

M.E.S Series No. 49

**Spiritual Father of the Ba‘th**  
**The Ideological and Political Significance of**  
**Zakī al-Arsūzī in Arab Nationalist Movements**

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**日本貿易振興会**

2000

中東総合研究資料 (M.E.S) は、日本貿易振興会アジア経済研究所地域研究第 2 部の中東研究の成果を発表するための限定出版物である。

第 49 号は、1999 年度にダマスカスで実施されたワフイク・ハンサ (東京外国語大学客員教授)、マーヘル・シャリーフ (ダマスカス・フランス - アラブ研究所教官)、青山弘之 (アジア経済研究所海外派遣員) による共同研究の成果である。

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2000 年 3 月

日本貿易振興会アジア経済研究所  
地域研究第 2 部

### Middle East Studies Series

The Middle East Studies (M.E.S) series aim at disseminating the results of research and study done under the Area Studies Department II of the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE), Japan External Trade Organization, Tokyo. This book is a result of the joint study carried out in Damascus during the fiscal year 1999, and is written by Wafiq Khansa, a visiting professor at Tokyo University for Foreign Studies, Maher al-Charif, a professor at IFEAD (Institut Français d'Etudes Arabes de Damas), and Hiroyuki Aoyama, a research fellow of the Institute of Developing Economies.

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March 2000

Area Studies Department II  
Institute of Developing Economies  
Japan External Trade Organization

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## Preface

A hundred years have passed since Zakī al-Arsūzī (1900-1968) was born. The ideology of the *ba'th* (resurrection), built on his unique linguo-philosophical theory, provides the rationale for the Arab Ba'th Party (*ḥizb al-ba'th al-'arabī*),<sup>1</sup> which had a great impact on the ideologization and politicization of nationalism in the Arab world.

It was not until the coup d'état of Ṣalāḥ Jadīd (February 1966) in Syria that al-Arsūzī was “rehabilitated” as the “spiritual father (*ab rūḥī*)” of the Ba'th.<sup>2</sup> This measure of the Jadīd regime was primarily a result of its aim to undermine the authority of Mīshīl 'Aflaq and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār, both of whom had been regarded as the founders of the Ba'th Party. In addition, the “rehabilitation” of al-Arsūzī is often criticized as a political scheme to legitimize the 'Alawis' predominance over Syria's internal politics, especially after Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad came to power in November 1970.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the evaluation of al-Arsūzī's significance in Arab nationalism, especially in the movement of the Ba'th Party, remains ambiguous and politically polarized.

In spite of the defeat in the war of June 1967 and the ascendance of the Islamic revivalist movements, Arab nationalism plays an important role in the political, economic and social spheres of the Arab world. The regimes have little means to legitimize themselves but through the language of Arab nationalism, while the peoples continue to depend on it in asserting their identity.

This study deals with al-Arsūzī's ideology of the Arab *ba'th* in order to make a contribution to the understanding of his role in Arab nationalist movements. Chapter One presents a biography of al-Arsūzī to review the formative stage of his nationalist ideology. Chapter Two details his philosophical theory, characterized by unique linguistic analyses of the Arabic language. Chapter Three examines his nationalist and political ideology, summarized in his conception of the Arab *ba'th*, and compares it with that of 'Aflaq's, a chief ideologue of the Ba'th Party from the latter half of the 1940s to the early 1960s. Chapter Four investigates al-Arsūzī's ideological significance in the various Arab nationalist trends in the contemporary Arab world.

The joint study was conducted in 1999 by Wafiq Khansa, a visiting professor at Tokyo University for Foreign Studies, Maher al-Charif, a professor at IFEAD

(Institut Français d'Etudes Arabes de Damas), and Hiroyuki Aoyama, a research fellow at the Institute of Developing Economies. Mujab al-Imam and Malek Salman, lecturers at Tishrin University, Latakia, translated the original texts into English and revised them. The time limitation of one year may not have permitted each author to fully reflect his "*problématique*" which has been developed throughout his earlier career. However, it is these authors' hope that the study will be a cornerstone for building the comprehensive understanding of ideological and political trends in the whole Arab world.

Hiroyuki Aoyama  
Damascus, March 2000

## Notes

1. Due to the merger with the Arab Socialist Party (*al-ḥizb al-‘arabī al-ishtirākī*) of Akram al-Ḥawrānī in 1953, the Ba‘th Party was renamed the Arab Socialist Ba‘th Party (*ḥizb al-ba‘th al-‘arabī al-ishtirākī*); the current name the party has at present.
2. Sāmī al-Jundī, *Al-Ba‘th* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār lil-Nashr, 1969), p. 19; Eric Rouleau, “The Syrian Enigma: What Is the Ba‘th?,” in Irene L. Gendier, ed., *A Middle East Reader* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 159.
3. According to Patrick Seale, after the coup d’état of February 1966, al-Asad, the Defence Minister at that time, took al-Arsūzī on tours of army camps to get him to lecture to the officers. Delighted by the attention al-Asad paid to him, al-Arsūzī contributed frequent editorials to the Ba‘th Party papers and army press and expressed al-Asad’s ideological viewpoints. In due course, al-Asad arranged for al-Arsūzī to receive a pension, which he kept until his death in July 1968. See Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), p. 89. The substantial re-evaluation of al-Arsūzī under al-Asad’s regime started with the publication of special issues of two magazines, *Al-Ma‘rifah* (Damascus), No. 113, Jul. 1971 and *Al-Mawqif al-Adabī* (Damascus), Vol. 2, Nos. 3-4, Jul.-Aug. 1972, to which al-Arsūzī’s disciples contributed various articles. Then, from 1972 to 1976, a six-volume collection of al-Arsūzī’s books and articles was successively published by the Political Administration of the Armed Force (*al-idārah al-siyāsīyah lil-jaysh wa-al-qūwāt al-musallahah*).