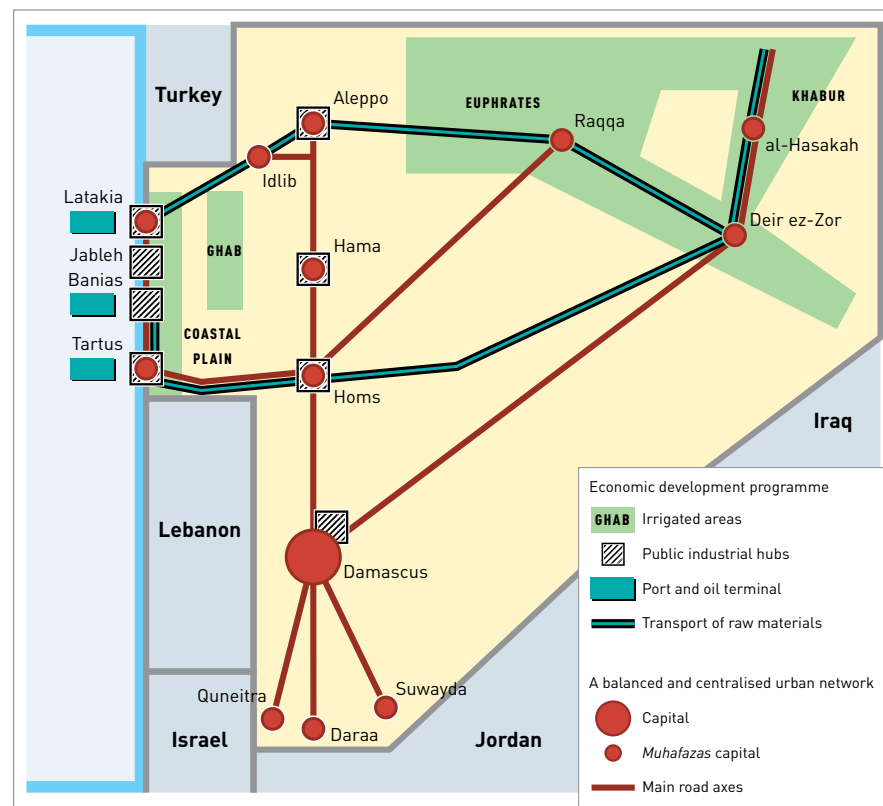


## Syrian Nation-Building and Ba'athism

From 1945 until 1970 Syria experienced a period of chronic political instability: repeated coups d'état, a union and then separation from Egypt (1958–61), the Ba'athist revolution in 1963, followed by another series of coups d'état ending with that of Hafez al-Assad in November of 1970—a “corrective movement.” During the first years of independence, national integration was difficult due to the weakness of the centralised power and the opposition between the two metropolises of Aleppo and Damascus. The different regimes endeavoured to put down the rebellions in the peripheries, which were accustomed to the autonomy granted by the French and to being able to control the Bedouins. The economic liberalism and the absence of a public policy for development caused an increase in social inequality. The situation in the rural part of society, which represented three quarters of the Syrian population, was most worrying; half of the peasant families did not own land, illiteracy was over 80 per cent, and life expectancy at birth was 40 years.

In 1963, a group of officers, members of the Ba'athist party, including the future Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, seized power through a coup d'état. The new regime nationalised the large companies and the banks, and launched an ambitious land reform. The great agricultural estates were dismantled and the land distributed among the peasants. The agricultural sector benefited from significant state support, most notably in matters of irrigation that took the form of the Euphrates Project (20 per cent of public investments between 1970 and 1990), the continuation of the Ghab Plain Project, and similar initiatives in the coastal region. The new regime took control of the industrialisation of the country and created industrial development hubs. The coastal region, the domain of the Alawite community, was favoured by the state, and because of its proximity to sea several large companies were established there. These ended up providing 20 per cent of the public sector industrial employment although the region had only 10 per cent of the Syrian population. Whatever the arrangements, the clientelist, communitarian, and/or political rationales took precedence over economic rationality. Certain Arab oil countries, wanting to support those countries which were in the front line against Israel, supplied funding for this “self-reliant” form of development. From 1973 until 1987, Syria alone received

## BA'ATHIST TERRITORIAL MANAGEMENT, 1963–1986



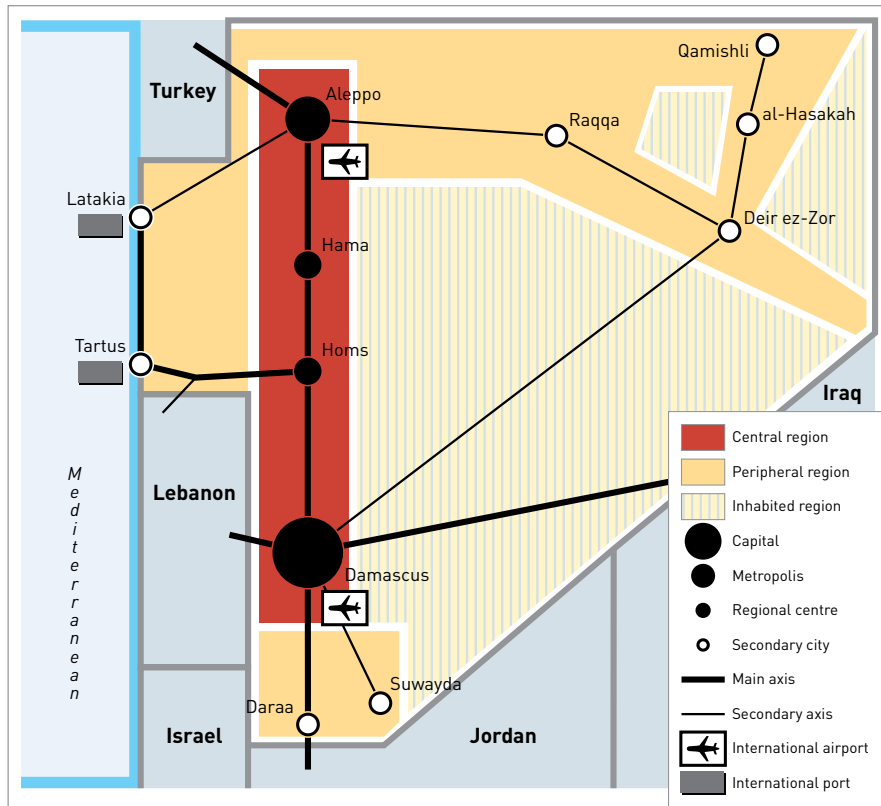
Fabrice Balanche, 2011.

between 500 million and 2 billion dollars of aid every year, the equivalent of a quarter of its GDP – excluding Soviet military aid.

The loss of Arab and Soviet aid caused a serious financial crisis in the mid-1980s, thus illustrating the failure of the “self-reliant mode of development”. The Soviets even demanded repayment of 10 billion dollars of debt. However, in the area of nation-building progress in social issues earned the Ba'athist regime the support of the population, and this contributed to national unity. The development of a communications infrastructure opened up the territory and unified the national market.

By the end of the 1980s Hafez al-Assad was obliged to change his economic policy. He embarked upon a gradual liberalisation, taking care not to

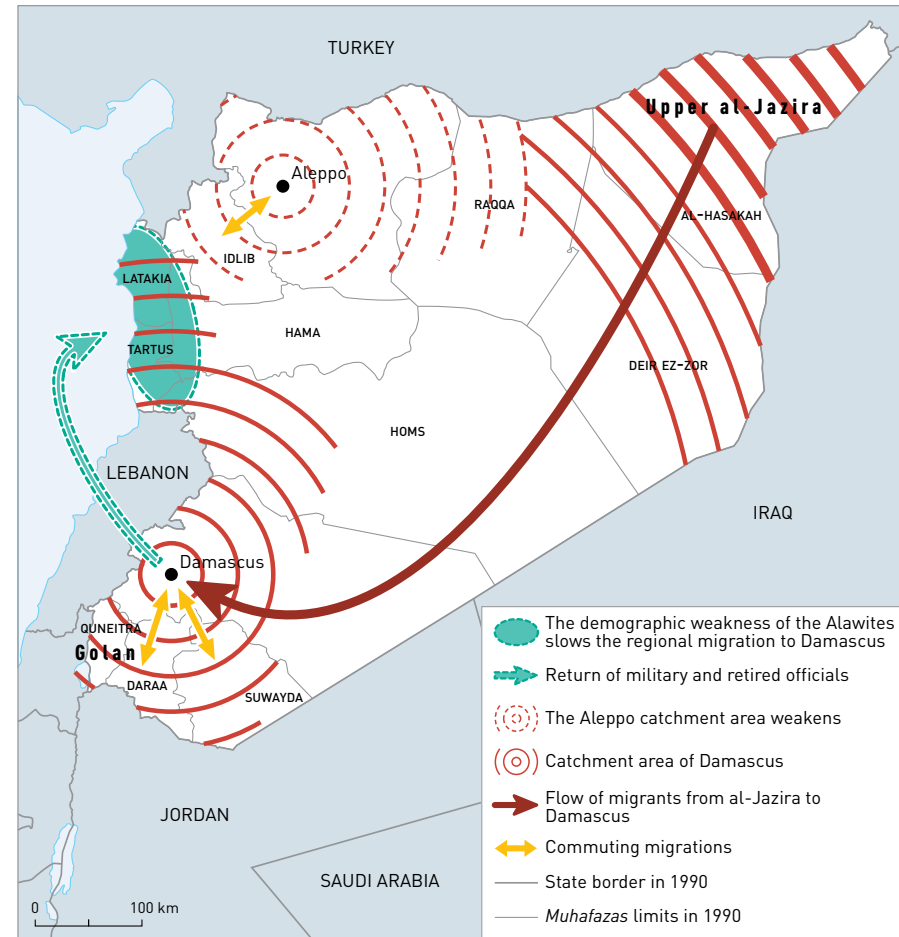
SYRIAN TERRITORY IN 2011: CENTRAL AREA AND PERIPHERIES



Fabrice Balanche, 2011.

undermine the authoritarian nature of the regime. Upon the death of his father in June of 2000, Bashar al-Assad took power and gave a new impetus to the process of economic liberalisation, without compromising on the fundamentals of the preceding era: land reform, an industrial public sector, an oversized administration, etc. Yet at the same time he interrupted the costly policy of development in the peripheral regions. The natural tendency to concentrate activities and the population around the four inland metropolises (Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus) continued, while the rivalry between Aleppo

INTERNAL MIGRATIONS IN SYRIA SINCE 1990



Source: Fabrice Balanche, based on Marwan Khawaja, FAFO, 2002.

and Damascus disappeared, with the latter truly establishing itself as the capital of the country. The evolution of internal migrations reflects perfectly the change of economic policy in Syria.