying the relationship that constrains the Syndicate and the state's apparatus, which mainly consists of both ministries of education and their institutions, has been a constant demand of the Teachers' Syndicate, and this demand appeared for years among the recommendations of the General Congress. For example, in 1967, among the recommendations of the General Congress of the Teachers' Syndicate, the need for cooperation between the Teachers' Syndicate and the Ministry



of Education was stressed. The Syndicate also requested the government to issue legislation based on the proposals of the Teachers' Syndicate to clarify the relationship between the Ministry of Education and the Teachers' Syndicate. In addition, it requested the government to assist the Syndicate both financially and in other practical ways to help implement its plans.

In 1974, one of the recommendations of the General Congress was to "Find a clear and specified formula between the Syndicate and the institutions of both the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to thereby achieve harmony and understanding, and increase the yield of education." In 1991, among the recommendations of the General Congress was: "The implementation of the formula that should govern the relationship between the educational departments and the Teachers' Syndicate, and which is contained in the Syndicate's law and internal system." In 2006, "Developing a formula that governs the relationship between the Syndicate and the ministries of education and higher education" was mentioned among the recommendations of the General Congress.

The repetition of this particular demand shows that this issue has not yet been resolved, even though it has been a demand from the 1960s up to the most recent meeting of the General Congress. An active member in the Teachers' Syndicate, an Alawit independent from Damascus, emphasized this. When I interviewed her, she said that most of the problems teachers are currently facing are the result of decisions taken by the Ministry of Education, which are decided without discussion with the Teachers' Syndicate. "Dr. Ali Sa'd, for example, the previous Minister of Education from 2005-2011, who is a Mrshdy Ba'athist from the Tartūs province, implemented several decisions that were the worst ever, which had bad effects on teachers' living circumstances. Such as, for instance, the decision to prevent the transfer of married

teachers appointed following competition conducted by the Ministry of Education to their husbands' workplace. Initially it was decided by the Ministry that married teachers should work away from their families in faraway provinces for only two years, and that then they could transfer to the province of their families, but two years later the minister refused to ratify this decision. Instead, without consultation, he issued another decision, preventing the teachers' transfer [back to their families], and justifying this by saying that there were no vacancies. This has never happened before in the history of education in Syria, even when Syria didn't have enough teachers to teach in its schools. It has always been the case that a married teacher should always be appointed in the province where her husband works; this has been the norm since independence! Sadly, some married teachers now had to leave their work to stay with their families, while other married teachers had no choice but to work away from their families, this separation causing much suffering. Furthermore, in attempting to discuss this decision with the minister, on Thursday of each week, the day that ministers meet the people, he refused to discuss the issue. He said that those who didn't want the job could leave it for someone else, and that there are hundreds of women who want the job and could work in their place. He was so arrogant, and seemed not to understand that all these women definitely wanted the job, otherwise they wouldn't have sat to compete for it, but that they just couldn't leave their children. Although these married teachers rejected this decision, and used various means to change it, through the media, the Teachers' Syndicate, Parliament, and even the Ba'ath Party, nothing helped. The minister was so powerful that nobody could change his rigid and unfair decision and all because he is supported by higher authority! No one asked himself or herself one simple question: "What can we expect from a teacher who is teaching and living far away from her children? What is the quality of her work?"

The minister only changed his mind at the beginning of the present crisis in 2011, just a few days before Nājy al-'try's government submitted its resignation to President Bashar al-Assad. Suddenly, out of the blue, there were vacancies! And he issued a decision allowing married teachers to transfer their work to the provinces where their husbands work.”

An active member in the Syndicate told a similar story. A Sunni Ba'athist from Damascus said that at the time when Dr. Ali Sa'd was the Minister of Education, a decision was made in the ministry to change the school curriculum and that there had been no consultation with the Teachers' Syndicate to develop the new curriculum. At the time the new curriculum was published, teachers were not ready to teach it, which resulted in a complete mess until they were trained how to teach it. “Usually all school books are printed by the Institution of School Books and Publication, a public institution. Later, when the Teachers' Syndicate founded its own printing house, at the time of the previous president of the Syndicate, Mr Mahmūd Z'itriyya, it participated with the Institution of School Books and Publication in printing school books. This benefited the Teachers' Syndicate, since it made about 80 million Syrian pounds, amounting to \$1,600,000, which was allocated to the Social Solidarity Fund. Later, it was claimed by the Ministry of Education, when Dr. Ali Sa'd was the minister, that the new curriculum couldn't be printed in the Teachers' Syndicate's printing houses, as there would be a waste of paper, since the new size of paper was larger than the previous one. Hence it was decided that all school books should be printed in Lebanon, and they paid the printing house there! Are you telling me that this has nothing to do with corruption? Why should a printing house in Lebanon be printing Syrian school books? Are there really no printing houses in Syria that are capable of doing this? In fact this was proved to be wrong when the following Minister of Education, Dr Sāleh

al-Rāshid , a Sunni Ba'athist from Aleppo, canceled the contract in Lebanon, and now once again school books are being printed in Syria. Although it was outright corruption, nobody could do anything about it, simply because Dr Ali Sa'd was powerful enough!"

An active member of the Syndicate in Damascus, an Alawite Ba'athist, said that the Ministry of Education and the Teachers' Syndicate were not in agreement. "We have a problem with the Ministry of Education, because the number of teachers who teach at public schools is way larger than the number of teachers who teach at public universities. Theoretically, the Teachers' Syndicate should be the largest pot that contains both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, since both ministers are definitely members of the Teachers' Syndicate, but in fact this is not the case. Most of the time, the ministries form committees and councils without the Syndicate being represented. The Syndicate's role is merely advisory, no more than this. The executive power always tries to override the Teachers' Syndicate, which ultimately negatively affect teachers. When the previous minister, Dr Ali Sa'd, was in power, the Syndicate suggested the formation of a Higher Council of Education, to include members of the Ministry of Education, the Teachers' Syndicate, and independent thinkers. It was suggested that this council should vote to decide on all decisions related to teachers, rather than the Ministry of Education, but the minister didn't agree to this. We tried hard to push for what we wanted through various means, but eventually the proposal died. Dr Ali Sa'd was that powerful! Everybody knew that he was powerful, but unfortunately we didn't know that this would work against the interests of the Syndicate."

Another member of the syndicate, an Alwaite Ba'thist from Homs, stated that: "a few years ago, a new trend took place at the same time as the adoption of a free-market policy by the government. Suddenly we started to hear terms such as NGO, civil

society and the role of civil society within the business strata. NGOs started to mushroom, but we never knew what their achievements were. You would see pictures of their councils and members in posh magazines while meeting, gathering together, or launching certain projects, but on the ground there were no tangible achievements that you could put your finger on, or any that have affected our lives. Look at Massar, for example, the joint project created by the government, represented by the governing body of Damascus, and civil society, represented by the NGO Trust, which, according to an initial estimate, will cost the government 1.3 billion Syrian pounds (260 million dollars). The project is still in progress as its construction is still taking place since it began in 2009, when the president and first lady attended the launching ceremony. All we know about this project is that: “it is a discovery center for children”. It is not a center where they can learn how to draw or play music; it is not a playground; and it is not even anything similar to a teaching center. We teachers really don’t know how children will benefit from such project. Furthermore, when I heard about the huge amount of money that was allocated to this project, I wondered about institutions of the Ba’ath Party, such as *Munazzamat talāʾi‘ al-Ba’th* or *Shabibat al-Thawra*, the Ba’ath institution that creates activities, competitions and entertainment camps for school students. Wouldn’t it have been better to allocate this huge amount of money to reform such an existing institution and advance its role and activities? Or at least allocate the money to reform the infrastructure of public schools that are in terrible need of heating and cooling systems, rather than allocating it for something that it is not certain will advance children’s skills and knowledge or benefit in any way. Also, it was really disturbing and frustrating to witness how such a project that has long been praised for being the project of “civil society” got this huge financial support so easily from the government. At the same time, the “real” civil society, that is us, the professional

syndicates, have to battle with the Ministry of Education and the Regional Leadership to achieve the minimum of our plans and interests, which ultimately will benefit the educational system in Syria.”

However, there are different, more positive, stories about the Teachers’ Syndicate’s relationship with the state, such as the one that was told to me by a previous president of the Syndicate, a Sunni Ba’thist. He said that during his presidency of the Syndicate, a teacher complained about an unfair penalty that had been issued against him by the Ministry of Education. The teacher said that there was a student in his class who was well supported by a certain political figure. However, this student didn’t perform well in an exam and the teacher failed him. As a result, people in the Ministry of Education made false allegations against the teacher, and he was penalized. The president of the Syndicate investigated the case and checked the validity of the teacher’s claim. When he was sure that the teacher’s complaint was valid, he went to the Minister of Education, who at that time was Dr Mahmūd al-Saiyyd, an Alawite Ba’thist from the province of Tartūs. He told him about the case, and the minister rescinded the teacher’s punishment and instead punished those who had fabricated a false case against him.

Mahmūd Z’itriyya tried to answer my question, *What is the major difficulty that you faced while you were president of the Teachers’ Syndicate?* He is a Sunni Ba’thist from the province of Damascus, and a previous president of the Syndicate from 1996-2006, and prior to this the Director of Education for ten years. He said, “The major difficulty was how to run the financial affairs of the syndicate. We are all teachers and enjoy no financial expertise in managing the financial resources of the Syndicate. It’s true that I was the president of the Teachers’ Syndicate, but I was just a teacher, and so is the accountant of the syndicate—he is only a teacher. When I became the president of the Syndicate, the Social Solidarity Fund was making an annual loss that amounted to

120 million Syrian pounds, that is, \$2,400,000. This was owing to lack of financial expertise in the Syndicate, in addition to definite corruption. I managed to improve the financial resources of the syndicate in several ways. For example, by renting a building that belonged to the Syndicate to the al-Furat oil company for 60 million Syrian pounds a year, that is, \$1,200,000, after it had previously been let for only 7 million Syrian pounds a year, that is, \$140,000. Also, I initiated specialized clinics in all provinces of Syria, that belonged to the Syndicate, which included pharmacies, and which served the teacher and his family for a nominal price. I also set up a printing house, which contributed to the Social Security Fund to the amount of 80 million Syrian pounds a year, that is, \$1,600,000. I learned to do all this the hard way.”

Another active member of the Syndicate, an independent Sunni from Homs, while addressing some of the difficulties the teachers faced on account of the policies of the Ministry of Education, asserted that, “The Teachers’ Syndicate doesn’t agree with many policies of the Ministry of Education. For example, there was the time when Dr ‘Ali Sa’d became the Minister of Education, when the Ministry of Education sided with the students rather than siding with the teachers, and when the penalties meted out to teachers who hit their students in the newspapers were published. Teachers should be punished without their being insulted in front of their students. Students should never learn that a teacher has been punished. This diminishes students’ respect for their teachers, and eventually adversely affects the discipline teachers impose on their students.”

On the one hand the Teachers’ Syndicate suffers from the iron hand of control that the Ministry of Education adopts while dealing with the Syndicate, but on the other hand the Syndicate does receive decent financial support from the state. For example, at the fifth General Congress, held in May 1986, one of the decisions was that the

“Allocation of subsidy from the presidency of the Council of Ministers to the Solidarity Fund should amount to five million Syrian pounds every year.” And one of the recommendations was “Work to raise the assistance provided by the state for the Solidarity Fund.” According to one of my interviewees, the Syndicate continues to receive an annual amount of money from the presidency of the Council of Ministers. It is also always allocated funding from the Social Solidarity Fund, which in 2006 amounted to 12 million Syrian pounds (\$240,000) and might now have reached 24 million Syrian pounds (\$480,000).

#### ***4. The Teachers’ Syndicate’s Relationship with the Ba’ath Party***

When I asked the previous president of the Teachers’ Syndicate, a Sunni Ba’athist, Mr Ziād Muḥsin, to describe the relationship between the Syndicate and the Ba’ath Party, he stated that “The Ba’ath Party is the key that opens all closed doors to the Syndicate. Every time the Syndicate suffers from a clash or disagreement with the Ministry of Education, and reaches a dead end, it contacts the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party regarding the matter, in particular the Office of Professional Syndicates, and pressure is put on the ministry to follow our interests. At the level of regulatory matters, the Ba’ath Party assists the Syndicate elections by providing the buildings needed, especially in the provinces where the Syndicate doesn’t have enough places to carry out the process of elections.” He continued by saying, “Actually, while everyone else is excited about the next political stage the country is about to enter, that is, political pluralism, we are worried about it. This is because this means we would lose the solid support of the ruling party, the Ba’ath Party, and we will have to find a new way to push for our demands. But we will find a way; we might have to resort to other means to make our needs known, such as going on strike.” I asked him why the



Syndicate hadn't adopted this method before in order to push for its demands. "We don't need to go that far now," was the reply. "Things can be solved quietly, by pressing and pressuring, although it takes much time, and sometimes things end up with the Syndicate being the one that has to cope with the situation. But still, it has never yet reached the point at which we have felt the need to go on strike." When I asked him, *Is enrollment within the Ba'ath Party obligatory? Do members of the Syndicate first have to be Ba'athists to be able to become enrolled in the Syndicate?* he answered, while smiling calmly, "You are a young girl; maybe you don't know that, as the late President Hafez al-Assad once said, all teachers are Ba'athists, even if they are not partisans." I can say that this answer summarizes the general atmosphere that dominates the Teachers' Syndicate. Teachers who teach in state schools and universities have to be enrolled in the syndicate. As for teachers who teach in private schools and universities, it is up to them; they are free to join or not to join the syndicate.

Most opening ceremonies of the General Congress have usually taken place in the presence of members of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, the National Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, members of the Central Committee of the Progressive National Front, representatives of other popular organizations, and some ministers. Some have taken place in the General Union of Workers' Syndicates.

When I asked a past president of the Teachers' Syndicate, a Sunni Ba'athist, to describe the interaction between the Syndicate and the Ba'ath party, he asserted that, "The Teachers' Syndicate is simply one of the Ba'ath Party's institutions. It consults with the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party regarding any major decision. Even at the time of the Syndicate elections, it was the regional Leadership who asked me to run for elections. I never thought about it. I ran for elections, and I was definitely elected by the Ba'athists, who enjoy a majority presence within the Syndicate and follow the party

line. I was elected by members of the Executive Office as president of the Teachers' Syndicate because it was what the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party wanted. This is a great deficiency in the work of the Syndicate, because look what happens: I became the president of the Teachers' Syndicate, even though I knew nothing about it; all I knew was that I was a member, and that I had to pay my monthly membership. But after I left the Syndicate I gained much more knowledge about it, and now it has been years since I last heard from the Syndicate. There is no method by which an accumulation of knowledge about the Syndicate can be passed on to future presidents. There should be a council for previous presidents, or some other formula whereby previous presidents can be consulted about contemporary matters that concern the Syndicate. Instead, each president starts from scratch, and after he/she leaves no one seeks his/her opinion regarding any matter concerning the Syndicate. I believe this is not only a problem concerning the Teachers' Syndicate, but a problem that relates to all the syndicates, and, if you may, all ministries in our country. That is why we are not moving forward."

*Now, when you look back at your experience as a president of the Teachers' Syndicate, if you could change anything, what would you change?* The past president of the Teachers' Syndicate answered, "I would make the Syndicate more independent from both the Ministry of Education and the Ba'ath party, to enjoy its autonomy at all levels. I tried to do that while I was president; I had long discussions and negotiations with the people in the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath party, but this didn't go anywhere. It is just not possible!"

As asserted by one of my interviewees, an independent Alawit from the province of Homs, most teachers work in public schools and universities, which means that one way or another they are appointed by the state. That is why the Teachers

'Syndicate is more aligned to the Ministry of Education than other syndicates are aligned to their respective ministries.

In sum, the Teachers' Syndicate is a front organization of the Ba'ath Party. It enjoys a majority presence of Ba'athists among its members, who view control of the Regional Leadership over the Syndicate not as interference in their affairs but as a help in providing guidelines and a mechanism for achieving their interests. Even so, they complain about the decline of the Regional Leadership's role in facing up to the disappointing policies of the Ministry of Education.

#### **E. Conclusion**

The Teachers' Syndicate follows the political orientation of the Ba'ath Party completely. This may be demonstrated throughout the period of political activism on the part of the Syndicate, and through some of its practices. For example, in March 1980, an exceptional General Congress took place in Damascus in support of the Ba'ath Party, which was facing a crisis at that time, and within its recommendations was the "Condemnation of crimes of the Muslim Brotherhood gangs and a demand to eliminate them." Also, there was an "Emphasis on absolute loyalty to the Ba'ath revolution in Syria."

In addition there has been various marches that the Syndicate has organized and carried out supporting political causes of the Ba'ath Party, such as condemnation of the war on Iraq, and supporting the regime facing American threats in 2005. Another practice is that at the end of each General Congress, Syndicate members send an official, formal telegram to the president, thanking him for his support, and informing him of what has been accomplished at their meeting. Furthermore, the Syndicate sends the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party a report every six months, informing it of

all its activities and progress.

Additionally, the president of the Syndicate and all presidents of all branch offices, have to be Ba'athists, and the majority of the members of the General Congress, Central Council and Executive Office are also Ba'athists. Independents can only run for two seats on the Executive Council, and sometimes only one seat. This has been an "informal" requirement; it does not appear in any law or system, but is the norm. Changing this is out of the question, as it is decided by the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party. In short, the Teachers' Syndicate is simply a front organization of the Ba'ath Party.

It has been stated in Syndicate booklets that the Syndicate was changed from a professional to a popular organization so that it could play a role in the political life of the country. In fact, what happened was that this became a means by which the Syndicate became one of the front organizations of the Ba'ath Party, and one which follows its political orientation and seeks its approval in all major issues. It can never adopt a political stand that is different from that of the Ba'ath Party. This is a major obstacle that stands in the way of the Syndicate becoming an autonomous organization, and it means that it cannot enjoy even a little political space of its own.

Members of the syndicate have suffered the decline of the supportive role the Ba'ath Party used to play. Previously, the Ba'ath Party set government policies, and ensured its supporters, of which teachers comprised a major sector, were protected. However, over the last ten years the Ba'ath Party has allowed the government to set its policies without protecting its supporters. Nonetheless, the Teachers' Syndicate remains the most loyal syndicate of the regime, and there is loyalty to the Ba'ath Party on account of its various achievements within the education sector. The decision taken by the late President Hafez al-Assad to make education in Syria free and compulsory until

the end of secondary school, and free until the end of university, is regularly mentioned with pride by most Ba'athists teachers.

Overall, the major source of frustration that members of the Teachers' Syndicate suffer from is not the Regional Leadership but rather the illogical policies of the Ministry of Education. It also suffers from the absence of the former supportive role of the Regional Leadership, which used to put pressure on the Ministry of Education to follow the wishes of the Teachers' Syndicate. Questioning the Regional Leadership or challenging it is never an option for Syndicate members, who are genuine Ba'athists, whether or not they are partisan. They see their syndicate as an organization of the Regional Leadership, and any discomfort they might experience with its decisions, or perhaps on account of the absence of necessary decision-making, is, according to them, a mere difference in views among the members of one and the same organization.

With this mindset and strong partisanship of members of the Teachers' Syndicate, it is hard to see any room for a change or empowerment of the Syndicate by its members. Members accept the flaws in the performance of their Regional Leadership without questioning or challenging it, or trying to find a way to push their demands forward.

There is a solid and unquestioning acceptance on the part of the members of the Syndicate of the performance of the Regional Leadership, even though it is a poor performance, and this blind adherence to the status quo enhances the lack of response of the Regional Leadership to teachers' concerns. Unless there is a challenging environment between the Teachers' Syndicate and the Regional Leadership, the Regional Leadership will not feel obliged to reform itself, improve its performance, or step up to the needs and demands of the Teachers' Syndicate's members, which it is supposed to support.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DOCTORS' SYNDICATE

#### **A. Introduction**

In this chapter, I will investigate the role that *Nqābat al-Aṭibba* (The Doctors' Syndicate) plays in the political life of Syria. The Syndicate enjoys a very low and quiet political profile. The Doctors' Syndicate has always been thought of as one of the professional syndicates that enjoys a greater autonomy than other syndicates from the Ba'ath Party. It also comprises the most prestigious community in Syria, since members of the syndicate are highly educated as only students with the highest marks in secondary school can attend schools of medicine. Doctors are well paid and some are very rich. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to study the Doctors' Syndicate.

By setting out the Doctors' Syndicate's structure, the procedures through which leaders of the Syndicate are recruited, and the process of elections, I will show how far the government and the Ba'ath Party are involved in the procedures and decisions of the Syndicate at both political and professional levels. I will also show to what extent the Syndicate remains independent of both these institutions. In addition, I will attempt to find out if there is any informal sectarian distribution of the leadership positions within the Syndicate.

#### **B. Historical Background**

In 1943, two doctors' syndicates were established in Syria. The first was the Damascus Doctors' Syndicate and the second the Aleppo Doctors' Syndicate. In 1952, other syndicates were established in both Lattakia and Hims. In the same year the

Doctors' Pension law was issued, and each of these syndicates had its own pension fund. The syndicates remained disunited and separate until 1974. After the Corrective Movement, the Ba'ath Party united all the doctors' syndicates into one Doctors' Syndicate based in Damascus. In 1974, Law No. 34 was issued that established a single Doctors' Syndicate in Syria, with branches in every Syrian province where the number of doctors exceeded thirty.

In 1981, Law No. 31 was issued that regulated the electoral system and the representation of medical sectors in the Syndicate Council and the branches' councils.

In March 2012, the Doctors' Syndicate comprises 33,107 members, 42 percent of whom are Ba'athists, and the rest either independents or members who belong to political parties of the Progressive National Front. Women constitute 24 percent of the membership.

### **C. Structure of the Doctors' Syndicate**

Throughout Syria, there are fourteen branches of the Syndicate. The electoral term is five years.

#### ***1. al-Wihda (The Unit)***

At the beginning of each election term, the Branch Council of each province issues a decision to initiate electoral units for doctors in provinces where the number of doctors exceeds five hundred. The Branch Council distributes doctors who are registered in the branch into units, with each unit comprising no less than thirty doctors.

The doctors of each unit meet to elect representatives to the Branch Body, with a fixed percentage of one representative for every ten doctors allowed to all provinces, regardless of the size of the province wherein the branch is located. Thus in the province

of Damascus, for example, if there are 7,000 doctors, the doctors within the units will elect 700 representatives to the Branch Body.

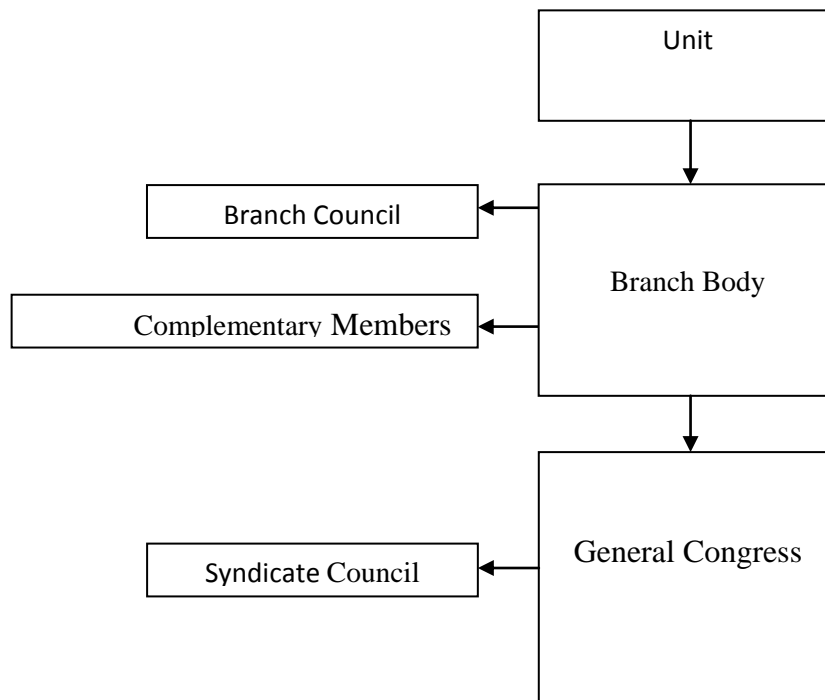


Fig. 3. Structure of the Doctors' Syndicate

## 2. *Hay'at al-Firi'* (The Branch Body)

The Branch Body consists of all the registered doctors in branches that comprise fewer than 500 doctors. In branches where the number of registered doctors exceeds 500, the Branch Body comprises the elected representatives of units in the province, in addition to the elected members of the previous Branch Council. The Branch Body meets shortly after being elected and elects:

- *Majlis al-Firi'* (The Branch Council), which consists of seven members, who are also members of the General Congress. The president of the Branch Council is president of the branch of the Syndicate in the province. It meets at least once every two



weeks. The Branch Council meets and elects from its members the president, general secretary and a Treasurer who is responsible for the financial affairs of the Syndicate and serves as the financial manager. Any sum of money paid from the Syndicate's money requires the signatures of the Treasurer and the president of the Syndicate.

- *Adaā Mutammimūn* (Complementary Members), which consists of ten members for each province who are also members of the General Congress.

Complementary members are members who are elected merely to represent the members of the branch in the General Congress. They are not members of any committee of the branch.

In each branch, the Branch Body elects seventeen members who represent the branch of the province at the General Congress. All provinces are therefore represented at the General Congress by a fixed number of seventeen representatives, regardless of the size of the province. Representation of the branches at the General Congress is not proportional with the size of the branch, which might be considered a flaw in the organizational structure of the Syndicate.

The president of the branch heads the meetings of the Branch Body, which is the highest authority within the branch. The Branch Body has the right to hold the Branch Council accountable and to indicate a lack of confidence in the president of the branch, or any member in the branch council, or the whole board. The Branch Body meets annually to discuss the report of the Branch Council and the budget of the branch of the previous year, as well as to approve this budget after examining the report of the accounting inspector. It also puts forward a new plan for the Syndicate for the coming year, and a new budget for the branch for the following year.

At the request of the president of the Branch Body, the latter can arrange an exceptional meeting, based on a request from the Branch Council, or on a written

request of at least 60 percent of the Branch Body members.

### **3. *al- Mū'tamar al- ām (The General Congress)***

The General Congress consists of:

- Seventeen representatives of each branch of the Syndicate, which include seven members of the Branch Council and ten Complementary Members from all provinces in Syria.

- Members of the Syndicate Council of the previous electoral term.

The General Congress meets each electoral term, after the elections of the branches take place. The General Congress elects:

- *Majlis al-Nqāba* (The Syndicate Council). This consists of eleven members, who elect the president of the Syndicate Council, who is also the president of the General Congress as well as the president of the Syndicate, the general secretary, and a Treasurer. Members of the Syndicate Council should comprise members of three sectors: higher education, the Ministry of Health and the private sector. The Syndicate Council meets at least monthly and usually once every two weeks. It executes the decisions of the General Congress and examines the performance of all the Branch Councils.

The General Congress is the highest authority of the Syndicate. It meets annually and sets the policy of the Syndicate, the annual report of the activities of the Syndicate, and the annual budget, and resolves any disagreements between the Syndicate Council and Branches Councils. It approves the budgets, names the accounting inspector, and discusses the report of the Syndicate Council. It can also indicate a lack of confidence in the president.

It is stated in the Syndicate's bylaw that the mechanism of decision-making

within the General Congress, the Branch Bodies, the Syndicate Council and the Branch Councils is by voting only, and that the decision of the absolute majority prevails. In the case of votes being equal, the decision of the party that the president belongs to prevails.

#### **D. The Interaction between the Doctors' Syndicate and the State**

##### ***1. Rules and Regulations***

Dr Abd al-Hamīd al-Qwwatly, a Sunni Ba'athist from the province of Damascus, and president of the Damascus branch from 2006-2010, stated that: "The Syndicate is a political, economic and social organization that combines all doctors in Syria within one organization. It secures their interests and supervises their professional performance while delivering their medical services to all members of society." He continued by stating that, "The main focus of the Syndicate's activities is to ensure the well-being of doctors at both professional and social levels, and being responsible for the relationship between doctors and doctors and between doctors and patients. The Syndicate receives complaints from patients who have experienced doctors' medical errors, and investigates such complaints. At the professional level, the Syndicate sets up scientific seminars, lectures, and conferences. There are thirty-three *Rābi ta* (scientific associations) within the Syndicate, with each specialization having its own association. For example, there is the Surgery Association and Digestion Diseases Association. Every ten doctors, let us say, apply to form an association of the Syndicate, and all associations hold their meetings and seminars within the Syndicate. Also the Syndicate undertakes social activities for its members, such as trips and summer vacations."

Doctors have to be registered as members of the Syndicate before they start practicing their profession, and cannot work unless they are members. All working doctors, whether in private or public hospitals, or even if they work in their own clinics,

have to be enrolled in the Syndicate before they can start to undertake their work.

In 1989, Law No. 20 was issued which unified the pension funds of all branches and unified pension provision for all branches in all provinces, whereas previously pensions used to vary between one province and another. The Syndicate currently provides a monthly pension fund for retired doctors that amounts to 1,5000 Syrian pounds (300\$) for those who have served for thirty years. In addition, there is the Common Fund which provides *Ma'ūnat Wafāat* (Aid of Death) to the doctor's family, which amounts to 600,000 Syrian pounds, (1,2000\$), to be spent in any way the deceased doctor's family wishes. There is also *Ma'ūnat Nihāyat Khidma* (the Aid of End of Service), which amounts to at least 800,000 Syrian pounds (1,6000\$), and which might reach one million Syrian pounds (20,000\$), depending on the number of years that the doctor has served.

All the resources of the Syndicate are self-sustaining; no funding is received from elsewhere. Funds are obtained from the renting of buildings and clubs that the Syndicate owns in the provinces. Each doctor has to pay an annual fee to the Syndicate, amounting to 5000 Syrian pounds (100\$). In addition, the Syndicate has recently opened various clinics and laboratories, such as those that carry out tests on couples prior to marriage that warn them if there is a chance that their as yet unborn children might be prone to inheritable diseases. The revenues that these accrue belong to the Syndicate.

Recently, the Syndicate has been trying to issue a credit system, whereby every five years a doctor has to renew his/her license from the Doctors' Syndicate. In order to be able to renew it, doctors would need to accumulate 150 points. For each activity they undertake, doctors would be rewarded a certain number of points. Activities rewarded would have to be scientific, such as publishing research papers, attending scientific

conferences, or lecturing in scientific seminars or conferences. If doctors fail to achieve 150 points within five years, the Syndicate could withdraw a doctor's license, which would provide the Syndicate with significant executive power over its members. This credit system is thought to guarantee doctors' advancement. Thus there would be a need for doctors to follow up and advance their knowledge in their specialties continuously. However, although this credit system is ready to be applied, it has still not been put into effect on account of the current crisis. There is also the difficulty of setting up seminars and conferences, as doctors from faraway Syrian provinces cannot travel to Damascus because of the lack of security and the current dangerous conditions obtaining on the roads.

When the Syndicate receives a complaint from a patient who has been exposed to a medical error, the Syndicate investigates this claim through the Disciplinary Board. If it is proved that the doctor has been negligent, the Disciplinary Board is empowered to issue punishments that vary from issuing a warning to the doctor, enforcing a financial penalty, or closing the doctor's clinic either temporarily or permanently. In each branch there is a *Majlis Ta'dīb* (Disciplinary Board) that comprises one judge appointed by the Ministry of Justice, three members named by the Branch Council, and one doctor named by the Ministry of Health. The doctor can appeal the decision of the branch Disciplinary Board to the central Disciplinary Board, which comprises a judge appointed by the Ministry of Justice, three members named by the Syndicate Council, and one doctor who is a representative of the Ministry of Health. If the doctor is still found to be negligent, he/she can appeal to the Appeal Court.

## **2. Elections**

There are two elections that are carried out by members of the Syndicate. The

first is the consultative elections, which is conducted only with Ba'athists doctors. The Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party chooses candidates from among those who have won the consultative elections, and arranges the Front List with the Progressive National Front. The Syndicate Council comprises eleven members of whom six are Ba'athists, two are from the Progressive National Front, and three are independents. The Branch Council consists of seven members which comprise four Ba'athists, one member of the Progressive National Front, and two independents.

It is stated that members of the Syndicate Council and Branch Council meet once they have been elected and elect one of their members as president of the Syndicate. According to one of my interviewees, however, an active member of the Syndicate and a Sunni Ba'athist from the province of Damascus, it is common for the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party to "recommend" that the Ba'athists, the majority in both councils, elect a certain person as president. When I asked him whether they always recommend a popular name, he answered, "Usually, in the case of the Doctors' Syndicate at least, and as far as I know, the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party recommends a popular name and adheres to the majority wish of the doctors. Sometimes it happens that they ask the Ba'athists to vote for an unpopular name, and the Ba'athists then meet their wish." *But if the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party asks the Ba'athists to vote for a doctor who they are not convinced is any good, why do they vote for him/her?* "Ba'athists can definitely say no if they want to; this happened previously in the province of the countryside of Damascus, but not in the Damascus branch." *And why not?* "As I said, usually the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party follows what the Ba'athists doctors want, who are the majority; however, when they recommend a name that the Ba'athists are not really happy with, we, that is the Ba'athists, still vote for that name, because we are Ba'athists. If we don't want to follow

what our political party wants, we had better leave it! But as long as we are Ba'athists, we will follow what our political party wants and support it, regardless of whether or not we agree or disagree. During the consultative elections we try our best to make the changes that we want, and most of the time we manage to do so, but if we fail, we stand by our political party. I believe this is the stand that most Ba'athists take in the Syndicate, starting with me and my fellow Ba'athist friends.”

But what also happens many times is that the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party “guides” the Ba'athists to elect certain names that they don't agree with to be their presidents, and the Ba'athists fail to get rid of these people in the consultative elections. They then suffer from their poor performance. According to an active member in the Doctor's Syndicate, a Sunni Ba'athist from the province of the Countryside of Damascus, “Usually Ba'athists vote for the Front List. As far as I recall, in the Damascus branch of the Syndicate, the Front List has never failed. However, many times the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party has forced certain names on us that we don't agree with, for example, the current president of the Doctors' Syndicate, Dr Abd al-Qādir al-Hasan, who has not held a meeting of the General Congress for two years now I believe he is aware that the Ba'athists now want to withdraw their trust in him, owing to his poor performance. This is why he keeps postponing the General Congress, claiming that it is not safe for members of other provinces to travel to Damascus, although we have told him many times that members from other provinces are willing to travel by plane. And I know that several branches of the Syndicate contacted the Office of Syndicates in the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party to help us to put pressure on him to hold the General Congress. However, the Office of Syndicates didn't help, and now we are stuck with him! I wish the Regional Leadership was more responsive to our demands and took a stronger stand. Also, the previous

president, that is, Dr Wā'il al-Halqy, was forced on us. Ba'athists didn't want him, and in the Syndicate's elections he didn't receive the highest number of votes, coming third or fourth, but we still had to vote for him and elect him as president because the Regional Leadership 'recommended' him. Now he has become the Minister of Health<sup>13</sup> which is even worse!" *But why did you elect him if you weren't convinced he would do well? Does the way the election is carried out affect your decisions?* "Not at all. Whom we elect is between the ballot paper and us. There is no one standing over our heads. It is simply our conviction that we have to vote for our party's choice, else why are we Ba'athists? If we choose not to vote for our party's choice we had better leave it and join another party, or just remain independent."

So the Regional Leadership does not appear to adhere to the results of the consultative elections of the Syndicate. If a particular Ba'athist received the highest number of votes, it is not necessarily the case that he would be "recommended" by the Regional Leadership to be the president of the branch, or the Syndicate. Moreover, his name might not even appear in the Front List. On the contrary, a Ba'athist who was elected to the syndicate council in the consultative elections, but with the least number of votes, might become the president of the branch or the Syndicate. It all depends on what the Regional Leadership wants. The only thing that the Regional Leadership cannot avoid is to drop the names of those who failed the consultative elections. Nevertheless, the Ba'athists still stick to the Front List and vote for it, despite their objections, and despite the fact that it is not relevant to the results of the consultative elections, on account of their "partisanship", as they call it. I believe this stance represents most of the Ba'athists in the Doctors', Teachers' and Engineers' Syndicates

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<sup>13</sup> Later, on 9 August 2012, he was appointed as the Prime Minister of Syria and he is still in office.



who vote for the “recommendation” of the Regional Leadership, despite their objections to this recommendation.

### ***3. The Doctors’ Syndicate’s Relationship with the State***

Dr Mhd Walīd Jumrān, a Sunni Ba’athist who was president of the Damascus branch from 1994-2006 from the province of Homs, stated that, “The relationship [of the Doctors’ Syndicate] with the Ministry of Health is merely administrative. Decisions issued by the General Congress that relate to the performance of the Syndicate are considered effective once they are issued. Moreover, certain decisions of the Syndicate need to be ratified by the Ministry of Health, but any decision that the Ministry does not ratify within sixty days is nonetheless considered to be effective. There are also meetings that take place at the Ministry of Health every three months that include two representatives from the Doctors’ Syndicate, two representatives from the Ministry of Health, the president of the Syndicate and the minister of health. And if there is any law that needs to be changed, the Syndicate sends a draft to the Ministry of Health, then it goes to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and then to Parliament.”

Nevertheless, the Syndicate definitely faces some difficulties. One of my interviewees, an active member in the Syndicate and an Alawite Ba’athist from the province of Homs, has said that it is now been ten years since the Syndicate first tried to issue a new law<sup>14</sup> to replace Law No. 31, and it is still not out yet. When I asked her why this was the case, she said that the issue had been ten years rotating between the Syndicate, the Ministry of Health, the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party, the Presidency of the

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<sup>14</sup> At the time of writing this chapter, on 13 March 2012, Parliament approved the law of the syndicate organization for doctors that replaces Law No. 31 of 1981. The major change is rejoining doctors within the army and armed forces to the Doctors’ Syndicate after they had been denied membership following the events of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Council of Ministers, and Parliament. Every time any party changes any detail it has to rotate around all parties all over again. When I asked her how she described the relationship between the Syndicate and the Ministry of Health, she stated that, “The Ministry of Health definitely enjoys the upper hand in the relationship. The Doctors’ Syndicate does not have the executive power that the Ministry of Health enjoys. For example, it is the Ministry of Health not the Syndicate that issues the license for doctors to start practicing their profession. Not only that but the Syndicate does not have a say in the matter. Issuing the license is limited to both the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Higher Education. After graduation, doctors who have studied abroad should apply to the Ministry of Higher Education, which has a list of foreign universities, to equate their degrees. Doctors who have graduated from foreign universities that are not on the list need to sit a special exam, while those who have graduated from universities that are on the list do not need to sit for such an exam. Only after passing the exam are doctors provided with the license from the Ministry of Health that enables them to start practicing their profession, but the doctor should first register with the Syndicate. As you can see, since it is the Ministry of Health that issues the doctors’ license and not the Doctors’ Syndicate, it is the Ministry of Health that definitely has the upper hand. Also, it is only the Ministry of Health that has the right to withdraw the license from any doctor, not the Syndicate. In addition, it is not the Syndicate that ratifies the doctor’s degree, but rather the Ministry of Health. The syndicate does not look at the degrees.”

When I asked her why the Syndicate does not demand a more powerful role, she said, “Well, this issue has been raised with the Ministry of Health, but it is just not going to happen. Why would those who enjoy authority and power ever want to give it away? Why would the Ministry of Health want to give the power they enjoy over the Syndicate away? They simply don’t have to!”

An active member in the Syndicate, a Christian from the province of the Countryside of Damascus who belongs to a party of the Progressive National Front, stated that, “The Syndicate suffers interference from the Ministry of Health in its business, such as sending doctors to attend conferences abroad. This should be left to the Syndicate and not to the Ministry of Health. Recently there was a conference on medicine in Argentina and the Ministry of Health sent a physical therapist to attend the conference! What does a physical therapist have to do with a conference about medicine? The ministry takes such decisions single-handedly without consulting the Syndicate in suggesting names of doctors who might represent Syrian doctors in such international conferences. Even though the current Minister of Health was the previous president of the Doctors’ Syndicate, and it might be thought that this would benefit the Syndicate, in fact this is not the case. He is still acting as though he is still the president of the Syndicate and the Minister of Health at one and the same time!”

Another problem facing the Doctors’ Syndicate was mentioned by an active member from the province of Aleppo, a Sunni Ba’athist. He said that, “As you know, the best medical practice in Syria is in Damascus and Aleppo. Aleppo is full of doctors that it does not need, while other provinces lack sufficient number of doctors in major specialties. We have a shortage of doctors in certain specializations and an excess of doctors in other specializations. The distribution of doctors in the provinces of Syria is not a fair one. You may note that most patients in most public hospitals in Damascus and Aleppo are from al-Jazīra, al-Qāmishly, al-Hasaka and other faraway provinces. This is mainly because the Ministry of Health distributes its doctors in the provinces without consulting the Syndicate, and doctors who want to open their private clinics can open them anywhere they want; they don’t need to be limited to certain areas. Therefore this imbalance takes place, and the Syndicate can do nothing about it. Previously, the

syndicate suggested the creation of a “mobile system” in which, for example, senior medical students of Damascus University study in Dir al-Zwr for one or more semesters, while senior medical students of Dir al-Zwr study in Damascus University for one or more semesters. This would help students of Damascus University to pass on knowledge and information to their colleagues in Dir al-Zwr, while students of Dir al-Zwr would have the chance to study in Damascus University which is the most advanced public university in Syria. We, that is, the Doctor’s Syndicate, suggested that we apply this “mobile system” to all public universities in all Syrian provinces. This is because this would provide students of faraway provinces the chance to keep up to the same level as students who live in the capital or central provinces, since university hospitals in these provinces have more advanced medical equipment and medical knowledge than university hospitals of faraway provinces. But this suggestion found deaf ears as usual. Unfortunately, the role of the Syndicate is limited to suggestions and claims, but doesn’t have the power to push things further if the Ministry of Health and the Regional Leadership do not respond to the Syndicate’s demands.”

He went on to say, “Moreover, the Syndicate should play a role in the policy of dispatch, by which each ministry sends certain doctors to specialize abroad. There are certain specialties that we lack, such as liver transplants, and we need to send doctors abroad to specialize in this discipline. However, the Syndicate does not have a say in this matter. The Ministry of Higher Education sends its own doctors to specialize abroad, the Ministry of Health sends its own doctors, and the Ministry of Defense sends its own doctors. Each acts autonomously, without there being any cooperation with other ministries or association, including the Syndicate. This sometimes results in there being many doctors in Syria specializing in the same medical discipline, while there is a lack of doctors in other specialties. Such decisions should be taken collectively [and in

agreement] with all these parties.”

An active member in the Syndicate, a Sunni and an independent from the province of Damascus, asserted that it was not only the Ministry of Health that meddled in the Syndicate’s business. For example, in 2008, the year that Damascus was the capital of Arab Culture, the General Secretariat of “Damascus the Arab Capital of Culture” decided to remove nameplates on the streets that carry doctors’ names. This was despite the fact that this contradicted the law of the Syndicate that allowed doctors to place nameplates in front of their clinics, but the mayor of Damascus executed this decision. Although removing the nameplates contradicts the law of the Syndicate, and despite all the objections and complaints that doctors expressed to all the state apparatus, and even to the Ba’ath Party and the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party, nothing changed. We had to remove our nameplates, and even now they have not reappeared. All restaurants and cafés were allowed to keep their; it was only members of the professions that had to remove their nameplates.

Another problem was raised by an active member in the Syndicate who is a Sunni Ba’athist from the province of Lattakia. He stated that workers and employers who work in public companies, and their families, have the right to free medication. Previously, the Syndicate prepared contracts between the Syndicate branch and public sector companies for doctors to practice on the workers. The doctor had to be a general practitioner, and earn a monthly salary from the public company. If there was a specialist requirement, the doctor had to state the need for a specialist, and the patient could choose any specialist he/she wanted. The worker’s company paid the Syndicate, and the specialist received 75 percent of the fees, while 25 percent went to the Syndicate’s Common Fund. Of the money received by the Syndicate, 5 percent was paid for administrative expenses, and 20 percent went to the rest of the doctors in the

Syndicate. Recently, however, during the time of the previous government of Mhd Naji al-Otari, health insurance companies took over the work of the Common Fund. This has negatively affected both workers and doctors since the workers are now allowed only a limited range of medication, with the annoying interference of health insurance companies who ask about every medical detail. Also, health insurance companies contract only a limited number of doctors, while previously it was patients who could choose the specialists they wanted. Thus, the health insurance companies are the only ones who win out. Moreover, the previous government forced all public companies to make contracts with health insurance companies, even if they had been happy with the Doctors' Syndicate. They had no choice about this, and most of these health insurance companies are not even Syrian companies.

In addition, it is mentioned in Law No. 31, article 58 that the presidency of the Councils of Ministers has the right to dissolve the General Congress, the Syndicate Council and the Branch Councils if any of these boards deviates from performing the work it is supposed to do. Also it is stated that this decision is not subject to any appeal or review. Although this has not happened since the law was promulgated, nonetheless, it is possible that this might happen – and it would be backed up by law.

Overall, the Doctors' Syndicate enjoys a certain degree of autonomy with regards to running its internal issues. Nonetheless, it is sometimes subject to interference from various ministries regarding the interests of its members.

#### ***4. The Doctors' Syndicate's Relationship with the Ba'ath Party***

According to an interviewee, an active member in the Syndicate and a Christian Ba'athist from the province of Damascus, the Ba'ath Party merely supervises the performance of the Syndicate, and participates in particular occasions and

celebrations of the Syndicate. A representative of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party attends the opening of the General Congress, in addition to a representative of the Ministry of Health. The existence of a representative of the Regional Leadership during the General Congress is merely symbolic; the Regional Leadership does not interfere in the professional matters of the syndicate, its presence is mainly political. The Syndicate also submits an annual report to the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, setting out the activities of the Syndicate. The Ba'ath Party helps the Syndicate to overcome some of the problems that it faces with the Ministry of Health and other apparatus of the state, although this particular role of the Ba'ath Party is increasingly diminishing. It is not nearly as effective or as powerful as it used to be. He stressed that the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party does not meddle in the business of the Syndicate, and usually agrees to what the Syndicate wants at the professional level.

I asked a previous president of the Doctors' Syndicate, when he looked back at his experience what he suggested might improve the performance of the syndicate. He said that, "I wish the Syndicate could enjoy more autonomy from the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, and from the Ministry of Health. I am a Ba'athist and I believe that it would benefit the Ba'ath Party itself if the Regional Leadership didn't interfere in the process of elections. They should let the Ba'athists choose their president freely without 'recommending' that certain names should be elected by the Ba'athists as presidents of the Doctors' Syndicate. If this were the case, the Regional Leadership could never be blamed for its choices, because then the presidents would truly be those whom the doctors themselves had chosen. But there are people who take advantage of the election process. It has happened many times that doctors who previously were independent, and who work far away from the Syndicate, when election time draws near become enrolled in any political party of the Progressive National

Front. This is so they can have the opportunity to share the Front List and be nominated as candidates for the Syndicate and run for elections. If the Regional Leadership did not interfere in the electoral process, the Doctors' Syndicate could get rid of such opportunists.”

When I asked an active member in the Syndicate, an Alawite Ba'athist from the province of Tartūs, to describe the relationship between the Doctors' Syndicate and the Ba'ath Party, he said that, “Well, to start with, the Doctors' Syndicate is a small syndicate. It comprises only a few members compared to other syndicates, and they are all busy people. At the professional level most of the struggles that the Syndicate faces are mainly with the Ministry of Health, and at the political level the Ba'ath Party is present mainly during elections. Usually it recommends that the Ba'athists elect a certain name as president of the Syndicate, and sometimes it is a name that is acceptable to Ba'athist members.” I asked him why he thought that was. He replied, “Well, you know that doctors are busy people with their work; there is no competitive atmosphere among them. There are anyway few people who are willing to give time to the work of the Syndicate. But I believe that the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath party and the Ministry of Health should be more responsive in meeting the demands of the Syndicate at the professional level. They should grant the Syndicate more power and support to achieve its demands.”

Then I asked him, *Why does the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party select the names of the Front List from the winners of the Consultative Elections? Why doesn't it go with the person who has won the highest number of votes?* He replied saying, “Previously, the Regional Leadership had certain considerations. For example, it used to ensure women were represented; that members of the Front List in the Branch elections in the far provinces where tribes exist did not belong to the same tribe; that there was



always a Christian member in the Syndicate's branch of Dar'ā; and so on. But now, the Regional Leadership does not play this balancing act anymore. It merely uses its power as a means whereby members of the Regional Leadership can personally benefit."

I asked him about the reason behind the informal percentage of the distribution of Ba'athists and independents in all syndicates' councils, and the majority presence of Ba'thists in all syndicates' councils and other associations. He said that, "Well, you know that, according to the constitution, the Ba'ath Party is the leader of the state and society, hence, it is granted this majority presence in all syndicates' councils. In any professional syndicate council, the number of Ba'athists should equal half the number of the members of the council plus one. This is the formula that is followed, and although this is an informal measure the procedure is followed within all professional syndicates. This will definitely change as the constitution has now changed, and the Ba'ath Party is now no longer the ruling party in Syria anymore."

When I asked him why the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party recommends certain people for Ba'athists to elect as their president, he said, "Well, this is what is called "central democracy," that is, the base elects and the top selects. At the finish, the Ba'ath Party recommends a name that has been elected by Ba'athists in both the Consultative Elections and Syndicate elections. It is true that the name might not have received the highest number of votes, but it is still a popular one, and, according to other considerations that the Regional Leadership takes into account, it recommends a certain name. In the case of the Doctors' Syndicate, for example, Dr Yūsif 'As'ad, who is the current president of the branch of Damascus, won the Branch elections of 2006 with the highest number of votes; however, the Regional Leadership didn't "recommend" his name to be put forward to be elected as the president of the branch of Damascus, because he is from the province of Tartūs. Nevertheless, in the elections of

2010 they had to “recommend” his name on account of the huge difference between the number of votes he gained and the number of votes the rest of the candidates acquired. Also, it should be noted that Dr Mhd Walīd Jumrān was the president of the branch of the Doctors’ Syndicate of the province of Damascus from 1994-2006, even though he is in fact from the province of Homs, because of his popularity among doctors. So there are certain considerations the Regional Leadership does take into account when “recommending” the name of the president to be elected. At the same time, the importance of these considerations do vary, according to the pressure put on the Regional Leadership by the Syndicate members.”

When I asked Dr Mhd Walīd Jumrān about his experience as president of the Damascus branch of the Syndicate at the time of the presidency of the late president Hafez al-Assad, he stated that the latter used to support the syndicates and grant them space to work. He said, “He was the greatest supporter of the Syndicate, not only of the Doctor’s Syndicate, but of all syndicates and unions. He always sided with them and supported their interests and needs.”

The Doctors’ Syndicate’s law still says that the electoral term is every four years, although, according to the decision of the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party, elections are now held every five years. Moreover, it is still stated in Law No. 31, article no. 3 that, “The Doctors’ Syndicate is a professional and social organization that believes in the goals of the Arab nation, in unity, freedom and socialism, and is committed to work to achieve these goals according to the decisions of the Ba’ath Arab Socialist Party and its recommendations.”

As illustrated, control of the Regional Leadership over the Syndicate is manifest mainly during the elections, by its arrangement of the front list and in “recommending” the president of the branch, or of the Syndicate. Although, this

“recommendation” can be challenged and changed by members of the Doctors’  
Syndicate through voting for someone else, this happens only seldom.

## **E. Conclusion**

It is noticeable that the nature of the profession of the members of the Doctors’  
Syndicate creates a certain atmosphere within the Syndicate that is manifested mainly  
by the fact that professional concerns override political ones. The main struggle that the  
Syndicate faces appears to be with the state’s apparatus, and mainly the Ministry of  
Health, which has the authority to make decisions that affect doctors and their  
professions, without consulting the Syndicate or without even considering the  
Syndicate’s point of view on most matters.

According to many of my interviewees, every time the Syndicate reaches a  
dead end with the Ministry of Health, the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party is the  
means through which the Syndicate tries to put pressure on the Ministry. Sometimes  
this maneuver works, but most of the time it does not. The Syndicate suffers from the  
lack of responsiveness of both the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party and the state  
apparatus.

The main role that the Ba’ath Party plays in the Doctors’ Syndicate is during  
elections. Although the president of the Syndicate, and the presidents of all branches are  
definitely Ba’athists, the Regional Leadership nevertheless usually asks the Ba’athists to  
vote for the name that it wants to be the president of the Syndicate. And although it has  
several times been the case that the Ba’athists have not been happy with the choice of  
the Regional Leadership, nonetheless, they have still been committed to it, and have  
voted for the choice that has been “recommended” without challenging it, simply  
because of their “partisanship.”

Independent members can never hold the post of president of the Doctors' Syndicate owing to the control of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party over the Syndicate.

On the one hand, there is the strong discontent that members of the Syndicate feel with the present government apparatus and the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party. There is also a strong discontent that the doctors feel about their lack of freedom, which is revealed very clearly in their interviews, especially when it comes to choosing their president. On the other hand, during the Syndicate's and the branches' elections, members are free to choose the people who represent them best, independently of what the Regional Leadership wants. Nevertheless, they choose to commit to the Regional Leadership choice without challenging it, which makes the process of elections a lost opportunity.

During elections, Ba'athists have the chance to challenge the bad choices of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, but they choose not to on account of their partisanship. Therefore, what the Syndicate is suffering from, apart from its struggle with the government apparatus, is control by the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party over the process of elections. The Syndicate also suffers because of the passive behavior of the Syndicate's members who choose not to challenge the performance of the Regional Leadership of their party and correct it.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

As shown in the previous chapters, professional syndicates occupy an intermediate position in Syria. They are not part of the state's apparatus, and at the same time they don't enjoy the autonomy that they would enjoy if they were part of a democratic country.

The relationship between each syndicate and its respective ministry, as well as the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, has been investigated in previous chapters. To achieve a clear understanding that is as accurate as possible, the structure of each syndicate, the process of elections, and the interactions between each professional syndicate with the state and with the Regional Leadership have been examined in detail.

In many ways the three syndicates are very similar. For example, membership of all three syndicates is compulsory. In Syria, teachers, engineers, and doctors cannot undertake their professional work in either the public or the private sector unless they are registered in their respective professional syndicates. Members do not have to be Ba'athists; they are free to be independents, Ba'athists or to belong to any political party in the Progressive National Front. Also, the process of elections is pretty much the same in all three syndicates.

The organizational structure of the three syndicates is also very similar, with few differences owing to the different size of the three syndicates. The Teachers' Syndicate is the largest of the three syndicates, with 362,525 members, and has a more detailed structure than the Engineers' and Doctors' syndicates. The structure of the Doctors' Syndicate's is the least detailed on account of the small number of its 33,107

members (Figures accessed in March 2012).

On the other hand, there are several differences between the three syndicates. For example, *al-Wiḥda*, (the Unit) of the Doctors' Syndicate, in contrast to that of the Engineers' and Teachers' syndicates, is merely an electoral unit, which means it cannot deliver any other services to its members, unlike the units of the Engineers' and Teachers' syndicates. The financial resources of both the Engineers' and Doctors' syndicates are self-sustaining and are not government-funded. With regard to the latter two syndicates, the state is not involved in any way in their financial matters, or in the process of monitoring their financial resources. In the case of the Teachers' Syndicate, however, the state contributes a great deal every year to its financial resources, and the Syndicate's financial budget is subject to supervision and inspection by the state's monitoring bodies.

At the professional level, the syndicates are autonomous, as the hypothesis of this thesis had originally assumed. However, in many cases, the three syndicates are subject to the interference of the respective state's apparatus in their interests and issues that concern members of the syndicates. The relationship between the three professional syndicates and their respective ministries is not governed by objective rules and regulations; on the contrary, it is governed by a personal relationship. That is, it depends on what the syndicate presidents want to achieve and the responsiveness of the ministries to the demands of their syndicates.

At the political level, the three syndicates follow the political orientation of the state, as the hypothesis of this thesis stated. There are, however, noticeable differences between the three syndicates at the political level. For example, the Teachers' Syndicate is more aligned with the Ba'ath Party than the Engineers' and Doctors' syndicates, to the extent that it can be without doubt regarded as a front organization for the Ba'ath

Party, and it enjoys a majority presence of Ba'athists among its members. The Doctors' Syndicate is the least involved politically as its members are not very competitive and are not as involved in their syndicate as much as members of the other two syndicates are on account of the nature of their profession, while the Engineers' Syndicate is the most politically involved. Ba'athists constitute the minority of the members in both the Engineers' and Doctors' syndicates with the majority being independents.

There are many similarities at the political level among the three syndicates, such as that it would be impossible for an independent member to achieve the position of president of any of the three syndicates. Independent members in all three Syndicate Councils are limited to only three seats, and presidents of the syndicates always have to be Ba'athists. The distribution of seats is decided by the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, and is never challenged by independent members of the syndicates, despite the fact that independent members enjoy a majority presence within both the Doctors' and Engineers' syndicates.

The three syndicates are subject to the hegemony of the Regional Leadership concerning the process of elections and recruitment of the leadership of the three syndicates. However, the three syndicates react differently to this hegemony. For example, all members of the Teachers' Syndicate, even the independents, on account of its historical alliance with the Ba'ath Party, view the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party not as a hegemonic power, but as the syndicate's greatest guarantor. But members of the Engineers' Syndicate, including the Ba'athists, have no problem in challenging the unfortunate choices and decisions of the Regional Leadership during elections. Of the three syndicates, members of the Doctors' Syndicate are the least involved in syndicate work, and its Ba'athist members don't challenge the Regional Leadership because of their "partisanship" as they call it.

### **A. Interaction of the Syndicates with the State and the Issue of *Shakhšana* (Personalization)**

In their relationship with the state, all three syndicates suffer the same problem, which is the policy of overriding control that the respective ministries adopt with regard to their syndicates. The ministries take decisions that affect the members of these syndicates directly without due consultation with either syndicate members or leaders of the syndicates. The performance of the syndicates is conditioned by the responsiveness of the respective ministry to the syndicates' demands. Here the issue of *shakhšana* (personalization) arises. In the case of the Teachers' Syndicate, for example, the relationship between the Ministry of Education and Teachers' Syndicate is entirely personal; that is, everything depends on the personality of the minister. For instance, the syndicate enjoyed positive feedback with the Ministry of Education when Dr Mahmūd al-Saiyyd was the minister, but this was not the case when Dr Ali Sa'd was the minister. For example, the latter prevented married teachers transferring to their husbands' workplace. These instances, both positive and negative, demonstrate the lack of autonomy enjoyed by the syndicate. The minister of education always had, and still has, control over teachers' concerns, and when the ministry responds to the Teachers' Syndicate's demands, this is considered to be on account of a beneficent ministry and is not regarded as the norm as it should be.

The performance of a syndicate and its success in performing its activities at a professional level is also conditioned by the personality of the president of the syndicate. Every president of any professional syndicate is by law a Member of Parliament; however, not all presidents take advantage of such a significant position, which is a vital means through which he or she can push forward and achieve the demands of the syndicate.



At the professional level, frustration is clearly indicated in the interviews of syndicate members set out in previous chapters because of the relationship between the three syndicates and the apparatus of the state, which mainly comprises their respective ministries. The relationship is not systematic and is not governed by laws and regulations. The three syndicates are governed by the single-handed policy that the ministries adopt when taking any decision concerning members of the syndicates. This does not mean the syndicates are totally abandoned by the ministries, but it does mean that there is a continuous and challenging process of negotiations and discussions between the syndicates and their respective ministries regarding decisions that best fit the interests of syndicate members. Ultimately, the success of the syndicates in achieving their demands depends on the personality of both ministers and presidents of the respective syndicates, their responsiveness to the demands of syndicate members, and their willingness to find a middle ground that benefits syndicate members.

The frustration of the three syndicates at the professional level sheds light on the decline of the performance and efficacy of the Ba'ath Party, which is supposed to be "the leader of state and society" and the greatest supporter of professional syndicates. In practice, however, professional syndicates are left to fight their own battles with their respective ministries, while the Regional Leadership remains unresponsive to syndicate demands and needs and is incapable of putting pressure on the government to respond to the demands of the syndicates.

The dilemma that faces the three syndicates that I have studied applies to all professional syndicates in Syria.

## **B. Interaction of the Syndicates with the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party**

It has to be said at the outset that establishing professional syndicates in Syria

was very important for organizing the professional and social lives of people in different professions. In the early stages of their existence, these syndicates witnessed a very active and productive life that contributed to the advancement of society in different domains. The Ba'ath Party and the political leadership of the country backed them up, because the syndicates were seen as an important means to organize social, political and professional activities in a semi-democratic fashion.

At the political level, the Ba'ath Party enjoys a strong presence in the three syndicates, since the majority of the members of the syndicate councils and the branch councils are Ba'athists, and the presidents of all three syndicates have to be Ba'athists.

This, however, was not the case in the past, and this fact has been stressed many times by most of my interviewees, especially the Ba'athists. According to my interviewees, when the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1963, it did not interfere in the work of the professional syndicates. When the late president Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1971, the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party unified the syndicates of each profession after the Corrective Movement had taken place. Previously, they had been scattered around the provinces of Syria, and each used to have a different pension fund and run its business separately. The Regional Leadership did not politicize the syndicates. The syndicates used to be autonomous in dealing with their own issues and were not dependent on the Ba'ath Party for decision-making. Also, the independents rather than the Ba'athists used to comprise the majority. However, this all changed after 1979, when the Muslim Brotherhood targeted the professional syndicates, especially the Doctors' Syndicate, the Engineers' Syndicate and the Lawyers' Syndicate on account of their solid presence in these three syndicates.

According to Dr Mhd Walīd Jumrān, "It is the Muslim Brotherhood who targeted the professional syndicates and politicized them. Prior to that, the Ba'ath Party

did not pay attention to professional syndicates and did not interfere in their business, but the Muslim Brotherhood took advantage of the absence of the Ba'ath Party in these institutions and thereby strengthened its presence within the syndicates.” He continued by saying, “The Muslim Brotherhood was not very popular at that time, well actually they never were. As far as I remember, in the 1950s, possibly 1956, during the parliamentary elections in the province of Damascus, Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'y, who was the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, failed to be elected when he was up against Rīāḍ al-Mālky who won the elections. He is the brother of ‘Adnān al-Mālky, who was a lawyer and a Ba'athist. Moreover, I am not sure when, but I remember that Fāris al-Khūry was once the president of the Islamic Waqf, and he was a Christian! Syrian people are moderate and tolerant people, and they have always been like this, which is why political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood have never gained popularity in our country.”

In 1981, in response to the machinations of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ba'ath Party took over the professional syndicates and changed the laws by which these syndicates function. The changes mainly affected the way people were elected, even though the informal distribution of posts among Ba'athists, the Progressive National Front and independents does not appear in any electoral law in any professional syndicate. The Regional Leadership granted the Ba'athists a majority presence in the councils of the three syndicates, and hence in the syndicates' councils. Prior to 1981, the three syndicates were functioning according to laws that had been issued after the Corrective Movement, but subsequently these laws were amended and issued as different laws in 1981. The three syndicates are currently operating under laws that were issued in 1981/1982. (The Engineers' Syndicate's internal law was issued in July 1981, the Doctors' Syndicate's internal law in August 1981, and the Teachers' Syndicate's

internal law in April 1982.)

The reason behind these changes in the laws relating to the syndicates, that is, the hegemony of the Ba'ath Party over the syndicates following the Muslim Brotherhood's attempt to infiltrate the syndicates, is not mentioned in any booklets of any of the three syndicates. Moreover, the presence of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party and the Progressive National Front are not mentioned in any electoral law or in any internal law of any syndicate. In reality, however, their presence is extremely strong and greatly affects the deliberations of the syndicates.

### ***1. Central Democracy: The Base Elects and the Top Selects***

The three syndicates are supervised by the regional office of the syndicates in the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, while the branches are supervised by the branch office of the syndicates in the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party. The syndicates send them reports regarding their activities, and the president of the Syndicates' Office attends the opening of the General Congress. The Regional Leadership is supposed to act to guarantee the interests of each syndicate in their dealings with the unfair policies of the government, and is also supposed to put pressure on the respective ministry to achieve the syndicate's demands. But these roles have diminished on account of the slump that the Ba'ath Party has been experiencing in recent times.

The control of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party over the syndicates is demonstrated mainly in two ways. The first is that the Ba'athists enjoy a majority presence within the three syndicates' councils, and the second is the fact that presidents of the three syndicates are always Ba'athists and are always "recommended" by the Regional Leadership. Independents have no chance of gaining the post of president. It

should be noted that these are informal procedures that are not mentioned in the electoral law of any syndicate.

Moreover, while it is written in the internal system of the three syndicates that the Syndicate Council should meet and elect its president, what actually happens is that the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party "guides" the Ba'athist members of the Syndicate Council to elect certain members as presidents. The syndicate president is not necessarily the person who has gained the highest number of votes in the elections, but sometimes is simply the one who the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party wants as president.

The consultative elections are the first phase of the election process for the three syndicates. The number of Ba'athists who win the consultative elections is double the number of Ba'athists who run for the Front List. The Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party then chooses the names of those who have won in the consultative elections who will share the Front List with the candidates of the Progressive National Front. The criterion for selection is not merely conditioned by the number of votes but also, and importantly, according to the interests and preferences of members of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party. The Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party has sometimes excluded names that have received the greatest number of votes, and has placed those who have gained the lowest number of votes in the consultative elections in the Front List. This makes the process of consultative elections a source of contention and frustration rather than a vital means for Ba'athist members to elect their representatives.

Members of the syndicates enjoy only a limited freedom to carry out the changes they want through the consultative elections, since the Regional Leadership controls the selection of the Front List and perhaps most of the time does not abide by

the number of votes cast. If Ba'athist syndicate members are not happy with the Front List, they still have an opportunity to carry out changes they want by refusing to vote for the names they don't want in the syndicate elections. Nevertheless, this opportunity is not taken up by the Ba'athists, who, in spite of their frustrations, still vote for the Front List.

The Engineers' Syndicate challenges the Front List more often than does the Doctors' Syndicate. Failing the Front List is never an option for the Teachers' Syndicate, as the Ba'ath party is its solid ally.

Most of the time the Front List wins the three syndicates' elections, but not for the same reasons. In the case of the Engineers' Syndicate, Ba'athists usually vote for the Front List on account of their convictions. If they are not convinced by the names listed for the Front List, they make sure they change the results of the elections according to their convictions, by voting for whom they want to see on the Front List. As far as the Doctors' Syndicate is concerned, however, Ba'athists vote for the Front List simply because they want to choose Ba'athists and not on the basis of any conviction. Members of the Teachers' Syndicate also vote for the Front List not merely on account of their convictions but also on account of a strong sense of partisanship. Failing the Front List is out of the question for the teachers. The electoral process for members of the Teachers' Syndicate is a routine process. The grassroots base elects and the top selects, and there is no room for a change owing to the Teachers' Syndicate's members' strong alliance with the Ba'ath Party.

This thesis has investigated three different professional syndicates, to find out if there is any difference in the political freedom each enjoys. The Doctors' Syndicate is considered to be one of the professional syndicates that enjoys greater autonomy than most of the other syndicates. However, my research has proved this not to be the case.

What my research has shown is that the Ba'ath Party spreads its control at the political level over the three syndicates, and that each professional syndicate reacts to this control in a different way. The Teachers' Syndicate does not even view this process as control, but as a mere guidance of its leadership, whereas the Engineers' Syndicate challenges this hegemony. The Doctors' Syndicate, however, does not.

My own interpretation of this difference is that the Engineers' Syndicate historically had more representatives in government as ministers and even prime ministers, a fact that lends greater governmental support to this particular syndicate. It is also, apart from the Teachers' Syndicate, the largest and wealthiest professional syndicate in the country. This allows it to move more freely within the political system and enables it to maneuver to gain more space and achieve more of the goals that it seeks for its members.

Table 1. Number of Ba'athist members in the three Syndicates Councils

	1990/1991	1995/1996	2000/2001	2005/2006	2010/2011
Engineers' Syndicate Council (11 members)	5	5	4	5	6
Teachers' Executive Office (9 members)	5	5	6	6	6
Doctors' Syndicate Council (11 members)	6	6	5	6	6

## ***2. Wajih Nisa'y: A Fair Representation of Women?***

Women are poorly represented within the three syndicates. The Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, the authority that controls the syndicates and which is supposed to utilize its power to empower women and advance their representation, is

not fulfilling its role in “leading the state and the society” in this issue. The Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party is falling short in “guiding” society to allow more space for women to participate and play a role in professional syndicates. The Front List of the three syndicates that is arranged by the Regional Leadership and the Progressive National Front always suffers from women being poorly represented.

Table 2. Women’s Representation in the Syndicates’ Councils of the Three Syndicates

	1990/1991	1995/1996	2000/2001	2005/2006	2010/2011
Engineers’ Syndicate Council (11 members)	-	-	-	1	1
Teachers’ Executive Office (9 members)	1	1	1	1	1
Doctors’ Syndicate Council (11 members)	-	-	1	1	2

The table above shows the poor representation of women in the main councils of the three syndicates. In the Engineers’ Syndicate, which suffers the poorest representation of women in the three syndicates, the maximum percentage of women has been 9 percent, even though women constitute 23 percent of the total membership of the Syndicate. In the case of the Doctors’ Syndicate, the maximum percentage has been 18 percent, although women constitute 24 percent of the total membership. The Teachers’ Syndicate has a very poor representation of women in the Teachers’ Executive Office, with a maximum of 11 percent, despite the fact that women constitute 58 percent of the total membership of the Teachers’ Syndicate.

Moreover, what is even more shocking is the poor representation of Ba’athist women in the three syndicates, which contradicts the claim among Ba’athists that the



Ba'ath Party plays a vital role in empowering women in Syria. It is also claimed that the Ba'ath Party paves the way for them to hold decision-making positions, a role that it has long been praised for.

Table 3. Representation of Ba'athist Women in the Syndicates' Councils of the Three Syndicates

	1990/1991	1995/1996	2000/2001	2005/2006	2010/2011
Engineers' Syndicate Council (11 members)	-	-	-	1	1
Teachers' Executive Office (9 members)	-	1	1	-	-
Doctors' Syndicate Council (11 members)	-	-	-	1	1

From the table above, it is clear that Ba'athist women constitute a maximum of only 9 percent in both the Engineers' and the Doctors' Syndicate Councils, and 11 percent in the Teachers' Syndicate council. Usually women are entirely absent within the syndicates councils. This is the case even with the Teachers' Syndicate, which is regarded as the syndicate most closely aligned to the Ba'ath Party. It is clear that unfortunately Ba'athist women haven't benefited much from this alignment. It is also disappointing that the Teachers' Syndicate has never had a woman as president, despite the fact that women constitute the majority of its members. The one event that can be regarded as an achievement for women during the twenty years covered by my research is that in 2010 the president of the Engineers' Syndicate was a woman, Mrs Hāla al-Nasir, who later became the Minister of Construction in 2011.

### ***3. Hizib aqāidy: The Secular Ba'ath Party and Cross-Sectarian Syndicates***

As asserted by most of my interviewees, when members of the syndicates vote, they never take into account the sect of the candidate; most of the time they don't even know his/her sect. They merely judge according to his/her professional reputation and performance.

However, when the Regional Leadership arranges the Front List it bears in mind that the Front List should afford balanced regional, tribal, and sectarian representation. For example, from 1990 until 2011, in the three Syndicates it is clear that the sect of both the president of the branch and the majority of members of the Branch Council follows the sect of the majority of the population of the province wherein the Syndicate's branch is located. For instance, for the last twenty years in the province of Siwaīdā', member of the Branch Council have been mostly Druze, while in the province of Tartūs they have been mostly Alawite. In the province of Aleppo and in Damascus, however, they have been mostly Sunni.

Through the Front List, the Regional Leadership makes sure that minorities are also represented within the syndicates' councils, and that their presence concurs with the proportion of their population within the province. For example, it ensures there is a Christian member in the Branch Council of the province of Dar'ā, a Sunni member in the Branch Council of the province of Tartūs and an Alawite member in the Branch of Hamāa.

For the last twenty years presidents of the three syndicates have always been Sunni, which is the majority sect in Syria.

In addition to the sectarian consideration, regional consideration is also taken into account. For example, the Regional Leadership always "recommends" the presidents of the Damascus branch of the three syndicates, and these members are

always from the province of Damascus.

Overall, the Regional Leadership has been successful in keeping a regional, sectarian and tribal balance within the Front List while recruiting the leadership of the three syndicates. Nonetheless, sometimes preferences are shown mainly through the process of voting by syndicate members. The Regional Leadership has done a good job by keeping a balanced sectarian and tribal representation, which has stressed the cross-sectarian feature of the professional syndicates, which in turn has enhanced the secular nature of the Ba'ath Party.

#### ***4. The Professional Syndicates over a Twenty-years Period***

The period of twenty years from 1990-2011 that is covered in this thesis encompassed ten years under the rule of Hafez al-Assad and ten years under the rule of Bashar al-Assad. During this period there is no discernible difference in the way the three syndicates have functioned and delivered their services to their members. Also, there is no discernible difference as far as the hegemony of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party over the syndicates is concerned. The one difference that can be detected is in the supportive role that the late president Hafez al-Assad used to play so far as the syndicates were concerned. He used to interfere personally to ensure that neither the government nor the Regional Leadership undermined the policies that syndicate members saw as best serving their interests. Most members of the three syndicates considered that the late President Hafez al-Assad was the greatest guardian and supporter of the syndicates. This was the dominant perception within the three syndicates, and many stories and factual accounts of his unlimited support and empowerment support this. President Bashar al-Assad, however, has not undertaken this role in any way, and all my interviewees stressed that he has never intervened with

either the government or the Regional Leadership on behalf of syndicate members. The syndicates are therefore left to face the policies of the government and the Regional Leadership without the backing of presidential support that was delivered by the late president Hafez al-Assad.

### ***5. It Takes Two to Tangle***

On the one hand, the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party most definitely controls the syndicates, starting with the arrangement of the Front List and ending with "recommending" the president of the syndicates. On the other hand, it is the Ba'athists themselves who provide the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party with the mandate to play this role by allowing it to elect the Front List and the president, despite their frustration and the negative remarks they have made. Ba'athist members of the syndicates justify their actions on account of their high sense of partisanship. In addition, there is the scattered power of the independents who constitute the majority in the Doctors' and Engineers' Syndicates.

For most of the Ba'athists I have met, the role they play in correcting the performance of their party is limited to party meetings and consultative elections. During Ba'ath Party meetings, Ba'athists might voice their objections and observations on the performance of their party, but once the Ba'ath Party faces the syndicate elections and are in competition with independents, despite their objections they stick to the Front List, because that is the choice of their party. Ba'athists do have the freedom to elect representatives they trust are good for the syndicates rather than the Front List, and the right person for the job has been elected many times in the Engineers' Syndicate elections; however, such events don't take place systematically; they happen only infrequently. To put it bluntly, failing the Front List is the exception rather than the rule.

This research has shown that because the performance of the Ba'ath Party with regard to the syndicates has deteriorated and nothing has been done to stop this deterioration, this has caused the deterioration of the syndicates themselves. What the Ba'athists in the three syndicates do not seem to understand is that despite their objections they nevertheless follow the Regional Leadership's "recommendations." In doing this, they are in fact not expressing their loyalty to the Ba'ath Party, but rather to the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party, which they always criticize.

At the political level, it is true that the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party spares no effort in trying to influence the political issues concerning the syndicates, but that doesn't mean that this custom cannot be challenged if Ba'athists decide to do so.

During the syndicate and branch elections, members are free to choose the people who represent them best, independently of what the Regional Leadership wants. But it seems that it has become customary for syndicate members to commit themselves to the leadership that has been chosen for them without their challenging this *modus operandi*. This has been a lost opportunity for syndicate members to prove themselves. Had they done so, and taken the initiative, the Regional Leadership would have had to carry out the changes that members insist they wanted.

As indicated by the research, the three professional syndicates studied do not exhibit democratic practices during their interaction with the respective state apparatus or with the political leadership of the country, which is vital for the transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy. Nonetheless, they do provide the proper venue for members to confront and change this reality, if they decide to do so.

When the Ba'ath Party spread its hegemony over the professional syndicates in the late 1970s, in the main it adopted the same tools and tactics by which it was attacked and fought by its rival, the Muslim Brotherhood. But what the Ba'ath Party failed to do

was to empower the professional syndicates through empowering their members and allowing them to elect their representatives and leaders freely and without “guidance” or “recommendations,” and without interference in their business. If the Ba’ath Party had done this, it would have gained efficient and genuinely supportive syndicates, which, at the end of the day, would have empowered the Ba’ath Party.

The hegemony of the Ba’ath Party was understood to be an emergency measure that had to be taken during the crisis in the late 1970s, and the wise thing to do would have been to restore the measure of autonomy that the syndicates formerly enjoyed once the crisis was over. By not restoring the autonomy previously enjoyed by the syndicates, the Ba’ath Party did itself a disservice, because the syndicates were unable to elect the best people to run their organizations as they always had to accept what the leadership wanted. This was despite the fact that the leadership was not aware of the best people to run and develop the syndicates. This weakened the syndicates, and in the final analysis the Ba’ath Party weakened itself.

When the Ba’ath Party first came into power it organized professional syndicates and empowered their interests, through which it gained the support of a large sector of society. The Ba’ath Party gained respect and loyalty from its popular base, that is, the workers, peasants, teachers and women. Previously, the Ba’ath Party had supported the professional syndicates against the interests of the executive, that is, the government and the ministries. However, members of all three syndicates have been experiencing an increasing decline of the supportive role that used to be played by the Ba’ath Party in relation to the syndicates, and this is part of the decline of the efficiency and performance of the Ba’ath Party as a whole. During the interviews, Ba’athist members of the three syndicates were talking loudly about their frustrations with the performance of the Regional Leadership of the Ba’ath Party. It was evident that the

frustration experienced among Ba'athists was even greater than among independents.

The syndicates were originally established and run in such a way that the cadres were to be filtered during the process of elections, so that the best of the grassroots would reach decision-making posts and carry out the changes that voters required. In this way cadres from the margin used to reach the center and serve in several political posts, represent their voters, and defend their interests. However, for the last fifteen years this process has not occurred. Instead, political posts have been filled by people emanating from the center who are already known to the Regional Leadership, and people from the margins have felt invisible as they have been left out of the recruitment process of decision-making posts. It is a very significant fact of this multi-faceted crisis that the margins feel resentment against the center, and this constitutes a very significant reason for the present crisis in Syria.

The Regional Leadership inadvertently weakened the syndicates and undermined their inner processes and their interactions with the functioning system of the state. Apparently the Regional Leadership was unaware that its actions would have a negative impact on the syndicates, the Regional Leadership itself, and, indeed, on the nation-state. This is because people at the margins who appeared to be invisible to people at the center turned towards sectarian or religious affiliations to help them with their problems and end their social grievances. Thus the secular state that the Ba'ath Party had always been so proud of was dismantled bit by bit as it turned its back on the demands of the people it was supposed to represent. This gave rise to further sectarianism that became ever more visible as it was unleashed during the crisis.

## CHAPTER VI

### EPILOGUE

The period under review is one of political change in the Arab World, especially in Syria, and the issue regarding the role of professional syndicates is important. During my interviews, the crisis was the dominant topic of discussion in the three syndicates. I therefore field the opinions and frustrations of several members concerning the crisis.

#### **A. The Engineers' Syndicate and the Current Crisis**

An active member in the Engineers' Syndicate, a Sunni Ba'athist from the province of Aleppo, said the following while talking about the current crisis. "The main reason behind the deterioration of the performance of the Ba'ath Party over the last twenty years is that it adopted a policy of quantitative recruitment regarding its members, rather than qualitative recruitment, despite the fact that it is the ruling party and anyway does not need quantitative recruitment. This resulted in the recruitment of opportunists and decline of the moral probity of its members, and at the end of the day this lead to the weakening of the Ba'ath Party and to its fading performance. Ba'athists in the 1950s and 1960s used to travel to poor villages in Syria to teach students who couldn't afford to go to schools for free. Where are these Ba'athists now? Where is the Ba'ath Party that used to be? It is now a mere blend of opportunistic and powerless members. Moreover, the Ba'ath Party is supposed to be a secular party, but now many of its members are not secular. Marwān Hadīd, the well-known Muslim Brotherhood leader, once said, "If you want to stop a train, you have to ride it first!" and this is what



has happened. The Muslim Brotherhood encouraged its members to get enrolled in the Ba'ath Party, and as the Ba'ath Party adopted the policy of quantitative enrollment it didn't pay attention to the backgrounds of its members; hence the breakthrough of the Muslim Brotherhood into the Ba'ath Party took place. Later, we witnessed the Regional Leadership appointing heads of the branches of the Ba'ath Party in Syrian provinces who were supposed to be Ba'athists, but were actually Muslim Brotherhood members, who worked hard to dismantle the Ba'ath Party from within, and were successful in doing so. This is what has led to the current crisis: the absence of the Ba'ath Party, the ruling party. It is the Ba'ath Party that claims to be secular that has permitted the mushroom presence of Muslim Brotherhood members within its ranks. Listen, dear, "Farāgh" (vacuum) does not exist in real life. If there is an empty space, there will always be somebody who will fill it. If there is an empty space, either you or I will fill it, or someone else will come and fill it. What the Ba'ath Party did is disappear from the lives of Syrians; hence, it left an empty space that was filled by others, mainly the Muslim brotherhood or Salafist. I am happy that political pluralization is taking place now, because only with the existence of competing political parties will the Ba'ath Party be able to renew itself and, it is hoped, get back to what it used to be, that is, the party of the people."

Another member in the Engineers' Syndicate, a Christian Ba'athist from Damascus, stressed while talking about the crisis that, "We, the Ba'athists, used to criticize the performance of the Regional Leadership loudly during Party meetings, and sometimes in the presence of some of its members. However somehow our voices used to be blocked. There is a terrible tardiness in the performance of the Crisis Management Committee, that is, if it exists in the first place! The General Congress of the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath Party should have met last year. Then they said they would

meet at the beginning of February 2012, then in mid-March 2012, and now it is April 2012, and it is still not known when the General Congress will meet. Why all this delay? Is it because the Regional Leadership is not yet ready to meet? If so, then to hell with such leadership! They have been talking about forming a National Unity government, to include members of the opposition, for weeks and months now, and still this hasn't happened. They are saying that certain parties in the opposition are refusing to join the government. Well why not let them combine with the opposition parties that have accepted joining with the government and leave the rest since they have refused to join? We are in crisis; terrorist bombings are taking place in Damascus and Aleppo; the economy is getting worse; and look at the pace of the performance of the Regional Leadership—it's terribly slow! Have you heard of any statement that any member of the Regional Leadership has made condemning the terrorist bombings? Have you seen any member of the Regional Leadership participating in any pro-regime demonstration? Have you heard of any member of the Regional Leadership setting a road map or an agenda for the country to get out of this crisis? The Regional Leadership has always been absent, and we Ba'athists always used to complain about this absence, but now we are in crisis! Honestly, I'm someone who has already got bored waiting for reforms, and I am not sure when they are going to happen, if ever, or even if they did whether this would mean anything to me."

When I asked my interviewee, *Then why are you Ba'athists still siding by the regime?* he said, "Well, the current chaos has not produced any promising alternatives. In particular, there is a hint of foreign interference. Can you explain to me when France and the US became "Friends of Syria" and wanted to participate in the conference "Friends of Syria"? As far as I recall, historically they have always been hostile states against Syria. And can you tell me how these terrorist gangs are getting all these

armaments and weapons when they belong to the poor strata of Syrian society?

Obviously there are rich states that are paying them money to provide them with arms or providing them with weapons. The other day Al-Jazeera stated that military aircraft were hovering in al-Mazza. Thank God I live there; I know for sure that wasn't the truth. Why is the Arab media putting out lies about Syria all the time? Can you explain? Clearly this is not a peaceful Syrian revolution, solely constructed within Syria; it is an internationally constructed revolution against Syria. No matter how disappointed we are with the performance of our state and our political party, we nevertheless still identify ourselves with the state, while we don't with the opposition. OK, let me ask you this. On the one hand there is a solid state with institutions and sectors needing to be reformed. On the other, there is a suspicious, divided, armed, opposition that for years hasn't even lived in this country that has no clear agenda for the future of the country and believes that violence and terrorism can bring change. With which do you side? Definitely with the presiding state! All different sides of the opposition merely offered to do one service that is "Failing the regime", and this is simply not what we want! We didn't build these institutions simply to fail them! We are part of the state and are asking for reform; the opposition is clearly not offering it."

This represents the stand of the majority of the members who still solidly side with their party, despite their negative remarks on the performance of its Regional Leadership. Although there is clear evidence of frustration and disappointment among members of the Syndicate, they are sure that a change in leadership will not bring about better options for themselves or for the future of Syria. They sense an international interference in the governance of their country, which makes them determined to refuse any change brought about by foreign powers. The lies perpetrated by the media and the sudden new caring language that Western hostile powers have recently adopted while

addressing the crisis in Syria have made this purported change even more suspicious, such that they wouldn't want to support it.

## **B. The Teachers' Syndicate and the Current Crisis**

An active member in the syndicate, a Sunni Ba'athist from Damascus, stated that, "A great part of this crisis is economic, owing to the terrible and irresponsible economic policies of the previous government. The previous government and the economic team, which comprised the previous Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Dr 'Abdullah al-Dardari, the previous Minister of Finance, Dr Mhd al-Husain, the previous Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, Dr Dīālā al-Haj 'Arif, the previous Minister of Economy, Dr 'āmir Luṭfy, and the previous Prime Minister Mhd Nājy al-ṭry, should all be held accountable for the terrible economic plans that they have introduced on the Syrian people. They have adopted the free-market system without ensuring the implementation of social networks to protect Syrians who belong to the middle class and the poor strata of society. Because of their stupid policies, the middle strata, that used to comprise most of Syrian society, comprising employees, workers, teachers and lecturers, vanished, and the gap between rich and poor widened. Furthermore, the Regional Leadership should also be held accountable for the current crisis, as it is the Regional Leadership that chooses the ministers and the mayors. Unfortunately, the Regional Leadership hasn't fulfilled its role as "the leader of society" and "the leader of the state." On the contrary, it has misused its role that is stated in article No.8 of the constitution. We Ba'athists have been suffering from the distance between the leadership and the grassroots in our party. The Ba'ath Party is supposed to start forming its ranks from the bottom to the Regional Leadership, comprising fourteen offices that are supposed to lead the state, but in practice this has not been the case. To

give you an example, lately the Ministry of Education made terrible decisions that negatively affected the process of education, and the Regional Office of Education, one of the fourteen offices of the Regional Leadership, kept silent about these decisions instead of rectifying the Ministry of Education's performance. The Regional Leadership should have interfered and stopped the economic team and the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs from acting out their terrible economic policies, because it is supposed to be the state leader. But, as always, the Regional Leadership did nothing, and left Syrians to suffer the consequences of the terrible economical policy, such as the high unemployment rate and high cost of living. This was despite the many reports that were sent to the Regional Leadership that made it clear that the economic team was driving the country into an economic crisis. It is not acceptable that Syrians should suffer the mistakes of the government and the Regional Leadership. They should be held accountable, as they are responsible for the economic crisis and social grievances that we have been experiencing for the last eight years, which have partly led us to the current crisis. However, we will still side with our state and political party. Currently, we are witnessing dreadful terrorism, violence and chaos. Let us first get through this crisis, and then we'll arrange the internal affairs of our country by ourselves. We'll carry out the process of reform, which has been long delayed, reform the state, and reform our political party. We won't accept that things will go back to being the same anymore."

This stand was further stressed by another active member of the syndicate, a Ba'athist Christian from Damascus. She stated that, "Now that the draft of the Constitution is out, and people are about to vote on it, Ba'athists are arguing about the fact that article No.8 has been omitted from the draft. This stated that the role of the Ba'ath Party is to lead the state and society. Some Ba'athists are against this change

while others support it. Well I believe that in practice this article had been omitted ten years ago. We Ba'athists used to ask the Regional Leadership members at Party meetings, and even when attending the General Congresses, to implement this article in practice, ever since the Ba'ath Party voluntarily gave up its role in leading the state and society to the government, who have provided a terrible service. Moreover, for ten years the Regional Leadership has not supervised the government's performance, and neither has it supervised government policies that have proved terrible for the main supporters of the Ba'ath Party, that is, the workers, peasants and teachers. At the end of the day, this neglect has done a great disservice to the Ba'ath Party itself. The absence of the implementation of article No. 8 in practice is the main reason behind this crisis."

I asked my interviewee what, from her point of view, the motives were for the solid stand of the Teachers' Syndicate's members with the state and the Ba'ath Party, despite their frustration, and why Syndicate members didn't want to join the opposition. She replied, "What opposition? I wish there were a genuine, intellectual and national opposition that we could rely on to get us out of this crisis. What you call an "opposition" are either Salafist groups or groups that belong to the Muslim Brotherhood, or groups of kids that are no more than seventeen years old who are out on the streets rioting. Many carry weapons or an armed militia that are committing crimes against civilians. They are a diversified group of people who appear on foreign TV channels, calling themselves the "opposition" and praising the "Syrian Revolution," while they live abroad and know nothing about what Syrians are suffering. None of these parties that you call the "opposition" have offered a better alternative to the state we have already in existence. This stand represents the independent teachers or those Ba'athists who belong to the Ba'ath Party merely because it is the ruling party. The genuine Ba'athists still side with the state because they believe in the ideals and

principles of the Ba'ath Party, which represent our aspirations and ambitions. These people differentiate between the great ideals of their party and the terrible way the Regional Leadership has behaved. This despite the fact that a large majority of the used-to-be supported sectors of the Ba'ath Party, such as teachers and workers, have lately felt abandoned and unprotected against the rigid, unjust policies and decisions of the government. We have felt as though we have been invisible for the last ten years, but now that there is a crisis we are once more seen by the Regional Leadership who expects us to rally around the state. However, what the Regional Leadership is not aware of is that we are not rallying for its sake, but for the sake of the Ba'ath Party, and for the sake of Syria, because only when the state is strong will Syria be safe. When the state is in danger, the only result will be chaos, not reform.”

Clearly from the interviews it appears that Ba'athist teachers, who comprise the vast majority of the Teachers' Syndicate's members, are consciously aware of the terrible performance of their Regional Leadership and don't hesitate to talk frankly about its flaws, as they themselves have suffered from this dismal performance. Nonetheless, they still side with the Regional Leadership, either on account of their true belief in the ideals and principles of their political party and their belief in its future reform, or because of the absence of a convincing alternative.

### **C. The Doctors' Syndicate and the Current Crisis**

When I asked an active member in the Doctors' Syndicate, a Sunni Independent from the Countryside of Damascus how the crisis had affected the work of the Syndicate, he said that, “Well, it affected the activities of the Syndicate big time. Our medical activities are on hold now, and all our activities are political. The Syndicate is setting up political lectures and meetings to talk to people about the crisis, instead of

setting up medical lectures.” As stated by many of my interviewees who I met in their clinics without patients, the crisis has affected doctors’ work as they are witnessing a huge decline in the number of patients in their clinics on account of the terrible economic situation the country is going through. People now cannot afford to go to doctors as they did previously.

I asked him, *Why do you think members of the Syndicate are still standing by the regime, despite their frustration with its inefficient performance? Especially independent members like you?* He replied, “We prioritize the stability and security that this regime has given us. I think this is the main reason. Maybe at first I was happy when people went out on the streets; this brought political reforms right away that we’d never dreamed of, even though we had been promised these reforms many times in the past. But none of them had previously materialized. The first reform that took place on account of the crisis was that the government changed. The previous government had been extremely corrupt, and had delivered the worst ever service to the Syrian people, and yet it lasted for eight years, and could have lasted longer had not people gone out into the streets. Ministers of the previous government were called to Parliament and were questioned about their performance; the media wrote about the government’s terrible performance, which caused poverty and social grievances, despite the fact that the government was getting stronger and more rooted. Also, changing the constitution and political pluralization would never have taken place unless people had been out protesting. I believe the system we have only functions under pressure! It should always be pressured to carry out political reforms. But then, when the opposition turned violent and became armed, and was not a peaceful opposition like the ones in Egypt or Tunisia, and terrorists attacks took place, here I started to back up the present regime, and I think everyone else I know did so too. The opposition was attacking neighborhoods and



forcibly making people close their shops, otherwise they would kill them. I live in Zabadany, and suddenly we started to see these armed gangs that were not known in our neighborhood. Some of them were even kids, seventeen- and eighteen-year- olds carrying arms and weapons; others were covering their faces. They were threatening people and forcing them to remain at home and close their stores. I thought I was in Afghanistan, not Syria. We remained in our houses for days, terrified until the army came and got rid of them. The regime with all its flaws is a better choice than such a violent opposition. I believe those kids have no idea what “democracy” means. I believe this is why members of the Syndicate, as those in many other syndicates, participate in most pro- regime marches. I still participate in pro-regime rallies, not because I’m happy with the performance of the Regional Leadership, but because I’m against such violent opposition. I participate because I am for the stable and secure Syria that we used to enjoy previously. The way I prioritize things has changed now. To me right now, fighting corruption is not a problem; fighting terrorism, however, is a big problem!”

An independent Sunni I talked to from Damascus, like many other people is very frustrated. I asked him why he thinks people are still not turning their backs on the present regime, and why they are still insisting on its existence. He said, “Well I am supporting the state, just like many other people who work in the state’s institutions, because we are part of it. We want to move forward; we don’t want to go backwards. I consider myself to be in opposition to many policies of the government and the Ba’ath Party, but I won’t go on TV to talk about my country, or meet with French people to decide the destiny of my country. I will sit here in my institution and criticize it, and try as much as I can, with others, to change whatever is wrong, through every means, until reforms are accomplished. I believe this is the only way reforms should come about—

from within and not from without. I don't believe in Burhān Ghalyūn who is calling for reform to be carried out by foreign troops; to hell with such reform. Or in Mīshil Kīlw, who has been staying in France in French hotels for months now, without not even once condemning any of the terrorist attacks that have hit Damascus or Aleppo, Can you tell me why is he lecturing us about the situation in Syria from there? And who is paying his hotel bills? This is not to mention members of the opposition such as Ma'mūn al-Himṣy who made a sectarian speech while talking to Syrians through videos on the internet, which was disgusting to listen to. Or 'Abd al-Halīm Khadām, who has been part of the regime for years, as he was the late president Hafez al-Assad and president Bashar al-Assad's vice president, before he leaves Syria and moves to France. Syrians have suffered a lot from his and his family's corruption. It is ridiculous to hear him talking about the drawbacks of the regime, while he himself constitutes a significant component of the terrible side of the regime. He talks about the violent means the regime is adopting, as if he has forgotten the first time Hamāa was bombarded in 1963, long before Hafez al-Assad ever came into power. It was he who was the mayor of Hamāa at that time. Definitely he could afford to live in France with his family, after all the money he has stolen from the Syrian people. But I don't believe in any of the members of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafist opposition, who only adopt violent measures to bring about change. I believe in people in the opposition like Qadry Jamīl, people who are living the crisis in our country and facing it like all the rest of us. I watched his conference the other day, and am considering joining his political party, but still I am not sure. I have lived all my life as an independent, loudly criticizing all the dark spots in the performance of the state, I am not sure if after all these years I can be enrolled in a particular political party."

I talked to an elderly, previous active, member of the Doctors' Syndicate, an

Alawite independent from Homs, who has lived his life criticizing many deficiencies in the rule of the late president Hafez al-Assad and the current president Bashar al-Assad. He stated that as the crisis progressed he became a solid supporter of the present regime. “These people are not protesting because they want more political rights; they know nothing about politics. They are sectarian; they are killing minorities in Homs, in Damascus, in any place they can catch them. They are gangsters; they disturb international roadways that connect the Syrian provinces, and they check the IDs of the travelers. Whoever is not Sunni, whether Alawit or even Christian, they kill them. My family and I had been prisoners in our house in Homs for weeks. Every night, from 12 midnight until the morning prayer, Salafists would go up to the mosques and start shouting on the amplifiers, “Allahu Akbar” “Come to Jihad,” and you know what Jihad is for them, right? It is mainly killing Alawites—that’s what Jihad is. They kidnapped my son’s father-in-law, a poor taxi driver, from his house and killed him, and then showed him on Al-Jazeera as having being killed by the bombing of the Syrian army. They blew up the power plant and we remained without electricity for days. Traveling from Homs to Damascus has become a dream now because of the unsafe roads. When I said to my family let’s go to Damascus, they thought I was about to commit suicide. My wife and daughters wore headscarves and I wore a white mantle. We drove to Lattakia, and then we came by plane to Damascus. Look at the neighborhoods that have been targeted by these terrorists in Homs: they are mainly Alawite and Christian neighborhoods. I haven’t opposed the regime all my life to get this! This opposition is the worst ever: it is terrorism. This cannot bring about reform; it will only bring chaos and tragedy. If they ever come to power, you think these people will accept me because I have opposed the policies of the state and the ruling party all my life? Most definitely not! They are even worse than this regime. They will kill me as soon as they know that

I'm Alawite; they won't care a damn about my political stand.”

As illustrated, the opposition lost a lot of its potential supporters among the members of the Syndicate on account of its lack of unity, its adoption of violent means, and its division between internal and foreign opposition which no member of the Doctors' Syndicate found they could identify with. They also found the opposition's mottoes and violence repellent. Hence, despite the deep frustration of Syndicate members regarding the tardiness of the process of reform, they still identify with the state, and still prefer to side with the state rather than the opposition. They have been suffering greatly from the latter's coercive methods of bringing about change and its adoption of sectarian cleansing.

Nevertheless, despite their frustration, the three professional syndicates are some of the strongest allies of the regime during the current crisis. This unified front shown by the three syndicates is for a number of reasons. Some syndicate members have simply not identified with the slogans of the opposition who have called for the “abolition of the regime.” Rather, they ask for the reformation of the state, as they consider themselves to be part of it. Other syndicate members have not found any convincing or appealing personalities in the opposition with whom they could identify. And for yet other members, the alternative would seem to be chaos, terrorism and the destruction of the state, and is therefore deemed to be unsupportable. Nonetheless, although the three syndicates stand by the present regime, syndicate members stress that Syria cannot, and should not, continue as previously. They want a transparent system with the rule of law and political pluralism.

The independents are looking forward to a multi-party system. Although many are frustrated by having to wait for so long for this to happen, the general mood among many of them now is that, “we would rather wait than welcome something we don't

know but which we are sure will bring about chaos and violence.”

Although the majority of the members of the three syndicates have become bored and disillusioned waiting for reforms, nevertheless most are certain that reforms are coming no matter what. The most common statement is that, “Syria can never be the same again anymore.” They are all sure that, no matter how long it takes, the regime will eventually reform itself, because there is no other way. I believe that this is the main reason why people are still standing by the regime, despite all its flaws. There is also the fact that the alternative doesn’t look better; on the contrary, it appears to be catastrophic, especially on account of the terrorism and violence that has been taking place. People can no longer travel to their hometowns and villages without tremendous worries and fear. With the terrorist events and violence, opposition to the government has lost many of its supporters. People who were previously opposing the regime way before the crisis took place became supporters of the regime after the crisis began.

When answering my questions, members of the three syndicates have called what is now happening in Syria a “crisis.” It is very noticeable that they didn’t use the word “revolution.” Many of them also refused to use the word “regime” as, according to them, there is a “state” of Syria, but no “regime.” To them it is clear that there is international lobbying against their country, starting with the ill-informed, misleading and biased media and ending with the armed opposition, which are not signs of a bright future for Syria. Many western media have cited the examples of Libya, Egypt and Yemen, but these countries do not seem to be displaying promising examples of pluralist societies since, according to my interviewees, none of these countries seem likely to be experiencing democracy any time soon. The rule of Muslim Brotherhood in both Tunisia and Egypt, the violence in Yemen, the NATO bombing of Libya, and the sectarian fights in Egypt all contribute to many syndicate members in Syria solidly

supporting the Syrian state as they regard it as a “better choice than the other.” Added to this is the fact that the opposition lost potential supporters when it targeted minorities, mainly Alawite and Christian, which has led to the unification of minorities, Alawite, Christians and Druze against the opposition, despite their very different stands either for or against the state. The opposition later also lost many of its supporters when it adopted violent and terrorist measures against peaceful civilians. Also, there is the interference of undemocratic states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and the uncontrollable chaos that neighboring revolutions have produced, which have all led most members of the syndicates to support the state rather than ally themselves with violence or face the unknown.

Overall, the current situation in Syria is a multi-faceted crisis caused by many factors, some of which can be identified as malpractices on the part of the leadership and lack of resistance to these practices by appointed leaders of syndicates, ministers and mayors. The Ba’ath Regional Leadership has appointed leaders who are mostly unqualified for the roles they are supposed to undertake, such as being presidents of professional syndicates, and those who are governed by them have been completely obedient and deferential. This in turn has led to the dreadful social, economic and political policies of the government. These facets, coupled with the passive role of the Ba’athists who have showed no courage in criticizing these malpractices, have all played a part in undermining the effectiveness of the state’s institutions. The malpractices have caused great aggravation to the majority of Syrian citizens who have suffered social grievances and have felt completely helpless about doing anything about these grievances. They do not know who or where to turn to, to change this complicated and complex reality.

## APPENDIX I

### BATHISTS AND FEMALE MEMBERSHIP OF THE THREE SYNDICATES

#### Bathists and female membership of the Engineers' syndicate

Female Membership		Ba'thists Membership		Total number of Members	Year	The Syndicate
%	Number	%	Number			
15	4,900	18	5,774	31,896	1990	Engineers' Syndicate
17	7,349	27	11,874	42,923	1995	
14	9,520	26	17,186	67,047	2000	
17	14,697	37	32,293	85,919	2005	
23	26,214	39	45,321	113,888	2010	

#### Bathists and female membership of the Doctors' syndicate

Female Membership		Ba'thists Membership		Total number of Members	Year	The Syndicate
%	Number	%	Number			
18	2,183	18	2,086	11,587	1990	Doctors' Syndicate
20	2,863	25	3,654	14,100	1995	
18	3,579	34	6,833	19,656	2000	
19	4,320	45	10,513	23,171	2005	
24	8,197	42	13,923	33,107	2010	

#### Bathists and female membership of the Teachers' syndicate

Female Membership		Ba'thists Membership		Total number of Members	Year	The Syndicate
%	Number	%	Number			
46	4900	75	138,807	185,077	1990	Teachers' Syndicate
52	7349	73	156,464	214,334	1995	
54	9520	71	175,253	246,835	2000	
53	14697	70	221,170	315,957	2005	
58	26214	69	250,142	362,525	2010	

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