



The Ideology of Authority: 50 Years of Education in Syria

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Apr 28, 2016

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Articles & Testimony

April 28, 2016

In the decades before 2011, Syria's Baath Party flag, which controlled "society and state," and images of the president and "Leader" dominated all public platforms: the corridors of the state's institutions and agencies, public squares, and even non-governmental institutions.

This branding was most visible in educational institutions – it covered universities, schools and student organizations. The Baath flag and pictures of the president appeared on educational documents from textbook covers to official records. Similarly, the images appeared inside the classrooms and lecture halls and on the outside grounds. Besides the physical presence of state images, the standard educational curricula were suffused with the party's ideology. Students even had to memorize the leader's sayings, biography, and the leader's role and details of party conferences.

Months after the outbreak of the March 2011 popular uprising, the regime dramatically shifted its ideological motifs. Amid the uncertainty and confusion within the ruling regime's agencies, the party flag was replaced by the national flag, even on the chests of party members and supporters. Sounds of the Baath Party anthem faded out as the melody of the country's national anthem swelled. Because of the simultaneous shift from Baathist to nationalist imagery, there is reason to believe that these changes were the result of a directive from party leadership. The shift was apparently designed to send the message to the opposition that the regime is a nationalist rather than political entity, and regime actions against the opposition will protect the Syrian people from a conspiracy against the nation.

Education has played a major role both during the focus on Baathism and the current shift. Since the early 1970s, education policy in Syria has been organically linked to politics, as the regime worked to culturally normalize this association in both formal and non-formal education. Ultimately, this normalization was designed to develop education into a system that worked towards the party's political objective: to ensure the survival of the dominant political-economic system, working in conjunction with the constitution, laws, and associated enforcement mechanisms.

Syria's 1973 constitution makes this connection explicit. In article 8, it stipulates that, "The leading party in the society and the state is the Socialist Arab Baath Party. It leads a patriotic and progressive front seeking to unify the resources of the people's masses and place them at the service of the Arab nation's goals." Article 21 of the constitution defines the purpose of the educational system as, "Creating a socialist nationalist Arab generation which is scientifically minded and attached to its history and land, proud of its heritage, and filled with the spirit of struggle to achieve its nation's objectives of unity, freedom, and socialism, and to serve humanity and its progress."

The education sector had been specifically excluded from party competition a year earlier by the National Progressive Front Charter, which required that, "Non-Baathist parties in the Front must pledge to work to end their organizational and guiding activities in this sector."

The Arab Socialist Baath Party's intellectual principles and vision for society and the state formed a frame of reference for its education policy. Thus, "popular democracy" became the model in whose framework the production of educated citizens occurs.

The leadership of the party took over direction of the educational process through two bureaus. The Education and Vanguard Bureau, whose offices were incorporated within the Baath party provincial branches, managed primary and secondary education. The Higher Education Bureau managed university education, and was linked to Baath Party branches within universities.

With the written foundation of the Constitution, Baath Party offices managed all aspects of national education, from educational policy to defining institutional structures and issuing appointments to leading educational positions, also subject to approval from the security apparatus and the presidency.

To further strengthen the link between education and the Baath Party, informal educational organizations developed to complement the goals of the formal educational system even before the National Charter and Constitution solidified this relationship. These groups enjoy independent organizational structures, as well as separate legal and financial frameworks. They work with a wide swath of students from six to twenty-four to support the development of formal educational policy objectives, summarized as the development of "Unity, Liberty, and Socialism" in these youth.

The National Union of Syrian Students, founded in 1963, is an organization that "works to organize students in universities and colleges." Since 1966, it has been considered the sole official representative for all Syrian university students. Among its goals are faith in the objectives of the Arab nation: "in Arab unity, freedom of intellect, coexistence, strengthening the spirit of affiliation with the homeland among the student body, loyalty to the nation's leader, deepening the spirit of patriotism and full participation in promoting national unity."

Five years later, The Revolutionary Youth Union was founded in 1968 as a political educational organization dedicated to students aged twelve to eighteen. Any organization member is required to have no political affiliation other than the Baath Party. As all students in preparatory and secondary school are automatically members, the organization is their sole political representative by default.

The Baath party's national leadership established the Baath Vanguard Organization in 1974. This organization encompassed the remaining unrepresented children: elementary school students. The Vanguard Organization describes its purpose as providing its students with "a nationalist, socialist education, deriving its intellectual and ideological materials from Baath Party ideology and the decisions of its conferences in the Arab world and in Syria."

These organizations all operate through programs that take into consideration the interests of targeted groups among the student body. They do this by offering many different activities in the fields of culture, politics, health, the social sciences, science, education, sports, the arts, the environment and information science. Moreover, they offer a variety of activities: seminars, conferences, workshops, competitions, debates, festivals, celebrations honoring

outstanding students, excursions, camping, volunteer work, international gatherings, cultural weeks, socio-economic forums, lectures, exhibitions, science camps, the exchange of student delegations and environmental volunteer work.

Over more than four decades, these institutions helped embed an entire system of values and behaviors into Syrian educational institutions: loyalty to the party; obedience to the leader and faith in his abilities; the immortality of his thought; political and cultural isolation; repression as a means of resolving differences, conflicts and tension; dogmatism and adulation; and ingratiating one's self to the centers of power. The standard of patriotism became loyalty to the party and the state, as well as pride in and obedience to the laws and awareness of one's duties. This is a "national education" that sought to build up the individual's sense of belonging to and pride in his homeland and its ruling political leadership.

Thus a set of features characterizes current educational policy in Syria. Its frame of reference is a mix of general social culture and nationalist-patriotic thought, manifested in the party's principles, the leader's thought and vision for society, the state and the individuals. The goal is to bring up generations that will live together in an inclusive society with an arrogant patriotic-nationalist inclination. The policy also attempts to guide society from its core to form a collective consciousness that unites members in one cultural melting pot, as this is an essential prerequisite for a socio-political regime's stability. Accordingly, the individual student is no more than an element within the community whose interests are achieved through the community as a whole.

This is accomplished through the easy accessibility and ubiquity of the party's various educational institutions. Its programs reach a wide audience through free, universal, compulsory primary and secondary education, as well as the policy of ample opportunities for university education. However, it is notable that university acceptance standards are lax because of the privileges granted to some groups of young people on partisan and political grounds.

Societal restrictions complement the effects of these widespread educational programs. The programs are regulated through centralized management of planning, direction, proceedings, and standardized curricula. More generally, there is a limited margin of freedom and a weak role of citizens in decision-making and formulating goals, with scant room for individual initiative at the level of implementation.

While nationalist imagery has now replaced Baathist references, this is merely a cosmetic change to a clearly deep-rooted tradition of Baathist education. In light of the ongoing challenges to the regime since March 2011, several measures, along with international and regional pressures, should be adopted to remove the partisan-political character from education and other societal systems in Syria. Article 8 of the amended Constitution should be repealed, allowing the parties that are members of the front who participate in governing to work with students in universities. Some of the content regarding the party and its conferences should be removed and the educational systems' formula adjusted. Furthermore, curricula should be modified to include new concepts providing Syrian educational systems with an open, democratic character.

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