CONCLUSIONS

The Ba’th regimes of Syria and Iraq have been in conflict since the very beginning of their coexistence in July 1968. Until early March 1972 this conflict chiefly resulted from the desire of the Syrian rulers to monopolize Ba’thi legitimacy to prevent certain categories of their Ba’thi supporters from shifting their political allegiance to the regime in Baghdad. Although the Syrian rulers partly overestimated the danger. Such tendencies did exist among certain members of the Syrian apparatus, that is among those who occupied key positions in the army and the party, threatening to erode the regime in Damascus from within.

But after Syria's victory in the Arab-Israeli October War of 1973 and then definitely after the Algiers agreement passed in March 1975 between Iraq and Iran both regimes felt strong enough to pursue more ambitious regional policies. Ever since, the resulting competition for regional resources and influence has dominated their bilateral relations, even during the short-lived rapprochement of 1978-79.

Having described Syro-Iraqi relations since 1968 as developing from a consolidation conflict into a competition for regional influence and resources, this evolution has yet to be analyzed in its relevance for the views according to which the contemporary Arab state is a territorial state rather than a nation-state, and inter-Arab relations are
characterized by a blurred distinction between internal and external affairs.

Over the twenty years covered by the present analysis it is manifest that Syrian and Iraqi actors increasingly distinguished between internal and external affairs, although the two domains remained blurred to some extent. Put generally actors do less and less conceive of the Arab world as of an overarching polity, and the strength of cross-border solidarities at the level of other ties such as between Sunnis of different countries has also decreased.

The increasing distinction between internal and external is most obvious from the dwindling instances since March 1972 of shifts in political allegiance of Syrian Ba’this to the regime in Iraq and corresponding fears by the Syrian rulers, which have ceased to be large-scale phenomena. This is clearly apparent from the greatly reduced reference to Ba’thi legitimacy in the mutual propaganda onslaughts.

This tendency towards greater distinction is not contradicted by the co-operation in the late 1970s and early 1980s between the Iraqi regime and the Islamist opposition in Syria. Co-operation between the two sides was purely pragmatic or utilitarian and by no means based on any kind of Sunni solidarity that might have linked the regime in Iraq to the opposition in Syria. In part, this success
is again based on the expectancy, or rather fear, that inter-Arab politics continue to function like communicating vessels. Yet, the expectations and fears have often been based on actual events and interactions that provide more real indications for the persisting tendency not to distinguish between internal and external affairs. While these examples first of all provide evidence of centrifugal tendencies in third countries there are also indications that shifts in political allegiance and changes in preference have continued to recur between Syria and Iraq, again mainly in favour of Iraq. Sympathy for Baghdad increased in Syria in 1976 after the regime in Damascus intervened on the side of Maronites in Lebanon, and more strongly during the Iraq-Iran war, especially when it continued to side with Iran after Iranian troops had occupied Iraqi - and therefore Arab - territory.

Syrian policy in Lebanon and towards Iran also affected the loyalty of Syrian Ba’this towards their regime. More generally, loyalty of Syrian Ba’this towards their regime. More generally, the survival of a clandestine pro-Iraqi Ba’th organization in Syria throughout the period after 1972, though of a much reduced and sometimes minimal size, testifies that outside and inside remained partly confused in relations between Iraq and Syria. This is confirmed by the temporary successes of the Syrian Ba’th to mobilize support among Iraqis.
Such political loyalties that are not contained within the borders of a given state have remained of relatively minor significance since 1972, and may remain a marginal feature of Arab politics. But although inter-state relations in the Arab world have tended to develop into a pattern more similar to those between European nation-states, this need not necessarily become a definite and irreversible state of affairs.

As a result of this attitude, but also partly because of factors outside the control of the Syrian regime, the country's economy started to slump in the second half of the 1970s and continues to decline. When the regime is no longer able to provide the material advantages it disburses to its apparatus, their support may falter and allegiance shift to alternative recipients. Then again actors from beyond the country's borders but eligible to be considered as internal may be rediscovered and play a more significant role as political partners or allies. Obviously in Iraq too, where shifts of allegiance to external actors had always posed far less of a problem than in Syria, the regime's ability to grant material benefit has enhanced its internal stability, particularly with the increase in oil prices after 1973.

However, should co-operation and alliances between Syrian and Iraqi actors increase in the future it will be
difficult to determine how far this will be due to a renewed blurring of the internal-external distinction between the two states: shifts of allegiance from Syria to Iraq may instead be caused by very material considerations. Iraq reaches favourable agreements with its international creditors, despite the debts and damages incurred from its war with Iran, it may be able to attract Syrian actors by means not of legitimacy but of finance.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s such a policy of financial inducement was open to Iraq only to a limited extent, even though its annual gross national product per capita exceeded that of Syria more than 20 per cent. At that time the Iraqi regime had to operate within narrower financial constraints and, unlike today, within an extremely hostile international environment, especially at the time of the nationalization of the Iraq petroleum company whose success was not completely certain. Moreover, of course, Iraq's regional ambitions during this early period were generally far more limited. After the increase in oil prices in 1973 Iraq clearly had the means to buy allegiance abroad, and the regional ambitions which required it. But either it did not use its new resources to this end, or the Syrian apparatus was already too much under the spell of the prospering infitah.

Since the increase in loyalty to the state, especially in Syria, seems dependent on immediate economic benefits it
may well turn out to be fragile and reversible, thus leaving unfulfilled a main condition for making the state a nation-state. Indeed it remains doubtful whether Syria, as well as several other Arab countries, has become sufficiently consolidated in itself not to fall victim to centrifugal tendencies in times of crisis when the cement of distribution and enrichment networks starts cracking. Certainly, no nation-state, however solidly establish, is immune to the disintegrating effects of protracted economic breakdown and crisis. But many states, such as in Europe, have acquired far more raison d’être, independent of immediate material returns, than Syria. Doubts about Syria’s nation-state character are reinforced by the absence of political participation that – in the simultaneous absence of total mobilization – is the precondition of internal legitimacy and thus of the inhabitants loyalty to the state.

This of course, is not to deny a priori that, since about 1970, Syria may have become less of a territorial and more of a nation-state, and that despite all adversities it will turn out to be a political entity accepted by its inhabitants and a polity of its own rather than part of a wider one comprising the Fertile Crescent.

In the post Cold War period thus the advocates of Arab Nationalism in both the countries i.e. for Syria & Iraq
respectively realised the impracticability of a comprehensive Arab Movement under the unstable political conditions in the Arab World. Consequently, its Pan-Arab character gave way to an increasing tendency to participate in regional politics. The new Ba'thist governments were more successful in accommodating by compromise and more often by coercion the political ambitions and economic interests of the more influential segments of society, such as the landed gentry, royal families and more recently army officers and bureaucrats generating the feeling of Wataniyya over Qaumiyya. Consequently the call to abolish boundaries between Arab States, and the demand to eradicate social and economic differences were fiercely countered by the adamant resistance of those who had vested interests in preserving the state of political fragmentation in the Arab World. Today the conflict between the Ba'th Government in Syria and Iraq cannot be entirely attributed to ideological differences. Underlying this conflict are the concrete state interests of the two countries, in which no amount of rhetoric on Arab Unity and brotherhood can dispel.