



Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970

Steven Heydemann

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For almost forty years Syria has been ruled by a populist authoritarian regime under the Ba'th Party, led since 1970 by President Hafiz al-Asad. The durability and resilience of this regime is a striking contrast to the instability and intense social conflict that preceded the Bath's seizure of power, when Syria was seen as among the least stable of Arab states. This dramatic transition raises questions about how the Ba'th succeeded in constructing the institutions needed to consolidate a radically populist and authoritarian system of rule. The Ba'th's accomplishment also poses a significant theoretical challenge to the widely held view that populist strategies of state building are inherently unstable. Drawing on evidence from Syrian, American, and British archives as well as from published French and Arabic sources, Steven Heydemann explains the capacity of the Ba'th to overcome the obstacles that typically undermine the consolidation of radical populist regimes. He links the Ba'th's adoption of a radical populist strategy of state building, and its capacity to implement this strategy, to the dynamics of social conflict, state expansion, and structural change in the political economy of post-independence Syria. Arguing that conventional accounts of Syrian politics neglect the centrality of institutions and institutional change, Heydemann shows how shifts in the pattern of state intervention after 1946 transformed Syria's political arena.

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