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Non-Ruling CP's: Syria

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SYRIAN CP STRUGGLE INTENSIFIED

For the past year an internal struggle has been going on within the Syrian CP, the oldest and now the most important of the Arab Communist parties. A majority of the leadership has challenged the policies of the veteran Secretary-General Khalid Bakdash -- who has replied by forming "parallel" organizations in various provinces. Despite the mediatory intervention of the Soviets, the fight goes on.

Despite Soviet intervention, the internal struggle within the Syrian Communist Party, which began a year ago but came into the open only a few months ago, (1) not only continues but has been intensified. The veteran Secretary-General Khalid Bakdash, his policies under attack by most of the Politburo and a small majority of the Central Committee, has been forming "parallel" party organizations of loyalists in various parts of the country.

This activity was announced and denounced at a "joint and expanded" meeting of the Politburo and Central Committee held in Damascus on May 5. The meeting was attended by five of the seven members of the Politburo -- the five who in May 1971 voted

a resolution criticizing Bakdash for running the party by methods reminiscent of Stalinism (2) -- and presumably by the half of the Central Committee which supported that criticism. Politburo member Zuhair Abdal-Samad delivered a report on the internal party crisis, but no details were given of this or of another report on "the domestic, Arab and international situation." The meeting did, however, issue an appeal to Bakdash, his fellow-Politburo-member Yusuf Faisal (one of the two Communist members of the Syrian Cabinet) and their supporters to work for the restoration of unity within the framework of the legitimate organizations of the party.

The appeal accused Bakdash and Faisal of forming "duplicate organizations" within the party, and of misusing the name of the SCP in issuing factional bulletins. Claiming that Bakdash had formed parallel organizations in five named provinces of Syria, the statement described this as "a malicious action harmful to the cause of the party and the cause of national unity." (3) The meeting softened this attack, however, by resolving to make "sincere efforts" to persuade Bakdash and his followers to work within the framework of the party's legitimate organizations for the best and quickest solution to the crisis; at the same time it was stressed that there was no intention of expelling them from the party.

Bakdash Hits Back

Ten days later, on May 15, Bakdash hit back in an interview with the independent Lebanese (Beirut) daily, Al-Nahar. He denied that the proceedings at the May 5 meeting had any validity at all. He, as Secretary-General, had not been informed of the meeting, which had been held in the absence of half of the Central Committee and of "the majority of representatives of [local] party organizations." He was therefore "authorized to declare that the statements and documents issued by this meeting ...do not represent the opinion of the Central Committee" but only that of those who issued them. He went on to accuse his critics of "using devious methods which violate Marxist-Leninist principles" and of following "a policy of blocs and divisions"; this, he added, reflected the disarray and truly revisionist tendencies of "the opportunist faction." (4)

Soviet Intervention

On the very day that Bakdash's counter-attack was published, May 15, a Soviet delegation led by first deputy chairman of the State Planning Committee and CPSU Central Committee member T. I. Sokolov arrived in Damascus for a two-week visit. The delegation was there primarily for interstate talks on trade and aid, but it may be presumed that Sokolov contacted local Communist leaders and tried again to get them to settle their differences. Such attempts had been made by earlier Soviet delegations -- one toward the end of 1971 and one, led by First

Deputy Premier Mazurov, in February. The Soviets reportedly backed Bakdash, but at the same time tried, in vain, to bring the two wings together. (5)

Soviet intervention may have led the anti-Bakdash grouping to modify its stand of relative independence (expressed, for example, in a programmatic resolution of May 1971 which "omitted to emphasize the responsibility of Peking in the Sino-Soviet conflict" (6)). Other points at issue between the two wings include the Arab-Israeli conflict, on which the "dissidents" took a considerably more militant stand than Bakdash or the Kremlin, and attitudes to the ruling Baath Party. Early in March of this year President (General) Hafez al-Assad, who seized power from an unstable ultra-leftist regime in November 1970, announced the formation of a "National Progressive Front," composed of the five parties already represented in the government -- the Baath, the Syrian CP and three smaller "Arab socialist" movements. Since Moscow, for its own reasons, hailed the formation of the front, Bakdash naturally did the same (7) (although in 1964-65 he had issued some vigorous warnings against such involvement with "Arab socialism"). The opposing wing, on the other hand, manifested clear if cautious distrust of this development, recognizing that the front would in practice be completely dominated by the Baath. (8)

The struggle within the SCP is not, therefore, being conducted in vacuo. The Kremlin and General Assad's Baath leadership are also involved -- on Bakdash's side, broadly speaking. The fact that these powerful outside pressures have not sufficed to end the struggle suggests that the veteran Bakdash has, indeed, lost the support not only of most Politburo colleagues but also of the majority of rank-and-file Communists in Syria. (The fact that his opponents control the semi-clandestine weekly SCP organ, Nidal al-Shab (People's Struggle) is also relevant.)

So the fight continues. The Damascus correspondent of the Cairo Middle East News Agency reported recently that "Bakdash and the wing opposing him are now feverishly competing for the support of party members and organizations. . . the continuation of this competition will mean the setting up of duplicate party organizations, which would result in two Syrian Communist parties." (9)

Kevin Devlin

- (1) See Kevin Devlin, "Syrian Communist Party Split," CAA Research Report No. 1378, Radio Free Europe Research (RFER), Munich, 13 April 1972.
- (2) The five are: Daniel Nimah (regarded as the leader of the group), Riyadh al-Turk, Ibrahim Bakri, Omar Khashash and Zuhair al-Samad.
- (3) Middle East News Agency (MENA) dispatch from Damascus, 15 May 1972.
- (4) Al-Nahar, cited in MENA dispatch from Damascus, 15 May 1972.
- (5) See Edouard Saab, "Moscou a tenté une nouvelle fois de reconcilier les groupes rivaux du P.C.," Le Monde, 12 April 1972. On 15 May 1972 a MENA dispatch from Damascus reported that "the two rival wings of the Syrian CP have been counseled by the CPSU to try to avoid anything which causes disagreement and to safeguard the unity of the party."
- (6) Saab, loc. cit.
- (7) See Bakdash's interview with the Bulgarian organ Rabotnichesko Delo of 6 May 1972, in which he hailed at fulsome length the formation of the National Progressive Front--and said nothing about the factional struggle within his own party.
- (8) The charter of the Front explicitly recognizes the "guiding role" of the Baath and its "majoritarian presence in all the institutions of the Front."
- (9) MENA dispatch from Damascus, 15 May 1972.