Book review:

_The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba‘th Party_

Reviewed by Roschanack Shaery.


Van Dam presents us with an impressive array of data such as Ba‘th internal party documents and memoirs (chapter eleven is entirely devoted to memoirs) and polemical writings since 1961, the post United Arab Republic era, to throw light on the complexity of sectarian elite power negotiations in an authoritarian setting. To many ordinary Syrians and policymakers the Asad regime is perceived as one and the same as the domination of an Alawi minority over a non-Alawi majority. Van Dam shows in detail how what he refers to as particularist identities such as sectarianism, regionalism, and tribalism have played a role in the power struggles in Syria and argues that Hafiz al-Asad had created a sophisticated system where these three particularist identities at times did play a role in strengthening his power while at other times in fact downplaying these identities supported the maintenance of the Asad regime. However the reality of playing out these identities strategically, in official discourse of the regime direct mention of sectarianism, and to lesser extent of other particularist identities has been frowned upon and those playing out such sentiments publicly have been punished. In fact, “in later periods of the power struggle among Ba‘thist officers it was reportedly proven that, in the final analysis, those who spoke openly in favour of strengthening the position of their own religious group weakened their own positions rather than those of their opponents, who also reinforced their positions on a sectarian basis but did not openly speak about it” (p.39).

The introduction gives us an overview of the various religious communities, their geographic distribution, and the overlap of particularist identities and socio-economic factors, arguing that “sectarian, regional, tribal and socio-economic loyalties, if they overlap, may complement and reinforce one another” (p.13). Chapter two discusses how the Alawi minority began to dominate the armed forces and the Ba‘th party while the urban Sunni elite did not find it suitable for their sons to join the military. Ba‘thist socialist and secular ideology was also attractive to the rural poor, who believed to have found a way out of being labeled as backward and as religious heterodox groups and hoped for upward mobility through joining the army to break the cultural and material hegemony of the urban Sunnis. In chapter three, van Dam shows how the coups have been responsible for the rise of sectarianism in the military, as after each coup more military bases where created around urban cities which were mainly Sunni, while Sunni officials were stationed in remote and strategically less central places (p.36). Yet simultaneously Sunnis were also appointed to high military posts but “to hold a high military function did not imply having independent power” (p.37), therefore complicating the picture of the role of sectarianism in the Ba‘th party. Chapter four discusses the Druze-Alawiite polarization in the army and the eventual purge of the Druze from the armed forces. Chapter five looks at the internal power struggles in the Alawite community. The community in itself is divided by tribalism and regionalism, the author argues, and even in the province of Latakia the power struggles between al-Asad and Salah Jadid in 1964 (p.65) were among the fiercest. Chapter six provides us with
statistics to present the complexity of sectarian representation in the political elite and the author argues: “it may therefore be incorrect to attribute the representation of specific religious communities in power institutions, at any level, to the existence of sectarian loyalties” (p.75). Sectarianism as van Dam shows in the Syrian context has not been a primordial and static communal identity but rather produced both from inside as well as outside the community as a result of long-term power struggles. For instance, in November 1967, Sunni civilians from Dayr al-Zur threatened to accuse Jadid (Alawi) of sectarianism if he would not support Major-General Ahmad Suwaydani (Sunni) against Hafiz al-Asad, arguing that if he does not take action against the removal of Suwaydani from the Ba’thist Military Committee “we shall accuse you of sectarianism,… and that the [Ba’th] Party is nothing but throwing dust in the eyes…and that the sons of the Alawi sect cannot forsake one another” (p.60). Sectarianism was thus also a discourse used by non-Alawites to put pressure on the Alavite political elite and to secure the non-Alawites’ own share of power in Syria. In a similar vein the author demonstrates in chapter seven how local and regional factors contributed to the production of sectarianism by discussing the effects of the war in Lebanon, the statements of other Arab states (p.92-93), and the anti-Alawite propaganda of the local Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Van Dam argues that through such hostile propaganda the regime began to become de facto more sectarian. The example of the battles between the state and the MB reflect how in a specific political climate perception of sectarianism can produce actual sectarianism. In other words, while the regime at that time was invested in safeguarding the interest of a certain Alawite population, the MB’s sectarian discourse – which served to express dissatisfaction with repressive politics – served the purpose that the Alawite political elite clustered together despite their grave disagreements. In chapter eight the author describes in detail the MB’s production of anti-Alawite propaganda and the battle of Hama in 1982, while chapter nine takes us on a journey of pointing to the relation of each family member and close associate to Hafiz al-Asad, of the politics of succession, and of the internal betrayals and disappointments.

In the conclusion, chapter ten of the book, van Dam offers some general analysis for the reasons of political stability in Syria and argues that “the developments described in this book suggest a clear relationship between political stability and the degree of sectarian, regional and tribal factionalism in the political elite: if these factions showed great diversity the result was political instability”(p.136-137). He moves on to suggest that since the take-over of Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 the country experienced more “internal political stability and continuity than ever before since independence” (p.137). It does not escape the reader that van Dam is unfortunately reproducing an official state discourse here whereby political stability seems to have only been possible to achieve through the monopolization of power whereas political pluralism supposedly would have resulted in a Lebanonization of Syria. Recent events in Syria have shown that political instability is in fact created when such zero-sum categories are forced upon ordinary citizens for too long. The author is almost apologetic to Hafiz al-Asad’s repressive policies as he emphasizes the structural problems without discussing the possibilities of the political elite to transform them but seems to agree that to tame them with the most repressive methods was the only option. In addition, van Dam argues that communal identities and loyalties are “natural and culturally specific bases of politics in the Middle East” (p.144), and believes that the momentum for their gradual transformation to so called secular nationalist and socio-economic identities has passed. It is ironic that although van Dam originates from the Netherlands, a country where religiously based political parties dominated the political system thoroughly and social institutions had been
communally based until the early 1970s, and where communal identities and regionalism overlap to this day, he would argue that politics based on communal identities are a cultural specificity of the Middle East. While secularism and anti-clericalism have been one of the important currents of thought since the 18th century in the Netherlands, communal identities have played a crucial role in the politics and the everyday life of the people, without one form of identity easily superseding another. If such rigid communalism as practiced in the Netherlands did not necessarily lead to endless violence and overt conflict, then certainly there are possibilities other than an iron grip to negotiate religious and ethnic pluralism in the Middle East as well. These observations aside, the book is a must read for anyone interested in postcolonial Syria, in the creation and politics of the Ba’th party, and in the production and maintenance of sectarianism in authoritarian settings.

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