

ARTICLE

State-led Development: The Privileged Linkage between East Germany and Ba'athist Syria, 1965–1972

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Abstract

Upon request from the newly established Ba'athist leadership in Syria, the German Democratic Republic sent dozens of special advisors to Damascus between 1965 and 1972 to help set up the state institutions that would move Syria from being a predominantly agricultural country to an agro-industrial one: reforming the decision-making process of national government in Damascus, setting up central planning over production and distribution and enforcing land reform were some of the key issues dealt with by East German and Syrian officials. The encounter proved highly important because the two regimes came close enough to assess their mutual assets and limits upon which they would establish a long-lasting partnership, whose institutional legacy featured in Syrian formal politics as late as the 2000s. State institutions, mass organisations and public enterprises thus became the main avenues for these two 'Easts' to interact during the Cold War.

Introduction

Between spring and autumn 1965, officials of the ruling Syrian branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party urged diplomats of the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*; DDR) to help them in setting Syria in tune with current patterns of socialist development – namely, to move the country towards an accelerated process of industrialisation which would unleash the productive forces of the country for growth, overcome deeply-rooted social inequalities and mobilise society under the leadership of the Ba'ath Party. All this should be achieved by centralising the decision-making process of the government in Damascus, which would intervene in the economy through planning, and in society through the provision of services.

Locked in the struggle for international legitimacy against the rival West Germany and acting in line with the contemporary Soviet policy of full engagement with a selected number of postcolonial countries holding 'high geopolitical promises', the hegemonic Party of the Socialist Unity of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*; SED) replied positively and sent dozens of engineers, agronomists and medical doctors to provide their expertise. Between 1967 and 1972, a special group, labelled Government Advisors (*Regierungsberater*), worked on the reform of those central state institutions tasked with the governance of the large public sector that had been expanded out of the nationalisations of early 1965. Despite few failures, particularly in agriculture, and the many shortcomings of attempting formal policies in patrimonial regimes, their advice shaped much of the central state institutions which would preside over economic development in Ba'athist Syria up to the late 20th century, that is, well beyond the demise of their original sources of inspiration.¹

¹ Cf. Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria* (London: IB Tauris, 1997); Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2001); Fred Lawson, *Syria* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 7–36; Matthieu Rey, *Histoire de la Syrie (XIX–XXI siècles)* (Paris: Fayard, 2018).

This essay provides a significant contribution to the rich historiography on the multiple connections between the Cold War, development and area studies, by showing how universal ideas and discourse on internationalism, socialist cooperation and development were framed and negotiated locally between states and within single countries.² With all due peculiarities, the case-study of East Germany and Syria confirms most of the recent scholarly findings about the changes, both in the content and in the timeline, of the connections between the socialist camp and postcolonial countries: namely the general movement from pro-active, full engagement of the USSR and its allies with postcolonial countries in the mid-1950s to the more cautious approach at the end of the decade, this latter due to the limited capacities to provide effective, and rapid, solutions to the ambitious development goals of their postcolonial partners. Further on, the disillusionment for the prospects of enforcing state-led socialism in developing countries and the failure in moving them closer to their camp led Moscow to more realist policies and selective engagements beginning in the mid-1960s. Though the chronicles of this case-study show how East Germany, for the sake of its own ideological and realist assumptions, was willing to invest more and for a longer time into Syria, the Middle East and the North Africa region compared to its European comrades, from 1969 Berlin moved in line with the rest of the socialist camp. More important here, such a shift to state-to-state realpolitik was highly welcomed by most of its Syrian partners for their own reasons too. The essay highlights how both sides came to acknowledge the material constraints and political boundaries upon which their partnership was built and could be sustained over time, namely, not the ambitious, holistic construction of socialism but, more pragmatically, the improvement of the central state as the leading, though not exclusive, engine of agro-industrial development. A mutual wariness thus developed out of ‘tough negotiations’ over cooperation agreements as well as the experience of the Government Advisors, who gave Berlin a unique insight into Syrian economics and politics and, conversely, gave Damascus the opportunity to interact with the patterns of governance of one of the flagships of state-led socialism and champion of ‘alternative globalisations’.³

East Germany in the Middle East

The SED’s decision to invest considerable resources in Syria had its origins in the peculiar position of East Germany in the Cold War. In the same way as West Germany became a showcase for ‘free-market’ capitalism, East Germany was a model for ‘orthodox’ Marxist-Leninism. This meant,

² Cf. Corinna Unger, *Development. A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development. A Cold War History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Joseph Hodge, ‘Writing the History of Development (Part 1: The First Wave)’, *Humanity. An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 6, 3 (2015), 429–63; ‘Writing the History of Development (Part 2: Longer, Deeper and Wider)’, *Humanity*, 7, 1 (2016), 429–63; James Mark, Artemy Kalinovsky and Steffi Marung, eds., *Alternative Globalizations. Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); Anna Calori et al., eds., *Between East and South* (Berlin: De Gruyter, Oldenbourg, 2019); Max Trecker, *Red Money for the Global South: East-South Economic Relations in the Cold War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), chapters 4, 5; Young-Sun Hong, *Cold War Germany, the Third World and Global Humanitarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Artemy Kalinovsky and Sergey Radchenko, eds., *The End of the Cold War and the Third World. New Perspectives on Regional Conflicts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development. Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Nathan Citino, *Envisioning the Arab Future. Modernization in US–Arab Relations, 1945–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nathan Citino, ‘The Middle East and the Cold War’, *Cold War History*, 19, 3 (2019), 441–56; David C. Engerman, ‘The Second World’s Third World’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 12, 1 (2011), 183–211; David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid. The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Alessandro Iandolo, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Model of Development in West Africa, 1957–1964’, *Cold War History*, 12, 4 (2012), 683–704.

³ Massimiliano Trentin, ‘Tough Negotiations: The Two Germanys in Syria and Iraq, 1963–1974’, *Cold War History*, 8, 3 (2008), 353–80; Mark, Kalinovsky and Marung, eds., *Alternative Globalizations*, 4, 10–14; Johanna Bockmann, ‘Socialist Globalization against Capitalist Neocolonialism: The Economic Ideas Behind the New International Economic Order’, *Humanity*, 6, 1 (2015), 109–128.

among other things, that even compared to the Soviet Union and other East European socialist countries, East German institutions attached particular importance to concepts like ‘internationalism’ and ‘anti-imperialism’.⁴ These concepts were *realist* in so far as the ruling SED leaders sought to shape the specific features of the state vis-à-vis West Germany in order to assert its legitimacy as a full-fledged sovereign nation, among its citizens as well as abroad. However, many East German citizens genuinely believed in constructing a new democratic regime that would break with Germany’s recent past and support peace and progress worldwide.⁵ Yet, authorities in Berlin framed and conducted this quest for identity and legitimacy within a clear-cut hierarchical order based on the Cold War equilibrium and the priority attached to international recognition against West Germany.

As a junior partner of the USSR, Berlin constructed its ‘coordinated foreign policy’ (*koordinierte Aussenpolitik*) in the Middle East along the strategic lines set out by Moscow but featured some peculiarities as well, the most important being the so-called ‘German Cold War’ in the postcolonial world.⁶ Since it had resumed formal sovereignty from the Soviet Union in 1954, East Germany had engaged in a worldwide struggle against West Germany to gain diplomatic recognition, which was countered by the West German ‘Hallstein Doctrine’. The rise to power of Arab nationalist forces in key states, like Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria and later Libya, seemed to open up a wide range of opportunities.⁷ East Germany banked on anti-Western sentiments rooted in the region’s experience with colonialism, as well as in local reactions to NATO’s attempts to extend Soviet containment there, first through the creation of the Baghdad Pact in 1955, and then through the active destabilisation of Syria’s progressive governments in Syria in 1956 and 1957. Drawing a parallel between the East Germans and Arab resistance against Western imperialism, Berlin championed its claim for diplomatic recognition as a gesture of ‘anti-imperialist solidarity’. However, Arab elites were not complacent about this narrative, fearing retaliatory measures by West Germany as well as a loss of bargaining power with both German states. There had been some early success in the mid-1950s, when East Germany had opened consulates in

⁴ As a matter of fact, Marxism-Leninism was a fluid strand of theories and policies that made reference to the original thinking and workings of Marx, Engels and, above all, Lenin. Cf. David D. Engerman, ‘Ideologies and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917–1962’, in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1, 20–43; Silvio Pons, *La rivoluzione globale. Storia del comunismo internazionale, 1917–1991* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012); Brigitte Schulz, *Development Policy in the Cold War Era. The Two Germanys and Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960–1985* (Munster: LIT, 1995), 12.

⁵ On ideology as a ‘dynamic force, both driving and justifying actions’, see Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development*, 24; Berthold Unfried, ‘Instrumente und Praktiken von “Solidarität” Ost und “Entwicklungshilfe” West: Blickpunkt auf das entsandte Personal’, in Berthold Unfried and Eva Himmelstoss, eds., *Die eine Welt schaffen. Praktiken von “Internationaler Solidarität” und “Internationaler Entwicklung”* (Wien: Akademischer Verlaganstalt, 2012), 73–98; in the same volume Reinhart Kössler, ‘Development and Solidarity. Conceptual Perspectives’, 19–38. For a more sceptical view, see Hong, *Cold War Germany*, 320; Lorenzini, *Global Development*, 4–5.

⁶ Bernd Fischer, *Als Diplomat mit zwei Berufen. Die DDR-Aufklärung in der Dritten Welt* (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin 2009); Joachim Scholtzseck, *Die Aussenpolitik der DDR* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2003); Heinz-Dieter Winter, *Konfliktregion Naher und Mittlerer Osten*, (Berlin: Verband für internationale Politik und Völkerrecht, 2005), 8; Lutz Maeke, *DDR und PLO. Die Palästinapolitik des SED-Staates*, (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017); Martin Robbe, ‘Die DDR in Nah- und Mittelost: Eine Begegnung und ihre Spuren. Ein Rundtischgespräch mit Diplomaten’, in *Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika*, 21, (1994), 564; Ziad Mouna, ‘The Palestine Liberation Organization and the German Democratic Republic’, *Orient*, 36 (1995), 97; Sabine Hofmann, ‘Wirtschaftskontakte versus Realpolitik: Israel und Ost- und Westdeutsche in der Aussenwirtschaft’, in Schwanitz Wolfgang, ed., *Deutschland und der Mittlere Osten im Kalten Krieg*, (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006); M. Müller, *A Spectre is Haunting Arabia: How the Germans Brought their Communism to Yemen* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015); Massimiliano Trentin, ‘“Socialist Development” and East Germany in the Arab Middle East’, in Mark et al., *Alternative Globalizations*, 127–144.

⁷ The so-called ‘Hallstein Doctrine’ encapsulated the West German policy of deterrence against any state recognising East Germany’s sovereignty as a distinct state, by way of economic and diplomatic sanctions, like closing down diplomatic offices, refusing or upholding foreign aid and downgrading economic partnership. See William G. Gray, *Germany’s Cold War. The Global Campaign To Isolate East Germany, 1949–1969* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2003), 49, 81, 174–181; Hermann Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen. Die DDR in internationalen System, 1949–1989* (München: De Gruyter, 2007), chapter 5.

several Arab capitals.⁸ But it was Bonn's actions which advanced Berlin's cause most decisively in the following decade. With the delivery of German tanks to Israel in 1964 and the successive establishment of full formal ties between West Germany and the State of Israel, on 12 May 1965, most Arab capitals immediately broke off diplomatic relations with Bonn.⁹ Among their retaliatory measures, radical Arab states upgraded the status of East Germany's diplomatic offices from Consulates to General Consulates. Berlin rewarded this gesture with generous credits to its Arab partners.¹⁰

Grasping Opportunities: East Germany in early Ba'athist Syria

After political independence from France in 1946, debates arose in Syria over which patterns of development the country should adopt, as well as which foreign experience should be considered to be a suitable reference. Emerging radical nationalists pressed for a more equal redistribution of wealth as they increasingly opened their political constituencies to rural peasants and industrial workers. This was the case of the pan-Arabist force of the Ba'ath Party, founded in 1947 in Syria.¹¹

On 8 March 1963, the latter seized power in Damascus by means of a military coup. It advocated for the rapid expansion of state intervention and the seizure of the assets of big landlords and urban merchants.¹² From April 1964, clashes in the main cities, economic boycotts and political intrigues threatened the Ba'athist regime with bankruptcy and reversal. The regime responded with the nationalisation of all the major productive sectors: textile factories, extractive industries and foreign trade.¹³ In late January 1965, almost 85 per cent of Syria's industrial activities passed under state control. In February, the whole foreign trade sector formally came under the control of the state-owned company SIMEX, which comprised more than forty-five trade companies. In March of the same year, oil and gas distribution facilities were nationalised.¹⁴ Then, the Syrian authorities wished to elaborate as soon as possible a programme to reorganise the productive sectors and provide effective management by the means of central planning: as for the economy, this would rationalise scarce resources and focus them according to the political and economic priorities set by the government, that is, increasing first industrial and then agricultural output; as for politics, it would consolidate the power of the Ba'ath Party against the restive and still wealthy opposition of conservative and liberal circles in Syria. As stated in the proceedings of the Regional Congress of the Ba'ath Party in March 1965, the Syrian government turned to socialist states for support, since the Western capitals still maintained privileged contacts with the Syrian conservative forces and generally supported Israel against its Arab rivals.¹⁵

The SED leadership jumped on this opportunity. On 20 May the Präsidium of the Central Committee (*Zentralkomitee*; Zk) of the Party approved the concession of a government credit (*Regierungskredit*) amounting to US\$25 million. It financed the related agreements for the

⁸ Wolfgang Schwanitz, 'SED-Nahostpolitik als Chefsache. Die ZK-Abteilung Internationale Verbindungen 1946–1970 sowie die Nachlässe von Otto Grotewohl und Walter Ulbricht', *Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika*, 21, 1 (1993).

⁹ Massimiliano Trentin, *La Guerra fredda tedesca in Siria, diplomazia, economia e politica. 1963–1970* (Padova: CLEUP, 2015), 201.

¹⁰ Steffen Wippel, *Die Außenwirtschaftsbeziehungen der DDR zum Nahen Osten* (Berlin: Klaus-Schwarz Verlag, 1996), 21, 22. The Government Credits were valued in US\$ but were, in fact, the monetary equivalent for buy-back and clearing agreements. The absence of transactions in hard currencies was a major asset for the strained finances of both states.

¹¹ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 52; Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1999); Rizkallah Hilane, *Culture et Développement en Syrie et dans les Pays retardés* (Paris: Anthropos, 1969), 103.

¹² John F. Devlin, *The Ba'ath Party. A History from its Origins to 1966* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press: 1976), 221, 283.

¹³ Hans-Günter Lohmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1995), 22.

¹⁴ Antoine Guiné, eds., *Rapport 1964–1965 sur l'économie syrienne* (Damascus: al Mu'assasa al Arabiyya li 'Shihāfa wa al Dirāsāt/Office Arabe de Presse et Documentation, thereafter OAPD, 1966), 62–78; Sayed Aziz al Ahsan, 'Economic Policy and Class Structure in Syria: 1958–1980', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 16 (1984), 312–14.

¹⁵ *Programme d'action du Parti Baas Arabe Socialiste*, (Damascus: OAPD, March 1965), 15; *Programme du pouvoir en République arabe syrienne* (Damascus: OAPD, 22 July 1965), 25, 49.

Economic and Technical Cooperation (*Wirtschaftliche und Technische Zusammenarbeit*; WTZ); in exchange, Damascus upgraded the East German Consulate to Consulate General.¹⁶

Between May and June 1965, several Syrian ministries asked East Germany to send advisors, in order to provide consultancy on reforms. First out of the blocks was the Ministry of Finance, which planned to reorganise the relations between the banks and the newly nationalised enterprises and to reform the state budget and taxation system.¹⁷ Under the ultimate guidance of the Section for International Relations (*Abteilung Internationale Verbindungen*) of the SED Central Committee, the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised a first mission. In early June 1965, they dispatched Dr Gottfried Schneider, a senior official at the Ministry of Finance. He was the first advisor to the Syrian Council of Ministers, setting the standard for later missions. On 12 July 1965, Schneider reported his activities to Syria's Finance Minister, Fattah al-Bochi. He had met with ministerial officials and collected information about their working procedures and explained the 'socialist reforms' in East Germany to his Syrian partners. He had visited state-owned enterprises and provincial officials in Homs, Hama and Aleppo, and worked with his Syrian partners on reform bills on the unification of the state budget, the funding of state enterprises, and vocational training for ministerial cadres. In his final report, he mentioned some of the obstacles Syria was facing: the resistance and resilience of liberal and conservative cadres within ministries; the persistence of profit-oriented 'capitalist' management in recently nationalised enterprises, preventing any meaningful change for workers and employees; and the fragmentation of the state budget, which hindered any unitary, central control over expenditures against the substantial independence of ministries and local authorities.¹⁸

Though being labelled as a 'moderate' for his balanced approach to the private sector, the Syrian Minister of Economy, Salah al-Din Bitar, basically agreed with his suggestions, and in July 1965 outlined to his counterpart, Minister of Foreign Economy Horst Sölle, the significance of the East German cooperation for the Syrian authorities: 'The main effort of the state is in the introduction of planning in foreign trade both in the public and private sector. We place great hopes on the support of friendly states for a useful exchange of experiences.'¹⁹

The meeting captured a few crucial elements for the partnership to come: the Ba'athist leadership wanted to take the upper hand over productive forces as comprehensively and as fast as possible by appointing loyalists to the management of the public sector and planning the access to credit and markets for the private forces. East Germany, instead, argued for a more gradual, step-by-step approach, which would help to reach out to the disgruntled but still influential conservative elites and to consolidate the leading role of the Ba'ath Party: central planning was to be enforced within the public sector first and only later on the private sector, whose integration into state-led development would come about gradually through sub-contracts and credits and only eventually by planning over production. Damascus called for a militant, confrontational approach to social change, whereas Berlin argued for socialist development policies to meet with social and political stability. Such a controversy would feature high in the early times of the partnership between Syria and East Germany and was not resolved until leaderships in both countries downscaled their ambitions about socialism and resorted to the looser but more viable practice of agro-industrial development tout court.

¹⁶ The WTZ Agreement was later signed in October 1965, Beschluss Nr. 41-10/65 des Präsidiums des Politbüros des ZK der SED, Berlin, 20 May 1965, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen, Bundesarchiv, Berlin (thereafter, Sapmo-BArchiv), DL2 1589.

¹⁷ Henke, MfAA, Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik an Stellv. des Ministers für Finanzen, Berlin, 'Entsendung Experten für Finanzen in die SAR', Berlin, 21 May 1965, Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten (MfAA) beim Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin (thereafter MfAA-PAA), A/13.676.

¹⁸ Mager, Ministerium für Finanzen an MfAA, Stellv. des Ministers, Dr. Kiesewetter, MfAA, Berlin, 'Über den Stand der Durchführung des Auftrages zur Beratung des Ministeriums der Finanzen der SAR', 21 Aug. 1965, MfAA-PAA, A/13.676.

¹⁹ Dreisch, Handelsvertretung der DDR in der SAR an Ministerium für Aussen und Innenhandel (MAI), 'Vermerk, I Gespräch mit Minister al Bitar', Damascus, 28 July 1965, Sapmo-BArchiv, DL2 1586. All the quotations have been translated from German by the author.

The *Regierungsberater* and the Socialist Transformation in Syria, 1965–1967

On 23 September 1965 the radical faction of the Ba'ath Party took the upper hand in the regime and adopted a programme of 'Socialist Transformation'.²⁰ It focused on economic planning, big infrastructural projects, and the leading role of the state in fostering industrialisation: agrarian reform should increase production, whose financial surplus would be reinvested in industry; land redistribution, peasant and state cooperatives, chemical fertilisers and mechanisation were the instruments.²¹

Syrian authorities asked for more East German advisors. During his preliminary meeting with DDR delegates in Damascus in November 1965, President Yusuf al-Zu'ayn expressed his belief that Syria still suffered from the heritage of 'Turkish dominance' and 'French colonialism'. The whole system of state building should be reformed along the lines of a 'top-down decision-making process'. This implied the expansion of state power over society 'as the main instrument for socialist building'; professional training for cadres at the new state institutions; the reform of local autonomies; and a new definition of the relationship between the party and the state. Eventually, he stated: 'I kindly ask you to introduce your experience into the heads of the Syrian people, so that they know exactly where they are heading for when you are leaving'.²²

These words well represented the contemporary nationalist discourse in postcolonial politics, according to which foreign dominance had disrupted those societal relations and political institutions which could have otherwise led to the emergence of powerful nation-states. It was now up to vanguard forces, like the Ba'ath Party, to 'resurrect' the 'unity' of the 'Arab nation' through the construction of a 'new state', whose centralisation of powers and direct intervention in society would overcome fragmentation and foster development. For Ba'athists, the Party would hold the political command of society whereas the state was instrumental to translate and implement that guidance into effective policies.²³ Among socialist states, they viewed East Germany as one of the most advanced in state building and rapid industrialisation; it could bank on the fascination by postcolonial elites with German nationalist thought, scientific and technological innovation as well as organisational competence in shaping the Party-state relations and domestic security.²⁴

The East German advisors were ultimately asked to work on the reform of the Council of Ministers and the overall central decision-making process, the transformation of the Ministry of Planning into the State Planning Authority, the reform of the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade, the reform of the Central Statistical Institute, the overall rationalisation of the state-led economic sector and the building of unions for the nationalised enterprises.²⁵

The SED leadership welcomed this request because it would enhance the influence and prestige of East Germany in Syria, paving the way to diplomatic recognition. However, it was well aware of the

²⁰ Largely originating from provincial and rural centres and with professional careers within public institutions, the 'radical' Ba'athists were those elements who supported an all-out struggle against conservative and liberal elites, mostly located in big urban centres; they had a militant approach against Israel, which echoed Maoist or Vietnamese 'people's war' and, paradoxically, they sought the support of the Soviet-led socialist camp. They rallied around Prime Minister Yusef al Zu'ain, President Nour ed Din al Atassi and General Salah al Jadid; see Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 29, 170; Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath Party* (London: IB Tauris, 1996), 62, 75.

²¹ Horst Grunert, Konsul der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, 'Jahresbericht 1965', Damascus, 12 Dec. 1965, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IV2/20 875; Al Ahsan, 'Economic Policy', 315.

²² Klaus Sorgenicht, General Konsulat der DDR in der SAR (GK) an ZK der SED, Abteilung Internationale Verbindungen, Niederschrift Nr. 2, 'Gespräch mit dem Ministerpräsidenten Dr. Yusef Zouayen', Damascus, 25 Nov., 1965, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IVA2/20, 874. Based on the long-standing prejudice of Arab nationalists against the late Ottoman Empire, the prime minister portrayed it as 'Turkish dominance', whose institutional and economic reforms in the late nineteenth century were indeed inspired by German state-building as well.

²³ Michel 'Aflak, 'L'Idéologie du Parti Socialiste de la Resurrection Arabe', *Orient*, 35 (1965), 147–166.

²⁴ Trentin, *La Guerra Fredda Tedesca*, 43–52; Julia Sittmann, 'Illusions of Care: Iraqi Students between the Ba'thist State and the Stasi in Socialist East Germany, 1958–89', *Cold War History*, 18, 2 (2018), 187–202; Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism. Between Islam and the Nation-State* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

²⁵ See note 22.

risks of such an entanglement in Syrian politics, whose fragmentation and partisanship would expose any foreign advice to the fortunes of their local allies, as happened with ‘development politics’ in most postcolonial countries.²⁶ If the expertise and tasks of the advisors were conceived as technical, the ultimate meaning and goal of such reforms were political: to provide an institutional framework suitable to a state-led, inward-looking development which, along with the experience of the socialist states, would benefit first and foremost the popular classes and marginal groups.²⁷ Nevertheless, the Syrian requests for cooperation were welcomed. In December 1965, the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers, Gerhard Weiss, recommended that the General Consul in Damascus handle the activities of the *Regierungsberater* with extreme caution and prudence:

The activities should have a consultancy nature and the advisors should not assume any state executive function. [...] We might show our positive as well as negative experiences, so that they could work out the suitable solution for the current stage of development in Syria. [...] Once we have explained the working methods of our institutions, it is up to the Syrians to elaborate the most suitable for them. When the Syrian partners submit their proposals, comrades could make comments on them.²⁸

There is no evidence that such caution was grounded on notions like ‘civilisational’ difference, whose discriminatory assumptions would prevent scientific, rational thinking to prevail in postcolonial societies.²⁹ Rather, caution was motivated only by the uncertainties of the political struggle inside the Ba’ath Party, and their impact on the East German advisors. The difficult economic situation radicalised tensions inside the Party, and most notably within the affiliated army officers, which split further into the ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ factions. Here, political cleavages overlapped and cut across clan and family affiliations, leading to the radicals’ coup d’état on 23 February 1966 that would exile the entire ‘old guard’ and ‘moderates’ of the Ba’ath Party.³⁰

Meanwhile, Berlin tried to balance *raison d’état* with solidarity to communist compatriots in Syria by refusing cooperation on sensitive issues, like intelligence. In August 1966, the Syrian government asked East Germany to dispatch advisors from the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatsicherheit*; MfS, widely known as the Stasi) to train the personnel of the Directorate for Political Security, whose main task was the control and repression of domestic dissent. According to new archival evidence, the MfS Minister, Erich Mielke, abstained from any official reply, as he would do later with Iraq.³¹ The SED leaders followed the Soviet policy of not promoting local communist parties to take power in postcolonial states but encouraged those parties to ally with progressive

²⁶ David Engerman, *The Price of Aid*, 9–11, 351.

²⁷ Grunert, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, Information, ‘Zur Entwicklung der syrischen Wirtschaft’, Damascus, 14 Aug. 1966, MfAA-PAA, 81/VIII, C487/73.

²⁸ Klaus Sorgenicht, GK an MfAA, Abteilung Arabische Staaten, Kurzprotokoll, ‘Über eine Beratung beim Genossen Dr. Weiss am 30.12.1965’, Damascus, 31 Dec. 1965, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IVA2/20 874. Further research is needed about the process of selection of the advisors and their training. Scarce reference suggests advisors were chosen by ministries for their technical competence and then scrutinised by the SED authorities for their political loyalty. Mostly without previous knowledge of Syria and the region, they were introduced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, first in Berlin and then at the General Consulate in Damascus; meetings and discussions among East German personnel in Syria took place under the auspices and control of the local SED officials at the General Consulate, later Embassy.

²⁹ Cf. Hong, *Cold War Germany*, 8; Engerman, *The Price of Aid*, 4, 10; Masha Kirasirova, ‘Orientalologies Compared: US and Soviet Imaginaries of the Modern Middle East’, in Artemy Kalinowsky and Michael Kemper, eds., *Reassessing Orientalism. Interlocking Orientalologies during the Cold War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 18.

³⁰ *Oriente Moderno*, 1–4 (Rome: Istituto per l’Oriente ‘Nallino’, 1966), 57–8.

³¹ Ministerium für Staatsicherheit (MfS), ‘Verbindung des MfS zu der Organen der politischen Polizei der SAR’, 25 Aug. 1966, SdM 1884, BStU, cited in Pietro Ballarin, MA thesis, ‘La cooperazione tra la Repubblica Democratica Tedesca e la Repubblica Araba Siriana durante la Guerra Fredda: il caso dei servizi di sicurezza’, University of Bologna, approved in December 2017; Lorenzo Trombetta, *Siria. Dagli ottomani agli Asad. E oltre* (Milano: Mondadori, 2013), 115. Cf. Julia Sittmann, ‘Illusions of Care’, 188; Joseph Sassoon, ‘The East German Ministry of State Security and Iraq, 1969–1989’, *Journal of Cold War History*, 16, 1 (2014), 4–23.

nationalist forces to steer them towards the ‘non-capitalist road’ to development and conquer influential positions within state institutions. But while such a stance meant *de facto* their subordination to the Ba’thists, East Germany was nevertheless careful and consistent not to provide any reason or instrument for the repression of local communists.³²

Supporting Syria after June 1967

The ‘Six Days War’, from 5 to 11 June 1967, marked the most resounding victory of the Israeli army over its Arab rivals and was a watershed in the Arab-Israeli conflict.³³ Despite the military defeat, the Ba’athist regime in Damascus did not collapse. Nevertheless, since early autumn 1967, fractures within the regime had emerged over the choice between different strategic priorities: *al-Furāt aw al-Qunaytirah*? That is, should Syria focus all its resources on a viable economic development programme, whose symbol was the huge Soviet-constructed dam on the Euphrates (*al-Furāt*) in Tabqa, and wage the hybrid ‘people’s war’ against Israel and pro-imperialist Arab regimes? Or should it focus primarily on a military build-up to recover the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, whose symbol was the city of al-Qunaytirah, and recover the highly-needed resources by re-engaging with the private sector and conservative Arab countries?³⁴

Like other socialist states, East Germany feared that the June 1967 defeat could lead to the collapse of the Ba’athist regime or to the renewal of relations with Western states, especially West Germany. To contain the impact of the war, East Germany and socialist states doubled material and political support.³⁵ For their part, the Ba’ath Party passed a resolution in August 1967 supporting the diplomatic recognition of East Germany – but, much to the SED leaders’ dismay, Syrian officials continued their bargaining: Damascus argued that if Syria recognised East Germany, West Germany and its allies would step up their support to Israel, without Syria receiving equal support from socialist states.³⁶ As a matter of fact, for Ba’athists, anti-imperialist solidarity was not a matter of reciprocity or ideological affinity in times of crisis. Failing to make any breakthrough, in October 1967 the SED agreed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Soviet Union to ease the pressure for diplomatic recognition and, instead, worked on expanding its influence within the central government, the Ba’ath Party, and economic institutions.

The first official mission of the *Regierungsberater* arrived in Syria in mid-July 1967. It was led by Hans Albrecht, a senior official working at the Commission for Central Control (*Zentral Kontrollkommission*), and tasked with the control over relations between central ministries and other state institutions. Until early 1968, they worked with the Office of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Finance, the Central Institute for Statistics, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Energy and Oil, and the Ministry of Economy and Trade.³⁷ Through the mediation of

³² William Graf, ‘The Theory of the Non-Capitalist Road’, in Brigitte Schulz and William W. Hansen, eds., *The Soviet Bloc and the Third World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 27–52; Information nr. 164/IX, MfAA, Abteilung Information, Berlin, 7 Sept. 1968, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IVA2/20, 876; Pedro Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship since 1955. A Troubled Alliance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 66–77.

³³ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall. Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 280; Galia Golan, ‘The Soviet Attitude Toward Resolution of Conflict 1967–1973’, in *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967–1973*, Nigel J. Ashton, ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 59–73.

³⁴ Grunert, GK der DDR in der SAR, 1 Bericht, geheim, *Hauptcharakteristika des Baath-Kongresses*, Damascus, 3 Sept. 1967, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY 30 IV A2/20 872; Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship*, 52.

³⁵ Klaus Storkmann, *Geheime Solidarität. Militärbeziehungen und Militärhilfe in der DDR in die Dritte Welt* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2012); Ramet, *The Syrian-Soviet Relationship*, 44–54.

³⁶ Grunert, GK der DDR in der SAR, Blitz-Telegramm nr. 387/67, Damascus, 4 Sept. 1967, MfAA-PAA, C487/73; Grunert, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, Aktenvermerk, ‘Gespräch mit Aussenminister Makhos’, Damascus, 2 Oct. 1967, MfAA-PAA, C511/73.

³⁷ Albrecht, Grundorganisation, Bericht zu ZK der SED, ‘Die Berater für die Regierung Syriens’, Damascus, 21 Nov. 1967, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IVA2/20, 874.

German-speaking Syrian translators, these East German advisors focused on the enhancement of the central institutions concerned with agro-industrial development. They recorded as a success the endorsement by the Syrian government of laws no. 147 and 150, which reformed the Council of Ministers and the related office, respectively. Their powers were expanded and would better coordinate the activities of the different ministries under the leadership of the presidency. This reform was depicted as a necessary precondition to implementing planning in governmental policies. Of paramount importance was the reform and upgrading of the Ministry of Planning into the State Planning Authority, which elaborated the Five-Year Plans and coordinated the different ministries concerned.³⁸ In June 1968, the Syrian government adopted the Basic Principles for the Law on Local Administration, which set up a new territorial administrative division, as well as elective bodies whose majority was to be composed of labour forces and the small bourgeoisie. Such elective institutions were assisted at every level by Ba'ath Party officials who would 'guarantee popular control'. This administrative architecture resembled the framework of the popular democracies in Eastern Europe.³⁹

Despite such promising results, the *Regierungsberater* faced major difficulties, too. Industrial production diminished and the deficit of the balance of trade increased because of the arms deliveries from the socialist camp and bad harvests; inflation skyrocketed, hitting hard all fixed-income citizens. Also, the state financial budget for 1967 was still not approved and the government faced troubles in finding enough resources to finance it.⁴⁰ East German advisors reported that they were facing increasing resistance from senior ministerial officials who opposed the Ba'ath or supported different factions. They saw the *Regierungsberater* as politically connected with the ruling group and tried to boycott their activities by denying them access to databases and information and by delaying lectures or preventing officials from adopting their proposals. In September 1967, Dr Schneider reported that 'an atmosphere of resignation and resilience prevail[ed] in the state sector'. He added that the fundamental problem lay in the absence of a unitary state budget, which prevented any accurate assessment of the financial situation of the country.⁴¹

In November 1967, the head of the *Regierungsberater* mission, Dr Albrecht, accused the Syrian government and President al-Zu'ayn of not 'facilitating' the reform process either. Instead of rallying public support, the leadership continued to adopt a confrontational attitude towards public officials. In turn, al-Zu'ayn complained that state power was still not sufficiently concentrated:

I would define the current situation as the 'telephone-phase' [*Telefonetappe*]; and a state cannot be governed by the telephone [...]. There is no unitary political line, yet. But there must be only one state, which must rule everything [...].⁴²

As early as February 1968, during the visit of an East German delegation to Damascus, al-Zu'ayn confessed to a SED official, Horst Grüneberg, that it was almost impossible to combine re-armament and

³⁸ *Rapport sur l'économie syrienne 1968–1969* (Damascus: OFA, 1969), 41–3. For the question of planning in Europe, see Michel Christian, Sandrine Kott and Ondrej Matejka, eds., *Planning in Cold War Europe. Competition, Cooperation, Circulation (1950s–1970s)*. (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2008).

³⁹ *Les principes de base du projet de loi sur l'administration locale, texte intégral* (Damascus: OFA June, 1968); Petzold, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, Abteilung Arabische Staaten (AAA), 'Bericht über die Beraterstätigkeit für den Zeitraum vom Mitte Mai bis Mitte Juli 1968', Damascus, 21 July 1968, MfAA-PAA, B1.1215/75.

⁴⁰ Schwartze, Schutzvertretung der Bundesrepublik Deutschlands (SIBRD) an Auswärtigen Amt (AA), Bericht nr. 223/67, 'Politische Lage in Syrien am Jahresende 1967', Damascus, 15 Dec. 1967, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (thereafter PAAA).

⁴¹ Schneider, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, AAA, 'Bericht über den Einsatz als Finanzberater beim Ministerpräsidenten der Syrischen Arabischen Republik vom 24.07.1967–20.12.1967 und 09.02.1968–30.03.1968', Damascus, 5 Apr. 1968, MfAA-PAA, B/1.1210/75.

⁴² Schneider, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, AAA, 'Vermerk über die Aussprache beim Ministerpräsidenten der SAR, Dr. Zouayen, am 15.11.1967', Damascus, 18 Nov. 1967, MfAA-PAA, B/1.1210/75.

economic development; much of the latter was sacrificed to the imperatives of foreign currency accumulation and military build-up.⁴³ Nevertheless, on 19 March 1968, East Germany and Syria signed a Protocol-Agreement concerning phase two of their mission.⁴⁴

The same year, the SED leadership approved a plan to speed up the productive specialisation of the national economy, that is, to focus on exporting ‘complete plants’ and importing more agricultural products, raw materials and semi-finished goods. As requested by the ministries of Finance and Foreign Economy (*Außenwirtschaft*) and following the strategic lines that had been set by the Soviet Union in 1965, East Germany tried to adapt bilateral relations to international standards and apply more sound financial rationality.⁴⁵ Regarding Syria, the Ministry of Foreign Economy envisaged concentrating on exports for the pharmaceutical, electric and petrochemical sectors in order to ‘guarantee the maximum increase of the national income’.⁴⁶ In May 1968, the East German trade attaché in Damascus, Gerlach, suggested further exploiting their personnel in Syria, central government advisors included:

The appointment of scientific and technical experts should be structured in such a way as to influence the investment projects that are compatible with our export capacities. That would let them elaborate everything necessary for our deliveries and he should cooperate with the commission appointed to evaluate the projects. [...] In such a perspective the effective and long-term presence of the economic, scientific and technical experts in influential positions must significantly contribute to the development of both the Syrian national economy and the international economy of the DDR, by providing a sound market position.⁴⁷

Promoting and Resisting State-led Socialism

In late 1968, simmering tensions within the Ba’athist regime went public. A ‘nationalist’ faction of Ba’athist military officers coalesced around General and Minister of Defence Hafiz al-Assad, and openly challenged the ‘radicals’ on the grounds of ‘nationalist’ and ‘pragmatic’ credentials: they criticised them for the close relationship with the socialist states, the full implementation of the Socialist Transformation and the ‘militant’ regional policy, which isolated the Party from society as well as Syria from the Arab politics that was shifting towards moderation and unity.⁴⁸ At the fourth Regional Congress and the tenth National Congress, held in Damascus in October 1968, Minister of Defence Hafiz al-Assad dismissed PM al-Zu’ayn and Foreign Minister Ibrahim Makhos from any government and Party functions, and placed his loyalists in a new government led by Nur ad-Din al-Atassi.⁴⁹ Most foreign and domestic observers commented on the fragility of the compromise and labelled the current phase ‘power dualism’ (*izdiwājīyyat-as-sultah*).

⁴³ GK der DDR in der SAR an Zk der SED, AIV, Vermerk, ‘Gespräch der Delegation des ZK der SED mit dem Mitglied der Nationalleitung und Ministerpräsidenten der SAR, Dr. Y. Al Zouayen am 21.02.1968’, Damascus, 22 Feb. 1968, Anlage Nr. 3, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IVA2/20, 874.

⁴⁴ The advisors were now granted the status of diplomatic officials, Rippich, GK der DDR in der SAR and MfAA, Stellv. des Ministers, Kiesewetter, ‘Protokoll für die Regelung der Beratertätigkeit in der Syrischen Arabischen Republik’, Damascus, 2 Apr. 1968, MfAA-PAA, B/1.1218/75.

⁴⁵ Cfr. Abraham Katz, *The Politics of Economic Reform in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1972), chapters 8–9; Engerman, *The Price of Aid*, 292–3, 355. For early signs of Soviet integration into world economy, see Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization. The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chapters 5–6.

⁴⁶ Clausnitzer, Ministerium für Außenwirtschaft (MAW), Direktionsbereich Übersee I an Handelsvertretung der DDR in der SAR, Information, Berlin, 9 Dec. 1968, Sapmo-Barchiv, DL2 VAN 677.

⁴⁷ Gerlach, HV der DDR in der SAR an MAW, Direktionsbereich Übersee I, ‘Vorstellung des HV für den WTZ-Abkommen und den Einsatz der Berater’, Damascus, 25 May 1968, Sapmo-Barchiv, DL2 VAN 1586.

⁴⁸ MfAA, Abteilung Information, Information nr. 164/IX, Berlin, 9 Sep. 1968, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IVA2/20, 876; Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), 142; Hanna. Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*, 191–8.

⁴⁹ Among others, Mustafa Tlass as General Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and Abd al Halim Khaddam as Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade, Schwartz, SIBRD an AA, Bericht 516/68, Damascus, 22 Oct. 1968, PAAA, B36 IB4, 304.

Despite this fragility, on 6 November 1968, Syria and East Germany signed the Agreement for Economic and Technical Cooperation for 1968–1970, which set the general framework for the experts working at technical levels.⁵⁰ Overall, forty-seven technical experts and advisors from East Germany worked in Syria in 1968/9, forty-two in 1969/70, and forty in 1970/1, mainly in sectors concerned with industrial development and management of agriculture, manufacturing and infrastructures. These competences matched only partially with the targets set by the East German Ministry of Foreign Economy, because they had to respond to the requests of their Syrian partners as well (see Table 1).⁵¹

The *Regierungsberater* now helped their Syrian partners to elaborate the executive decrees which would improve planning and management in different state-led sectors. ‘Democratic Centralism’ was the theoretical reference to best safeguard ‘a unitary and goal-oriented management’ of a modern and complex government.⁵² Herbert Niederberger, Director of the Budget Coordination (*Bilanzkoordinierung*) at the State Planning Commission of the DDR, was despatched at the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade, and elaborated the draft for the new law establishing state monopoly over foreign trade; Ernst Gebauer, SED Secretary at the Ministry of Processing Machinery and Vehicles Construction (*Verarbeitungsmaschinen und Fahrzeugbau*), worked at the Ministry of Industry on a draft law to improve management in state factories, their relations with the competent ministries and the role of workers’ unions. Advisors Joseph Brossman and Klaus Dürrwald, from the State Planning Commission and the Central Institute for Statistics, respectively, trained Syrian officials at the Syrian State Planning Authority on economic planning and statistics according to the socialist experience. Richard Popluschnik, Director for the Control of Local Administrations at the Ministry for Domestic Trade and Supply, was assigned to the same ministry in Syria and focused on the development of domestic trade, consumers’ cooperatives and the legislation concerning relations between state-sector and private trade. Last but not least, Dr Heinrich Heid, who worked at the Ministry of Agriculture, oversaw the reform of central government institutions concerned with agriculture.⁵³

According to the East German advisors, reforms faced huge obstacles. The government in Damascus elaborated a strict austerity program to increase capital accumulation. More coordination and planning were needed but, as the *Regierungsberater* reported, ministries lacked both resources and, most importantly, competent and committed officials. They still acted as mere administrative centres rather than effective planning and management ones. For example, Niederberger noted that the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade and the Ministry of Industry still had only loose control over state enterprises and could hardly implement any planning.⁵⁴ Gebauer reported that even the state-led import-export society, SIMEX, could not exert a monopoly over foreign trade and was just an import company for the state sector. The company was harshly criticised for ineffectiveness and mismanagement, and opposition forces inside and outside the Ba’athist government depicted it as the ‘actual face of socialism’.⁵⁵ According to advisor Popluschnik, the state was far from exerting any effective control on domestic trade. Most of the shopkeepers and trade dealers were very small; the state could not monitor their accounts and smuggling was still a major source of revenue; cooperatives were just too few in number, and in rural areas the barter system was still a common practice.

⁵⁰ Rippich, GK der DDR in der SAR and MfAA, Stellv. des Ministers, Kiesewetter, ‘Protokoll für die Regelung der Beraterstätigkeit in der Syrischen Arabischen Republik’, Damascus, 2 Apr. 1968, MfAA-PAAA, B/1.1218/75.

⁵¹ Clausnitzer, MAW, Direktionsbereich Übersee I, ‘Gesamt Übersicht WTZ-Expertenentsendung SAR’, Berlin, 8 Nov. 1967, Sapmo-BArchiv, DL2 VAN 677.

⁵² Petzold, GK der DDR an MfAA-AAA, ‘Einschätzung der Vorschläge und Gedanken über die weitere Entwicklung der Tätigkeit des Ministerrates’, Damascus, 2 Jan. 1969, MfAA-PAAA, B1.1216/75.

⁵³ Rippich, ‘Protokoll’, see note 50.

⁵⁴ Niederberger, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, ‘Gutachten zur Analyse des Ministeriums für Wirtschaft und Aussenhandel der SAR im 2. Halbjahr 1967’, Damascus, 20 May 1968, MfAA-PAAA, B1.1211/75.

⁵⁵ Gebauer, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, ‘Auszug aus der Analyse über die Tätigkeit des Aussenhandelsunternehmer SIMEX vom Juli 1968’, Damascus, 2 July 1968, MfAA-PAAA, B1.1218/75.

Table 1. Technical experts and advisors of East Germany in Syria, 1968–1971.

Sector	1968/1969	1969/1970	1970/1971
Ministry of Energy and Infrastructural Investments	9	8	7
Ministry	4	3	2
Societies for the realisation of big projects	3	2	2
General Directorate of the National Electric Society	2	3	3
Ministry of Local Municipalities	4	6	6
Department for Water Resources	2	3	3
Department for Cities and Town Supply	2	3	3
Ministry of Industry	14	7	6
Textile industries	4	4	4
Food industries-flour mills sector	2	2	1
Food industries-cereal sector	1	1	1
Porcelain factory in Damascus	5		
Tile factory in Hama	2		
Agriculture	17	18	18
Veterinary doctors	11	11	11
Research Institute for Agriculture	1	1	1
Mechanisation	2	3	3
Central Department for Research	1	1	1
Planning	1	1	1
Cooperatives	1	1	1
Other sectors	3	3	3
Planning	2	2	2
Finances	1	1	1
Total	47	42	40

Source: Claunitzer, MAW, Direktionsbereich Übersee I, Berlin, 8 November 1967, 'Gesamt Übersicht Wtz-Expertenentsendung SAR', Sappmo-BArchiv, DL2 VAN 677.

The 'big traders' (*Grosshandel*) still enjoyed a prominent role for purchase, deliveries and sale, and private traders still enjoyed wide contacts with the Lebanese and Western markets.⁵⁶ Tasked with the professional training of central state cadres at the Office of the Council of Ministers, Gerhard Anton offered a gloomy picture of the Syrian civil service. He harshly criticised the current wage system for the absence of any incentives for labour productivity: salaries were based on age rather than competence; and senior appointments were made on general educational level, without any regard to sectorial competence. Politically, Anton reported that civil servants were quite sceptical about the Ba'athist reforms, often assuming passive and resilient attitudes. 'We have already experienced several ministers and governments, we are going to survive the current one, as well.'⁵⁷ There was a widespread belief that socialism simply equalled nationalisation, and did not entail major changes in labour, management and planning organisation.⁵⁸

As a matter of fact, the same *Regierungsberater* had their share of responsibility in disrupting relations with their Syrian partners. Already in mid-October 1968, the new coordinator of the government advisors in Syria, Consul Rippich, labelled many cases as 'unrealistic and not agreed with the Syrian partners': he reported that some advisors handed over projects which did not take into account the obstacles facing reforms, especially the political ones. Actually, they acted as if Syria was on the verge of adopting the same development models as the socialist states in Eastern Europe, which was not realistic.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Popluschnik, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, 'Analyse und Bericht über die Tätigkeit im Zeitraum von Mitte Oktober 1968 bis Mitte Januar 1969', Damascus, 4 Jan. 1969, MfAA-PAAA, B/1.1211/75.

⁵⁷ Anton, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, 'Analytische Einschätzung des gegenwärtigen Zustandes des Personalbestandes der zentralen Organen der SAR', Damascus, 25 Jan. 1969, MfAA-PAAA, B1.1214/75.

⁵⁸ Gebauer and Niederberger, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, 'Bericht über den Besuch von 20 Betrieben und Institutionen im Raum Damaskus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo und Lattakia', Damascus, 13 Dec. 1968, MfAA-PAAA, B1.1211/75; Niederberger, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, 'Bericht über die Tätigkeit im Zeitraum Februar bis Mai 1969', Damascus, 10 June 1969, MfAA-PAAA, B1207/75.

⁵⁹ Rippich, GK der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, 'Bericht über die Tätigkeit der Berater in der SAR im Zeitraum von Mitte July bis Mitte Oktober 1968', Damascus, 14 Oct. 1968, MfAA-PAAA, B1207/75.

Overall, both positive and negative remarks by government advisors on Syrian partners were made concerning the criteria of professional competence, or lack thereof, and political commitment to reforms. The first was seemingly evaluated against specific knowledge as well as a work ethic based on discipline, punctuality and productivity. Proper training for work (*Erziehung zur Arbeit*) was meant to overcome all difficulties and – though embedding the hierarchical order of modernisation between the ‘developed’ East Germany and ‘developing’ Syria – it was nonetheless seen in both Berlin and Damascus as flexible enough to prove effective in different local circumstances. Little or no political commitment to reforms, instead, was a generic reference to the opposition, which provided little explanation for their reasons. As a matter of fact, if state intervention was widely accepted to support industrial economic development within the frameworks of development economics, scepticism and outright rejection concerned its rationale and effectiveness in agriculture and trade, where either liberal views or vested interests were still deeply-rooted among landlords, merchants and public officials as well.⁶⁰

The Way to ‘Normalcy’: Diplomatic Recognition and Hafiz al-Assad

Spring 1969 marked a turning point for the diplomatic recognition of East Germany in the Arab world, with direct repercussions for Berlin’s engagement in Syria. In order to be legitimised and supported by the socialist camp, the new Ba’athist leadership in Baghdad, led by Ahmad Hassan al Bakr and Saddam Hussain, played on the inter-German rivalry and decided to grant diplomatic recognition to East Germany on 30 April 1969.⁶¹ Fearing to be side-lined by the neighbouring, and rival, Ba’athists in Baghdad, Damascus established diplomatic relations with Berlin on 5 June, and received a US\$50 million loan to finance the new Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement. Having severed all major relations back in 1965, West Germany had no practical means to retaliate against this ‘unfriendly’ act.⁶² More broadly, substantial credits, usually double the ones provided in 1965, were granted to the Arab partners establishing diplomatic relations with Berlin, and in the early 1970s five out of the ten main recipients of East German capital investments in the Third World were Arab states; Egypt, Algeria, Syria and Iraq received 92 per cent of all aid to the Arab world, which amounted to 69 per cent of all the aid given by East Germany to developing countries.⁶³

The main consequence for East Germany was a marked shift toward *realpolitik* because the radical, socialist-leaning Ba’athists were in retreat, as Soviet Ambassador in Syria, Nouredin Mukhtidinov, had told the German comrades in April 1969.⁶⁴ Now, East Germany moved to consolidate its

⁶⁰ Interviews with Helmut Monsees, former DDR trade-attaché in Syria, 1979–85, Berlin, 19 Jan. 2006; Heinz-Dieter Winter, former DDR Ambassador in Syria, Vogelsee, 28 Jan. 2006; Dawood Hido, former Director of Foreign Trade at the Ministry of Economy, President of Oil Market Department, Damascus, 27 June 2005, 7 July and 22 Aug. 2006; Rizkallah Hilane, former Advisor to the Council of Ministers, Damascus, 3 July, 21 Sep. 2006; Issam Al Za’im, former President of the Syrian Economy Society, former Minister of Industry and Director of the State Planning Authority, Damascus, 26 June 2005, 24 Sep. 2006; Muhammad al Imady, former Minister of Economy, Damascus, 3 and 16 July 2006; Jamil Qadry, Secretary of the Committee for the Union of Syrian Communists, Damascus, 11 Sep. 2006; Abdallah al Ahmar, Assistant Secretary General Ba’th Arab Socialist Party, Damascus, 17 Aug. 2006; Mahdi Dakhallah, former Minister of Information, Damascus, 24 July 2006; Samir Seifan, private consultant, Damascus, 27 July 2006; Jacques Abd al Nour, Provincial Secretary of the Syrian Communist Party (Bakhdash), Aleppo, 20 Sep. 2006.

⁶¹ Legationsrat I. Mirow, z.Z. Bagdad, an das Auswärtiges Amt, Bagdad, 28 Apr. 1969, AAPD, 1969, ZB6-1-12408; Botschafter Lilienfeld, Teheran, an das Auswärtiges Amt, ‘Anerkennung der Zone durch Irak’, Teheran, 20 May 1969, AAPD, 1969, ZB6-1-12787.

⁶² ‘Lettre Confidentielle’, signed by the DDR Foreign Minister, O. Winzer, and the Syrian Foreign Minister, M. Sayed, Damascus, 6 June 1969; WTZ-Abkommen, Damascus, 23 July 1969, Sapmo-Barchiv, DL2 367; Grey, *Germany’s Cold War*, 212–219.

⁶³ MfAA, 3.AEA, ‘Konzeption für Verhandlungen für die diplomatische Anerkennung in arabischen Ländern’, Berlin, 13 Aug. 1969, Sapmo-BArchiv, DY30 A2/20 871; Wippel, *Die Außenwirtschaftsbeziehungen der DDR*, 24.

⁶⁴ Luetzkendorf, Botschaft Moskau an ZK der SED, Abteilung Internationale Verbindungen (AIV), Abschrift 44/69, Moscow, 29 Apr. 1969, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY 4182 1334. Nuredin Mukhtidinov made his career in the KGB and was closely connected to the rising star of Yuri Andropov, Pedro Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship since 1955. A Troubled Alliance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 46.

influence in the state apparatus and the Ba'athist leadership, with the ultimate goal of promoting its own economic interests within the process of state-led development in Syria. Remarkably, whenever debating development topics, discourse by East German diplomats and SED officials shifted from the theoretical framework of socialism to the larger, and looser, one of 'progress', which would fit better with nationalist forces.⁶⁵ In order to win the trust of the multifaceted and plural Ba'athist élite, the East German Ambassador in Syria, Alfred Marter, further stressed the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness in their cooperation. As a consequence, the *Regierungsberater* would avoid any reference to the political aspect of their activities. Instead, their advice on reforms would be exclusively characterised as instrumental to the improvement of the state sector.⁶⁶ Despite many efforts at making cooperation profitable for East Germany as well, Berlin was not successful in extracting profits from Syria. The financial rewards for diplomatic recognition still meant that Damascus enjoyed very favourable conditions.⁶⁷ Again, the East Germans acted more cautiously where cooperation in the realm of domestic security was concerned. Only the Ministry of the Interior (*Ministerium für Inneres*) developed a close relationship with its Syrian counterpart, but on limited activities, like forensics for criminal police, traffic police and fireguards.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, the final showdown between Ba'athist factions came in late 1970, during Black September, when the nationalist faction led by Hafiz al Assad blocked the radicals, who had sent troops to northern Jordan in support of the Palestinian forces in their bid to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy. Soon thereafter, al-Assad seized power on 16 November by another military coup d'état. He immediately appointed a Provisional Regional Command of the Ba'ath Party and labelled his new programme the 'Corrective Movement'.⁶⁹ Quite contrary to his previous claims, al-Assad left untouched most of the reforms aimed at state and party consolidation. But at the same time, he forced the Ba'athists to soften their radicalism and agree on a compromise with other forces, like the Syrian Communist Party, as well as the conservatives.⁷⁰ The new working arrangement with domestic allies was formalised in the National Progressive Front (NPF) on 5 March 1972, whereas the new constitution, adopted on 12 March 1973, centralised the decision-making process in the hands of the presidency.⁷¹ In his role as senior and high representative of the Ba'ath Party, Abdallah al Ahmar insisted on the 'originality' of the Syrian institutional framework, whose origins were nonetheless rooted in the international context of the time, socialist states included. More straight-forward was Yusuf al-Faysal, senior leader of the Syrian Communist Party, who retrospectively stated that the institutional model of East Germany had been a source of inspiration during the long negotiations which led to the NPF and the new constitution: 'we might say that theory came from the DDR, whereas practice came from Syria'.⁷² Despite formal power-sharing mechanisms, President al-Assad had the ultimate say on strategic issues like security-defence and foreign policy, as well as on general economic planning. Syria developed a patrimonial system, where a tiny ruling élite held ultimate power, which radiated out to subordinate levels along clientelist lines, whereas institutional structures increasingly assumed corporatist features.⁷³ As a matter of fact, the

⁶⁵ Mark, Kalinowsky and Marung, *Alternative Globalizations*, 12.

⁶⁶ Marter, Botschaft der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, 'Information über die Erfüllung staatlicher Verträge und Vereinbarungen und dabei auftretenden Probleme', Damascus, 11 Jan. 1970, MfAA-PAAA, B/1.208/75.

⁶⁷ Interview with Helmut Monsees, Berlin, 15 Jan. 2006; interview with Klaus Gädt, Berlin, 18 Jan. 2006.

⁶⁸ AIV, ZK der SED, 'Zur Lage in der SAR', Berlin, 24 Apr. 1970, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY30 IV A 2/20/876.

⁶⁹ Marter, Botschaft der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, Blitz-Telegramm 406/70, Damascus, 17 Nov. 1970, MfAA-PAAA, C498/73.

⁷⁰ Marter, Botschaft der DDR in der SAR an ZK der SED, AIV, Bericht, 'Die neue politische Führung der Baathpartei und der Regierung Syriens', Damascus, 1 Dec. 1970, Sapmo-Barchiv, DY 30 IV A2/20 876.

⁷¹ Cf. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 206, 244; Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 65–89.

⁷² Interviews with Yusuf Faysal, President of the Syrian Communist Party (Faysal-faction), Damascus, 20 Sep. 2006. It was the same for Ammar Bakhdash, General Secretary of the Syrian Communist Party (Bakhdash-faction), Damascus, 6 Sep. 2006; Abdallah al Ahmar, Damascus, 17 Aug. 2006.

⁷³ Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 206–16; Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria*, 161.

Corrective Movement marked the end of the long period of radical change that had started in the early 1950s.

Regarding the economy, the ‘opening’ (*infitah*) rewarded business people who recognised the regime of al-Assad but did not diminish state intervention in the economy. Conversely, the security imperatives and planning for the October War of 1973 helped to rationalise and define clear targets and priorities. Public investments of the third Five-Year Plan focused on strategic infrastructures, like oil prospects and the Euphrates Dam, which would satisfy the growing energy demand. In order to increase agricultural production, the regime favoured and subsidised middle-sized landowners and farmers.⁷⁴ As former Minister of Industry Issam Za’im recalled, ‘the private sector resumed its activities, as functional to the financial support of the public sector. In parallel, the state kept control and leadership over those sectors that it considered to be strategic’.⁷⁵

Initially, there was a certain disorientation among the *Regierungsberater*: they wondered whether the Corrective Movement was a temporary phase, which would lead later to a massive re-engagement with socialist-oriented reforms, or a strategic programme. Most of them adamantly opposed the liberalisation policy of the Syrian government, arguing that it would prove a major opportunity for local conservative forces to come back, particularly from Lebanon and the Gulf states.⁷⁶ However, in early 1971, Rudolf Dietrich, a government advisor at the State Planning Authority, assessed that it was no longer a question of either introducing further elements of ‘socialist economy’ in Syria or conceiving economic planning as a ‘creative’, political act (as still claimed in 1970 by the US-educated Assistant Secretary-General at the Ministry of Economy, and future Minister of Economy, Muhammad al-Imady).⁷⁷ Rather, the *Regierungsberater* could help to improve the effectiveness of the existing economic structures, which were still based on capitalist and market dynamics.⁷⁸ In November 1971, engineer Gebauer outlined that, at the current pace, the Syrian agro-industrial state (*Industrie-agraar Staat*) would rely more on foreign capital investments than domestic ones.⁷⁹

Ultimately, the new political situation in Syria coincided with the end date of the mission of the government advisors. Between June 1971 and March 1972, Ambassador Alfred Marter and the new Syrian President of the Council of Ministers, Abd al-Rahman al-Khlayfawi, agreed to revise it. Consultancy by East Germany continued, but only on the basis of specific requests rather than as a full, comprehensive package. The new advisors arrived in April 1972 and were appointed to the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Interior, and the State Planning Authority, as well as to professional and vocational training institutes for state cadres.⁸⁰

Conclusions

The experience of the East German advisors to the central government in Syria provides qualified evidence on the encounter between European socialist states and their Middle East counterparts as well as on the influence that the former could exert on the latter.

⁷⁴ Mirow, SIBRD an AA, Bericht Nr. 157/70, ‘Liberalisierungsmassnahmen seit 1969’, Damascus, 13 Mar. 1970, Damascus, PAAA, B66 IB3, 706; Al Ahsan, ‘Economic Policy’, 315, 318.

⁷⁵ Interview with Issam al Za’im, Damascus, 14 and 22 Aug. 2006.

⁷⁶ Gebauer, Botschaft der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, ‘Abschlussbericht über meine Tätigkeit als Berater für Industrie in der SAR’, Damascus, 25 Mar. 1972, MfAA-PAAA, B 1.218/75.

⁷⁷ Al Imady M., ‘Données Générales sur la Planification’, in *La planification économique et social en R.A.S. 1960–1970* (Damascus: OFA, 1970); interview with the author, Damascus, 3 July 2006.

⁷⁸ Dietrich, Botschaft der DDR an MfAA, ‘Einschätzung zur Ausarbeitung der Hauptaufgaben und der Zielsetzungen des 3. Fünfjahresplanes der SAR für den Zeitraum 1971–1975’, Damascus, 1 Feb. 1971, MfAA-PAAA, B 1.1212/75.

⁷⁹ Reported in Petzold, Botschaft der DDR in der SAR an MfAA, Minister Winzer, ‘Bericht über die Tätigkeit von Regierungsberatern der DDR in der SAR in der Zeit von Februar bis März 1972’, Damascus, 15 Apr. 1972, MfAA-PAAA, B/1.208/75.

⁸⁰ MfAA, Abteilung Wirtschaftliche und Technische Zusammenarbeit mit Entwicklungsländer, ‘Konzeption zur Entwicklung der WTZ der DDR mit der SAR bis 1975’, Berlin, 24 Apr. 1972, MfAA-PAAA, B/1.208/75.

According to current historiography, East Germany was the only socialist state able to influence the process of state-building in Syria, and Berlin maintained Damascus as the most reliable partner within the whole Middle East.⁸¹ The fortunes of the relationship between the states were closely tied to the power politics of the Soviet Union, whose influence in the Middle East rested on the ability to intervene and broker regional conflicts, like the Arab-Israeli one. However, it connected to the trajectories of the history of development as well because state-led development was identified and enacted as the most suitable ground on which East Germany and Syria would build a mutually beneficial, long-lasting partnership.

The *Regierungsberater* contributed to putting Syria in tune with contemporary trends in international development and state-building, according to which the central state was to be the major engine for economic growth and social justice.⁸² The expansion of social services and state intervention in the economy required a much more complex administrative apparatus than the one inherited from the Ottoman Empire or the French Mandate. In addition to enforcing social change against 'backwardness', for socialist and radicalised postcolonial elites, like the Ba'athists who ruled Syria in the mid-1960s, the state would also guarantee their leadership against Western-oriented rival forces. Both SED and Ba'athist leaderships 'weaponised' the developmentalist state, and then 'institutionalised' it as the normal avenue for bilateral partnership.

The focus on development issues proved to be a major asset for both East German and Syrian ruling elites because it combined effectively national interest with international solidarity, that is, the desire for autonomy from Cold War engagements. On the one hand, East Germany boosted its industrial exports and effectively supported its 'progressive' partners in Syria through state institutions, though to a lesser extent and value than initially expected. On the other hand, Syria obtained quite favourable conditions for trade and cooperation, and the Ba'athists could integrate into the venues and circles of international solidarity of socialist states. If there is no clear evidence of East Germany re-assessing its domestic model of development after such an experience, the mission of the advisors proved to the SED leaders all the assets and limits of their influence on a postcolonial partner like Syria. After that, East Germany promoted abroad its cooperation for development as the top-of-the-range amongst socialist countries because of its effectiveness and efficiency; features like international and socialist solidarity were only meant for domestic audiences and highly selected foreign comrades. For their part, the Ba'athists under Hafiz al Assad learned to select foreign advice with greater caution and according to more precise development projects. It all started as a transfer of knowledge, thus embedding a top-down, hierarchical relationship in terms of development standards, and it resulted in a circular process of reciprocal knowledge which was pivotal in shaping a long-standing relationship, whose legacies in Syria survived the demise of East Germany in 1989.

⁸¹ Cr. Przemyslaw Gasztold-Sén, Massimiliano Trentin and Jan Adamec, *Syria During the Cold War. The East European Connection* (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria, 2014); Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship*, 230, 254; Alexey Vassiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy. From Lenin to Putin* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 61, 107. The instability of the Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (or South Yemen) soon proved a daunting challenge, Müller, *A Spectre is Haunting Arabia*.

⁸² Cf. Unger, *International Development*, chapters 5 and 6; David Engerman, Corinna Unger, eds., 'Modernization as a Global Project', *Diplomatic History*, 33, 2009.