

**ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN SYRIAN POLITICS, 1949-1970**

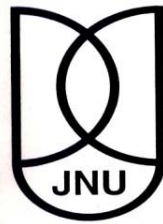
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*in partial fulfilment of the requirements*

*for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation titled "**ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN SYRIAN POLITICS, 1949-1970**", submitted by me in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this or any other university.

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CERTIFICATE

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ASP	Arab Socialist Party
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
UAR	United Arab Republic
NCRC	National Council of the Revolutionary Command
NCR	National Council of the Revolution
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
SARC	Syrian Revolutionary Command of the Armed Forces
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The military organization is a part of every state. Since times immemorial the role of military has differed from society to society depending on time and place. Earlier the military was used only for defence against territorial threats but as time passed its role has changed. In the present times the military has come to influence politics either directly or indirectly. Direct involvement means running the government and indirect means influencing decision making, policies, foreign policy, etc without governing directly. Each society experiences different types of military intervention in politics depending upon its historical background, colonial history, tradition, culture etc.

Politics in any country is influenced by a variety of factors and the role of military is one such factor. Military's role in politics raises a number of issues. In order to understand the military's involvement in politics, it is important to understand what propelled it to do so and its impact on politics.

Syria was the first Arab country in the West Asian region to fall under military rule in 1949 followed by Egypt and Iraq. A number of military coups and coup attempts shook the country in the period 1949–1970. This period represented the most crucial phase of Syria's political history. The country came under a complex system of governance wherein power alternated between the military and civilian politicians, but the overall control remained with the men belonging to the armed forces. The involvement of the military in politics ranged from direct intervention or dictatorship to behind-the-scenes influence. This issue makes the role of military in politics in Syria different from that of Egypt and Iraq.

#### **Conceptual Discussion on Civil-Military Relations**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the subject of civil-military relations became one of the major topics of discussion due to altered framework of international relations and change in the domestic politics of many countries.

In simple terms, a civil-military relation is based on what constitutes military work and what does not. The military organizations are basically seen as subcomponents help in order to fight and win wars. Expansion of the works of military organizations into the areas of civil governance not only blurs the difference between soldiers and civilians. What also happens is that the description of a military organization and its ethos and rationality are also blurred. Therefore, it becomes very difficult to ascertain as to what “kind of organization the military is and what it could and should be used for” (Rosen 2010:27).

Earlier scholars looked at the military institution as “an alien and demonic political group incapable of interacting with other social groups but able to act against them”. Machiavelli argued that a “military man cannot be a good man.” Voltaire went a step further to describe the military institution as the “manifestation of brute force in rationalized form”. Samuel Adams argued that a “standing army, however necessary it may be, is always dangerous to the liberties of the people.” However, after the Second World War a different point of view started developing regarding military institutions. The military institution was regarded by the scholars as being able to play a positive role in the socio-political development of the newly created states. Before military organization was a mere tool for territorial expansion but in the post Second World War era it came to be viewed as a legitimate pressure group due to which its utility as a domestic force received a great enhancement (Karabelias 1998:7).

Essentially, the concept of civil-military relations is a “modern and Western concept” which involves the doctrines of popular sovereignty, nationalism and military professionalism. Therefore, it is difficult to differentiate the civilians and military realms of the ancient societies in the same manner through which we have analysed these two in the past two centuries. During premodern times, the military had an intrinsic relationship with their host societies. The soldiers did organise rebellions against their governments and even overthrew them, for example in 1622 when the Janissaries overthrew the Ottoman Sultan and brought a new successor to the throne. As sufficient surplus could not be produced by the early agrarian societies, maintaining professional armies such as the Janissaries was difficult. In the society of the Mongols there was no difference between soldiers and civilians and attributed their large number of cavalymen to the fact that the skills and equipments of a “mounted warriors were the same as those of herdsman on the steppe.” This was evident in the ancient Greek societies. In Athens and Sparta,



“every citizen was a soldier and every soldier a citizen.” There was no separation between the rulers and the ruled in medieval European warrior societies. The leaders of the church also proved to be fierce warriors like any knight. A significant change was brought forth by the French Revolution by creating a strong civilian authority in a nation-state which was capable of demanding obedience from every citizen to meet the needs of the republic (Cowley and Parker 1996:89-90).

With the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the civilian and the military worlds began to diverge because of the emergence of complex professions and suspicions towards the civilian world as it did not share most of the values held by the military. According to Cowley and Parker, civil-military relations in Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had a troubled path. The Dreyfus affair in France nearly ripped the army and the country apart. In the Second World War Adolf Hitler exercised his power to dominate and overrule the army. According to the authors, during this period there existed a far more superior relationship between the civilian and military authorities in US. The authors state that according to the Western model of representative governments the military is supposed to remain subordinate to civilian control and for the military to function effectively that civilian leaders must grant considerable autonomy to the military professionals to take decisions in planning and execution of operations. They are of the opinion that as Clausewitz observed, both the civilian and the military realms are inextricably related and therefore it is difficult to draw a boundary to differentiate them (ibid.89).

Samuel Huntington, one of the pioneers in the field of civil-military relations, has argued that the interaction between two important elements of security and accountability form the main basis from which the tensions between civil-military relations arise. In every society, military institutions are influenced by two forces: “a functional imperative stemming from the threats to the society’s security and a societal imperative arising from the social forces, ideologies, and institutions dominant within the society.” Huntington argues that civil-military relations is shaped by elements which pressurize the military institution to try to become a competent force and the various competing forces compelling the military to be accountable and responsive to the needs of the society of which it is a part. Resolving the tensions which arise from these competing imperatives constitutes the central problem of civil-military relations. The literature

on civil-military relations has mainly been concerned with civilian control of the military, in other words “governmental control of the military” (Ulrich 1999: 6).

According to Welch, civilian control can be called as consisting of a “set of relationships than individual event. It lacks sharpness.” The tensions between the civilian and military authorities may always be there but this shows the shifting balance of strength between the civilian political institutions and political power of military institutions. He states that, “no military, in short, can be shorn of political influence, save through the rare step of total abolition.” One of the main challenges of the civilian authority is the ability to demarcate the areas of responsibility for the members of the armed forces and the military institution and to ensure their acceptance of this definition of separate areas of responsibility (Welch 1976: 2).

Now the active and increasing role of military in politics is not considered as an unnatural and deviant phenomenon. The earlier political scientists from Niccolo Machiavelli to Gaetano Mosca did recognise a government dominated by the military. But some scholars identified such governments as “unnatural” and therefore military rule was not considered as natural just like civilian rule. Even in the 1930s, military rule was seen as the ultimate type of totalitarianism. The intervention of military in politics has taken place time and again in the form of coups and counter-coups (Perlmutter 1969: 382).

Irrespective of operating in a developed or a developing society and differing in the extent and degree of influence, the military has always been involved in politics in one way or another. “As politics is about the authoritative allocation of value in society, no military would want to opt out from participating in political process in some way at any time.” The civilian control of the military may vary from being minimal to a maximal influence depending on certain factors such as the power of the civilian authority and their ability to hold on to power, the kinds of internal and external threats to the government and most importantly the military’s opinion about its own role and position in the society (Houngnikpo 2010: 48).

According to Carl Von Clausewitz, the military in any society may not be always be apolitical but should be subordinate to the civilian authority, not vice versa. The military is bound to make certain political judgments and express political opinions just like the civilian leaders (Houngnikpo 2010:219).

The literature on civil-military relations focuses on two issues: first, “the degree of autonomy of the military from civilian power and its influence on democratic and civilian control of the military; and, second, the propensity of the military to interfere in civilian affairs and stage coups”. In his work, *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington argues that civil-military relations are influenced by three key variables: the functional imperative (high or low external threat); ideology (whether society as a whole was liberal or conservative); and constitutional structure (whether the civilians are united as in parliamentary systems with majority governments, or divided, as is the case when the executive as the legislature share oversight responsibilities). Huntington puts forward a civilian control of the military through either “subjective” or “objective” control. Maximisation of power by the civilians in undemocratic settings leads to subjective mechanisms of control over the military but it might also politicize the military as powerful civilian politicians might use them for increasing their own influence. Bengt Abrahamsson is of the view that the military cannot remain apolitical, but is actually a “politicised and active interest group.” In Abrahamsson’s view the “key to maintaining democratic control over the armed forces is to acknowledge, first and foremost, the military’s political nature and design appropriate control mechanisms that allow civilian governments a fair choice in their defence options” (cited in Hounnikpo 2010: 49-55).

It has been argued that a strong political structure does not allow a great degree of military intervention in politics. In countries where the political institutions are weak and political culture is at a low level then there occurs a greater degree of military intervention. Eric Finer, Samuel E. Finer and Jay Stanley have described about the nature and degree of military intervention. They have categorised four types of civil-military relations first, when the military officers who exercises their legitimate rule over the civilian government; in the second, when the officers use the threat of some kind to gain authority over the civilian government; in the third, when the military officers replace one civilian regime with another as the former failed to function effectively towards them; and in the fourth category, the officers decide to overthrow the civilian regime and to rule directly (Finer et al. 2002: 65). On the other hand, Samuel Huntington’s typology of civil-military relations is based upon the political ambitions of the actions taken by the military officers. He classifies them into three categories: first, those cases which resemble a “palace coup”; second, those resembling “a reform coup”; and third, those resembling “a revolutionary one” (Huntington 1957: 34).

A different view has been put forward by differentiating civil-military relations in Western states from those in the newly developing nations. Civil-military relations in Western states have been divided into three categories: aristocratic, democratic and totalitarian. In the newly developing nations, one finds five categories: authoritarian-personal, authoritarian-mass, democratic-competitive, civil-military coalition, and military oligarchy (Janowitz 1964:15).

However, the above mentioned typologies are not agreed upon by others who emphasise the necessity of a multi-factorial model. A composite and comprehensive model for the understanding of civil-military relations should include “the size of the military institution, the social background, the level of professionalization of the army, their political ideology, their cohesion and unity and their desire to protect the corporate interests” (Karabelias 1995:32).

There are three theories of civil-military relations which have been considered worth discussing. These are the Fusionist theory, Convergence theory and Concordance theory. Fusionist theory mentions that there is a separation between civil and military structures in a society given their values and attitudes held by them. Samuel Huntington has drawn attention to fusionist theory and argues that military as an important political group arises from the making of national security policy. He has focused on the American military establishment after the Second World War. Huntington argues that the division between military and society is necessary and focuses on the analysis of the interactions between the two. The professional military is assumed to have attributes different from the common man. They are believed to have specialized characteristics. In order to keep the values of the military strong within the prevailing liberal values of the American society, he advocates that the military has to remain a highly professional body with its own expertise, corporate structure and ethics. The military is conservative in its outlook and has to be controlled by the liberal civilian authority and the way to have civilian control over the military is to have what he calls “military professionalism” (Huntington 1957:46).

Convergence theory was the product of another theoretical debate on civil-military relations in the 1960s. Scholars like Morris Janowitz did agree with Samuel Huntington that the military and the civilian worlds were different in terms of their norms and values but did not approve of professionalization of the military. It was argued that the military should retain its differences from the civilian world and at same time be imbued with the norms and expectations of the society that created it in order to have a greater chance of civilian control over the military

(Janowitz 1964:33). The Agency theory was a product of the debates revolving around the failure of the US in the Vietnam War. After much discussion Peter D. Feaver put forward the Agency theory of civil-military relations. He used a principal-agent framework in order to explain the civilian leader in a superior position influencing the military which was in a subordinate position. His theory was based on the costs of monitoring the military and the perceived expectation of the punishment if the military was found to be guilty of something (Feaver 2003:16).

Concordance theory offered an alternative to the theories put forward by Huntington and Janowitz. It argues that the three societal institutions of military, the political elites and the citizenry should aim for a cooperative relationship and have some degree of agreement over four primary indicators, namely the social composition of the officer corps, the political decision making process, the method of recruiting military personnel and military-style domestic military intervention (Schiff 2008:131).

### **Role of Military in Politics: West Asian Context**

The role of military in political affairs is intertwined in any society. But the relation between military and politics is not unique only to West Asian countries but to many other Third World countries all over the world. In the 1950s and 1960s, when many countries in West Asia such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria experienced a number of coups and counter-coups in several countries, it was seen “as a positive development heralding progress, technological advancement, modernization and the promotion and safeguarding of an appropriate nationalist agenda.” But in the coming decades it became clear that the increasing role of military in politics could also harm the political development in these countries (Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe 2008:4).

One of the basic arguments has been that the military models in West Asia developed out of a colonial situation, bureaucratic organization of the Ottoman Empire and an agrarian social structure. There also exists convergence of the value orientations of the military and the adult male behavioral expectations in West Asia, as for instance in Syria, such as manliness (*rujula*), honour (*sharaf*), dignity (*karama*), generosity (*karam*), self-respect (*ihitiram al-dhat*), toughness (*gaswa*), revengefulness(*al-tha'ir*), anger (*ghadab*), bitterness (*marara*) and support of weak

(*nisrat al-da'if*). However, this is not permanent and may change depending upon situations (Kolkowicz and Korbonski 1982:13).

The coming to power of the military in a number of West Asian countries after the Second World War has been regarded as a return to traditional authoritarian rule after failed experiments with democracy and parliamentarism. The military in West Asia has contributed in different ways by taking part in political affairs of one's own country. In some countries in West Asia military has helped to build modern political structures, to mobilize masses in politics, economic development, etc. The military has therefore been described as the "new middle class" because of being an organised group, capable of taking over the reins of power from the inefficient and corrupt civilian governments (Karpas 2004:84).

The British and the French had recreated the armies of the Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria which they colonized by dissolving previous military formations. These colonial powers wanted to keep the armies small, provided simple weapons and made it sure to keep the army below civilian politicians and out of politics. But the situation changed after the colonial power left. The armies had to handle situations such as putting down strikes, declare emergency, etc. which strengthened the military and also became an instrument of support for political parties which sought to increase their power (Owen 1992:66).

The role of military in politics in Syria, Egypt and Iraq possessed some similar characteristics such as all of them were experiencing democracy before military entered into politics. The democratic institutions were controlled by the oligarchies of businessmen, communal leaders and wealthy landowners. In all the three countries once the military gained control over politics, the civilian regimes never returned. There was an emergence of an ideological army after 1961 and in Syria and Iraq socialism dominated the political system. There was a great emphasis placed on expanding their forces and modernise the arsenals due to foreign policy interests. The basic differences which can be found in the political systems of military rulers in three countries is that in Egypt the military officers shaped the rules and institutions of governance to the advantage of Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Whereas in Syria and Iraq, whenever a particular military ruler became oppressive and arbitrary, he was ousted through another military coup, thus resulting in a series of coups (Hinnebusch 2002:76).

According to Perlmutter, having an ideology or a political organization is not important for an army to participate in the political affairs of a country. Indeed, it can “take over the established, popular, nationalist-radical party.” He cites the example of Syria: A faction of army officers took over the left wing of the Ba’th Party in 1966 coup and they came into power. The ideology of the Ba’th Party was used by the army officers to legitimize their rule; “the Ba’th Party became a party in uniform” (Perlmutter 1981: 33).

Military rule in West Asian countries has always been drawing attention of numerous scholars. Scholars like Bensahel and Byman has mentioned that the political leaders of the West Asian countries rely on the loyalty of the military officers to remain in power. In order to gain compliance the leaders of this region have been relying on coercive power and most importantly on armed forces to curb dissent and opposition forces. Therefore, according to the authors, “military organizations are constituencies no authoritarian leader can afford to ignore.” In the 1940s and 1950s countries in West Asia, especially the Arab countries were experiencing proliferation of military takeovers of the government. At least one coup or a coup attempt was experienced by many Arab countries in West Asian region after the end of the Second World War. As per the authors, during the period 1961-1969, 27 successful coups and coups attempts for military takeovers were recorded in nine Arab countries (Bensahel and Byman 2004:129-131).

### **Syrian Army under the Ottoman Empire**

The Ottoman Empire was heavily depended upon its military strength for its survival and expansion. The military was an integral part of the Ottoman society and it received huge respect from the people as the defenders of the state and state’s religion, Islam. The core of the Ottoman army consisted of the Anatolian Turks. The minorities also comprised a large part of the army such as the Arabs which dominated half of the Empire’s territory. Towards the end of the Ottoman Empire, Arabs contributed to almost one-third of the Ottoman units (Nicolle 1989: 4).

The Ottoman troops occupied Syrian provinces in 1516 and 1517. With the conquest of the area, the Ottoman army also started recruiting local individuals and groups into that of the *askeri*,<sup>1</sup> the soldiers. According to the earlier tradition, the Ottoman Empire did not favour the recruitment of local people into their armies but it was difficult to find enough men from outside meeting their requirements. Gradually, the local population also made their way into the Ottoman army units (Zurcher 1999: 113).

Therefore, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century it was regarded as the weakness of the Ottoman army when the empire was experiencing its decline. In order to reverse this decline great emphasis was laid on modernizing and reforming the army. From 1870s, the military was provided with many educational and technical facilities the aim of which was to raise the army to European level. Another important objective was to create a new army not only to fight against the external enemies but also make it able to help strengthen the Ottoman government (Akmese 2005:1-19). In 1876, Sultan Abdulhamid II came to the throne and a newly promulgated constitution was accepted. This constitution was of great significance because it allowed the Arab subjects to enter Turkish military schools which went on to produce Arab officers who played key roles in the Arab revolt and Syrian and Iraqi independence movements. Since these officers were trained under German military instructors, they came to imbibe some of their political outlook such as social Darwinism, Nationalism and their military doctrines. When the Arab officers came to realise the weakness of the Ottoman Empire, they struggled for independence (Aboul-Enein 2005) When Abdulhamid II came to power, the scenario of the military system seemed different from it was earlier and a new military elite emerged. During Sultan Abdulhamid's rein a vast network of military schools was opened and the intake of these schools increased and broadened. But the long term effect of this was that the new military elite came on to question the Empire's weakness and continuing decline under the rule of Abdulhamid II. This provided the spark for the 'Young Turk' Revolution of 1908. This reflected the patriotic feelings of the military and the

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<sup>1</sup> Askeri is an Ottoman Turkish term that refers to a class of imperial administrators in the Ottoman Empire. This elite class consisted of four main groups: the military, the court officials, the nobility, and the religious clergy. Though term itself literally means "of the military", it more broadly encompasses all higher levels of imperial administration. To be a member of this ruling elite, one thus had to hold a political office in the service of the Ottoman Empire, meaning that both Muslims and non-Muslims in those positions could be considered *askeri*.



demand for a replacement of the autocratic rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II with a strong and modern government. Although the members of this revolution came from the civilian population as well as the army, a key role was played by the army officers in this revolution and later also. All these pointed towards the changing intellectual and moral values of the military and the way they viewed themselves within the state and society (Akmese 2005:1-19).

The formation of the Syrian army can be traced back beyond the advent of the Ottoman Empire. It was during the Umayyad caliphate in the eighth century A.D that the Syrian armed units were formed and led the Arab campaign against the Byzantine Empire. Under the Ottoman Empire, Syrians were regularly conscripted for the empire's forces or were forced to join the armies of the local chieftains. At that time the sense of nationalism did not take birth in the minds of the Syrian armies and therefore they fought on one side or the other without any conviction. Due to long period of subjugation under the Ottoman Empire and social and political fragmentation, the national military tradition of the Arab army could not develop. But the new military elite which emerged during the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Ottoman era were gradually becoming acquainted with nationalist sentiments and their sense of belongingness to a particular tribe, clan or village. After the alliance of the Ottoman Empire with Germany and Austria-Hungary, the military officers were provided with training from the German military instructors. Such officers proved to be very useful for the defence and security purposes of the Empire. Many officers of Arab origin from historical Greater Syria had taken part in the First World War. It is important to mention that some officers acted as dissidents and took part in small semi-secret societies operating in Syria for independence and also in the army of the Hejaz who opposed the Ottomans (Henriques 2003:55).

At the beginning of the World War I, a major territory of the Arabian subcontinent formed a part of the Ottoman Empire. The British protectorates of Kuwait, Aden and Oman were a few exceptions. The Ottoman Empire became successful in consolidating power in Arabia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But by the turn of 1914, the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the tribal people of this region stretching from Arabia to as far as Syria became far from cordial. This was the case not for all tribes as few remained fiercely loyal to the Ottoman Empire such as the Shammar tribe of north-central Arabia. The subjects in the Empire came to realise that the real power were not vested in the hands of the Sultans after the Young Turk Revolution but in the hands of the

members of the Committee of Union and Progress. The authoritarian form of government which was formed after the Revolution and growing military weaknesses of the Empire became the main reason for a growing discontent. The most controversial issue was that of the Constantinople-Baghdad Railway built with the help of Germans by the Ottoman Empire. The Arabs were of the view that Ottomans were now trying to consolidate power in Hejaz. This region which bordered the Red Sea and also included the holy cities of Mecca and Medina were being ruled by the Hashemite clan. Sharif Husayn\*<sup>2</sup> was the King of Hejaz and he was looked upon as the focus of nationalist aspirations by many Arabs. At the background of all this, there were secret societies which were functioning in Syria and Iraq which were aiming for nationalism (Murphy 2008:5-6).

The Arab Revolt in the Hejaz, headed by the ruling Hashemite family of Mecca, occurred in 1916. A number of Syrians served in the forces advised by T.E. Lawrence and other Britons during the revolt and also in the Eastern Legion (*La Legion d'Orient*), a French-organized unit. The revolt did not lead to a major uprising in Syria but, in 1918, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Syria was conquered by the Allies, Arab troops commanded by Amir Faysal, son of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, entered Damascus and were greeted warmly by the local population. Amir Faysal proclaimed himself king of Syria in 1918, but his reign was short (1918-20). Faysal had been supported by officers of the Arab Army from the Hejaz, former Ottoman officers, and local Syrian nationalists. However, there were many conflicts among these diverse groups. Following their defeat by the French (and the intervention of Britain, who compensated the Hashimites for their loss of Syria by giving them Transjordan and Iraq), the French Mandate was established in Syria (and Lebanon) in April 1920, and a volunteer Arab force was formed to maintain internal order (Murphy 2008:82).

The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 defined the different spheres of influence in West Asia between Britain and France after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. Amir Faysal's attempt to become king of Syria by leading an army went in vain. Faisal could not gain recognition as king of Syria in the series of conferences starting from the Paris Peace Conference

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<sup>2</sup> Sharif Husayn was the Sharif of Mecca, and Emir of Mecca, from 1908 until 1917, when he proclaimed himself King of the Hejaz. He initiated the Arab Revolt in 1916 against the Ottoman Empire during the course of the First World War. In 1924, when the Ottoman Caliphate was abolished, he further proclaimed himself Caliph of all Muslims. He ruled Hejaz until 1924, when, defeated by Abdul Aziz al Saud, he abdicated the kingdom.

in 1919 which decided the fate of Syria. Realising this he started to gather support for himself in Syria. In March 1920, the Syrian National Congress declared him as the king of Syria. Faysal could not remain the king and was soon the French took over Syria by defeating the Syrian forces at the battle of Maysalun on 23 July 1920. Thus, the French mandate came to be established in Syria in April 1920 by the League of Nations (ibid.82-83).

Amir Faysal led his Sharifian officers in the hope of defeating the French and taking over Syria. But the Syrian territories formally came under the mandatory rule of the French on September 29, 1923. Unlike in Iraq where the ex-Sharifian officers constituted most of the political elite under the monarchy, in Syria the case was different in the sense that the army had little or no impact on interwar politics. After the mandate was handed to French, the Sharifian army faced its demise as the army was dismantled and many Syrian officers were jailed or exiled. The ex-Sharifian officers were looked down upon by the republican nationalists did not approve their inclination towards the Hashemites. Therefore it can be said that there was an absence of a “strong military tradition in Syria” (Jankowski and Gershoni 1997:335).

The Ottoman Empire saw the development of a ‘modern army’ in 1826 when the Janissary\*<sup>3</sup> ended and the Bektashi order\*<sup>4</sup> was banned by Sultan Mahmud II. The Ottoman army received training and large-scale reforms were initiated with the help of the German advisors and Captain Von Moltke. Therefore, the Ottoman army began to attract a lot of people belonging to lower classes. People from the lower classes not only came to occupy middle and lower positions but also some of the highest positions within the Ottoman army. Perlmutter describes that the recruits were taken into the army at a young age and therefore “lost all their original class and social identity, finding new identities in their rank and profession in the army.” Perlmutter mentions that according to Eliezer Be’eri, the Arab officers before 1939 are the successors of the Ottoman officers (Perlmutter 1974:54).

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<sup>3</sup> Janissary was a member of an elite corps in the standing army of the Ottoman Empire from the late 14th century to 1826. Highly respected for their military prowess in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Janissaries became a powerful political force within the Ottoman state. The Janissaries frequently engineered palace coups in the 17th and 18th centuries, and in the early 19th century they resisted the adoption of European reforms by the army.

<sup>4</sup> The Bektashi order, or the ideology of Bektashism is an Islamic Shi’a Alevi Sufi order (*tariqat*) founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Persian saint Haji Bektash Veli. It is a Sufi order and shares much in common with other Islamic mystical movements. The Bektashi order was widespread under the Ottoman Empire. The order had close ties with Janissary corps, the bulk of the Ottoman army. With the abolition of Janissaries, the Bektashi order was banned throughout Ottoman Empire by Sultan Mahmud II in 1826. This decision was supported by the Sunni religious elite as well as the leaders of other, more orthodox, Sufi orders.

## Syrian Army under French Rule

The British and the French constituted army units when they had their mandate over Iraq and Syria respectively. The French followed a policy of recruiting most of its troops from minority population avoided the Sunni Arabs majority of Syria were not encouraged to join the army as they had nationalist aspirations.

The ethnic and religious minorities which formed a large portion of the *Troupes Speciales* were Druzes, Christians, Kurds, Alawites etc. The French followed this policy of recruitment, a trend which was set by colonial powers in their dependencies, i.e. “first to recruit enlisted established by colonial powers in their various dependencies, i.e. first to recruit enlisted personnel and later officers also from tribal groups remote from the central capital, from minority groups and especially from groups with limited independence aspirations. Frequently these groups came from economically less-developed areas and were therefore attracted by the opportunities in the army” (Van Dam 1981: 39-40).

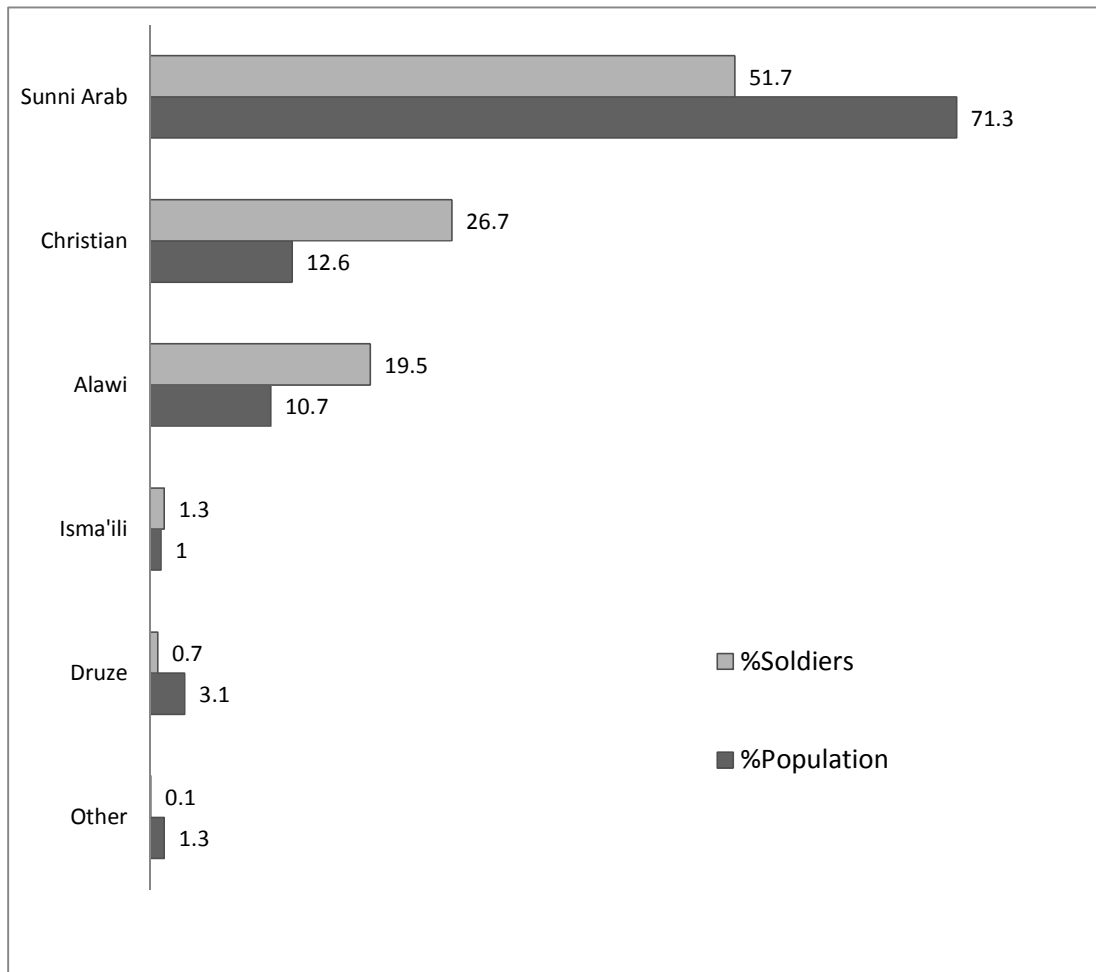
In Syria mostly Alawis and other minority origin people were recruited to the *Troupes Speciales*. The strength of the *Troupes Speciales* during the time of Syria’s independence in 1946 was nearly 7,000 but after independence it was reduced to approximately 2,500 men in 1948. The Ottoman Empire established organised armed forces by the nineteenth century and by the mid-twentieth century, the wealthy and the upper class people saw the military organisation as an inferior institution. The upper class people did not like to send their sons to serve in the military organisation. During Ottoman rule and after gaining independence some West Asian countries instituted the concept of *badal* (literally: substitute), an amount of money to be paid in order to relieve a conscript from compulsory military service. This practice created a notion that “military service was a burden rather than a privilege, and enabled the well-to-do to spare themselves the efforts, while laying it on the shoulders of the poor who could not afford to pay the *badal*. Batatu has described how the Alawis being among economically weaker sections were unable to pay the *badal* and hence came to be over represented in the Syrian armed forces. But Khafaji is of the opinion that this fact alone does not suffice for Alawis being overrepresented in armed forces. Khafaji argues that conscription was a temporary service and therefore did not lead to “advancement in the military corps.” The lower class people were represented heavily in the

lower ranks of the military but they lacked representation in the officer corps (Khafaji 2004: 179).

The Syrian army took its birth when the French created the *Legion Syrienne* which afterwards came to be known as *Troupes Auxiliares* under the French rule of the Levant (Present day Syria and Lebanon). In the 1930s its name was changed to *Troupes Speciales du Levant*. The area comprising present day Syria, Palestine and Lebanon apart from other areas, were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for a long period of time spanning across centuries till the end of World War I. Much before The World War I, intellectual fervour of Arab nationalism started developing and spreading across the cities of Syria. In the meanwhile, King Faisal drove out the Ottomans in 1918 with the help of the ‘Arab army’ from the Hejaz. King Faisal wanted to rule Syria after freeing it from the clutches of the Ottomans. But after much attempts king Faisal failed and the French got the League of Nations mandate in 1920 to rule Syria and Lebanon. In the end, “however, the conflicts between a king from Arabia, ex Ottoman officers mostly hailing from Iraq, and Syrian intellectuals, merchants and notables became too sharp to contain, and it required little military effort for the French to establish their control over the whole country” (Keegan1983:561). The French returned these armed forces to their respective governments of Syrian and Lebanon which then went on to become their national armies (Rubin and Keaney 2002: 116).

The French recruited most of the troops from the minority communities keeping in mind the threat of Arab nationalism of the Sunni Muslims. The so called *Troupes Supplementaires*, “consisting of an Alawite battalion, and a Druze and Kurdish squadrons, were mainly deployed in their own areas, but the minorities also constituted a clear majority of the officers and other ranks of the *Troupes Speciales*.” The Sunni Muslims and the upper classes of Syria considered military organisation as an inferior institution and hence the *Troupes Speciales* “consisting of 10,000 men and 306 officers (of whom only 88 were French, mainly in the higher ranks), contained a majority of Syrians who were of rural background and minority origins” (Keegan 1983: 561). From Figure 1 the composition of the *Troupes Auxiliares*, can be understood as it was during the year 1924-28. The figure confirms that the Alawis and the Christians were overrepresented in the *Troupes Auxiliares* who together accounted for nearly 46 percent of all troops. But the Sunni

Figure 1: Composition of the *Troupes Auxiliaires*, 1924-8.



Source: Kolkowicz, Roman and Korbonski, Andrej (1982), *Soldiers, Peasants and Bureaucrats: Civil-Military Relations in Communist and Modernising Societies*, London: George Allen and Unwin, p.53.

Muslims accounted for only one-half of all the soldiers and most of them spoke Kurdish or Circassian instead of Arabic (Kolkowicz and Korbonski 1982:53).

By the end of the World War I French and British, both were competing to get their hold over the regions of West Asia which would be granted independence from the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the French and the British became interested in using the emigrant communities of both the countries to fulfill their colonial interests. Factors contributing to this were the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the strong military pre-eminence of the British in the region vis-a-vis their positions in Egypt and Iraq. The British military presence proved to be a major threat to the weak French military presence in the region. "Considering this situation and the potential that these communities abroad offered, the French government moved to formalise its relationship with the favourable émigré committees in France. This initiative crystallised in the creation of the *Comite Central Syrien* on May 1917, born out of the previous *Comite de l'Orient*, the same one that had previously enjoyed the support of the French colonial party." The *Comite Central Syrien* was given the function of 'centralising and coordinating the self-determination' of the Syria emigrant communities who wanted help from the French and to recruit and form a military unit comprising of loyal Syrians abroad in order to oust the Ottomans (Ta'uber 1995: 174).

After the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire when the Syrian officers returned to Syria, most of them had to stay without jobs. Most of the officers who left the Ottoman army and came to form a new Arab army were mostly of Iraqi and Syrian origin. The Iraqi Army accused the Syrian Army of not taking part in the Arab revolt but having served the Ottoman Empire (Ta'uber 1995:174).

Abdullah Atfeh, a Syrian military man's career clearly depicts the various kinds of roles that he had to play under different political conditions. Atfeh attended the Ottoman Military Academy in Istanbul and was given advanced military training in France. He was a military officer under the Ottoman Empire and went on to serve in the rebel army formed under Sharif Husayn. Atfeh led Husayn's army against the Ottomans by bringing about a military uprising. He served as a Commander in the Arab Army till the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. After this he joined the newly created Syrian Army under King Faisal I, the new ruler of Syria. He also participated in the battle of Maysaloun on July 24, 1920 but faced defeat in the hands of the France. Soon after the battle, Syria came under the rule of the French. French got the mandate to rule Syria and

the immediate consequence of this was that the Arab Army was dissolved and all the officers loyal to the Arab Army were sent to exile for a year. In the year 1921 he joined the Army of the Levant and gradually got promoted to higher positions. Atfeh was made the Commander of French troops on the Syrian coast during the World War II. But when the French advanced Damascus in May 1945, he ordered his troops to fight against them. After Syria gained independence in 1946, he was in support of President Shukri al-Quwatli and was eventually appointed as the Chief-of-Staff of the newly formed Syrian Army in 1947. He was also entrusted with the arduous task of transferring the allegiance to the Syrian Republic from the Army of the Levant. Moubayed is of the opinion that it was not easy for many men as they had spent a long time working under the French and had also received military training under them. With the end of the British over Palestine seeds were sown for the beginning of the Arab-Israeli war. In the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, the Syrian forces had to face defeat in the hands of the Israel. This caused a lot of havoc and uproar in Syria. According to Moubayed it is often believed that Atfeh was made the Minister of Defence under Prime Minister Jamil Mardam Bey and that he also commanded the Syrian army during the war. Therefore, he was held responsible for the defeat in the war. But the author states that this was wrong and Atfeh was never made the Minister of Defence during the war. In reality, as stated by the author, the position of Defence Minister was assumed by Mardam Bey himself after Ahmed al-Sharabati was fired from the position at the beginning of the war. Moubayed mentions that, "Atfeh was relieved of his duties as Chief-of-Staff in favour of Husni al-Za'im." Sharabati and Atfeh were criticized by the politicians for being responsible for the poor showing during the war and mismanaging it. Another grave accusation which was made against them was that of "profiteering at the army's expense by purchasing outdated weapons." It was demanded by the politicians that they should be tried in the court on corruption charges. Atfeh took the blame upon himself and temporarily retired from public life. Soon after Quwatli's government was overthrown and Atfeh's career was revived as he was appointed as the military advisor under Za'im's regime (Moubayed 2006: 41-42).

The Syrian army is a traditional and a classical army established on French pattern and having an inclination of the Soviet military doctrine. After the independence of Syria from the French, Palestine defeat and a host of other issues emanating from Syria's domestic problems catapulted the army into politics. Since then the Syrian army has been at the forefront of influencing Syria's political affairs both internally and abroad (Petran 1972: 234)



## **Military during the Democratic Era (1946-1949)**

With its independence on 17 April 1946, Syria took over the inheritance of the country from the hands of the French and before that from the Ottomans. The politicians who came to rule the country mostly belonged to the 'ruling class' of merchants and notables who fought the nationalist struggle against the French rule. These civilian politicians set up a parliamentary democracy in Syria in which the traditional politicians had the upper hand.

Two most important political parties which were present in Syria during the time of independence were the Nationalist Party and the People's Party. The National Bloc had its birth under the French rule. Peretz states that the members of the National Bloc mostly belonged to the upper or middle classes and mostly were not in contact with the common masses and were unaware of the problems faced by the general public. The Nationalist Party was formed from the National Bloc which was initially a group of the nationalist leaders fighting the French. The Nationalist Party included people like Shukri al-Quwatli, Jamli Mardam and Faris al-Khuri. The People's party emerged as an offshoot of the Nationalist Party in the year 1947. The bulk of the members of the People's Party comprised of merchants of Aleppo and estate holders. Some other political parties which were trying to make a mark in Syrian politics were the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Communist Party, the Ba'th Party and the Arab Socialist Party (ASP) (Peretz 1994:410).

Elections were conducted in July 1947 in newly independent Syria. The parliamentary democracy was in a very fragile and formative stage. The civilian politicians sought to establish political legitimacy after the French rule through the elections. The election results showed that the Nationalist Party won 24 seats, the opposition won 33 seats and the independents won more than 50 seats. The Nationalists came to form the government with Quwatli as the President and Jamil Mardam as the Prime Minister. Soon after coming to power these politicians were more concerned with maintaining their power (Howood 1988:33).

These politicians sought to fulfill their nationalist aspirations one by one. One of the first steps taken by the Syrian government was to unify the various communities in Syria. The communal representation system in the parliament was abolished and the Druze and Alawi areas were taken under the administration of the central government of Damascus. By carrying this out the

nationalist politicians wanted to weaken the communal leadership and the autonomous tendencies of these areas. Another step taken by the government was to reduce the troops of the Syrian military (Firro and Brill 1992:361). After the Palestine war defeat discontent and riots took over the whole country and hence the parliamentary democracy in Syria seemed to come to an end. Soon after this in 1949 the first military coup shook the country which brought the military into politics. Thereafter began a series of coups and counter coups bringing about great instability in Syria (Hopwood 1988: 34).

The *Troupes Speciales* was handed over to the Syrians in July 1944. After achieving independence from French rule in April 1946, Syrian politics was marked by a series of coups beginning with the coup of 29 March 1949. General Husni al-Za'im staged the first coup in the political history of Syria after the Second World War. Za'im's coup was a significant one because this reflected the first military intervention in politics. It is important to understand and examine the factors which led the military to take over the reins of power from the hands of the civilian authority.

Syria after independence emerged as a state which was liberal in form. But there occurred not much change in the political system as the notable politics of the pre-independence period still persisted. The landlords and merchants emerged as the natural political elite in post-independence Syria. They drew their support from places like Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Latakia. These notables were of the view that it was their rightful reward of assuming the key positions in government offices for taking part in the independence struggle against the French. Political parties became "mere parliamentary blocs of landlords, tribal chiefs and their clients, without ideology or organization, for, secure in their local power bases, the traditional politicians had no incentive to draw the masses into participation or seek their active support" (Hinnebusch 2002:23).

Syria had no national army after the French left Syria in 1946 as there were only a few hundred members of the *Troupes Speciales* who were the only trained military manpower available to the state. These military men had no idea as to whom they would be loyal since they witnessed clashes between the French and Syrians during the last days of the Mandate. These clashes "had shaken the loyalty of the force, with some soldiers deserting to the nationalists while others took up an offer of asylum in France." But the men from Alawi mountains, Jabal al-Druze and

Bedouins from north-east continued to provide for the main core of the army such as “the corporals, sergeants and junior officers” (Seale 1988:39).

The civilian leaders who came to rule Syria after independence were not competent enough and lacked in administrative experience. This contributed to some of the main problems relating to the civilian government. It is a well known fact that idea of Arab unity took birth in Syria and Syrians always hoped for the establishment of a single Arab state in the Fertile Crescent. So, it was widely believed that the problem faced by Arab world was primarily due to the division of the territories previously ruled by the Ottoman Empire into different political entities. This belief has led the Syrians to think that Arab unity would solve their problems. Therefore, the Syrian leaders became concerned with broader Arab problems and this also attracted attention of other states in Syrian affairs. The first and the foremost issue was that of the creation of a new state of Israel in Palestine. Palestine was a part of the Ottoman Empire and it was due to this that the Syrians considered it as a portion of their “natural” inheritance. The Syrians always voiced their discontent emanating from the issue of Jewish immigration to Palestine and finally in May 1948 Syria along with other Arab countries went into a war against the newly formed state of Israel. The disastrous defeat of the Arab army in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war led to great disturbances in Syria with widespread riots and the army blaming the civilian leaders of being corrupt and incompetent (Devlin 1983:44-45).

The defeat had major repercussions on the political affairs of the countries which took part in the war. Agitation, strikes and political unrest across Syria started against the Quwatli-Mardam Bey government. Anti-government riots became strong and eventually the cabinet was forced to resign in December 1948 (Sulaiman 1984:89). An added problem was that of the huge number of Palestinian refugees residing in Syria. 100,000 Palestinian refugees proved to be a serious burden on the Syrian economy and also on the already volatile political life (Ismael et al. 1991:204).

Amidst chaos, Husni al-Za'im passed an order for the army to intervene in order to bring the unrest to an end. To bring the situation back to normal, martial law was imposed. Military censorship of the press came into force. Za'im took over himself the duty of restoring the confidence of the people by beginning a tour of the country holding talks and discussions. Because of these measures Husni al-Za'im came into national prominence and order was brought out of instability (Torrey 1964:111).

Sporadic fighting continued even after the 1948 war between Syria and Israel until the Syrian-Israeli armistice agreement, signed on July 20, 1949. Another main reason behind the popular discontent and riots after the 1948 war was also over the negotiations relating to the building of a Trans-Arabian pipeline\*<sup>5</sup> (known as the Tapline) via Syria. However, Za'im was successful in bringing about order in Syria. "This success, in addition to the authority that martial law gave him, might have suggested to an impulsive and ambitious officer and adventurer of his kind the idea of displacing the government that sought his help." Later on Za'im entered into an agreement with the ARAMCO Company for resuming the works on the pipeline which was stopped due to great resentment from the Syrians and also due to parliamentary opposition (Haddad 1971:55).

However, it is very interesting to note that the army officers in Syria like most of their counterparts in other Arab states neither showed any interest in politics nor took part in the struggle for independence in the inter-war period. This was not the case during the Ottoman Era because the Syrian and Iraqi army officers had taken an active part in the Arab National Movement before the First World War by cooperating with the civilian leaders (Haddad 1971:193).

Among the Arab League members, Syria always proved to be aggressive regarding its attitude towards the Palestine problem. The quota imposed by the Arab League's Military Committee for arms and weapons to fight the Palestine war was not only fulfilled by Syria but provided more than it was required. According to the quota, each country in the Arab League had to provide 500 volunteers and 2000 rifles whereas Syria actually provided 2,987 volunteers and 2,640 rifles. Syria also opened training camps for the volunteers who wanted to join the Arab Liberation Army (Tal 2004:247).

Many officers in the Syrian army had resigned prior to 1948 in order to take part in the Arab-Israeli War. Colonel Adib al-Shishakli and Akram al-Hawrani led armed bands which attacked Jewish settlements near the Syrian border. This act was interrupted by the British units and the

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<sup>5</sup> The Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), was an oil pipeline from Qaisumah in Saudi Arabia to Sidon in Lebanon. Construction of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline began in 1947 and was mainly managed by the American company Bechtel. Originally the Tapline was intended to terminate in Haifa which was then in the British Mandate of Palestine, but due to the establishment of the state of Israel, an alternative route through Syria (via the Golan Heights) and Lebanon was selected with an export terminal in Sidon.

British government sent its representations to the government of Syria. Since Syria was concerned with the problem of Palestine, Syria became a member of the Arab League's political and military alliance. The main aim of this was unification of Arab policy and action against the problem of Palestine. But gradually widespread criticism began developing against the Arab command and the Arab Higher Committee inside Syria and "both were accused of incompetence, dereliction of duty, and of lack of any real plans for the salvation of a united Palestine" (Torrey 1964:104-105).

Right from inception, the Syrian army seemed to be politicised and radicalised. The army in Syria has always been drawn towards populist sentiment due to its sectarian and class composition as it had a large number of recruits from the minority populace. "But it was the Palestine disaster, discrediting the oligarchy, which turned out the officer corps into a centre of nationalist ferment and made it a strong advocate of the social reforms thought needed if Syria was to defend itself from its enemies" (Hinnebusch 2002:26-27).

The UN Partition Plan for Palestine which was adopted on 29 November 1947 was a prelude to the succeeding war between the newly formed state of Israel and a coalition of Arab forces in 1948. The resolution was held as being unfair on the part of the Palestinians by the neighbouring Arab countries. Therefore, a coalition of Arab forces was formed in order to confront the Israeli army and put an end to the ousting of Palestinians from their homeland immediately after the British mandate over Palestine would end. Around 1,876 men from the Syrian brigade took part in the war. The Arab forces did not possess good quality weapons and were short of ammunition. But the Syrian brigade was an exception who fought and became the only country among all other Arab forces "to capture and hold three small areas in Palestine located between Lake Huleh and Lake Tiberias." There were many other issues related to the Palestine problem which were creating havoc in Syria. Issues such as "the violation of the UN Resolution by Israel and the anti-Arab attitude of the Western powers, the defeat of the Arab army in the war, implication of the Syrian government leaders in the theft of funds collected for the Palestine purpose increased public anger and frustration." Syria was facing national unrest as the people were demanding for another war with Israel on the anniversary of the UN partition plan. Za'im was successful in restoring order after two weeks. The presiding Prime Minister Jamil Mardam Bey resigned and a new government came to be formed under Prime Minister Khalid al-Azm (Petran 1972:95).

In the later period of 1948, the Syrian opposition was growing profoundly disappointed with the ruling government. This was not only because of the defeat in the 1948 war but also several other reasons such as the government's failure to regain the former province of Alexandretta, to free the Syrian assets blocked in France and to maintain independent Syrian currency. The Prime Minister Khalid Azm made attempts to please the public and the opposition by reducing army expenditures, constructing a pipeline from Iraq to the Syrian coast and finding a backing for the Syrian currency (Online Web: Syria after Independence).

Husni al-Za'im overthrew the civilian government of President Quwatli and seized power on 29 March 1949 marking the first coup after independence. He had organized the coup properly as it was said to be a bloodless one. The army came to occupy the strategic positions and important political figures including the President and the Prime Minister were arrested (Hopwood 1988:34). It has been observed that there could be a strong relation between the defeat in the Palestine war and the instability of Syrian political life marked by a series of coups starting from March 1949. Since the civilian authorities were dependent upon the military to suppress the riots and maintain order, so an idea of taking over power from them developed in the minds of the military officers. Moreover, the Syrian officers were under a lot of pressure and insult due to the severe criticism received from the civilian politicians and hence were in search for a scapegoat for their faults. All these combined, provided ample scope for the military to justifiably take over the reins of power from the old politicians (Fisher 1963:11-12). Brig. Husni Za'im Commander of the Syrian army said the military coup was ordered because of "attacks against the army, inside as well as outside the house of representatives." Army officials said not a single drop of blood was shed in the lightning coup. Za'im said the revolutionary movement was "purely local and had no foreign implication" (Online web: Janesville Daily Gazette).

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## **CHAPTER II**

### **MILITARY TAKEOVERS FROM 1949-1958**

#### **Factors Responsible for Military Intervention in Politics**

The years that followed after independence were difficult for Syria. The Syrians did not have a good knowledge of running their country as they were ruled by the Ottomans for nearly 400 years and then by the French for another 26 years. The entire political class that formed after independence came from the urban notability and big landowning families from Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama. These politicians had no idea how to rule the country. “The landlord-merchant upper class made the natural political elite; its leadership in the independence struggle entitled it to the reins of power in the new state” (Hinnebusch 2002:23). Hence after nearly two and a half years the country found itself in deep instability and was torn apart by rivalries between civilian politicians and the army officers. The primary reason which can be attributed to the Husni al-Za’im’s takeover of Syrian politics and the first entry made by the army into Syrian politics after independence is the growing incompetence and President Shukri al-Quwatli’s decision to amend the constitution providing provision for his re-election. In 1947 Quwatli made a grave mistake by amending the constitution of Syria in order to allow for his re-election. This made the opposition angry and led to countrywide protests against the Quwatli regime. The challenges towards the current regime was mounting also due to the fact that the politicians of the National Bloc to which Quwatli and a host of other politicians such as Sabri al-Asali, Lutfi al-Haffar, Sadallah al-Jabiri and Fares al-Khoury, belonged were too aged for a rising new generation of young Syrians. The younger politicians felt that the old politicians could not mirror their aspirations in a proper way (Moubayed 2012: 71-72).

The Palestine catastrophe saw the search for a scapegoat by both the army and the civilian politicians. The defeat in the war was attributed to the irresponsibility and corruption of the politicians by the army. Some politicians did not want to take the blame on themselves and hence blamed the High Command. According to the Syrian army the matter was of a serious nature because the politicians did not pay heed to the fact that front-line troops were provided with

obsolete and insufficient arms and food deliveries for the troops were uncertain. The army gradually came under a lot of pressure and realized that the government was not making any proper arrangements for the war. These factors were not enough for the army to become restive of the situation. Another factor was that the army's image was constantly under attack in the chamber by Faysal al-'Asali, a deputy leader of a right-wing faction called the Socialist Co-operative Party. But one of the most important factors due to which the discontent and the anger of the army grew was the cooking fat scandal. This incident took place early in 1949. Za'im was made the Chief of Staff in the first month of the Palestine war. After taking command of the army he made a few changes and reshuffled a number of senior appointments within the army. A new Chief Supply Officer called Antoine Bustani was appointed by Za'im. One day President Shukri al-Quwatli and Prime Minister Khalid al-Azm set out to check the front-line positions and supply points. During their tour they came across a pungent smell coming from field kitchen. After much enquires they came to know that it was from burning cooking fat. An order was passed by Quwatli immediately for the arrest of Colonel Bustani. Za'im did not comply with the orders and helped Bustani to escape (Seale 1965:41-42).

There were economic troubles also in Syria which were followed by rumours of corruption of the civilian politicians. By later period of 1948, there occurred clashes between pro and anti government supporters along with strikes and riots. Due to these reasons the country in a state of near anarchy. Mardam Bey was compelled to resign and then the country was left without a government. "It lacked competent leadership, was possessed of a turbulent and distressed citizenry, was subject to a collapsing economy, and burdened with an army that felt betrayed by a coterie of scheming politicians." Husni al-Za'im took up the bold task of ordering the army to intervene, imposing martial law and finally restoring order. The measures taken up by him not only showcased the ability of the army to deal with difficult situations but also brought Za'im into national prominence (Fisher 1963: 57).

The Palestine disaster was of course one of the main factors responsible for the military intervention. The shocking defeat of the Arab Liberation Army in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, took the whole country by storm. People reacted with waves of riots and strikes. The political unrest was growing. The government led by Quwatli and Mardam Bey was held responsible for the failures and widespread corruption which ultimately led to the defeat (Luciani 1990:207).



The politicians, on the other hand, sought to hold the military responsible for the debacle. Since Za'im was the Chief of Armed forces during war, he was held responsible for the defeat and therefore came under attack in the parliament. Khalid al-Azm who succeeded Mardam Bey as the Prime Minister, cut army expenditures and reduced its strength. After a special tribunal to investigate corruption "picked an army officer as its first accused, the army believed this to be a ruse whereby the politicians were attempting to shift the blame for the Palestine fiasco onto the army's shoulders" (Fisher 1963: 57). The civilian politicians pointed towards the corruption which was prevalent in the army involving defective weapons and tainted provisions. The civilian politicians revealed scandals in the military rank by accusing certain officers in illegal deals. One of the prominent officers named Colonel Fouad Mardam Bey was to be tried in the court with the charge of treason. This caused huge uproar and anger among the military against the civilian government (Moubayed 2000: 11). In the parliament, Faisal al-'Asali's accusations on Za'im was a serious one. Al-Za'im was accused of conspiring with King Abdullah and in a session on 7 March 1949, Al-'Asali said that Za'im should be tried on charges of treason. He also went on to accuse Zaim of trying to firebomb his house. An investigation into the matters was ordered due to which Za'im and many other army officers feared the worst. Therefore, Za'im tried to garner support for him and the army as a whole by arousing fears regarding impending forced retirements and trials (Talhawi 2001:37).

Another important development during late 1940s was that the young military officers were drawn towards parties like the Ba'th, the Communists, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian Social Nationalists. From the beginning core members of the Ba'th came mainly from the middle class and from rural backgrounds. The Ba'th got little recognition by the urban notables who "were under the influence of traditional quarter leaders and religious shaikhs hostile to a secular creed. Most of the initial members of the Ba'th consisted of the rural and minority youth like the Alawi, Druze or Isma'ili who came to the cities to pursue education and got attracted to the radical and secular movements in order to undermine the dominance of the ruling elite and to achieve integration into the national politics (Luciani 1990: 207-208).

The cooking fat scandal in which Colonel Antoine Bustani was accused created a wave of discontent that took over the military officers. Za'im did not comply with the president's arrest orders for Bustani and hid him in the attic of the Ministry of Defence. He feared that further

investigation would implicate him also. Bustani's arrest was claimed as unjust by many officers. But President Quwatli arrested Bustani and sent him to Mezzeh prison. To add to the fury of the officers, Za'im was summoned for inquiries. When Za'im went for the investigations, he was kept waiting for several hours before being called in by Khalid al-Azm, the Minister of Defence. "Realizing that the officers' disgust with the civilian government was at its peak, Husni al-Za'im began preparing for his takeover." On March 24, 1949, Za'im and his supporters gathered at the residence of Za'im's brother-in-law Nazir Fansah and discussed regarding the civilians attacks on the military and that this had to be stopped. That same day, Za'im was attacked by Faysal al-Assali and it was more of a concern to Za'im because he was not defended by the Minister of Defence, Khaled al-Azm. Za'im reminded the officers present in the gathering that the "Defence Ministry was in the hands of a civilian aristocrat who had never carried a rifle in his life and did not respect the honour of serving in the armed forces" (Moubayed 2000: 13).

One of the most important factors prompting the coup of 1949 was factionalism among Syria's political elites. "At the head of the coup was Colonel Husni al-Za'im, of Kurdish origin, who seized power by taking advantage of the rise of radical forces on the left and the resentment of a number of nationalist officers against the fresh Palestine experience." It was in the interest of America to get the Tapline agreement passed in the Syrian Parliament. Interim Prime Minister Khalid al-Azm tried to persuade the parliament but all went in vain. It is believed that the officers of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) conspired with Za'im to help him overthrow the Quwatli government and thereby help him to establish his own government which would be beneficial to America also (Saunders 1996:11). The opposition parties such as the Populist Party also wanted a change of government and applauded Za'im when he led the coup and ended the rule by the Nationalist Party in Syria (Aldosari, 2006: 258). He also claimed that he would work towards eliminating corruption and undertake developmental measures (Levin 2001:174).

The above mentioned factors propelled the military into Syrian politics for the first time. These factors not only brought the military into politics but also helped the military to be ever present in the political scenario of Syria. The Syrian military from this point of time became intrinsically intertwined with politics. Sometimes the military came to rule directly and sometimes influenced politics indirectly.

## **Coups, Counter Coups and its Impact on Politics (1949-1954)**

The examination of the occurrences of the coups and the counter-coups alone would not suffice for the military's role in politics. The intricacies of the political life in Syria have to be taken into consideration in order to look into the causes and consequences of the coups. The factors which were intrinsic in deciding the course of events in the early part of political life of Syria were orientation of certain regions and different groups towards neighbouring states, the lack of representation of the minorities in politics, rise of parties such as the Ba'th and the Communist parties etc. These issues would be dealt with in parallel to the discussion on military's role in politics.

The first three coups in Syria all of which took place in 1949 were led by officers who were trained under the Ottoman rule and then French rule. The new generation of officer corps did not come forward to make their presence felt in politics but they "served notice that the Syrian officer corps was a political force to be dealt with." The new officer corps was not against army's political activities and many encouraged army's involvement in politics. They did so not because they felt that there was a dearth of a strong leadership in Syria but due to lack of political leaders with a national vision as a result of weak constitutional period and a traditional of ethnic, regional and kinship groups which prevented able leaders to emerge. It was strongly felt that the army was capable of producing such men (Perlmutter 1981: 135).

Husni al Za'im was the first to carry out a coup on 29 March, 1949 by ousting President Quwatli's government. It has been debated by the historians that the first coup carried out by Za'im was "a brain child of USA, or whether the USA simply supported al-Za'im when he approached them with the idea in early 1949." A different version of the event has been given by Miles Copeland, a CIA officer at the US embassy in Damascus. He mentioned in his book, *The Game of Nations* which was published in 1969 that relations between President Quwatli and USA was becoming sour by 1948 and hence a 'political action task force' headed by Major Stephan Meade was created to oust Quwatli. Copeland states that he wrote to the CIA and the US State Department, saying:

*"If you cannot change the players search for a man, preferably an officer, who would have more power in his hands than any other Arab leader ever had before. The only kind of leader who can*

*acquire such power is one who deeply desires power for the mere sake of it” (Moubayed 2012: 77).*

Zaim’s regime was a military one set up after a coup due to which it needed a legal image within the political circles. He appointed As’ad Kourani as chairman of the Constitutional Assembly. Kourani was given the task of drafting a new republican constitution for Syria. He was made the Minister of Justice and Public Works in Za’im’s cabinet. Many legal reforms which were passed during Za’im’s rule were the handiwork of Kourani. He helped Za’im introduce many significant laws such as civic law, punishment law, commercial law, and construction law, many of which functioned for a long period. A historic law giving women the right to nominate themselves for public office and vote in parliamentary elections was also passed (Moubayed 2006: 284).

Za’im’s rule did not last long and he was overthrown in a coup by Sami al-Hinnawi in August 1949. However, Za’im tried to strengthen the army and initiate reforms in various sectors of Syrian life. But soon he became overwhelmed with his power and when this was realized by his supporters, he started losing their support. One important feature which can be outlined is that after Za’im’s entry into the political arena the Syrian army was never far from politics. “Za’im’s over-ambitiousness led to his downfall.” Sami al-Hinnawi who succeeded Za’im accused the “tyrant Za’im and his servile clique’ of committing innumerable crimes against the state.” Hinnawi ‘strangely’ set up a civilian government and promised to keep military out of politics (Hopwood 1988:35).

The main reason behind the overthrow of Za’im by Hinnawi was the death of Antune Sa’ada, the founder and president of Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) to which Hinnawi was sympathetically and ideologically linked. Although Hinnawi helped Za’im seize power in Syria and lead the coup to overthrow the civilian leader Shukri al-Quwatli, the abduction of Sa’ada and handing him over to the Lebanese authorities ultimately leading to his death infuriated Hinnawi and his supporters. Za’im had promised to support and take care of Sa’ada since he was taking refuge in Syria to escape a death sentence in Beirut. Sa’ada was busy preparing for his insurrection when Za’im informed his opponents in Lebanon about his whereabouts and secretly extradited him. This acted as a catalyst for Za’im’s overthrow and his execution along with his Prime Minister Muhsen al-Barazi (Moubayed 2006: 57).

After the coup of Hinnawi, elections were held in November 1949 in which the People's Party emerged victorious and declared plans for a Syrian union with Iraq (Kahana and Suwaed, 2009: 247). Hashim al-Atassi was asked to form the government. All the parties were legalized and allowed to take part in political affairs of the country except the Communist Party and the Rightist Socialist Co-operative Party. Elections were held on 17 November in order to form a constituent assembly for drafting a new constitution. Women and eighteen year olds exercised their right to vote for the first time. The election results showed Populist Party's dominance in the assembly (Petran 1972: 98). Under Atassi's government the main emphasis was put on Syria's unity with Iraq and all other issues took a back seat. But strong opposition to this idea was from the army (Kahana and Suwaed 2009: 247).

Unlike Za'im, Sami al-Hinnawi had no dictatorial ambitions and immediately handed power to a civilian cabinet dominated by the People's Party. For the first time since independence, as a result, Syria had a government committed to unity with Iraq. Two subsequent developments further bolstered the unionist trend. On 29 September 1949, Sabri al-Asali convinced his National Party to reverse course and come out publicly in favour of unity as well. The National Party was earlier against Hashemite influence in Syria. In the November 1949 parliamentary elections, the People's Party was able to secure 43 out of 114 assembly seats and the independents who were allied with it secured 20 more seats. One of the main reasons for the People's Party's conversion to Pan Arabism\*<sup>6</sup> and unity with Iraq stemmed from the fact that the traditional politicians hailing from Damascus as well as Aleppo were threatened with the rise of new political parties such as the Youth Party and the Ba'th. The old politicians were also worried because of the probability of the younger radical parties to engage with the army and make conspiracies to overthrow civilian dominance in politics. Akram Hawrani who played a prominent role in the rise of the Ba'th Party also had a hand in both coups which overthrew Za'im and Hinnawi. The representatives of the older politicians were of the view that an unity with Iraq would "neutralize the military threat to their continued dominance." Due to this the unity plan with Iraq was being denounced by Hawrani and the Ba'thists and they termed it as an

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<sup>6</sup> Pan-Arabism is an ideology espousing the unification – or, sometimes, close cooperation and solidarity among the countries of the Arab world, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea. It is closely connected to Arab nationalism, which asserts that the Arabs constitute a single nation. Its popularity was at its height during the 1950s and 1960s. Advocates of pan-Arabism have often espoused socialist principles and strongly opposed Western political involvement in the Arab world. It also sought to empower Arab states from outside forces by forming alliances and, to a lesser extent, economic co-operation.

“imperialist conspiracy.” The military soon realized the civilian government’s hostile attitude towards the military. Hinnawi could not remain in rule for long and was ousted on 19 December 1949 by Colonel Adib ali-Shaishakli. Shishakli’s coup was the third coup in nine months. He established a civilian government and controlled political affairs of Syria from the background. His civilian cabinet was the first of the seven civilian cabinets to be formed in the next 23 months (Kahana and Suwaed 2009: 247).

All the top officers of the military met after ousting Hinnawi and prevented all unity plans with Iraq. The first communiqué after the December 1949 coup said that “the action was aimed at thwarting those who conspire with certain foreign circles against the well-being of the army and the integration of the state and its republican institutions” (Mufti 1996: 52-54).

Shishakli did not rule directly after the December coup. Whereas Hashim al-Atassi was elected as the President and Khalid al-Azm was appointed as the Prime Minister. Under the garb of a civilian government was Shishakli’s hidden aim of putting a check on the government and ensuring the army’s interference in the government. Therefore, he made sure that all the civilian governments must include his ‘right-hand-man’ Fawzi Selu as the Defence Minister.

Shishakli was pursuing to draw Syria closer to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In 1950, he visited both the countries and obtained a loan of \$6,00,000 from Saudi Arabia which was to be repaid over a period of three years beginning from 1955. The wealth of both the countries made the political leaders irresistible to forge a close relationship. But it was Khalid al-Azm who voiced his resentment by saying that “he resented finding Syria like a commodity offered for sale by contending parties.” In June 1950, Nazim al-Qudsi of People’s Party became the Prime Minister of Syria. People’s Party during that time was the single largest party in the Syrian assembly. With the People’ Party coming into power, the unity plans with Iraq was undermined and unity plans with Saudi Arabia and Egypt took precedence (Chaurasia 2005:254).

There came a shift in the unity plans in 1951. Ma’aruf al-Dawalibi was elected as the president of Syria on 23 June 1951. The People’s Party, of which Dawalibi was a member and the Islamic Socialists, with whom he maintained close relations both were supporters of unity plans with Iraq. Azm was still the Prime Minister of Syria during that time. Due to this Shishakli feared of Hashemite influence in Syria and therefore, asked aid from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Just like

Shishakli and Azm, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia were against Hashemite influence in Syria. However, anti-Azm elements in the parliament were beginning to strike Azm due to his misgovernance. In order to bring about change in government, opposition forces were working with anti-Azm factions of the army. Azm's government failed to pass the budget for the fiscal year 1951-1952 and this was used as a pretext by the opposition forces to pressurize Azm to resign. Azm resigned on 30 July 1951. A new government came to be formed under the premiership of Hasan al-Hakim on 9 August 1951 who was also a pro-Hashemite. Before Hakim formed his cabinet, Shishakli went on a visit to Saudi Arabia to meet King Ibn Saud. After he returned from the visit, a statement was released in the Egyptian paper *al-Ahram* by Shishakli reassuring the people that Syria's orientation was towards Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He made it clear through the statement that "although there was a Prime Minister whose personal views on foreign affairs were not in line with those of his own government and the army, the true leaders of Syria-Al-Shishakli and Syrian army-fully controlled Syria's fundamental policies." Shishakli and the army kept a close watch and also monitored Hakim's government (Ginat 2010:64).

A new Constitution came to be formulated under Shishakli's regime in 1950. The constitution of 1950 contained the systemic features of 1930 constitution which had a provision in which the elected unicameral chamber of deputies would choose the president and who in turn would appoint the prime minister. Gradually Shishakli felt that his power was beginning to be undermined by the conservative politicians as he initially entrusted the responsibility of governance in the hands of civilian politicians. Shishakli staged another coup in November 1951 and this time with aggressive policies of leading the government. After assuming office he dissolved the parliament and outlawed political parties, student organizations, and trade unions. Only a single party called the Arab Liberation Movement established by him in June 1953 was allowed to function (Ismael et al. 1999:194).

After the 1951 coup Shishakli returned with an aggressive attitude. Now he sought to rule Syria with an iron grip. He sought to rearrange the army to a normal position in order to make his regime 'legitimate.' He lessened the powers and privileges of the military. This move was criticized and resented by most of the military officers "outside his entourage" (DeRoune 2005, 793). Shishakli also attempted to weaken the autonomous status of the various minority communities. In 1953, under his regime the minority representation in the Syrian People's

Assembly was completely abolished. Measures were undertaken in order to 'Arabize' and 'Islamize' various institutions. Shishakli was of the opinion that in order to impose central authority over the minority communities, the military strength of the minorities in the Syrian army should be reduced. Therefore, he applied measures to weaken the presence of Alawis and Druzes in the army and by crushing the 1954 Druze revolt, it was thought that military superiority and central authority over minorities could be imposed (Ma'oz et al.1999:3).

In July 1953 a new constitution was adopted in Syria by replacing the 1950 constitution. Elections were held in which the ALM members came to form the Chamber of Deputies. The other political parties boycotted the elections (Aldosari 2006:259).

It is however important to examine the differences in ideologies between Za'im and Shaishakli. Za'im regarded himself as a modernizer but not a radical nationalist like Shishakli. Shaishakli was a staunch nationalist participated in the anti French revolts and fought in the Palestine war. He made collaboration with opposition leaders like Akram Hawrani, who was leading anti-feudal struggle in Shishakli's hometown, Hama. Shishakli took up the arduous task of nationalist indoctrination of young officers and promoted Sunni nationalist officers to key positions. During his rule state centralization and cultural Arabization was undertaken. The separatist movements in both Druze and Alawi mountains which occurred during his era was dealt with strong measures. Although a nationalist, he co-opted with the French and the US in order to balance the threats to Syrian independence from Iraq. As stated by Hinnebusch," once in full power he broke with and banned the radical parties, promoted the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie, eschewed land reform, lost the support of younger more radical officers and was overthrown in a Ba'th inspired coup in 1954." The new generation of politicized radical officers which emerged was promoted to responsible positions by Shishakli and were drawn to the SSNP. The Ba'thist party was the main rival of the SSNP and these young officers mainly of Druze origin were supporters of Shishakli until he crushed a Druze uprising. In the later half of the 1950s a third generation of military officers emerged who were "more rural and plebeian, infected the army with village resentments against the ruling elite" (Hinnebusch 2002: 27).

The people who were behind Shishakli's coup were the Druze soldiers, Communist Party members, members of the Ba'th Party. Alawites, Kurds and other minority groups were also involved in the plot that overthrew Shishakli as they were enraged due to his Arabisation



program. There was also growing discontent from the Ba'athist officers as Shishakli had arrested many young army officers including a prominent Ba'athist officer named Adnan al-Maliki. (Kaplan 1995:108).

Migliorino describes that the first three military coups as a “debut of the army as an actor in the political scene” and military's intervention in politics represented a “first strong rejection of the oligarchic class in power.” According to the author the first three military coups reflected the rise of a new “radical opposition” in Syria (Migliorino 2008:97).

While examining the question of frequent military intervention in Syrian politics, the issue of minority representation in politics and in the military cannot be ignored. The first instance was when the Syrian army was reduced from 7,000 to a mere 2,500 just after Syria achieved independence. The Syrian army was considered as an instrument by the minorities for their upward social and economic mobility. Although the minorities were over-represented in the army they mostly occupied the lower ranks within the army. The reduction in army troops would have proved to be big blow for their economic and social upliftment. Another major step taken by the civilian politicians was the reduction and abolition of communal representation in the parliament which was hitherto enjoyed by the minorities under the French rule. The politicians went a step further and abrogated certain jurisdictional rights in matters of personal status. These regulations led to unrest among the minority communities but were crushed by a series of military measures.” The authorities in Damascus for the first time were able to achieve a decisive military superiority over the wayward minorities through the use of sophisticated weapons and methods” This event made the minorities realize that they too had the right to take part in the political life of the country and they achieved this by exploiting struggles for power both within the army and the political parties (Binder 1999:83-84).

The newly emerging Syrian political parties such as the Ba'ath party, Communist party and the Syrian National Party realized that mere parliamentary system and the prevailing political structure could not fulfill their aims of taking over powerful positions in the government. Following Shishakli's overthrow, the 1954 elections brought about the former traditional politicians into power. However, the young army officers joining the newly emerging parties like the Ba'ath and came to infiltrate the political system of Syria and they began to compete for

power. Many factions of army officers developed which were struggling for power but the Ba'th party came to have an upper hand in this by the turn of 1957 (Maoz et al. 1999:4).

The Syrian political life can be regarded as being least stable following the years after Shishakli's overthrow in 1954 till Syria's unity with Egypt. Shishakli was ousted in February 1954 and in September-October 1954 elections were held which established a civilian form of government.

Behind the success of Shishakli's December 1949 coup was Akram Hawrani who was his friend and a cousin. Hawrani was active in mobilizing the peasant youth and the disadvantaged groups in rural areas. But after Shishakli appointed himself as the President in 1953, many loyalists of Hawrani's party belonging to the army were sacked. Fearing Shishakli's power Hawrani fled from Syria. During this period Hawrani's party, the Arab Socialist Party merged with the Ba'th and he took part in the opposition against Shishakli which eventually ousted him. The unified Ba'th Party formed a coalition with the Druze and several conservative groups and came into prominence with the 1954 elections. At the same time the Syrian Communist Part was bringing Syria closer to the Soviet Union. In the meanwhile, Nasser in Egypt was planning for a pan-Arab unity and was trying to increase his influence in Syria (Sinai and Pollack 1976:24).

Following Shishakli's overthrow, free and fair parliamentary elections were conducted according to Syrian standards. Most of the seats were won by the sectarian and tribal independents and the biggest beneficiaries of the elections were registered by the Ba'th Party; "a new group that attempted to paper over ethnic and religious fissures through an appeal to Communist-style economics and a pro-Soviet foreign policy" (Kaplan 2005:109). Different competing factions within the military were carrying out political maneuvering and this in turn brought about socialist and Arab nationalist forces into power (Aldosari 2006 :259).

It is important to note that the earliest of the coups were led by army officers who had "excellent connections with the notables and the officials." The earlier group of supporters of Shishakli included people from distinguished Sunni families. According to Podeh, the traditional landowning and upper class nationalists had "exhibited amazing homogeneity and longevity in Syrian political life." Through an analysis, Podeh arrived at the conclusion that during 1946-1958, out of 208 ministerial positions 90 posts were occupied by people who mostly came from

landowning and upper class elites. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that till the mid-1950s the dominance of the Syrian political system by traditional elites was still continuing. But after the 1954 parliamentary elections, a counter-elite emerged which became successful in “making some inroads into the closed club of elite families.” The results of the 1954 elections showed that the power of the People’s Party was on the decline whereas the Ba’th Party was rising into power by receiving 22 seats out of total 142 seats when compared to only one seat that it own in 1949 elections. The Ba’th also enjoyed the support of key army officers which played a decisive role in the political life of Syria in the coming years (Podeh 1999:17).

A few days after the overthrow of Shishakli in 1954, Hashim al-Atassi who spearheaded the opposition against Shishakli’s regime returned to politics from house arrest. He resumed his position as the President of pre-Shishakli days and Sabri al-Asali was appointed as the Prime Minister. All the other ministers, ambassadors, parliamentarians of pre-Shishakli days were restored .In 1955, elections were conducted and Shukri al-Quawtli, the head of the National Party was elected as the President. While in exile (1949-1955) Quwatli was being subsidized by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, both the countries also backed the Syrian Communists as they opposed to the Baghdad Pact. Quwatli was very careful and sought not to antagonize the left-wing of the Syrian army. The Saudi-Egyptian influence in Syria was endorsed by the “little RCC, the strongest military faction which was led by Major Abd al-Hamid Sarraj” (Ginat 2005:150).

In January 1958, army officers headed by Chief-of-Staff Afif al-Bizri left for Cairo. They declared that the government was in the danger for a sudden collapse and therefore, they need to seek help from Egypt. This was a reflection of the fears that the army had regarding the rise of the Communists in Syria and their weakness due to divisions within itself to take action itself. Both the radical nationalisist of the Ba’th and army officers were aware of the weakness of the government and knew that if the Communists gain control of the country it would be difficult to revive it. “Do with us what you will”, they said in effect to Abd al-Nasser, “only save us from the politicians and from ourselves” (Alexander 2005:107).

Although the Syrian military establishment permitted the politicians to stay at the forefront in politics, in reality the army did not stay out of politics. The army was divided within itself. “Army officers loyal to Akram Hawrani wanted the speedy adoption of socialist reforms; other officers chafed for a chance to live in the presidential palace; a smaller number continued to

support traditional political elements; cliques based on geographic origin jostled with one another. Each group contained competing and ambitious elements.” In 1956 a resolution calling for unity with Egypt was adopted at a national conference which said:

*“Expanding the bilateral agreement with Egypt, by concluding an agreement between the two parties covering economic, political, and cultural affairs, so that these agreements may serve as nucleus for all-embracing Arab unity.”*

By the year 1957-1958, a majority of the military officers were of the view that an appeal to Nasser for Arab unity could benefit their various aims. “With the enthusiastic support of the Ba’th and the grudging acquiescence of more traditional politicians, none of whom could publicly oppose the sacred cause of Arab unity, they asked that Egypt and Syria unite.” A joint session of the parliaments of Syria and Egypt was held in the year 1958 for the unification process to begin. The actual negotiations were a product of a small number of military officers and political elites from Syria. Members of the Ba’th Party especially Salah al-Din Bitar played an important role in the negotiations. Demonstration for unity at the Egyptian National Assembly was put forward by some military officers, Bitar and some Deputies from the Syrian Chamber of Deputies on January 16 1958. The United Arab Republic (UAR) was established on February 27, 1958 (Palmer 1966: 67).

From 1954 to 1958, Syrian politics was marked by a “strange and tempestuous amalgam of opposing forces.” Even though the Ba’th did not have numerical strength, it needed to dominate the government by increasing internal discipline and party cohesion. In September 1955, Nasser announced an agreement to purchase Czech (Russian) arms. At the same time Khalid Bakdash was also elected to the Syrian parliament in 1954 and the Communist Party in Syria was showing signs of progress. According to Bakdash, the Ba’thists were “a band of adventurers, spies and saboteurs isolated from the people, who undermined the Arab Liberation Movement” (Hopwood 1988:73). This forced the Ba’th to look for allies in order to prevent the left to seize power. Nasser was seen as the best option by the Ba’thist and the traditional politicians who did not want the communists to make a strong base in Syrian politics (Curtis 1986:212).

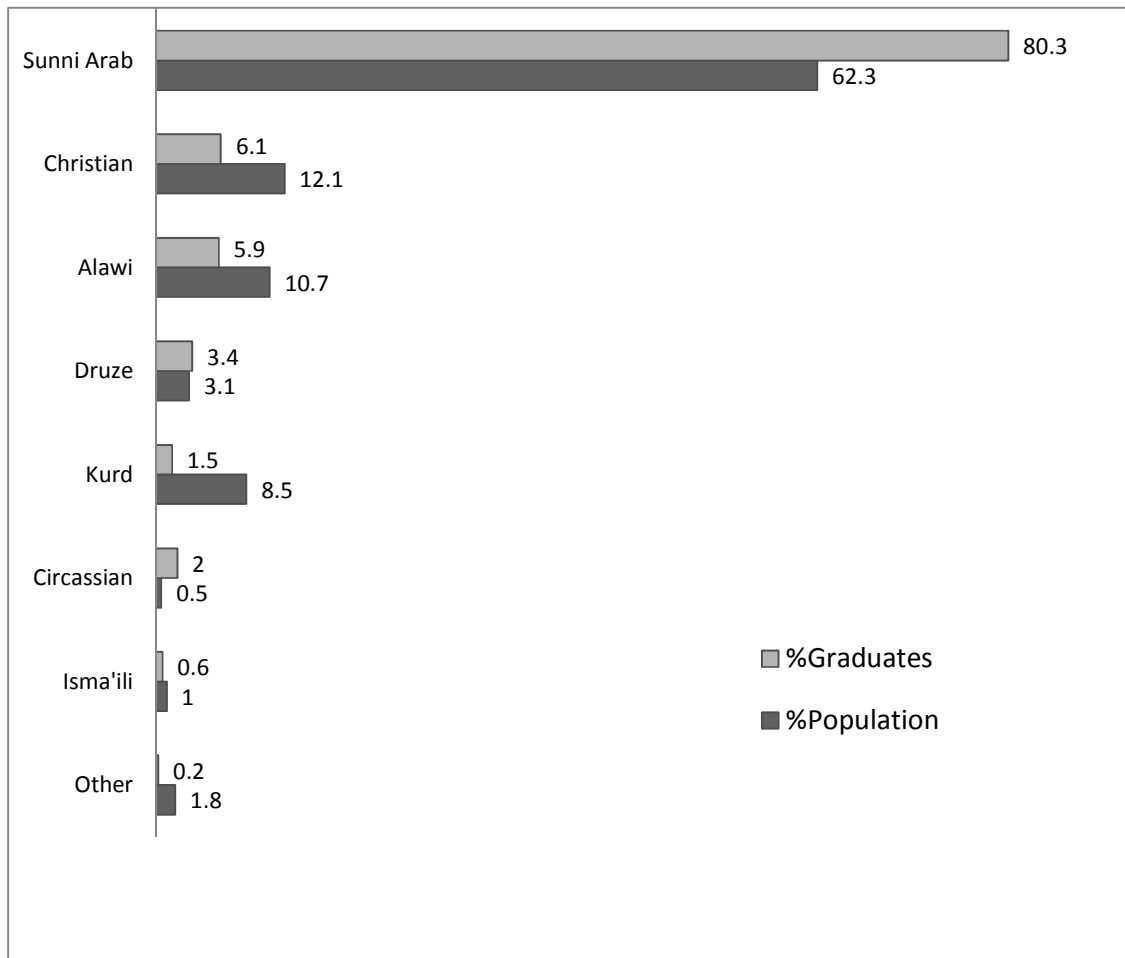
It can be summed up by concluding that the coups marked the entry of the minorities into the political arena. From the period 1949 to 1958, in between coups and counter-coups Syria was

experiencing a so called parliamentary life. For most part elections brought about the traditional Sunni and upper class elites to power. "Party politics was heavily sectionalist," The National Party represented mostly the Damascus region and was close towards Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The People's Party, based in the Northern areas of Homs and Aleppo, was more inclined towards Iraq. Civilian politics was, however, "Sunni politics." The first military intervention in politics can be explained as a "response to a civilian call for help, but the army soon learned that it did not need an invitation." Za'im who led the first coup in Syria was a Kurd and he was partial to the Kurdish and Circassian army units which led to the alienation of other officers. Za'im was assassinated by the Druze officers who were earlier supporters of him. Hinnawi led the second coup and established a pro-Iraqi civilian regime. In December 1949, Shishakli overthrew the regime and stopped all plans for unity with Iraq and handed over the government to the civilians. After two years Shishakli, again a Kurdish officer took power back from the civilians and led an autocratic regime. Through his repressive policies he offended the Druzes and was toppled by a Druze officer with the help from a group of civilian politicians in the year 1954. The elections that took place in 1954 and afterwards reorganized the Syrian "political-military establishment." The Kurdish officers were relegated to the background and their places came to be occupied by the Alawi officers. Another important development during the 1950s was the rise of the Ba'th party into prominence which also had a large military following (Horowitz 1985:493).

However, it has been noted that even although the first three military coups in Syria had different origin and purpose, all had a common element among them. All the coups were influenced by the need to address the post-independence problems faced by Syria. The military officers who led the coups were aware of the issues which needed immediate attention such as the incompetency of the civilian politicians to govern, rampant corruption, modernization and expansion of the military etc. Kolkowicz and Korbonski have described that all the three coups were led by Kurdish military officers. They also have provided an explanation in this context. According to them the number of minority origin officers in the upper ranks of the Syrian army in the post-independence era decreased to a great extent. The pattern of minority recruitment was not followed after independence. The civilian politicians tried to limit the entrance of men belonging to minority communities. This seemed as an unrepresentative military to many people. Kolkowicz and Korbonski stated:

Whereas Sunni Arabs comprised under one-half of all pre-independence officer cadets, they accounted for 80 percent of all graduates in the first five post-independence classes, the only period for which complete and reliable published data exist. The percentage of Christians, Druzes and Alawis fell correspondingly. Geographically, Damascus province still provided most cadets, although proportionately it sent no more to the academy than in pre-independence years. The most dramatic change was the increased representation of the largely Sunni provinces of Aleppo, Homs, and Hama and the sharper fall in the percentage of cadets from the predominantly minority peripheral provinces of al-Ladhiqiyah and al-Suwayda' (Kolkowicz and Korbonski 1982:59-60) (See, Figure 2).

Figure 2: Origins of Military Academy Graduates, 1947-51



Source: Kolkowicz, Roman and Korbonski, Andrej (1982), *Soldiers, Peasants and Bureaucrats: Civil-Military Relations in Communist and Modernising Societies*, London: George Allen and Unwin, p.60.

## **Arab Liberation Movement**

In this part a special effort has been made to examine how the Arab Liberation Movement Party was used by the military to civilianise itself. Adib Shaishkali was a military officer of Syria and was the President of Syria from 1953-1954. He had helped Hinnawi to overthrow Za'im in the August 1949 coup. He was greatly influenced by the concept of 'Greater Syria' and was also a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. When Shaishkali became aware of pro-Iraqi sentiments of Hinnawi of which he was completely against, Shaishkali led a coup in December 1949 and ousted Hinnawi from power. Fawzi Selu, the 'right-hand man' of Shishakli was made the Minister of Defence in order to put a check on pro-Iraqi sentiments. On 4 September 1950, a new constitution was approved by the Constituent Assembly but maintaining authority in a leaderless government was difficult for the Chamber of Deputies. On 28 November 1951 Shishakli carried out another coup, arrested the civilian cabinet members and installed Fawzi Selu as the Prime Minister of Syria. Selu was only a figurehead and the real power was in the hands of Shishakli. In the political history of Syria, Shishakli's regime was known to be the most dictatorial one. He tightened his control over the civil service, courts, banned many newspapers, and persecuted many politicians. Apart from all this he also banned all political parties in Syria and formally established his own political party known as the Arab Liberation Movement (ALM or *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Arabi*) (Federal Research Division 2004:49). By 1952 all student organizations, trade unions, political parties, and other such activities were banned and replaced by the ALM (Peretz 1994:413).

Moubayed claims that by outlawing all other political parties, Shishakli formed his own party in order to create a school of thought of his own (Moubayed 2008:87) The Arab Liberation Movement was launched on 25 August 1952. Shishakli's intention was to make it the sole political organization of Syria and was of the opinion that all the "good elements from all parties and all classes" should be regrouped to be included in this party (Haddad 1971:213).

At the inauguration ceremony Shishakli declared:

*"The Arab Liberation is not a new party to be added to the list of old parties to confuse the nation and divide its forces. It is a loyal sincere attempt to regroup the good elements from all*



*parties and all classes, to forge them into a single powerful bloc, fully capable of restoring the nation's confidence, and give the country a voice which is listened to and respected”(Moubayed 2000:87)*

Haddad states that Shishakli's political party made use of the Pan-Arab nationalism slogans and set to head towards economic and social reforms in Syria. Members of this party mainly were civil servants who wanted to “improve their standing” but it is very important to note that the party did not experience any popular prestige as hoped by Shishakli and higher military officials did not seem willing to join or were reluctant to admit their membership in it (Haddad 1971:213).

Provizer is of the view that the idea of Arab Liberation Movement had its genesis in the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) set up by Nasser in Egypt shortly after the 1952 Revolution. Nasser established the party in order to legitimize his military rule and prevent any opposition to his regime. The same path was being followed by Shishakli in order to make his regime free from all threats of opposition and to his military dictatorship. Provizer states that:

simply forming a political organization like the RCC cannot provide assurance of legitimacy to the regime. However, it gives the army independence in political action and maneuverability where strong civilian organizations exist. Where they do not exist, the army's political party serves to preserve the military dictatorship (Provizer 1978: 318).

Through his party, Shishakli promised to bring about emancipation of women, improve the military, advance the Syrian economy and create employment opportunities for the youths. His main aim behind the party was to garner huge public support and to spread his message through speeches he ordered the expansion of the Syrian radio (Moubayed 2000:87).

Shishakli publicly claimed that he had a detailed plan for various programs and reforms that his government was going to execute. He was of the belief in a “disciplined police state where power was centralized in the hands of the leader.” He often remarked that “modern states could be run very much in the same fashion as modern armies. According to Shishakli

order, obedience and discipline were the three factors crucial to a government. One party state was what Shishakli always hoping to create with a dominant social, political ideology and also a program for national unity. A few days into his coup, he remarked at a press conference; “I am a simple colonel and my duty is Chief of Staff. All the responsibilities of the nation are in the hands of His Excellency General Fawzi Selu” (ibid.82).

In 1953 Shishakli asked Fawzi Selu to step down from power and presidential elections were being announced in October. All the banned political parties were barred from taking part in the parliamentary elections that year. Only his party, ALM was allowed in the elections. Shishakli was the only presidential candidate and won 99 percent of votes. He became the 8<sup>th</sup> President of the Syrian Republic on 10 July 1953. The number of seats in the Syrian parliament was reduced to 83 out of which 60 seats went to the ALM. Maamoun al-Kuzbari was called to preside as the speaker of the parliament (Moubayed 2012: 103).

The creation of his own party did not seem to help Shishakli to hold on to power and slowly the support for his regime was diminishing. Moreover, a campaign organized by him against the Druze uprising at the end of 1953 made a large number of army officers hostile to his regime. The final blow to his already weakening regime was received from the student demonstrations organized by Akram Hawrani and traditional politicians (Fisher 1963: 60).

A July 1953 referendum made Shishakli the President and the Prime Minister of Syria for a period of five years. Shishakli sought to replace the previous constitution of 1950 with a new constitution of June 1953. This constitution concentrated power in the hands of the president. The July 1953 constitution was approved as soon as Shishakli became the President. In the upcoming September-October elections the other political parties were allowed to participate, all took part except the People’s Party which boycotted the elections and the ALM own 19 seats out of 83 (Peretz 1994:413).

The civilian politicians who became hostile to Shishakli’s regime came together to establish a Front of National Opposition and they accused the results of the September-October elections as being illegal. The Front announced that their main aim was to end the autocratic regime of Shishakli and to restore democratic rule (Surrey 2004:1018).

Shishakli's regime was brought down in February 1954 by a group of army officers dominated by Captain Mustafa Hamdun, a disciple of Shishakli and some Druze officers who were inspired by Akram Hawrani. The way Shishakli used the Arab Liberation Movement Party in order to civilianize his rule has been aptly described by Perlmutter. Perlmutter states that the way was open for "future civil-military relations patterned after Shishakli's model. Shishakli's rule made the Syrian army an unashamedly political instrument" (Perlmutter 1981:137).

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## CHAPTER III

### ROLE OF THE MILITARY DURING THE UAR PHASE, 1958-1961

#### **The Set-up of the UAR**

Prior to the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) on 27 February 1958, National Front Government, a coalition government was functioning in Syria. After the establishment of the UAR, Syria and Egypt came under the governance of the National Union. The National Union was set up formally in May 1957. Abd al-Nasser and Shukri al-Quwatli, the President of Syria published a joint communiqué announcing the formation of the UAR in the first week of February 1958. Under the National Union the Supreme Executive Committee was formed in order form an organization which would help in accomplishing the twin goals of anti-imperialism and socialism both in Egypt and Syria. In the year 1959 elections were held to form the “popular base” for the National Union-“the organization of popular provincial, regional and supreme groups.” Elections to the Local Executive Committees were held on 8 July 1959. District Executive Committees were formed which in turn were composed of secretaries of Local executive Committees (Podeh 1999:101).

The geographical division of the National Union was made to include Southern Region (Egypt) and Northern Region (Syria). The structure of the party resembled that of the government which “began at the village level, through the district level and rising to the provincial level, the regional congresses, the United Arab Republic congresses and finally ending at the top, i.e. the President of the National Union.” Only the higher organs of the National Union was put into operation and the middle and lower ones ranged from being tentative plans to ineffective operating units. There national organs under the union was divided into three administrative areas namely, regional congresses, general congresses and the Supreme Executive Committee. In both the regions of the UAR the membership of the regional congresses were to be fixed by the president of the union (Perlmutter 1974:149) (See, Appendix I).

## **Impact on the Syrian Army**

One of the conditions put forth by Nasser for assenting to the idea of Syrian-Egyptian union was withdrawal of the Syrian military from political life. Under the UAR regime Abd al-Nasser sought to suppress the Syrian military so that it could not rise up against the regime under any circumstance. Nasser's charismatic personality acted as a positive development for the pro-Nasser faction of the Syrian army but the overall impact of the UAR regime on the Syrian military was negative.

Abd al-Nasser first of all planned to weaken the political base of the politically inclined officers and wanted to take advantage of the already fractious army in Syria. The first step taken by Nasser was to consolidate both the armies i.e. Syrian (the First Army) and Egyptian (the Second Army) and new joint headquarters were established in Cairo under the command of Abdel Hakim 'Amer. Another step undertaken by Nasser was the removal of the commander of the First Army, 'Afif al-Bizri on 23 March 1958, from his post since he was suspected of having communist inclinations. Later Bizri was posted in the UAR Higher Planning Council to keep him isolated from all Syrian contacts. Jamal Faysal came to fill the position of commander of the First Army of Syria but he had no actual powers in his hands and acted only as a figurehead. Nasser rewarded the important Syrian officers by nominating them to several key civilian positions. By doing this Nasser "attempted to disengage the officers from the army." It can be said that the Syrian army was undergoing "purification." Just after the formation of the UAR, it was being noticed that not only Bizri was dismissed but several other Syrian officers were either removed or forced to retire. Nasser also started a policy of transferring the senior and then the junior officers of Egypt and *vice versa*. Lastly, one of the most important developments was that the Desert Patrol, the Gendarmerie, the police, Department of General Security (all under army command) were all combined and made into a single unit called Police and Security on 13 March 1958. The Syrian Minister of Interior, Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj was made the head of this particular unit (Podeh 1999: 54).

The Syrian Egyptian union came into being in February 1958 and a combined United Arab Republic cabinet was formed on 6 March 1958. A number of politically active military officers came to occupy posts in the combined cabinet. Another important officer Sarraj became a close aide of President Nasser and was given the key position of Minister of Interior for the Syrian

region. A senior Ba’thist officer, Mustafa Hamdun was chosen by Nasser to head the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and he went on to become the Minister of Agriculture. Nasser tried to oust the communist rival by using the help from the Ba’th Party from both local and national federations. Colonel Ahmad Abd al-Karim took over the post of Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Amin al-Nafuri was made the Minister of Syrian Communications. Among four vice-presidents, two Syrians, Sabri al-Asali and Akram Hawrani held the posts. Jamal Faysal was made the Commander of the First Army of the UAR. Fisher mentions that “while elevating the officers on the political scene, Nasser, at the same time, safely removed most potential threats from command positions in the army” (Fisher 1963: 67).

The Syrian First army did not have any Egyptian among its troops. But the Egyptians kept a close account of the Syrian First Army and eventual penetration of the army by the Egyptians helped the Egyptians to maintain their influence within the army. Jamal Faysal who replaced Afif al-Bizri was seen as an uninspiring officer and real powers were vested in his deputy ‘Abd al-Muhsin Abu al-Nur an Egyptian military officer. Four important departments of the army came under the direct control of Abu Nur. One of the most important departments related to army organisation was handed over to an Egyptian officer. In order to make the Syrian navy and air force commands subordinate to the Egyptian ones, they were ordered to directly report to the headquarters based in Cairo. Although there are no official records, it has been estimated by the American Intelligence sources that “600 Egyptian officers were interspersed throughout the First Army. The Egyptian ability to control the Syrian army was due in no small measure to the existence of four (!) intelligence and security services operating within the Syrian region: two under Sarraj’s supervision; one headed by a Syrian Colonel; and, the Egyptian General Intelligence Agency, supervised by Abu al-Nur.” Many Syrian army officers who were considered to be pro-Ba’thist were removed and placed in the Egyptian Second Army or faced dismissal from their service (Podeh 1999:113-114). After banning Syrian political parties, Nasser took up the task of detaching the Syrian army officers from their power bases in Damascus by appointing Syrian army officers and Ba’th Party members to positions in Cairo. These positions in the UAR were devoid of any responsibility (Kupchan 2010: 342-344).

Sarraj was seen as a strong man in his regime by Nasser after making Sarraj the Minister of Interior and eventually the President of the Executive Committee of the National Union. Sarraj

showered his loyalty for Nasser and he became ruthless and efficient in his conduct due to which he was disliked by Syrian people. Nasser's tactics to silence Syrian politics and Sarraj's support for this gave a spark to the growing discontent among Syrians' especially the army which began plans of seceding from the UAR. In the words of a Syrian General-“Every Egyptian officer during the union acted as if he were Gamal Abd-al Nasser, and Syrian officers felt so demoralized that they felt no incentive to oppose the secession” (Hopwood and Harper 1991, 62).

The Ba'thist officers were of the view that they would be given key positions in the UAR regime. But their hopes were dashed as the real picture unfolded. The Ba'thists became disillusioned with Nasser and the UAR regime as they were marginalized and not given responsible positions in the government. The Syrian military officers also strongly resented the preferential treatment meted out to their Egyptian counterparts who were given promotions along with key positions. “The heavy hand of the Egyptian bureaucracy, Nasser's penchant for personal political control, and his ill-advised plans to implement statist economic policies in Syria as he had done in Egypt only heightened popular Syrian anger against the unification process” (Kamrava 2011:114).

The Ba'thist army officers were the worst sufferers during the union period. They were sent from Syria to take up positions in Egypt which was like being in virtual exile for them. The hatred of the officers towards the UAR intensified due to the fact that they were Alawites, non-Arab Muslims and therefore not members of the Sunni Muslim elite (Moosa 1988: 296). The minorities were gradually gaining strength through the military wing of the Ba'th. Realising this and to keep them away from their political bases, Nasser transferred nearly 500 Syrian Ba'thist officers mainly of minority origin to Egypt. In 1959 a few minority officers came together to form a secret Military Committee (*al-Lajna al-Laskariya*) of the Ba'th. This committee was formed in complete isolation and no one from the civilian party hierarchy was included in this. The committee was composed of three Alawis (Muhammad Umran, Salah Jadid, and Hafez al-Assad) and two Isma'ilis (Abd al-Karim al-Jundi and Ahmad al-Mir). The committee began drawing officers from other communities and expanded to include the Alawis, Isma'ilis and Druzes who filled nine of the total fifteen positions. The military committee came into existence for asserting Syrian independence from the union and blamed the traditional military leaders of

the Ba'th such as Hawrani and the veteran politicians of the Ba'th. In spite of being against the UAR authorities, it played no key role in the secession of Syria from the UAR. The committee came into prominence only after the coup of March 1963 (Pipes 1990: 156).

Moosa throws light on how the Alawites perceived the idea of union as a whole. The Alawite or Nusayri\*<sup>7</sup> army officers linked to the Ba'th were not in total agreement with the idea of a union with Egypt. The union was symbolic of Arab nationalism which calls for political union in the Arab world under a united leadership. The Alawis, a Shia minority were apprehensive of losing their identity in the union and of being overwhelmed by a Sunni majority. They regarded the Ba'th Party's pro Arab ideology as a "veil hiding a feeling of Islamic and Arab nationalistic superiority." Alawites felt that with this ideology the Ba'th would rise to power in Syria and then they could promote their sectarian interests (Moosa 1988: 296).

In Syria the plans for the union were hastened and not given a proper thought. This in turn gave the leverage to Nasser to take advantage of the union for his own benefit. The combination of "Syrian subjugation and radicalization-in short the acceleration strategy-proved disastrous to the UAR because it alienated the major power groups in Syria without breaking their power. The army was the key group." Nasser resorted to specific measures under which he could weaken the Syrian army. Although no drastic measures were taken by Nasser, he tried to target the Syrian army which led to its gradual weakening. Nasser frequently emphasized the "professionalization" of the Syrian army by effectively curbing the political inclinations of the Syrian army and its link with various political groups which should have in reality improved the army's quality. But actually there was no effort put towards making the Syrian army professional instead it seemed that the main aim of these measures was to remove the "major tool of political power from the Syrian groups, which regularly measured their power by appeals to the army." This policy of Nasser was enough to alienate the Syrian officers from the political bases but was not enough to render them harmless (Etzioni 2001: 131).

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<sup>7</sup> The name of the Alawi community is of recent coinage dating only from French Mandate. Before the First World War the community was known either as Nusayriya after its alleged founder Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, a ninth-century religious propagandist, or, in a variant of the same word, as the Ansariya, the traditional name of the mountain range which they inhabited. Only in recent decades has a member of the community become known as an 'Alawi or Alawite, strictly speaking a follower of 'Ali, the fountainhead of Shi'ism, a name which places the 'Alawis within the family of Shi'i sects.



Although under the UAR the Syrian control over the army was declining, Syria had to pay more for the maintenance of the army compared to that of pre-union days. The Syrian expenditure toward maintaining the military forces was “14 million lira for 1957-1958, 23.9 for 1956/1960, and 26.1 for 1961/1962. In terms of the percentage of the total Syrian budget, military expenditure increased during the union years from 38.5 percent (1957/1958) to 47.2 percent (1961/1962).” Egyptian expenditure increased during the union years from “38.5 percent (1957/1958) to 47.2 percent (1961/1962). Egyptian expenditure, in the same years was 25.5 percent and 27.1 percent, respectively”. In terms of per capita expenditure, the Egyptian’s ranged “between 3.0 to 3.9 lira in these years, while the Syrian’s started at 3.3 but grew to 5.9. That is to say, Syrian payments increased 66 percent during the less than four union years” (Etzioni 2001:119).

The Syrian army’s grievances towards the UAR authorities were evident through a statement made by the Syrian Revolutionary Command on 2 October, 1961:

From the very first day we wanted unity to be represented by an exchange of officers from both regions. Our youths went, full of vitality and Arabism, to the South. What was sent us from Egypt? All the evils and sins committed under the name of unity started from this point. They sent us officers who took up positions in the intelligence machinery before any other machinery. They came to us with the mentality of intelligence officers and not with the nationalist spirit with which we faced them, nor with the Arab brotherliness which inspires sincerity and confidence. These people began spreading like octopuses into the various machineries, poking their noses into the various affairs and imposing themselves on all occasions (Seale 1961:471).

Then the Revolutionary Command went on to air another set of grievances. According to them the Egyptian officers did not respect the hierarchy of command and paid no heed to the senior Syrian officers. A statement by the Revolutionary Command stated that the Egyptian officers “dominated all the sensitive positions in the First Army Command and the unit commands.” While the Syrian officers sent to Egypt “were just filling wooden chairs without authority or power.” When the Syrians faced problems due to this and complained, they were blamed for favouring ‘regionalism’ and were accused of not being able to take into consideration a broader view. They soon came to realize that the Egyptian authorities were planning for “an organized

collective liquidation' of Syrian officers: The number of those transferred from the army increased daily.” The officers were transferred under various circumstances such as transfer to different ministries or by forcing them to retire (ibid. 471-479).

The Military Committee members had mixed reactions when the union was dissolved. Out of 600 Syrian officers who were stationed in Cairo, only 60 were believed to be Ba’thists. Although the Military Committee members were against some of the policies pursued by Egypt under the UAR, they were not in support of a total separation of the two countries. They were shocked when they came to know that Bitar’s and Hawrani’s support for separation became public. Since the five Military Committee’s members had an independent mind of their own, they posed a threat to the Egyptians. These five officers declared that they would like to “repair the Egyptian-Syrian rift” and therefore had to return to Syria. But they were not permitted to go to Syria and instead imprisoned because of suspicion of collaborating with Hawrani. Several Ba’thist officers were sent for imprisonment, including Hafez al-Assad who was jailed for a period of 44 days in the Abu Za’bail jail. Mustafa Tlas was successful in escaping imprisonment but was ordered to negotiate with the new government in Syria on their behalf. Assad was released from jail after an agreement was struck between Syrian and Egypt. “The break-up of the Syrian-Egyptian union thus triggered a decade-long struggle between army factions and diverse ideologies.” Another problem faced by the Syrian military officers was that they were not considered loyal by the subsequent Syrian government. Many officers were given relief from their military command. Assad was given a civilian position in the department of naval transport with the Ministry of Economics. Tlas was made inspector in the Ministry of Food Supplies (Talhami 2001:81).

## **Dissolution of the UAR**

The UAR was dissolved on 28 September 1961. A variety of reasons can be attributed to the dissolution of the UAR. Some of the main reasons were poor economy due to drought, Nasser’s measures to marginalize the Syrian political life and the detaching the army from politics. Apart from these factors the heavy handedness of the Egyptian authorities over Syrian affairs and brutal security force under Sarraj in order to prevent any opposition against the regime also contributed to the break-up of the union.

The failure of the union has been an issue of discussion and has been commented upon by observers and both the parties to the union. Although both the countries provide different factors for the break-up of the union, there are some general factors involved which are based on a widespread consensus. These factors can be divided under two headings namely “fundamental weaknesses” and “actual political causes.” Most importantly, it was thought that conditions were not “ripe for the union; Arab nationalism proved weaker than regionalism.” It was admitted by the Egyptians that Egypt was not ready for a union as they were lacking in Arab consciousness. On the other hand, the realization of being different and separate developed under the union. In the view of the Syrians, “the behaviour of the Egyptians in Syria had caused the Arabs to detest unity.” Whereas, the Egyptian version states that Syria was in reality attracted by the “Arab hero personality” of Nasser and did not have any desire for union and due to this it proved to be difficult to hold the union together. These were considered to be a consequence of fundamental differences in economic, political, social and cultural differences. When the idea of a union was being worked upon, Egypt’s economy was on a way to a “state-owned economy under the banner of the socialist democratic cooperative society” and was under a centralized power. The economy of Syria was based on a laissez faire economy and power was spread among the political parties, trade unions, traditional and regional groups and the officer corps and all these in turn were represented in the army by politically inclined officers. In the opinion of the Egyptians, “Syrian politics were traditionally volatile, and the Syrians were hard to govern.” On the whole, two factors which propelled the 1961 coup were widespread discontent within the Syrian army and the economic hardships faced by the Syrians due to the July decrees. In general parlance, resentment was on the rise since there was an increase in “Egyptian domination” of Syrian political affairs and also the economy. The abolition of Syrian political parties was one major grievance of the Syrians against Nasser (Oron 1961: 606).

The break-up of the union was a “function of widely different expectations of the parties; the practical difficulties of merging two countries with different histories, political institutions, and economies; and the ham-fisted way in which the Egyptians sought to bring Syrian politics to heel.” The Egyptians had different expectations from the union. The Egyptians vied for power under the union and therefore the union was not among ‘equals’ but it brought Syria under the Egyptian political system. Nasser came to occupy the highest position of the President and four vice-presidents were appointed under the union. A union cabinet was formed to look into issues

such as defence, education, foreign affairs. Two regional cabinets were appointed separately to preside over issues related to Egypt and Syria respectively. Syrian Defence Ministry and foreign affairs Ministry were made a part their Egyptian counterparts. Moreover, the Syrian intelligence service was made a subsidiary of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (Cook 2012:76).

By the fall of 1958, a whole new set of initiatives were introduced with a strong centralized governmental structure. Stringent measures were imposed on foreign trade, land reform and a new labour law was introduced. Future plans of currency unification as a step towards economic integration was also announced by the regime spokesmen. These measures led to growing apprehensions in the minds of Syrian middle and upper class. Some Syrian businessmen and landowners went to Cairo in 1958 in the months of October and December to discuss the problems they were facing due to the introduction of new initiatives and to persuade Nasser that these were not suitable for the Syrian region of the UAR. Their attempts went in vain. In the Aleppo region of Syria, which has been a heavy agricultural area with commercial connections with Iraq, Nasser's policies were leading to great disillusionment with the union (Jankowski 2001: 122).

Nasser took various steps to control the Syrian economy. One such step was taken on 18 April 1960. According to this measure, the import of luxury items to Syria such as cars, washing machines, refrigerators etc. were stopped. To add to this measure, TV sets were subjected to an annual tax of 50 lira. On 5 February 1961, a significant change was put forward by stopping the free trade in foreign currency thereby leading export and import businesses to come under the control of the government. Many other policies were introduced to help the "masses of peasants and workers against the merchants and landlords, while still other measures had both austerity and socialist goals." A decree relating to minimum wage and a minimum salary was passed on 25 April 1960. Another decree was passed relating to the banks on 3 March 1961 according to which the banks were "Arabized and the state was granted 35 percent of their stock and a seat on their boards of directors." On 20 July 1961, a major step was undertaken and all the major banks and insurance companies under the UAR were nationalized. Apart from the nationalization drive, Nasser increasingly sought to transfer the control of the UAR from the Syrians to the Egyptians. On 3 August 1961, power was concentrated in the union cabinet stationed in Egypt and all other regional cabinets were dissolved. Another policy was undertaken in order to lessen the Syrian

army's power and increase Egyptian control over it. Earlier, many Syrian officers were transferred to Egypt and vice versa. "But while the Syrian officers were given high-sounding titles, the Egyptians first took over strategic intelligence posts and then many command positions." Transfer of Syrian military officers was made frequent and some of the officers were also pensioned and appointed to civilian posts in the foreign ministry. (Etzioni 2001:117).

Police rule and loss of political freedom was characteristic of the military dictatorship under the UAR regime and the Syrians were starting to express their growing resentment towards this. The provisional constitution of 5 March 1958 which was issued by President Nasser drew widespread disappointment among the Syrian people. Article 1 of the constitution proclaimed that the UAR was a democratic republic. But it could not be a 'democratic republic' in the true sense as the political parties of Syria were dissolved on March 12 and the country was run by a provisional constitution till the break-up of the union and without a parliament until the formation of the National Union by the appointed national assembly created in Egypt (Haddad 1971: 240).

Sarraj was Nasser's most loyal supporter but as difficulties of the union started rising, Nasser's trust on Sarraj started declining. After the quarrel between Sarraj and Abdel Hakim Amer\*<sup>8</sup> regarding authority over Syria, Sarraj was sent to Cairo according to the orders of Nasser and Amer was transferred to Syrian so that Sarraj's men and influence could be uprooted. Even if Sarraj was still the Minister of Interior, his security organization was "turned over-by Amer-to the officer of the president." Sarraj left for Egypt in August 1961 but realized that he was stripped of his powers and therefore he resigned on September 26. As the internal security organization was no more under Sarraj, this gave the Syrian army an "impetus to try to regain its former position." A group of Damascene\*<sup>9</sup> army officers holding positions of majors and colonels started to plan for a coup to overthrow the UAR regime and on 28 September 1961, the overthrow became successful (Etzioni 2001: 119).

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<sup>8</sup> Abdel Hakim Amer was an Egyptian General and a political leader. In 1956, Amer was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the joint military command established by Egypt and Syria. He was made the Vice-President of the United Arab Republic and also the Minister of Defence. He also served as the personal representative of Nasser, the President of the UAR.

<sup>9</sup>Damascene army officers were a coalition of military officers from Damascus, Syria who carried out a bloodless coup against Nasser in 1961 and ended the Syrian-Egyptian union. The Syrian officers were to some degree operating at the behest of the Syrian bourgeoisie who opposed Nasser's socialist policies and in particular land reform measures. Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi led the coup on 28 September 1961 which brought about the dissolution of the UAR.

In the military sphere, Nasser tried to uproot the Syrian officers whom he considered politically inclined. Many officers were asked to retire and offered reassignment in the First Army. And as the gap between the Ba'th Party and the UAR started to widen, several Ba'thist officers also were purged from the military during the election for the National Union in mid-1959. Some Ba'thist officers were reassigned to areas where they could not exercise their power or even to Egypt where they could not indulge in activities against the UAR. A Syrian source estimated that "more than 800 'politicians' of all stripes" had been purged from the army by mid-1959; after the Syrian secession from the UAR, a spokesman for the secessionist regime claimed that "more than 1,000 commissioned officers and 3,000 noncommissioned officers had been dismissed from the First Army, and another 500 officers had been transferred to Egypt under the union" (Jankowski 2002:129).

If the coup of 1961 is seen as a product of the nationalization policies then it could be derived that as the nationalization process was undergoing implementation, divisions and resentment started developing. A large part of agricultural sector was brought under state control through the July 1961 Decrees\*<sup>10</sup>. Law 117 provided for nationalization of the remaining private banks, firms related to heavy industries and fifty shipping companies. Law 118 made it mandatory for many private companies to sell 50 percent of their shares to the government. In Syria, it should be underlined, the situation of public sector was different from that of Egypt. The public sector in Syria was smaller than Egypt during the time of the UAR. The private sector interests also seemed to be better organized than that of Egypt's. The socialist decrees were beginning to hamper the economy of Syria acting as a catalyst for the coup of 1961 (Alexander 2005:122).

For the Syrian-Egyptian integration to take place, Nasser sent Egyptian bureaucrats to Syria, whose state apparatus according to Nasser was "scarcely worthy of a grocery shop." The large landowners in Syria faced alienation due to economic and social reforms, while the merchants and businessmen were bogged down under the new commercial regulations. Under the pretext of economic integration, Egypt was planning to exploit Syrian resources and markets. According to

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<sup>10</sup> The July Decrees were a series of measures undertaken by the UAR government in order to bring about transformation in the economy and fasten the process towards becoming a socialist state. One group of laws attempted at a partial restructuring of the distribution of wealth. A second set of laws extended workers' rights. The third set of decrees provided for the complete or partial nationalization of banks, insurance companies and many of the larger industrial, commercial and financial enterprises in both regions of the union.

Heydemann, new regulations were seen to “suffocate the dynamism of Syria’s merchants, stifling trade and agriculture.” (Heydemann 1999: 87-88).

To sum up the factors leading to the dissolution of the union it is imperative for us to consider the conditions which made the Syrian elites to step out of the political arena and decide for the unification to take place. At least six factors influenced their decision. First, both the army and the political leaders were fearful of the fact that the Communist influence would engulf Syrian politics. Second, these two were facing pressure from the Syrian right due to some reasons. “The Eisenhower doctrine had been formulated in January of 1958. During 1957 the Turkish army had held maneuvers on the Syrian border. Iraq had continued to make overtures to Syrian elements favoring cooperation within the Fertile Crescent.” Third, power was diffused within Syria and mainly within the army which had “resulted in an impasse which rendered positive action by any group difficult if not impossible.” Fourth, the people of Syria were in support of the union and were overwhelmed by Nasser’s heroic image. Fifth, “many (if not all) of the actors were emotionally involved in the nationalist movement and had identified with its goals.” Sixth, it was a firm belief of the Syrian political elites that they would come out on top to rule regardless of the conditions put forward by Nasser prior to the formation of the union. The conditions put forward by Nasser before the unity became the primary reason for discontent. The discontents got intensified as the Syrian people realized that the Syrian political parties including the Ba’th were really going to be dissolved and the Syrian political leaders would not be “doing business as usual.” The situation in Syria was as if “optimism was followed by disillusionment.” The Syrian elites were of the opinion that they were given positions which were lower in rank than that of what was held by their Egyptian counterparts (Palmer 1966:50-67).

However, in spite of the entire negative factors which led to the dissolution of the UAR, there was improvement in the socio-political status of the middle-class people in Syria. Many young people were included into the government administration and in the educational sector. Several young army officers were given promotions and placed in positions earlier held by the veteran conservative officers. A lot of young officers of Druze and Alawi origins came to dominate these positions which indicated a growth in the integration of minorities in Syrian politics (Ma’oz and Yaniv 1986: 19).

## **Nasser's Role in Dividing the Syrian Military**

Nasser's ambition behind the façade of the UAR became evident gradually. Nasser set forth some conditions for the union to take place. These conditions were that all the political parties would be banned and these would be replaced by the "National Union." Another condition was an assurance that the Syrian army would be detached from political affairs throughout the union. However, all the political parties accepted their dissolution after the formation of the UAR. The Ba'th which was actively taking part during the formation of the union enthusiastically went on to dissolve itself. The Ba'th was of the opinion that the UAR was a step towards their aim for Pan-Arab unity and that it would be given a major role to play under the UAR regime. Immediately after the formation of the union on 27 February 1958, the Ba'th members were given positions in the central government but they were not given a free hand in running the government. The relationship between the Ba'th and Nasser became worse following the emergence of Abd al-Karim Qassem\*<sup>11</sup> in Iraq. Further two important developments were seen before the elections to the National Union. Syrian people directed their anger of dissatisfaction on the union towards the Ba'th. Due to this Nasser and the UAR authorities were reluctant to support the Ba'th in the election campaign. The Ba'th partially boycotted the elections and the results of the election proved to be a huge defeat for the Ba'th Party. The Ba'th managed to win only 250 out of total 9,445 seats. The Ba'th Party's relations with Nasser seemed to worsen and a number of Ba'th Party members resigned in 1959 from their posts. Nasser was left with no other political allies and he came to rely on Egyptian Field Marshal Amer, who had been dispatched to Syria in October 1959 along with a group of Syrian officers and bureaucrats headed by the Syrian military officer Abd al-Hamid Sarraj\*<sup>12</sup>. Amer began to impose himself in the Syrian

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<sup>11</sup> Abd al-Karim Qassem was a nationalist Iraqi Army general who seized power in a 1958 coup d'état, wherein the Iraqi monarchy was eliminated. He ruled the country as Prime Minister of Iraq until his downfall and death in 1963.

<sup>12</sup> At the age of thirty-five, Sarraj became the most powerful Syrian military official, serving also as Minister of Interior, Secretary-General of the Syrian National Union (NU), head of propaganda and Chairman of the Syrian Economic Foundation (set up in March 1960). He had participated in the 1948 Palestine War, played a role in Husni al-Za'im's coup of 1949, and took over the department of personnel for Adib Shishakli in 1952. When the latter was ousted in 1954, Sarraj was temporarily sent to Paris as an assistant military attaché. In March 1955, the new Chief-of-Staff Shawqat al-Shuqair appointed him head of military intelligence. From this sensitive position Sarraj was able during the next three years to play a crucial role in thwarting numerous conspiracies against the regime. In his capacity as Syrian Minister of Interior, he established for himself a strong power-base since the formation of the UAR. The arrival of Vice-President 'Amir in Syria in October 1959 ignited a power struggle that ended with 'Amir's silent return to Cairo in mid-1960 and Sarraj's appointment as president of Syrian Executive Committee



affairs and tried to mobilize urban and upper class people and old politicians of Syria in support of the government. But it failed and the opposition against the union was growing. (Rabinovich 1972:17).

In 1957, it may be recalled, the National Front Government was experiencing its downfall. Against this background, the Syrian army was “disintegrating into a dozen or so personal or political factions.” The army seized an opportunity to utilize Nasser’s popularity to defeat the political rivals and mainly to lessen communist influence in Syria. Therefore, the army was at the forefront of supporting the formation of the union believing that it would bring an end to the internal rivalries within the army and also that they would be given equal opportunity to rule Syria along with Nasser (Hinnebusch 2002:42). Khalid al-Azm, the Minister of Defence in the cabinet of Prime Minister Sabri al-Asali in the year 1956 played an important role to establish relations with the USSR. He was being labeled as the ‘red millionaire’ by the Syrian press for his close relations with the USSR. Although Azm had claimed that “he would solidify ties with any country willing to offer assistance to Syria,” he was not in favour of a union with Egypt. In 1958, Azm voted against the union but his vote was overruled by a parliamentary majority, “under pressure from Nasserist officers in the Syrian army (Moubayed 2006:189).

Nasser saw the possibility of a civil strife occurring in Syria due to the ever increasing Syrian internal divisions and the emergence of many competing factions within the army leading various coups and counter-coups. According to Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, “Nasser concentrated primarily in his mid-Sept 1957 meeting with Afif al-Bizri and Sarraj on warning the Syrians against the dangers of the Syrian military’s dividing into armed camps and the consequent risk of civil war in Syria.” After meeting Syrian military officers Sarraj and Bizri, Nasser became sure of the fact that “political entanglements of the Syrian officer corps had seriously sapped the military capabilities of the Syrian Army” (Jankowski 2002: 97)

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(EC). He was a very close aide to Nasser during the short-lived time of the United Arab Republic later Vice President.

There were instances when Nasser tried to influence the Syrian military officers before the formation of the UAR. Nasser was aggressively pursuing a policy of giving public speeches at various places both inside and outside Egypt for mobilizing support for a union. In all speeches he emphasized the idea of “Arab nationalism and unity, which he linked to the defence against imperialism and his campaign against Iraq and the Baghdad pact.” Nasser gave a speech to the Syrian armed forces also in which he accused Saudi Arabia of trying to bribe Colonel Abdel Hamid Sarraj (Chief of Syrian Intelligence) to foil the plans for UAR. “Arabism not pharaonism is our political ideology,” he asserted in a rally at the Evacuation Square in Damascus on 9 March 1958 (Vatikiotis 1978: 235).

The pro-Nasser faction of the Syrian army played an important role in shaping the politics of Syria even after the break-up of the union. In 1962, the pro-Nasserite officers along with the Ba’thist officers conducted a coup to overthrow the government. Both the Nasserite and the Ba’thist officers affiliated themselves to the National Council of the Revolutionary Command (NCRC). The NCRC was no doubt dominated by the Ba’th but also had members from Nasserist faction, independents and unionists. The NCRC was accepted both by Nasser and Iraq. In the year 1963 representatives from Syria, Egypt and Iraq met in Cairo to discuss for a tripartite union. The Cairo negotiations for the union did not produce any concrete results and hence the talks collapsed. In such a situation the Ba’th made efforts to throw the nasserist officers out of power. Finally, the Ba’thist officers succeeded in purging the Nasserist officers out of power and suppressed an uprising in Aleppo. The Nasserite officers and pro-Nasserite civilians bounced back and carried out a failed coup on 18 July 1963 which was violently crushed by the Ba’thist army units. This coup was aided by Egyptian intelligence. The consequence of the coup was that many Nasserite officers were executed and some were sent abroad (Alexander, 1998:241).

Although the talks for the union collapsed, but it was indicative of the fact that the Ba’th wanted a union with Egypt in order to fulfill its ideological visions and also to limit Nasserist penetration in Syria. However, the army officers of the Military Committee were not in support of the union and they also had purged the Nasserite officers in the Syrian army. Several attempts were made by the Nasserite officers during 1963 to conduct a coup and establish a government favourable to a union with Egypt. The tripartite plans collapsed as the repeated attempts of the Nasserite officers to overthrow the government were foiled by the Syrian military. In July 1963 the

incumbent president, Luay al-Atassi was forced to resign and Amin al-Hafiz, the head of the Military Committee came to occupy the office of the President (Walt 1987:83).

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## CHAPTER IV

### THE POST-UAR PHASE, 1961-1970

#### **The Separatist (*Infisal*) Regime, 1961-1963**

The UAR was dissolved on 28 September 1961. In the aftermath of the break-up of the Egyptian-Syrian union, a new anti-Nasserite regime consisting of Syrian conservatives and army officers came to be established in the late September 1961. The regime was a secessionist one which is known in Arabic as the *Fatrat al-Infisal*. The secession of Syria from the UAR according to Bass “was as stinging a humiliation as Nasser had ever faced” (Bass 2003:80). On 2 October 1961, a number of politicians signed a manifesto “denouncing Nasser and thanking the army for their blessed deliverance” (Seale 1990:68).

According to Podeh, the coup was backed by conservative political and economic elites of Syria. The officers who led the coup called themselves Supreme Revolutionary Command of the Armed forces (SARC). These officers belonged to the group of Damascene army officers. They declared that their main aim was to eliminate corruption and tyranny which was prevalent under the UAR and also to “return the legitimate rights to the people.” After the coup Nasser made his first live radio broadcast. He said:

What occurred today is more serious than what happened in 1956. What happened in 1956 was a foreign attack, and what happened today was a foreign attack, what happened today is an act which affects the targets which we have all demanded. The coup is a stab in the heart of the unity and Arab nationalism (Podeh 1999:149).

The coup of 28 September 1961 which brought the UAR to an end was led by a coalition of officers headed by Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi. But soon this coalition disintegrated and Nahlawi was left with only a small faction composed mostly of Damascene officers under him. After the disintegration of the Damascene officers three separate factions were formed. One faction was led by Haidar al-Kuzbari, other headed by Mufiq’Assasa and Mustafa al-Dawalibi and the third faction came to be headed by Nahlawi. These three factions of Damascene officers gradually

rose to prominence and tried to intervene in Syrian political affairs in order to gain power. Each faction competed with one another to hold on to power and accordingly legitimize their rule (Mufti 1996:135).

Due to the existence of different factions, offices were gradually losing their hold over the army and were forced to share political and military powers with many other military groups. The factiousness within the army led to a great deal of interference by the civilian leaders and reduced the ability of the army to put pressure on the civilian government. "The officers' desire to maintain a constitutional façade and their awareness of the regime's frailty made them averse to creating constitutional crises" (Rabinovich 1972:29).

During 1961 to 1963 all the events which took place within Syrian political system were guided by mainly two groups of people. On one hand was the Ba'athist unionist bloc and on the other hand was the group of military officers centered on Syria's Supreme Commander General Abd al-Karim Zahr ad-Din. The Ba'athist unionist bloc was a loosely formed group comprising the Military Committee, some Ba'ath officers, a group of Nasserites led by Jasim Alwan and some other unionists like Luayy al-Atasi and Fahd ash-Sha'ir. There were many unionist cells across various units of the Syrian army. Rabinovich points out that many Nasserite officers were maintaining contacts with Cairo and were planning for another coup to overthrow the post-UAR civilian government in Syria (ibid.30).

The separatist regime in Syria was there for a period of 18 months. The period can be characterised by a confusing chain of events starting from 28 March 1961 till 2 April 1962. On 29 September 1961, an interim government came to be formed under President Mamun al-Kuzbari who also became the Prime Minister. Kuzbari assured to plan for the reestablishment of a constitutional regime by conducting elections after two months from the dissolution of the union. The events that followed after the dissolution of the UAR resembled the developments that took place after the overthrow of Shishakli in 1954. The cabinet under his government was mostly composed of technocrats, university professors, big landowners and old politicians. (Hottinger 1963:282).

The Constituent Assembly came to be elected on 1 December 1961 and the election results showed similar results to the election which took place in the fall of 1954. Forty two percent of

the deputies were independents or the representatives of Bedouin tribes (in 1954 they constituted 47 percent); the largest party was once again the People's Party with 22 percent of the seats (21 percent in 1954); 14 percent were members of the National Party (13 percent in 1954), and 14 percent were Ba'thists (15 percent in 1954). Although constitutional and political powers was vested in the civilian government formed in the autumn of 1961, the army still "saw themselves as the final arbiters of the country's destiny and they sought to intervene in every major policy decision." The army officers sought to institutionalize their participation in policy making decisions and this led to the formation of a National Security Council (*majlis al-amn al-quami*). The main motive behind this intuition as defined by the officers was to formulate "broad lines of the state's policy". Due to a number of reasons the army officers could not exert much influence on the civilian government. One of the main reasons was that the military lacked an efficient and strong leadership (Rabinovich 1979:29).

Mamun al-Kuzbari's government had the support of a faction of Damascene officers led by Haidar al-Kuzbari (Prime Minister's relative). In order to receive outside support, Kuzbari's government put forward a new proposal regarding pan Arab unity. Kuzbari proposed a new "federation of Arab states in which, by contrast with the last UAR, member nations would retain full internal and international sovereignty" Kuzbari's government took a pro-Jordanian stance in relation to plans of unification (Mufti 1996: 136).

Many contending factions were at work even before the coup of 28 March 1962 led by Nahlawi which were planning to oust the secessionist government. The Military Committee which was formed during the UAR was aiming to overthrow the separatist regime and strengthen and reconstitute their organization. The Committee members considered the Nasserite officers to be their best available option who would help them in achieving their aim. The most prominent among Nasserite officers was Colonel Jasim Alwan-"whom the secessionist government had not dared to purge, not wishing to be accused of treachery to the Arab nationalist cause of which Nasser remained the great emblem." But soon a fundamental problem arose between the Military Committee and the Nasserite officers. The main ambition of the Nasserite officers was to mount a coup in order to reinstate Nasser (their hero) as the President of the UAR. But the Military Committee wanted a coup so that they could carry out discussions with Nasser regarding a union based on equality between Syria and Egypt. "They hoped to engage him in a candid raking over

of past mistakes so as to agree on a radically modified formula of government in which Nasser's powers would be limited and those of the Ba'th enhanced." In reality, the Ba'thist military officers had the aim of strengthening their position vis-à-vis other factions of the army. In order to make their task easier Ba'thists officers decided to ally with the Nasserite officers who also wanted to overthrow the post-UAR civilian government. These differences in the aims led to problems (Seale 1990:69).

Another coup took place in the year 1961. This took place on 21 November 1961 and was led by another faction of Damascene officers headed by Mustafa al-Dawalibi. Officers Kuzbari, Husseini and their supporters were arrested and sent to jail on the charge of accepting money from Jordan. However, this accusation cannot be called as completely true as stated by Moubayed. The general elections took place on 1 December 1961. A parliament was formed which constituted of a total 155 seats out of which 86 came to be occupied by conservatives. The People's Party came back to power with two veteran leaders occupying highest positions in the political system. Nazim al-Qudsi was elected the president by the parliament on 14 December and Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi became the Prime Minister. The government under Dawalibi was pro-Iraqi. After a meeting of Qudsi and Iraq's Abd al-Karim Qassem, plans made for "close military and political cooperation" between Syria and Iraq (Moubayed 2006: 54).

At a military conclave held in early 1962, Deputy Chief of Intelligence, Sharaf Za'balawi argued that "since the whole of the army and 90 percent of the people sympathized with Nasser, the Damascenes would be better off declaring immediate reunification with Egypt themselves before the Nasserist current swept them away altogether." Nahlawi also understood the situation and changed his position from being an anti-UAR unionist to being a pro-UAR unionist and hence tried to join hands with the Ba'thists and the Nasserites. This was decided by Nahlawi because his faction was in a dilemma and its secessionist struggle was proving to be untenable as there was a revival of Pan-Arab agitation and Nasser's propaganda campaign for another union. Nahlawi also wanted to establish a more obedient government. (Mufti 1996:197)

In the meanwhile, Dawalibi's government was experiencing increasing pressure from the trade unions, the Ba'thists and other radical elements due to the revival of conservative measures. Qudsi had other plans in mind. He wanted to create a counterweight to the Nasserites, Ba'thists and other factions existing within the Syrian army which were posing a threat to him. Under

increasing pressure in March 1962 Dawalibi was asked to resign. The Deputies withdrew their vote of confidence in the government. Dawalibi resigned on 25 March 1962 and negotiations were underway for the formation of a national unity government. Even before the negotiations could come into a conclusion, a coup led by Nahlawi on 28 March 1962 ousted Dawalibi, President Qudsi was arrested and after the coup Nahlawi himself went to jail. (Heydemann 1999:155).

This was a failed coup attempt made by Nahlawi. The Nasserite officers resisted Nahlawi at Homs. The Supreme Commander of armed forces, Zahr ad-Din was also not cooperative. Mufti states that Zahr ad-Din did not want Nahlawi to succeed and achieve a stronghold over Syrian politics. Nahlawi had to rely on his own supporters only. This coup led to a serious confrontation among the various factions within the Syrian army (Mufti 1996:137). The coup received sharp criticism, public demonstrations were held to press for restoring civilian government despite the imposition of military curfew. One significant outcome of this coup was that it galvanized the rival factions within the army to carry out a counter coup with the objective of preventing a reunion with Egypt (ibid.156)

Jasim Alwan who was a prominent Nasserite Syrian army officer did not like the post-UAR civilian government and was also planning to overthrow it. He felt guilty of the fact that had he not been away on a military mission he could have prevented the 28 September 1961 coup which brought an end to the UAR regime. In 1962 after the second coup attempt of Nahlawi, Alwan led another coup before the planned date of 2 April. However, his coup attempt failed as no army unit came to support him (Rabinovich and Shaked 1984:648). Alwan did not get the support of the pro UAR and Ba'thist factions of the army. The Military Committee and the Nasserite allies became alarmed because of the pre-empted coup by Nahlawi and started rallying support for themselves. In order to avert outbreak of bigger problems among various army factions, an army Congress was convened at Homs on 1 April 1962. The result of this meeting was that President Qudsi was again made the President and some officers were exiled. It was decided that Nahlawi and his allies would be exiled and that the same punishment would be meted out to Alwan and his supporters (Seale 1990:69).

After Nahlawi's faction of army got neutralized due to the Military Congress's decision to send him and his allies into exile and also danger was reduced from Alwan's supporters, Chief of



Staff Zahr ad-Din carried out a counter-coup on 2 April 1962 and ordered the all the troops to stand in support of the President Qudsi. The army complied with his orders and President Qudsi was released. The parliament was also restored (Moubayed 2006:307). On 7 April 1962 the newly appointed Chief of Staff and the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, Zahr ad-Din announced that the army would not be permitted to participate in the newly formed cabinet. President Qudsi returned to the presidency with the help of the army and General Zahr ad-Din claimed publicly that President Qudsi agreed to fulfill the goals of achieving a “unity with liberated Arab countries and particularly with Egypt and the establishment of social justice and fair socialism. President found a way to curb Nahlawi’s power by appointing him to the military attaché to Indonesia. Qudsi felt that it was important to appease the army officers and the socialists. So Bashir al-Azma who was a close aide of Nasser was made the Prime Minister in April 1962 and the cabinet which was formed under him consisted of socialists and members of the pro-Nasser Ba’th Party. In order to mend relations with Egypt once again, President Qudsi sent Foreign Minister Adnan al-Azhari to Cairo. This did not work out to be successful and they went on to file a complaint against Nasser in the Arab League accusing him of interfering in domestic politics of Syria (ibid.308).

Bashir al-Azma’s cabinet lasted for two months and was reshuffled. The cabinet survival was based on support from the army and a small number of its supporters believed in a “conditional unity with Egypt” and another group of supporters also wanted the implementation of the socialist decrees of 1961. However, the army grew impatient as Azma’s government could not work towards a federation with Egypt and eventually he was asked by the army to step aside from his position. Towards this end within three days in September 1962 some important amendments to the constitution of 1950 were made thereby granting power to the president to dissolve the cabinet within a year of its election. After Azma stepped out from his position, Khalid al-Azm became the Prime Minister on 13 September 1962. After Azm became the Prime Minister, Nahlawi and his supporters sneaked into Syria and tried to forge an alliance with the Ba’thist and Nasserite officers. Nahlawi was again planning to overthrow the civilian government. But this was a trap set by Zahr ad-Din and his allies in order to remove Nahlawi completely from the scene. It can be summarized by saying that a “quite, legal coup d’etat” took place on 13 September 1962 led by Zahr ad-Din which was “believed to have restored constitutional rule” (Haddad 1971:247).

Here it can be said that the supreme commander Zahr ad-Din tactfully suppressed the coups and countercoups during the separatist regime. He was appointed as the Defence Minister under President Qudsi. Perlmutter states that after Zahr ad-Din's 2 April 1962 coup the army entered Syrian politics once again (Perlmutter 1981:144).

Alwan collaborated with the Ba'thist Military Committee to overthrow President Qudsi. But the Ba'thists did not want to share power with Alwan. Although they carried out the coup together which turned out to be successful Alwan was sidelined and sent to exile. Alwan sought asylum in Egypt. This coup was carried out on 8 March 1963. Alwan was not bogged down by these events and planned to carry out another coup and this he planned with the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN), a radical Nasserist organization. Alwan carried out his coup on 18 July 1963. Amin al-Hafiz, a Syrian army General, foiled the coup and on 27 July 1963 became the President of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command and also as the Commander-in-Chief of the army (Ginat 2010:225).

According to Perlmutter, the period of constitutional government after the dissolution of the UAR did not last long. Again no one party received a decisive majority in the elections to create a lasting coalition government and to end the fighting. The author states that the raucous "Egyptian-Syrian denunciations only opened the way for a new army intervention" (Perlmutter 1981:144).

The separatist regime which was there in Syria from 1961-1963 represented the return of the old politicians who became dominant in the parliament and the government. De-nationalization measures were undertaken for banks and industries during this period. A disastrous land reform policy was also formulated under which large tracts of land being expropriated were returned to the big landlords some of whom drove out peasants out of their villages. "Instability-street riots, strikes, and military intrigue-was rife." Nasserites and the Ba'thists who mostly came from middle class became disappointed and the unionist sentiments led to resentment among the people. The regime was responsible for the fragmentation of the political scenario which divided nationalists and the leftists over the issue of seeking reunion with Egypt and on what terms. Thus, an "already fragmented political arena was further divided between Nasserites (for union), Communists (against), and Ba'thist(divided)" (Hinnebusch 2002:43).

The problems which were inherent in the 1961-1963 separatist regime created a favourable environment for the Ba’thist coup of 8 March 1963. The events which took place during this period acted like catalysts for shaping the group of military officers behind the March 1963 coup.

### **The Ba’thist Takeover (1963-1970)**

During the 8 March 1963 coup the Ba’th Party was the political party which joined hands with the army. The Ba’th was planning for a long time to increase its influence within the ranks of the army. Penner states that in the early phase of the 1960s, the Ba’th succeeded in its plans to a great extent and hence it could “seize and retain power, free from the threat of subsequent countercoups” (Penner 2006:148).

The Ba’thist coup of 8 March 1963 was led mainly by the Military Committee along with other officers. The Military Committee did not have any hold outside the realm of military and no organization in the political scenario. Therefore, the Military Committee saw it appropriate to garner support from the traditional Ba’thist leaders and the Ba’th organization. The Military Committee was accepted into the Ba’th Party as the sole military organisation and was allowed to retain its autonomy (Galvani 1974:6).

The officers who seized power in 1963 coup created an executive body called the National Council of the Revolutionary Command <sup>\*13</sup> which would formulate policies to be implemented by a cabinet of ministers responsible to it. The NRCC consisted of 12 Ba’thists, 8 Nasserites and independents. The NRCC then invoked a repressive mechanism of emergency by declaring it as “Military Order no.2 of 8 March 1963.” The emergency law curbed democratic liberties which were reinstated by earlier the government. This decree was never acknowledged as legal by the jurists as it did not conform to the provisions of the constitution and was not approved by the Council of Ministers (Middle East Watch Report 1990:25).

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<sup>13</sup> On 8 March 1963 the Military Committee of the Ba’th carried out a coup ousting President Nazim al-Qudsi. The National Council of the Revolutionary Command took over control and assigned itself legislative powers ; it appointed Salah al-Din al-Bitar as head of a "national front" government. The Ba'ath participated in this government along with the Arab Nationalist Movement, the United Arab Front and the Socialist Unity Movement.

After taking over the reins of power, Hafiz instituted socialist reforms and within the period of 1964 to 1965 Syria had undergone a remarkable shift towards socialism. Rapid nationalization process was taking place in the areas of real estate, industry and external trade. Amin al-Hafiz also nationalized all Syria's oil and mineral. These processes in turn led to a wave of protests and uprisings by the merchants of Damascus and religious leaders which were effectively suppressed and then Hafiz took over control of the army (Ginat 2010:226). "For the first time in the history of this coup-saturated country, any leader aspiring to rise to the top position in the state had to control the army, the party, and the civilian apparatus" (Talhami 2001:84).

The Ba'thist officers were in a state of perpetual fear from a countercoup which could occur anytime and bring an end to their power. Therefore, many ruthless measures were adopted in order to eliminate any source of resistance within the army and hence began "the process of economic, political and sometimes physical liquidation of the traditional civilian *elite*." Hafiz's government had many young Ba'thists who had a different vision of how the country should be ruled. As a result of this, disagreements started developing among the Ba'thist officers and led to the occurrence of the February 1966 coup and brought the so called 'neo-Ba'thists' into power (Keegan 1983:562).

Hafiz was a Sunni Muslim and he disliked the fact that a number of people belonging to minority community- Isma'ili constituted a number of cabinet ministers starting from 1963-1967. Some of the Isma'ili cabinet ministers during this period were Anwar Jundi, Khalil Jundi, Sami Jundi, Sabit Qasir, Mustafa Rustam, Shtawi Saifu, and Mohammad Fazil. In July 1963, a large number of pro-Nasserites along with their supporters carried out a 'bloody confrontation' with the government. Hafiz crushed the 'antistate movement' and took over the control of the army. Hafiz came to occupy the position of the president of National Council of the Revolutionary Command which later on came to be known as National Council of the Revolution (NCR). He also became the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. The Muslim Brotherhood was also trying to make an impact on political affairs of Syria. A public uprising took place in Hama in April 1964 which lasted for 10 days and was finally suppressed by Hafiz (Emadi 2001:111).

Salah Jadid who helped Hafiz in the 8 March 1963 coup was working towards building support in order to seize power. After the coup of 1963 he was made the Army Chief of Personnel and later on Army Chief of Staff. He followed a policy wherein the officers loyal to him were given

key positions and the ones not loyal were discharged. During his tenure as the Army Chief he appointed and encouraged the Alawi officers to join the army. Many Alawi officers were entrusted with key positions within the army. Among several relatives whom Salah promoted to key positions in the army, Izzat Jadid was the commander of the “crack armoured unit assigned to Damascus, which had helped carry out the coup of February 23, 1966, and subsequently guarded the nerve-centers of the new government” (Schiffrin 1974:284). Following the coup he appointed Nurreidin Atassi, the former Deputy Prime Minister as the new President. “The real power in the land was Salah Jadid and, in the wings, another Alawite, a man who knew that he was now only one more step, one more coup away from the Presidency: Hafez Assad” (Hart 1984:202).

Under Hafiz’s government many Alawites also came to fill important government positions. In this context Bhalla has said:

In 1963, Baathist power was cemented through a military coup led by President Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni general, who discharged many ranking Sunni officers, thereby providing openings for hundreds of Alawites to fill top-tier military positions during the 1963-1965 period on the grounds of being opposed to Arab unity. This measure tipped the balance in favor of Alawite officers who staged a coup in 1966 and for the first time placed Damascus in the hands of the Alawites (Bhalla 2011:9).

In the meanwhile, the Ba’th Party was facing different problems in the later phase of Hafiz’s rule. Gradually bone of contention started developing between the Military Committee and the traditional Ba’thist leaders, older and the younger party members, urban and rural members, between civilian and the military faction etc. One of the examples which illustrates the power struggle is that in 1965 problems regarding power started developing between Amin al-Hafiz and Salah Jadid, the chief-of-staff who supported Hafiz to get rid of the Ba’th Party’s veteran leadership. Jadid became successful in mobilizing support from the Alawis and Druzes as he himself was an Alawi. Hafiz, a Sunni was left with no other option but to rely on Sunni Muslims, former rivals and civilian leaders. The members of Jadid’s faction were in a stronger position as they occupied several positions in the army, air force, commandos and the armoured corps (Ma’oz and Yeniv 1986:25).

Some of the main issues which were creating problems between the old leaders and the younger members of the Ba'th related to the different policy priorities, issues based on power, personal ambitions of the members of the National Command of the Ba'th\*<sup>14</sup> and the Regional Command\*<sup>15</sup> (See, Appendix II). This intra-Ba'th struggle for power culminated into the 23 February coup of 1966 led by Salah Jadid. According to Louis and Shlaim, "it was the result of a winnowing process of radicalization within the Ba'th Party politics that was intimately tied to the military through the Military Committee of the Ba'th Party ruling apparatus" (Louis and Shlaim 2012:82).

The government under the Jadid entrusted more power to the civilian leaders present within the Ba'th. Jadid sought to bring the military under the control of the civilian rule. But Assad wanted a more conventional role for the armed forces. The rule of the neo-Ba'thists was ruthless and extreme. Even the small property owning classes and merchants were sent into exile or being done away with. Keegan states that the Syrian army seemed more politicised than ever before, "with military competence and attention to duty ceasing to figure at all in the selection of officers for promotion." One of the main reasons for this was the 1967 war with Israel and the loss of Golan Heights to Israel (Keegan 1983:562).

Disagreement between Jadid and Assad enraged both and they tried to pacify each other. The final blow came when Jadid decided to have Assad stripped of all his powers. Assad accused Jadid of doing "political experimentation" with the Syrian army. All these mounted to the 13 November 1970 coup in which Assad finally ousted Jadid and his supporters. After Assad's coup he felt that it would be difficult for him to rule Syria as he was an Alawi. It proved to be a tough situation for him to hold the highest position in the political scenario of Syria and moreover "to

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<sup>14</sup> The 23 February 1966 military coup d'état in Syria against the historical party leadership of Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar led to the emergence of two separate Ba'ath parties. Each of these parties maintains its own (pan-Arab) National Command and regional structures. The National Command ranked over the Regional Commands. Until the 1960s, it formed the highest policy-making and coordinating council for the Ba'ath movement throughout the Arab world, in both theory and practice. However, since 1966 when the Iraqi and Syrian Regional Commands entered into conflict and set up puppet National Commands, there have existed two rival National Commands. These are largely ceremonial, and were formed in order to further their rival claims to represent the original party.

<sup>15</sup> The term Regional Command stems from Ba'athist ideology, where region literally means an Arab state. The Regional Command is supposed to be subordinate to the National Command. Since al-Assad's rise to power, the National Command has been subordinate to the Regional Command. Prior to the 1970 Corrective Revolution which brought Hafez al-Assad to power, the local party leadership was elected by fellow Ba'ath members, when al-Assad came to power the Regional Command appointed all party officials.

do so openly in defiance of the centuries-old tradition that power belonged in Sunni hands, demanded political courage.” Same problem was faced by Salah Jadid and he had chosen Nureddin al-Atasi for the post of president who was a Sunni. Therefore, Assad chose a Sunni schoolteacher, Ahmed al-Khatib for the post of President and himself remained contented with the position of Prime Minister. “But his early doubts were not in keeping with his character and convictions, as from boyhood he had tried to free himself from sectarian complexes.” Finally, on 22 February 1971 Assad came to occupy the post of the President of Syria (Seale 1990:173).

The Alawites rose to power gradually both in the military and in government positions right from 1963. The three coups of 1963, 1966 and 1970 were instrumental in consolidating the power of the Alawites. The Alawites played a crucial role in the March 1963 coup and later on came to occupy key positions within the governments that followed. Sectarian politics took its ugly turn when Sunnis went against minorities within the Ba’th and also within the military. In order to resist President Hafiz, a Sunni, to strengthen his position, the Alawites filled most of the positions within the military with co-sectarians. Therefore, this led to flooding of the military establishment with Alawites and other minority origin officers. After the March 1963 coup seven hundred vacancies were available in the Syrian army out of which half came to be filled by Alawites. At one point of time the restrictions became so stringent that the Sunni graduate cadets were not allowed to join the officer corps. Pipes stated:

while Alawis, Druze, and Isma’ilis held politically sensitive positions in the Damascus region, Sunnis were sent to regions distant from the capital. Although communal affiliation did not drive every alliance, it provided the basis for most enduring relationships. Alawi leaders such as Muhammad Umran built key units of members from their own religious community. Sunni officers often became figureheads, holding high positions but disposing of little power. In retaliation, Hafiz came to see nearly every Alawi as an enemy and pursued blatant sectarian policies, for example, excluding Alawis from some positions solely on the basis of communal affiliation (Pipes 1990:170).

### **The Ba’th and its Rise to Power in Syrian Politics**

Here a special effort will be made to examine the Ba’th Party in capturing power and its emergence as a formidable force in Syrian politics. The Arab Ba’th Resurrection Party (*Harakat al-Ba’th al-Arabi*) came into being on 7 April 1947. Its founders were Michel Aflaq (an

Orthodox Christian) , Salah al-Din al-Bitar (a Sunni Muslim) and Zaki Arsuzi (an Alalwite) who were urban middle class nationalist intellectuals inspired by the nationalist struggles in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon during late 1930s and 1940s. Their struggle was mainly against the rule of the British and the French over these areas of West Asia. During this period, many other movements also started developing against the imperialist rule. A populist nationalist movement was formed by Akram Hawrani in support of the landless peasants in Hama region of Syria. Hawrani's Party came to be known as Arab Ba'th Socialist Party. In 1953 the Arab Ba'th (Resurrection) Party and the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party merged together to form the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party. Soon the Ba'th Party established branches in many Arab countries but it could be successful in exercising power only in Iraq and Syria.

The charter or the basic document of the Ba'th, as written by Michel Aflaq, defines it as follows:

The party of the Arab Ba'th is a socialist party. It believes that the economic wealth of the fatherland belongs to the Arab nation. Socialism arises from the depths of Arab nationalism. It makes up the ideal social order that will allow the Arab people to realize their possibilities, to enable their genius to flourish, and to ensure for the Arab nation constant progress (Spencer 2000:89).

The constitution of the Ba'th Party declares:

the Arab nation...constitutes a cultural unity. Any differences existing among its sons are accidental and unimportant. They will disappear with the awakening of the Arab consciousness. The nation will be the only bond existing in the Arab state. It ensures harmony among the citizens by melting them in the crucible of a single nation, and combats all other forms of factional solidarity such as religious, sectarian, tribal, racial and regional factionalism (Elhadj 2007:108) (See, Appendix III).

The mottos of the Ba'th Party were "Unity, Liberty, and Socialism" (*wahda, hurriya, ishtirakiya*). Principles which guided the Ba'th Party were "unity and freedom of the Arab nation within its homeland, and a belief in the special mission of the Arab nation, that mission being to end colonialism." To be able to achieve these, the Party had to be populist, nationalist, socialist and revolutionary in its character. Although the Party made it clear that it rejected class conflict, it worked towards "land reform; public ownership of natural resources, transport, large-scale industry and financial institutions; trade unions of workers and peasants; and acceptance of non-



exploitative private ownership and inheritance.”Constitutional form of government and freedom of speech were supported by the Party (Hiro 2001:8-9).

The Ba’th Party’s organizational scheme was approved in the Eighth National Congress. It is worth noting that in the Ba’th both the Military and the Civilian sectors have similar organizational structure. But one difference is that the Military Organisation comes under the purview of the Military Bureau (Rabinovich 1972:231) (See, Appendix IV).

The first party Congress of the Ba’th was held in 1947 in which Aflaq was elected as the General Secretary. In this Congress, the constitution and the party’s internal statute were adopted and therefore, 1947 is considered as its founding year by Ba’thists (Abdulghani 2011: 121).

The oligarchic politicians who inherited Syria from the French could not solve the problem of unequal land tenure structure and coupled with this was the issue of not including the middle and the lower class people into the political system. Due to these reasons Syria was facing growing agrarian unrest during the post-independence period. Simultaneously, the support provided to Israel by the West and West’s attempt to increase its influence throughout the region with the help of alliance systems sparked the growth of radical parties. The Ba’th was such a party which grew out of this. The Ba’th Party successfully infiltrated the army and became an attraction for the rural and minorities of Syria. The Syrian military had to meet the needs of country’s defence due to the perceived threat from Israel and therefore a lot of military recruits were selected from middle class and rural youth. The military became “a hotbed of nationalist and popular dissent.” The 1963 Ba’thist coup was a reflection of the growth of radicalism in the Syrian military. But the regime that was established following the coup had to face opposition from the traditional politicians that it had overthrown and also from the pro-Nasser people and the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the regime faced opposition from many fronts, initially it had a narrow support base. The regime was also “wracked by a power struggle along sectarian, generational and ideological lines in which ‘ex-peasant’ radicals, in particular Alawis, assumed power at the expense of middle class (usually Sunni) moderates.” The regime successfully built a strong ideological party which “mobilized a largely rural base of support and which institutionalized the Bath’s socialist and Arab nationalist ideology.” The army proved to be a pillar of strength for the regime as many peasant minorities especially Alawis were included in it (Nonneman 2005:83).

Most of the followers of the Ba'th consisted of the people from the rural origin such as the Alawites and the Druzes. The party also drew many officer corps of rural communities within its ambit. The main reason which attracted the officer corps towards Ba'th was that it stood in support of the peasants and Akram Hawrani's strong influence within the young military officers. Hawrani was instrumental in the establishment of the Homs Military Academy which provided an opportunity of social advancement for the children from rural backgrounds. Due to this the rural-based officer corps "attained access to a political organization, and that organization was gradually transformed into a vehicle for their interests" (Galvani 1974:3-16).

The merger of the Ba'th Party in 1953 took place as an opposition towards Shishakli's rule in. During Shishakli's rule, the Party was banned and Hawrani was sent into exile in Lebanon and this is when the two merged. The Ba'th had a prominent role in deposing Shishakli and the merger resulted beneficial when the party won 22 seats out of 142 in the 1954 parliamentary elections (See, Table 1). Gradually after the merger, Hawrani's ideology of socialism started dominating the Ba'th Party ideology of Arab unity. The concept of class struggle was making its way into the party to become a major component of Arab nationalism. "A strong dose of socialism was injected into its doctrine, gradually dissolving Aflaq's own interpretation of the concept." The dominance of socialism in the Party became evident when the party revised the 1947 constitution in order to change the original name, Arab Ba'th Party to Arab Ba'th Socialist Party (Rabil 2006:21).

Even though the Ba'th managed to secure only 10 percent of the parliamentary seats, it emerged as the third largest party in the parliament. Mere number of seats did not bother the Ba'th Party as it was better organized and had a cohesive element in it. This was missing in other political parties with the exception of the Communist Party and the People's Party. The Ba'th Party had the potential to organize effective workers' demonstrations and also draw the attention of the masses. It had a wide support base among the intellectuals and the young military officers. According to Peretz, this was a success "indicative of its growing leftism" (Peretz 1994:413).

Table 1: Strength of political parties in Parliamentary elections in Syria

1949		1954	
Political party	Number of seats	Political party	Number of seats
Independents(including 9 tribal representatives)	31	Independents	64
Independents tied to the People's Party	20	People's Party	30
Ba'th Party	1	Ba'th Party	22
National Party	13	National Party	19
Syrian National Socialist Party	1	Syrian National Socialist Party	2
Cooperative Socialist Party	1	Arab Liberation Movement	2
Islamic Socialist Bloc	4	Communist Party	1
Total	114	Total	142

Source: Seale, Patrick (1965), *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958*, London: Oxford University Press, p. 183. Note: The figures are only a rough guide; no exact comparison is possible. In 1949, party boundaries were fluid and candidates' affiliations unclear; the Chamber then consisted of 114 members as against 142 in 1954; the National Party officially boycotted the 1954 elections although many of its members stood; in 1954 no Islamic Party contested the election.

During the years 1954-1958 the Ba'th came to hold many prominent positions but had to share power on and off with the Communist Party of Syria. The Ba'th came to realize the growing power of the Communist party and took the advantage of key military officers and civilian politicians and sent envoys to Cairo to discuss about the Syrian-Egyptian union. But to its surprise one of the conditions put forth by Nasser prior to the formation of the union was the dissolution of all political parties in Syria including the Ba'th. The Ba'th had no other option but to abide by the conditions but soon resentment and disagreements started developing with Nasser on various issues related to socialist policy, foreign policy, authoritarian rule under Nasser, and the nature of unity arrangements. The Ba'th showed their resentments publicly and a number of Ba'thists including the founding members Hawrani and Bitar supported the coup of 1961 which led to the dissolution of the UAR (Salem 1990:43).

When the Ba'th saw the gradual growth of the Syrian Communists and the influence of the Soviet Union during the mid 1950s, they began to work towards the formation of the UAR. Since the Ba'th played a significant role in the formation of the union, it hoped that it would occupy key positions in the UAR and "solely control the Syrian region." Although Nasser did not promise the Ba'th members any key positions, "the leaders may have drawn a totally unwarranted conclusion that they were to have a favoured place in the new system." The members of the Ba'th became disappointed as they were given only minor roles to play. Worried because of the situation, Aflaq and Bitar asked Nasser to "unofficially set up a secret political committee," consisting of six persons: "Amer, Baghdadi and Zakaria Muhi al-Din, representing the Egyptian region; Hawrani, Bitar and 'Aflaq, representing the Syrian region." But the idea was rejected by Nasser. Nevertheless, it can be said that Nasser had a tolerant attitude towards the Ba'th as its organ, *al-Ra'i al-'Amm*, was allowed to continue its publications and "some of the party's political activities were allowed to continue behind the façade of sports and social clubs." A decree was issued on 8 April 1958 which appointed Hawrani as the Vice-President of the UAR and also as the Chairman of the Syrian Executive Committee along with greater responsibilities in the areas of administration, finance, and Arab refugees. The Ba'th saw the relatively weak hold of Cairo to over Syria as an opportunity to take over some important positions in the administrative field. The Ba'th went on to dismiss many administrative officials who were mostly landowners belonging to the People's and the Nationalist Parties and replaced them with their own members. The Ba'th used its strong influence over the army and sometimes

passed orders to transfer officers to other regions considered as “unsympathetic to its ideas” (Podeh 1999:53-54).

In 1958 Mustafa Hamdun, member of the Ba’th Party, was appointed as the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. His appointment to this position helped to increase Ba’th Party’s influence over the trade union movement taking place under the UAR. Nasser took the help of the Ba’th to remove their “mutual communist rivals” from the national federations and local unions. It is however important to note that in September 1958 the Ba’th Party emerged as the winner of the Executive Committee of the General Federation of Trade Unions. The Ba’th was assured of its victory beforehand as the Ministry of Labour did not allow thirty-six unions which were not under the Ba’th to vote (Heydemann 1999:122).

Under the union, many pro-Ba’th officers were transferred to Egypt, or removed or were given other diplomatic posts to hold. A secret organization came to be formed in 1959 by five such officers stationed in Egypt which eventually went on to include fifteen members (See, Table 2). This organization was to function secretly and was named the Military Committee. The main goal of the organization was to restore the “Syrian army to Syrian control.” The Military Committee members played an important role in the dissolution of the UAR among several other military groups (Galvani 1974: 3-16). The so called “transitional Ba’th” was born when the Military Committee was formed. From the beginning it “sought to recreate the party-within the officer corps-but on a new basis, and to steer it toward a course at variance with that of the UAR regime” (Batatu 1999:144).

Gradually the relations between the Ba’th and Nasser started deteriorating to a great extent. In his second UAR anniversary speech Nasser said:

If any group, faction or political party tries to deceive this nation they will not succeed because the people are fully alert. If any group among us comes forward that claims a monopoly of politics we will tell them that our basic objective is to establish a society free from political exploitation.

Removing the Ba’th Party from the UAR political system helped Nasser to have a tight grip over the union but this also proved to be a factor leading to the collapse of the union. The Ba’th Party was the main force behind the formation of the UAR and Nasser made a grave mistake by

restricting the role of the Ba'th as he lost his supporters from within the party and also within the Ba'thi military officers. On 30 December 1959 four Ba'thi Ministers, Bitar and Hawrani among them, submitted their resignation as they felt being out maneuvered by Nasser (Podeh 1999:104).

The UAR dissolved in 1961 and the Ba'th revived itself within one and a half years after the unions's dissolution. It successfully rose to power in the coup of 1963. The period after this coup experienced a series of coups and counter-coups. Although the Ba'th played minimal role in the coup, it was the 'rightist separatist elements' of the Ba'th which came to play a significant role within the state apparatus after military's hold over power. In the meanwhile, the Nasserites were trying to come to power through two coup attempts. The second coup attempt by the Nasserites proved to be disastrous as nearly seventy people were killed (Berberoglu 1999:57-58).

On 8 March 1963 a group of military officers belonging to the National Council of the Revolutionary Command took over power in Syria. In the same year, in the month of May, the Ba'thists (members of the Arab Nationalist Socialist Party) planned to overthrow the armed forces and the people involved in the administrative system who were thinking of a close alignment with Egypt. A new government came to be formed along these line on 13 May which was Ba'thist in it character. Once again another purge took place in June and the 'National Guard' came to be formed consisting of 'recruited members' of the Ba'th movement. On 27 July 1963 Maj-Gen Amin al-Hafiz became the President of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command which is considered as equivalent to the head of the state (Europa Publications Limited 2004:1019).

Table 2: Composition of the Military Committee

Officer	Province	Community
Muhammed Umran	Hamah	Alawi
Salah Jadid	al-Ladhiqiyah	Alawi
Hafez al-Assad	al-Ladhiqiyah	Alawi
Abd al-Karim Jundi	Hamah	Isma'ili
Ahmad al-Mir	al-Ladhaqiyah	Isma'ili
Salim Hatum	al-Suwayda'	Druze
Hamad Ubayd	al-Suwayda'	Druze
Muhammed Rabah al-Tawil	Al-Ladhaqiyah	Sunni
Husayn Milhim	Aleppo	Sunni
Uthman Kan'an	al-Ladhaqiyah	Alawi
Sulayman Haddad	al-Ladhaqiyah	Alawi
Mustafa al-Hajj Ali	Dar'a	Sunni
Ahmad Suwaydani	Dar'a	Sunni
Musa al-Zu'bi	Dar'a	Sunni
Amin al-Hafiz	Aleppo	Sunni

Source: Kolkowicz, Roman and Korbonski, Andrej (1982), *Soldiers, Peasants and Bureaucrats: Civil-Military Relations in Communist and Modernising Societies*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, p. 64.

After the 1963 'Ba'th Revolution' Bitar, the co-founder of the Ba'th was made the Prime Minister of Syria. "Although the Ba'th Revolution was bracketed chronologically by prior and subsequent coups, countercoups, and power struggles, it was far more than convulsion in the body politic." The non-Ba'thists were being removed from positions of power and the Ba'th Regional Command came to preside over the political life of Syria. However, just as the Ba'th Party "became ascendant, the military officers who had commandeered it as a vehicle for their rise to power abandoned its original egalitarian ideology by establishing a military dictatorship." The founders of the Ba'th, Aflaq and Bitar were expelled from the party and sent to exile. In an interview Bitar said, "The major deviation of the Ba'th is having renounced democracy.... The two real bases of the regime are dictatorship and confessionalism. The Ba'th Party, as a party, does not exist" (Federal Research Division 2004:213).

In the year 1963 the Ba'th had merely 500 members in Syria. In order to increase the Party membership and revive the party, it relaxed the entrance requirements and carried out a huge recruitment drive. Although this led to an increase in the party's membership to a great extent, it had a problem too. Rabinovich mentions that the frantic recruitment drive led to the admission of what he calls "elements alien and strange to the party's mentality" (Rabinovich 1972: 76)

After the 8 March 1963 coup the Ba'th came into power and brought about three significant changes in Syria. First, When the Ba'th and the military gained prominence in 1963, the people from rural and minority communities found a channel through which they could gain political power. It was an important landmark in the political history of Syria because the rural and minority origin people who were earlier oppressed came to mark their presence in the political arena of Syria. "In general the redistribution of wealth and the restructuring of the system of patronage according to new tribal/family affiliation has had more impact on Syrian society than any ideology." A second change was "centralization and modernization of administrative functions under the military and the concomitant, rise in all other cities and regions." The third and the most important of all changes was that the military came to penetrate all spheres of political life of Syria. Before 1963 although the military participated in politics, it could do so only with the help of civilian leadership, businessman, ideologues etc. But since the coups of 1963 and 1966, "the position of the military has been virtually hegemonic" (Curtis 1986:212).



The regime which came to power in 1963 favoured radical nationalism but did not possess an organized following of the masses. The civilian wing of the Ba'th was not strong enough to hold on to power against the rise of the military wing. Soon a state of emergency was declared by the regime and a crack down on the regime's internal enemies was followed. Many right-wing officers as well as Nasserites and the Communists faced removal from their military service. Several loyal Alawi Ba'thists were offered promotions and key positions in the military by Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad, members of the Military Committee formed in 1959. "Ethnic alliances joined ideological conflicts and personal aspirations in the struggle for power." General Ziad al-Hariri, the Minister of Defence and Chief-of-Staff was dismissed along with his supporters. Many Nasserites in the government were forced to resign and their political party, the Arab Nationalist Movement faced abolition and a number of its leaders were imprisoned (Salem 1990:10).

By the turn of 1964, the Ba'thist regime faced changes as a new leadership was emerging dominated by younger military officers and a small number of civilians who showed deviations from the party's pan-Arab ideology. The new leaders were more concerned with Syrian region rather than the whole Arab region. They came to be regarded as the 'regionalists.' The earlier Ba'th leadership had shown a "tactical readiness to suppress their rivals with little hesitation or remorse." The new leaders were no doubt committed to democratic values and civilian leadership but the ruling coalition which was formed in mid-1960s was based upon an authoritarian and militarized political system. A new constitution was introduced in 1964 which included provisions for representative and civilian institutions but in fact they were given little or no power and were to remain subordinate to the military dominated NRCC. The overall impact of these ideological and political changes is described by Malcolm Kerr, who states that the Ba'th Party suffered from a "serious moral impoverishment" as a result of its abandonment of early revolutionary principles (Tessler 1994:364).

The 1966 coup was led by Jadid and Assad, both Alawite military officers. They initiated land reforms, banks and firms were nationalized and monopoly of trade was handed over to the state. These measures came to be greatly supported by the 'Neo-Ba'thists' from lower classes and from rural areas. The new leadership sought a sharp approach towards Israel. In the power struggle

among the Ba'thists, the Alawi officers managed to mobilize support due to their leading roles in the Military Committee and in the Military organization of the Ba'th Party (Shora 2009:246).

Even after the 1966 coup the party was weak in its representation in the armed forces. Therefore, Ba'thist officers tried to occupy some of the key positions within the military and within months of the 1966 coup, the Ba'thist officers could be seen occupying positions in brigades, intelligence agencies and also were involved in making decisions relating to promotions, appointments, transfers and dismissals (Petran 1972:171).

One of the most important developments which took place post-1966 coup was that the Syrian army was undergoing important changes. The Ba'th tried to create what it called an "ideological army." This meant an army based on the ideology of the Ba'th. This led to a great upheaval within the army. The Ba'th viewed the armed forces as being different from what it was during the previous regimes. The Ba'th Party stated:

An army is the shield which ruling organizations erect around themselves in order that they may be active in developing their achievements, that they may be protected against surprises, whether internal or external, and that they may even strike.... All those who attempt to obstruct the functioning of their organization. In this sense the Army is a two-edged weapon: either it is a professional or bourgeois army it is a sword drawn against the neck of those classes.... Therefore, world imperialism and its agents make desperate efforts to maintain the bourgeois composition of the armies in the developing countries. They do so.... by introducing a spirit of professionalism and blind obedience into military concepts and by excluding the army from politics.... The replacement of the concept of the classical bourgeois 'professional army' by that of the 'ideological army' was the greatest blow aimed in modern times at world imperialist interests in the developing countries (Van Dam 1981:114).

In this context Rabinovich has described that in the post-1966 coup a 'symbiosis' occurred between the armed forces and the Ba'th Party. He points out that this was an "explicit, formal recognition and legitimization of the military as a political actor par excellence" (cited in Kokowicz and Korbonski 1982:66).

The 1966 Ba'thist coup increased the "Alawi complexion" in the regime. Many military officers were removed from their positions. Assad came to occupy the position of the Defence minister of

Syria and Jadid got rid of his military command and turned his attention towards the civilian wing of the Ba'th party. The new leaders exploited the 'popular revolutionary rhetoric' in order to introduce socialist measures and to form armed militias of peasants and workers. Several "popular organizations" were set up such as Peasant Union, Women's Union, Writer's Union etc. Trade unions of workers who were considered unsympathetic to the regime were closed down. The leaders came to depend on the protection of the 'state security apparatus' so that they could hold on to power. So much insecurity was faced by the leaders of the regime that during the 1967 War with Israel, Assad, the Minister of Defence stationed some of the best military units near Damascus to prevent threats emanating from the domestic front thinking that the enemies of the regime might take advantage of the war and try to seize power. The war was lost by the Arab States and Syria's Golan Heights and the Mt. Hermon were lost to Israel among other areas of belonging to other states. In the year 1969 Assad moved against his former ally, Jadid and took over major organs of the media under him. Assad strengthened his control over other institutions of importance as well. Assad declared that his regime would be a less radical one and would undertake pragmatic approach As the members of the Ba'th Party belonged to different backgrounds, their differing views relating to the future development weakened the solidarity within the party. Ideological struggle ensued and surfaced during the mid-1960s. Jadid and his supporters believed in "collectivist, state-run economy and a people's war of liberation against Israel." While Assad and his supporters were concerned with "accommodation with the private sector, expansion of the Ba'th Party to allow participation of non-Ba'thists in the state, and modernization of the armed forces." The power struggles between Jadid and Assad reached its peak during al-Hafiz's rule (1963-1965) (Salem 1990:10).

Assad seized power in 1970 through the 13 November coup and sent Jadid and many of his supporters to al-Mezze prison. He showed himself as a political liberal and conducted elections, formed a parliament and approved a new constitution. Under the banner of National Progressive Front other parties along with the Ba'th also joined. Measures for economic liberalization were being applied. But under Assad's regime new security services were set up, stringent rules were applied to control the mass media etc. Initially the democratic institutions seemed to flourish but in reality they lacked in influence. "More than ever, power was concentrated in the hands of just one man" (ibid.11).

Assad emerged victorious after the 1970 coup and his influence as a political and a military figure was enhanced. Prime Minister under Jadid's regime, Nurreddin al-Atassi and his supporters were defeated and were jailed (Emadi 2001:111). Assad emerged above all the Alawites, Druzes and the Isma'ili military officers. He sought to adopt a 'less militaristic approach' and an 'irreconcilable stance' towards Israel. Assad termed this coup as a "Corrective Revolution" or *al- harakat at-tashihiyya* (Shora 2009:246).

### **Syrian Social Nationalist Party**

A brief discussion on the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) is essential as it was once a very strong rival of the Ba'th Party in Syria until its demise in 1955. The SSNP (*al-Hibz as-Suri al-Qawmi al-Ijtima'i*) which is also known as the Syrian Nationalist Party or the Social Nationalist Party was founded in 1932 by Antune Sa'ada and it called for the formation of a 'Greater Syria.' The party was founded in Beirut, Lebanon. It embraced extreme ideals and had a great influence on the Ba'th Party. The three main principles of the party are "radical reform of society along secular lines, a fascist-style ideology, and Greater Syria" (Pipes 1992:101). One of the main objectives of the party is "to effect a Syrian national social renaissance capable of achieving its ideals and restoring to the Syrian nation its vitality and power. The party also aims to organise a movement that would lead to the complete independence of the Syrian nation, the consolidation of its sovereignty, the creation of a new system to safeguard its interests and raise the standard of life, and the formation of an Arab front" (Qadir 2006:113).

The SSNP was the first party in Syria to have members from the military after becoming active at the Homs Military Academy in 1934. Initially the party drew many of its members from the educated elite. Although the party did not enjoy widespread support, most of its members were of cultural, military, political and intellectual prominence. Adib Ali Shishakli who was Syria's one of the most popular military rulers was a member of the party. Another military ruler who is believed to be influenced by the ideology of the SSNP was Salah Jadid. (Pipes 1992:102). Jadid was the one who led the 1966 coup along with Assad and they were instrumental in bringing about some of the "strict secularist and socialist reforms for the first time in Syria's modern history." They worked towards the creation of a strong authoritarian government predominantly

composed of lower and middle-lower classes such as peasants, workers, the army and especially younger generation people. The Ba'th party was used to mobilize public support for the regime that came to be established after the 1966 coup and sought to influence people with the concepts of Arab nationalism, Syrian patriotism, socialism, secularism and anti-imperialism (Binder 1999:85). As time passed, the political parties which had strong influence within the political scenario gradually lost their stronghold over political affairs of Syria. Political parties like the SSNP, the Syrian Communist Party, Arab Socialist Party and the Ba'th Party gained prominence. In 1953 the Ba'th Party and the Arab Socialist Party merged to form the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party. The 1950s witnessed intense rivalry between the Ba'th Party and the SSNP. In 1955 the assassination of Colonel Adnan Maliki, the then Deputy Chief-of-Staff and a Ba'th Party member by a SSNP member led to total decline of the SSNP's influence in Syrian politics. After the SSNP's decline, the Ba'th Party formed an alliance with the Communists in order to erode the leftover power of the conservative parties. (Federal Research Division 2004:211).

Some similarities and differences can be drawn out in relation to the SSNP and the Ba'th Party. According to Pipes, "by the early 1950s, there was not a single high school graduate who had not had some exposure to the Ba'th Party or SSNP while in school." Both the parties shared a common aim of improving the lives of the peasants by mobilising them and bringing about a revolution against the oppressors of the peasants. Mostly, the lower ranks of the military supported the SSNP and the military officers were supporters of the Ba'th. Many people belonging to poorer and weaker sections of the society in Lebanon and Syria were drawn towards these two parties and joined them in large numbers. But the SSNP could never gather more supporters than the Ba'th. Both the parties enjoyed the support of the Alawites and many Orthodox Christians were attracted towards the SSNP. But in the long run, the Ba'th emerged more successful than the SSNP in attracting people and in the sphere of politics. Both the parties were reluctant to include the Sunni Muslims. Although this was the prevailing trend in both the parties, the Ba'th Party's founders made efforts to attract and accommodate Sunni Muslims. The so called secularist doctrines of both the parties made the Sunni Muslims to refrain from joining both the parties. "The SSNP never shed its stridently anti-religious and radical secularism; in contrast, Aflaq acknowledged the Islamic spirit and tried to accommodate it. Due to this the SSNP continued to remain a party of the minorities, while the Ba'th attracted a fair number of Sunnis" (Pipes 1988:303-324).

## **Hafez al-Assad**

Syria had experienced 21 coups and counter-coups during the period 1949 to 1970. The coming of Hafez al-Assad into power put an end to nearly two decades long instability in the political system of Syria. Under his regime the legislature, judiciary and the executive came to be placed under important members of the Ba'th Party (Elbadawi and Makdisi 2010:148). Assad needs special mention in this study because he became the first Alawite President of Syria who had taken over the reins of power by conducting a coup in the year 1970. According to Orbach, Assad's coming to power ended the long period of havoc and instability in domestic politics of Syria. "From the 1946 French withdrawal of the armies to Assad's bloodless coup in 1970, Syria was a train wreck of a country, with coup after coup and a temporary unification with Egypt" (Orbach 2007: 107). Assad was born in 1930 into a peasant family from Qordaha in Northern Syria. At the age of fourteen he was sent to a French school in Latakiya. Assad became a member of the Ba'th party when he became sixteen. He was actively involved in the student demonstrations against the French rule in Syria (Gresh and Vidal 2004:34).

Assad was elected as the president of the Union of Syrian Students in 1951 and came to be regarded as a politically important school-going student. For boys like Assad who did not come from rich families, a profession at the armed forces seemed to be an attractive one. It was so because from the independence of Syria in 1946, the fees at Homs Military Academy had been abolished. Assad wanted to join the Air Force and was one of the thirteen boys to be selected to study at the flying school in Aleppo. Later on, this flying school was promoted and given the status of an academy (Seale 1982:31).

Syria being predominantly an agricultural country had a large number of peasants residing in nearly 5,500 villages. The lives of the peasants were at the mercy of the landlords. One of the most important factors to shape Assad's attitudes was the peasants' revolt in Syria which gained recognition with the advent of the Arab Socialist Party of Akram Hawrani in early 1950s. It was Hawrani who was the first to cultivate a revolutionary and political attitude amongst the Syrian army. He was also successful in mobilising many peasants to fight for their rights against the landlords. The first three military rulers who ruled Syria from 1949-1954 were not able to address the problem faced by the peasants. Although Shishakli was a friend of Hawrani and

followed the vision of a Greater Syria of Antune Sa'ada, he failed to shape a "coherent social or economic philosophy with which to shape his policies" (ibid.32).

He can also be credited for being the first Alawite to be accepted by the Homs Military Academy. In the 1940s, Assad was actively involved in Ba'th Party politics. During the years 1966 to 1970, he was "part of the Alawite elite triumvirate with Salah Jadid and Muhammad Umran." Assad led a successful coup on 30 November 1970. The troops loyal to him arrested the opponents and took over control of the radio and the press (Nisan, 2002:122). He joined the secret officers' unit which had links with the Ba'th Party in 1950 (Kumaraswamy 2006:32). During the years 1961-1963, Assad worked at the Ministry of Sea Transportation and at the same time focused on political activities of the Ba'th. In the 1960s various factions of the Ba'th were at loggerheads to gain control over the country. Behnke states that instability returned to Syria when almost ten unsuccessful coups took place during the years 1963 to 1970. The 8 March 1963 coup which took the Ba'th Party to power was led by Amin al-Hafiz along with Ba'thist officers like Assad. Gradually Assad tried to gather strength within the Ba'th Party. Assad became the Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Air Force in 1964 and he was also appointed to the Ba'th Party's Regional Command. From 1963 to 1966, Amin al-Hafiz was the President of Syria only in name as most of the affairs of the state was being controlled by the young group of Ba'thist officers including Assad. Jadid's coup took place on 23 February 1966 and Assad helped him to carry it out. Under Jadid's regime, Assad was given the portfolio of Defence Minister. In 1967, the Arab-Israeli conflict reached new heights and Assad saw this as an opportunity in order to gain a widespread support. During the war with Israel, Syria lost a significant amount of its territory to Israel and therefore, Assad's influence suffered a big blow. The defeat in the war led to great disunity in Syrian politics and Assad tried to make use of the instability to his advantage. He tried to become a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause by supporting the Palestinians who fled to Jordan and also extending help to form the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Behnke states that "during Hafez al-Assad's years in office, Syrians saw him everywhere. Al-Assad's portrait hung in public buildings, homes, and streets, sometimes on banners or posters many feet high, and statues of him dotted Syrian cities" (Behnke 2005:29).

After Jadid's coup and the dismissal of the old leaders of the Ba'th there was constant infighting in the Ba'th. Many Ba'thi Military Committee members left the party or were ousted. Therefore,

only two main factions of the Ba'th were left; one led by Jadid and the other led by Assad. Assad was discredited due to the failure of the 1967 War. The then President Nureddin al-Atassi and the Deputy Secretary General of the Ba'th Party ordered Assad and Mustafa Tlas be stripped of all party and government positions. The coup of 13 November 1970 which was termed as the "Corrective Revolution" (*al-Thawara al-Tashiriyya*) marked the point in Syrian history when the army's intervention in politics reached its peak. Assad led the coup and strengthened his position both in Syrian politics and also within the Syrian army. This coup reflected the subordination of the Ba'th Party institutions by the victory of the senior officers and the army. The army also emerged victorious over the state apparatus and within the Syrian public. Assad was being backed by the army which for the first time in Syrian history which stood in complete solidarity. This did not happen earlier during the military coups of the 1950s and 1960s when the army was divided due to discord within ranks and hence fought with one another. According to Rubin and Keaney the "Corrective Revolution was not only the peak of military involvement, but also the end- at least thus far-of this involvement" (Rubin and Keaney 2002:114).

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## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

Before the Second World War, the military organization was seen merely as a defence force against external and domestic threats to a particular country or society. But the Second World War changed the view that was held by people regarding the military. The military came to be regarded as being able to play a constructive role in the society by participating in the socio-political development of societies. The evolution of civil-military relations reflects that the earlier image of the military as a 'negative element' in politics is no more relevant in the present day context. However, it becomes difficult to draw boundaries separating the political arena from the military one. A thin line divides the duties, ethos and responsibility of the military from that of politics. The concern of the present study is not to discuss and distinguish politics from military organization.

Through this study an attempt has been made to study the role of military in Syrian politics. It has been found that the military organization in the West Asian context differs from that of the European models of military organization. Factors which can be attributed towards the difference are historical background, colonial rule, cultural and traditional values etc. In West Asia, the military has always been an issue of discussion due to its active intervention in political life. The region experienced a series of coups spanning across several countries in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Syria is the first Arab country in the region to experience a coup after the Second World War. Syrian context offers interesting insight into the factors of military intervention in politics and also the struggle between the civilian politicians and the military to hold on to power in political life. Syrian military's role in politics has ranged from direct takeover of power to authoritarian rule to behind-the-scenes role. General Husni al-Za'im's coup is of utmost importance since the role of the Syrian army remained no more "subject to the decisions of civilian politicians and instead became a political force in its own right."

The military in Syria had its origin under the Umayyad Caliphate. The Syrians were regularly recruited as local troops under the Ottoman Empire. But gradually as the idea of nationalism gained awareness in the minds of the Syrian and other Arabs serving under the Ottomans, they sided with King Faisal and fought against the Ottomans. The Rule of the Ottomans came to an

end in 1918. After that many Syrians joined and served in the Arab Army for a short period (1918-1920) under the rule of King Faisal. In 1920 Syria came under the rule of the French. The French recruited more than half of the army from the Syrian minority communities. The Sunni Arabs who constituted majority of the Syrian population did not represent much of the recruited troops under French. Syria has a number of minority communities such as the Alawis, Druzes, Kurds, Armenians, Christians etc which have always been over-represented in the *Troupes Speciales*, a Syrian armed force formed by the French. But people from the minority communities mostly filled the lower ranks and file of the army. The French favoured a minority recruiting policy as they felt threatened due to nationalist aims of the Sunni Muslims of Syria. But the minority recruitment policy is not enough to explain the over-representation of the minorities in the army. Another reason is the concept of '*badal*', a fixed amount to be paid for relieving a conscript from military service. It was difficult for the lower class people and the minority communities who were mostly economically weak to pay for *badal*. The urban Sunni Muslims and the upper class people paid *badal* to relive their sons from conscription. The military organization was also considered as an inferior institution by the upper class urban people and therefore refused to send their sons for military conscription or for recruitment.

Syria gained independence on 17 April 1946 from the French rule. The Syrian political system of the country after the French left was characteristic in defining the future course of events. The power to govern Syria came to be placed at the hands of the 'traditional ruling elite' and the upper class people. These people were the ones who were at the forefront of leading the opposition against the French. In 1946 Syria was grappling with a host of other domestic problems. The Minority communities of Syria who mostly came from rural areas faced political marginalization in the hands of the majority Sunni Muslims after independence. On 8 July 1945 the French had handed over *Troupes Speciales* to the Syrians which later on became national army of Syria. The number of troops in newly formed Syrian army which was mostly occupied by the Syrian minorities and considered as a platform for their social and economic mobility, was drastically reduced by the civilian government of Syria. When the French handed over the *Troupes Speciales* it numbered 7,000 but as per the decision of the political leaders of the country it was reduced to a mere 2,500. The political leaders justified the reduction of the army by claiming that the army was proving to be an economic burden. This study has found that it

came as a major blow to the minority communities who felt that the ruling elite was trying to marginalize them.

The defeat in the Palestine war in 1948 further antagonized the army officers who were under constant criticism and accusation by the civilian politicians. The first coup led by Husni al-Zaim in 1949 was also supported by the opposition politicians who wanted Shukri al-Quwatli's government to be overthrown. In the first coup the military did not single handedly overthrew the government but had the support of civilian politicians also. An interesting trend which was identified in the course of the study is that all the first three coups in 1949 were conducted by military officers (Husni al-Za'im, Sami al-Hinnawi and Adib Ali Shishakli) who were Sunni Muslims of Kurdish origin and belonged to well to do families from Aleppo and Hama. Hence, it can be derived from this that the Shia minority communities such as the Druzes, Isma'ilis and Alawites were not at the forefront of overthrowing civilian governments till 1954 but this trend was reversed in the period after Shishakli was ousted. Shishakli was overthrown by mainly Druze military officers. After the break-up of the Syrian-Egyptian union in 1961 Alawite military officers rose to prominence in Syrian politics. Hafez al-Assad was the first Alawite Air Force Lieutenant to lead a coup and set up his own government in 1970.

Many important developments were observed during the late 1940s and 1950s in relation to the rural and minority origin youth being attracted to the Arab Socialist Party, the Ba'th Party and last but not the least, their enrollment to military academies in large numbers. The rural youth who enrolled themselves at the Homs Military Academy during 1940s were also greatly influenced by Akram Hawrani's socialist ideas, his fight for agrarian reforms and social justice for the rural peasants. The ideas of Hawrani greatly appealed mostly to the minorities and the rural youth who were studying at the Academy. The enrollment of the minority youth into the military academy was in large numbers in 1946 and it continued. In 1947 the Ba'th Party was formally established and its first Congress was held. The Ba'th drew a lot of members from the marginalized and the disadvantaged sections of the Syrian society and also many young military officers. It is from this time that the Ba'th was being used as an instrument by the young military officers especially from rural areas and minority communities to play a decisive role in the political affairs of Syria. In 1952 the Ba'th Party and the Arab Socialist Party merged together

and this became a platform of representation for the military officers and people who came from rural areas and minority communities.

Shishakli's overthrow was led by Druze military officers with support from civilian politicians who were against Shishakli's autocratic regime. The period after the fall of Shishakli's regime again saw the establishment of civilian governments and the return of the traditional ruling elite. But the military was not completely detached from politics. During this period the military kept a close watch on the civilian governments and monitored them. In the mid 1950s the Syrian military was divided into various factions and the civilian leadership was also weak and divided. The issue of Pan-Arab unity was creating havoc in the domestic affairs of Syria. Military officers were divided into factions supporting Communists or Ba'thists or pro-Iraqi or Pro-Egypt etc. However, the proponents of unity with Egypt succeeded leading to the establishment of the UAR on 27 February 1958.

Under the UAR regime, both the Syrian military and the civilian politicians were relegated to the background. The Ba'th Party members and the military officers both gradually became disenchanted with Nasser's repressive policies under the UAR. The Syrian military officers, except the Nasserites felt vulnerable due to their reduced role in political life. The main point to be noted here is that many Syrian military officers were given civilian posts in various ministries and departments without much responsibility and power. Only Abd al-Hamid Sarraj was considered loyal by Nasser and given an important position in the UAR but later on an Egyptian military officer, Abdel Hakim Amer, was chosen over Sarraj and even Sarraj was stripped of his powers. The dissolution of the UAR was led by Damascene officers with the support of the business community members who were hit hard by Nasser's economic policies and July 1961 decrees.

Following the dissolution of the UAR, civilian government was established under President Nazim al-Qudsi, a member of People's Party. The Syrian army was divided among themselves and were struggling over the issue of reunification with Egypt. Nasserites, anti union officers, Ba'thists etc were all struggling to get hold of power after the break-up of the UAR. The Ba'th Party's power seemed to grow gradually as the civilian governments which were formed post-UAR had the support of Ba'thist military officers and the cabinets which were formed included several Ba'th Party members. The coup of 8 March 1963, was indicative of the rise of Ba'th

Party to power when for the first time Luay al-Atassi, a Ba'thist military officer became the president of Syria. From the year 1963 the Ba'th Party came into power its stronghold over Syrian politics continued. This coup reflected how tactfully the Ba'th tried to sideline all the other contenders for power in Syria. Ba'th Party not only became a formidable force in politics but also was successful in ensuring that no one else could take over power from its hands.

An examination of the civilian governments shows that they had some inherent problems due to which their hold over Syrian political affairs greatly weakened which provided the military to take advantage of the situation and enter politics. After the first 1949 coup in Syria, although a few civilian governments were formed, the military always acted from behind-the-scenes and interfered in political affairs. An overall examination of the various civilian regimes which were formed amid military coups and counter-coups shows that whenever a civilian cabinet was formed, it included certain members who were supporters of military officers or favoured by the military officers who helped to establish that particular civilian government. For instance, Fawzi Selu, the right-hand-man of Shishakli had to be included in the civilian government set up after December 1949 coup led by Shishakli. Same trend was noticed in the subsequent civilian governments which were set up in the post-UAR period. The civilian governments were also under constant supervision and monitoring by the military officers on whose support the civilian government's survival depended. This fact greatly weakened the hold of the civilian politicians over Syrian political life. If such civilian governments did not fulfill the goals set up by the military officers from whom they drew their political support, they were toppled. Therefore, it can be stated that although there were formation of civilian governments in between various coups and counter-coups, the military was ever present in the background and kept an eye over the civilian governments.

As far as the Ba'th Party's role in perpetuating the role of military in Syrian politics is concerned, it can be said that most of its members consisted of military officers who came from rural and minority background right from its inception in the 1940s. Many initial members recruited to the Ba'th were intellectuals and teachers who were minorities. In particular, the ideology of socialism and secularism of the Ba'th attracted many Alawites, Druzes and Kurds serving in the Syrian army. Most of the people who were in the government after the Ba'thist coup of 8 March 1963 were Ba'thist civilian and military members. But the younger Ba'thists

who were oriented towards 'Regionalism' had more power in the regime than the older Ba'thists. In the 1966 coup, the Ba'thist co-founders were completely removed from the political scenario and were sent to exile. The 1966 coup also brought about the increase in Alawite military officers in the army as more and more seats in the Homs Military Academy came to be filled by them from the mid-1960s.

While discussing about the Ba'th it must be remembered that another party with similar ideologies, the SSNP was also an attraction for the people from rural areas and for the minorities in the early 1950s. But there were some basic differences also. The SSNP was considered to be pro-Western and anti-Communist and anti-Arab nationalist whereas the Ba'th Party's main agenda was to unite the Arabs in order to eliminate Western influence in the region. The Ba'th Party rose into prominence after the SSNP was banned in 1955 and became one of the main factors behind perpetuating the intervention of the military in politics.

Throughout the study nowhere it could be seen that the Syrian army was overtly against civilian rule and hence the military opted for coups and counter-coups which rendered Syrian as one of the most unstable country during the period 1949-1970. It was observed that the Syrian military remained ever conscious of the social and political issues and whenever it was felt that the interests of the military was being hampered or undermined, a change was brought in the Syrian political scenario by direct or indirect military intervention.

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(\* indicates a primary source)

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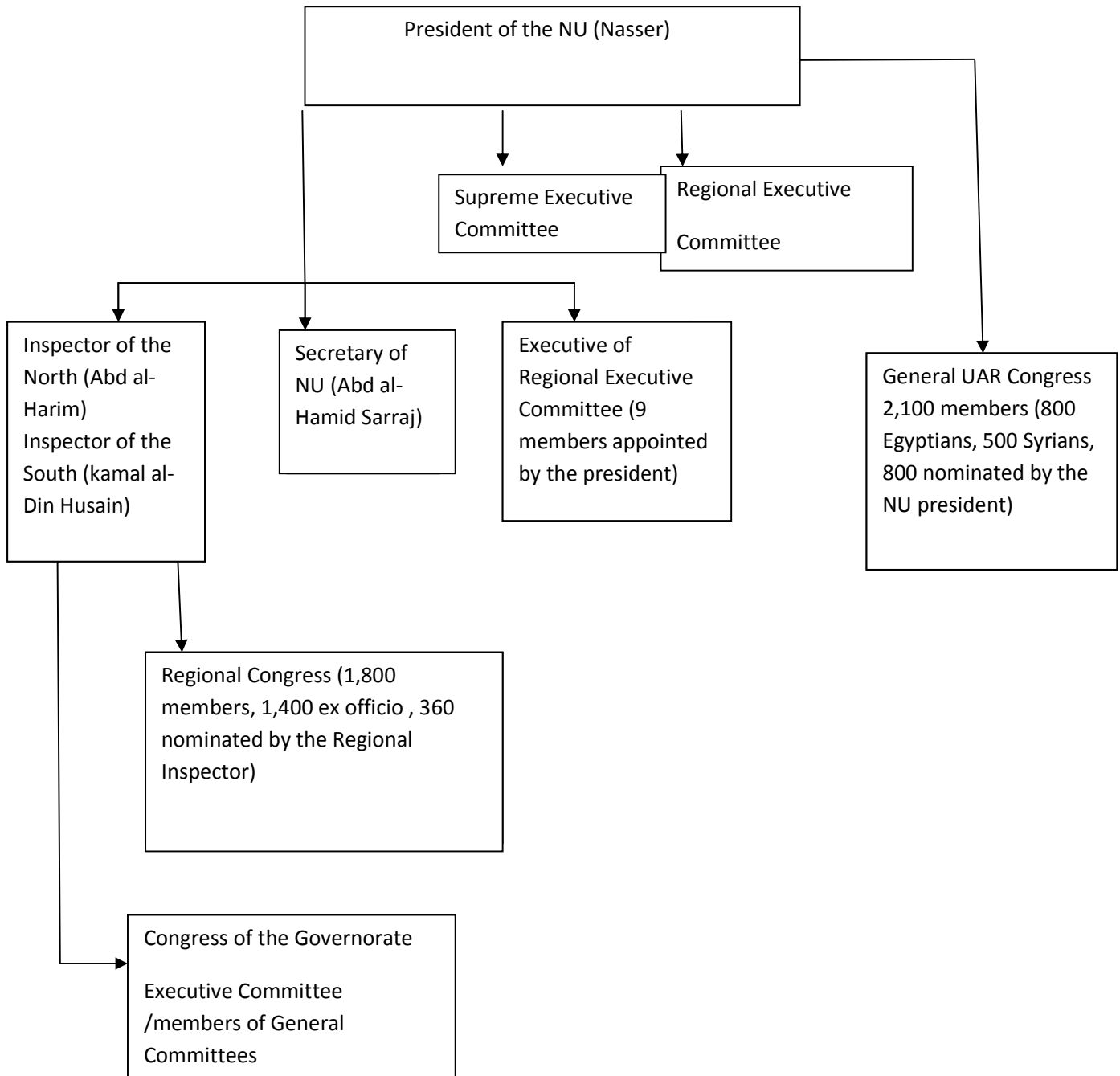
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**APPENDIX I: EXECUTIVE AND REGIONAL ZONES OF THE NORTHERN UAR REGION (SYRIA)**



Source: Perlmutter, Amos (1974), *Egypt: The Praetorian State*, USA: Library of Congress, p.152.



## APPENDIX II: COMPOSITION OF REGIONAL AND NATIONAL COMMANDS, 1963-

66

1. Regional Command Chosen by the Syrian Regional Congress in September 1963<sup>16</sup>

Hamud Ash-Shufi (secretary-general), Dr. Nur ad-Din al-Atasi, Khalid al-Hakim, dr. Mahmud Naufal, Ahmad Abu Salih, Colonel Hamad ‘Ubaid, Colonel Hafiz al-Asad, captain Muhammad Rabab at-Tawil.

2. Regional Command Chosen by the Extraordinary Syrian Regional Congress in February 1964

General Amin al-Hafiz, Colonel Salah J’did, Mohammad ‘Umran, Colonel Hamad ‘Ubaid, Colonel Hafiz al-Asad, Colonel ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, Fahmi al-Ashuri, Suleiman al-Ali, Muhammad az-Zu’bi, Sami al-Jundi, Jamil Shiyya, Dr. Nur ad-Din al-Atasi.

3. Regional Command Chosen by the Second Regional Congress in April 1965

General Amin al-Hafiz, General Salah J’did, Colonel Hamad ‘Ubaid, Jamil Shiyya, Dr. Yusuf Z’ayyin, Habib Haddad, Muhammad az-Zu’bi, Mustafa Rustum, ‘Adnan Shuman, Al-Walid Talib.

4. Regional Command Elected by the Extraordinary Regional Congress in August 1965

Colonel ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, Colonel Mustafa Tlas, Majr Salim Hatum, Major Muhammad Rabah at-Tawil, Dr. Nur ad-Din al-Atasi, Dr. Yusuf Z’ayyin, Jamil Shiyya, Muhammad ‘Id ‘Ashawi, Marwan Habash, Fa’iz al-Jasim, Hisam Haiza.

5. Regional Command Chosen by the Extraordinary Regional Congress in March 1966

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<sup>16</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the composition of the Commands is taken from Ba’thi sources. This is based on *an-Nahar*, February 9, 1964.

General Hafiz al-Asad, General Ahmad Suwaidani, Colonel ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, Major Muhammad Rabah at-Tawil, Salah J’did, Nur ad-Din al-Atasi, Fa’iz al-Jasim, marwan habash, Kamil al-Husein, Habib Haddad, Mustafa Rustum, Muhammad az-Zu’bi, Dr. Yusuf Z’ayyin, Jamil Shiyya, Muhammad ‘Id ‘Ashawi, Dr. Ibrahim Makhus.

6. National Command Elected by the Sixth National Congress in October 1963<sup>17</sup>

*From Iraq:* Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, mahdi Ammash, Ali Salih as-Sa’di, Muhsin ash-Shaikh Radi, Hamdi ‘Abd al-Majid. *From Syria:* Michel ‘Aflaq, Amin al-hafiz, Salah J’did. *From Jordan:* Dr. Munif ar-Razzaz (?).

7. National Command Elected by the Seventh National Congress in February 1964

*From Syria:* Michel ‘Aflaq, Amin al-Hafiz, Salah J’did, Muhammad ‘Umran, Shibli al-Aisami, Mansur al-Atrash. *From Lebanon :* Jubran Majdalani, ‘Abd al-Majid ar-Rafi’i, Ali al-Khalil. *From Iraq :* Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr. *From Jordan :* Dr. Munif ar-Razzaz. *From Saudi Arabia :* ‘Ali Ghannam.

Source: Rabinovich, Itamar (1972), *Syria under the Ba’th 1963-66*, Jerusalem: Israel University Press, p. 226-227.

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<sup>17</sup> Only the partial composition of the two National Commands is known. The Ba’thi sources did not disclose the names of the Jordanian delegates.

## **APPENDIX III: SPECIAL PREFACE TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE BA'TH PARTY.**

Ba'th Arab Socialist Party—Pan-Arab Command.

‘The Arab Nation is One, and possesses an Eternal Message.’

### **The Constitution**

‘A National, Popular, Insurrectionary Movement struggles  
on the path of Arab Unity, Freedom and Socialism.’

### **Preface**

The provisions of the *Constitution*, as the eleventh Pan-Arab Congress emphasised, remain one of the basic points of departure of the Party. Nevertheless some of them constituted a conflict between two mentalities.

The bourgeoisie mentality wished to use the Party since its birth for its personal ends and aspirations. It was able to disseminate through it some of the presuppositions which were consonant with its bourgeoisie nature, to wit: the Parliamentary regime; the contradiction it found in defining a directed and free regime; a number of other liberal notions.

The revolutionary mentality was tied to the masses. It was able to establish among the fundamental and general principles the fundamental points of departure of the contemporary Arab revolution: Arab unity, freedom of the Arab masses, and the realisation of socialism.

Accordingly at this stage in the life of the Party the Constitution was encompassed by subjective and particular circumstances. A specific leap forward, it adopted the generality of basic causes of contemporary Arab nationalism. Nevertheless, reality subsequently established that that was not enough. In particular the *Constitution's* efforts at defining theoretical points of departure offer a basis for a theory of struggle for the Arab revolution. This is what the Party has undertaken through its Congresses and the course of its struggle, especially the Sixth Congress, in which some theoretical points of departure were settled. That broadened the horizons of the party's

intellectual heritage, transcending the adverse consequences, difficulties and deficiencies with which the first ethical principles of the Party were concerned.

It does us no harm to take a critical look at our heritage and to revise it continually to correct the defects. The mission to developing the Party in relation to subjective, personal, fortuitous and ever-changing circumstances is a national and Pan-Arab mission which the Party's Congresses and Commands undertake. This is the hallmark of the Party's excellence and its force and the increase of its membership and the endurance and scope of its influence.

If the Office of Propaganda, Publication and Information celebrates the production of the Party's Constitution as it is, it does not thereby direct the comrades' contemplation to the Party's heritage alone. Rather did the internal discipline laid down by the Eleventh Pan-Arab Congress subscribe at the outset to the proposition that 'the Party's aims are the achievement of the fundamental and general principles in the Constitution and its theoretical points of departure and the resolution of its Congress (Chapter 2).' [This must refer to a second article in the proceedings of the Eleventh Congress. Article 2 of the Constitution merely treats of the geographical site of Party Headquarters.]

The first duty which attends the enrolment of new members of the Party is instructing them in the fundamental and general principles in the Constitution. They must be studied and explained and believed, because they are the motives for the Party's struggle, and because they were and are and will be the fundamental driving force of the struggle of the Arab masses in all part of the Arab country. These principles are unity, freedom and socialism.

Office of Propaganda, Publications and Information. Damascus  
August 1973.

Source: Roberts, David (1987), *The Ba'th and the Creation of Modern Syria*, Kent: Croom Helm Ltd. p 157-158.

## APPENDIX IV: THE BA'TH PARTY: AN ORGANISATIONAL SCHEME

The following scheme of the organisation of the Ba'th Party is based on the internal Regulation of the Ba'th party, approved by the Eighth National Congress, and on the Internal Regulation of the party's Military Organisation in Syria, issued several weeks later. The scheme describes the party as it should have been late in 1965, disregarding its development and deviations from these rules in the actual operation of the party.

### *Membership*

There are three categories of membership in the Ba'th Party : Active member (*'udw'amil*), Apprentice member (*'udw mutadarrib*), and Supporter (*nasir*). An Active Member participates in all formal meetings of his unit and has the right to vote in all party elections and, depending on the duration of his active membership, to run for party offices. In Syria a new recruit must spend 18 months as a Supporter and 18 more months as an Apprentice Member before he becomes an Active Member.

### *The Syrian Regional Organisation*

The smallest unit in the party's hierarchy is the Cell (*halqa*) which includes three to five members. Three to five Cells constitute a Section (*firqa*), defined by the party as "the elementary unit of the organisation". The Section elects its own Command (*qidaya*), composed of five members, but its Secretary (*amin sirr*) is appointed by the Command of the superior subbranch (*shu'ba*). The subbranch is made up of three to five Sections and is the lowest level in the party to hold a periodical Congress (*mu'tamar*). Certain Subbranches are independent and they elect their own Commands and Secretaries, but in those Subbranches that are incorporated in Branches (*far'u*, pl. *furu'*) the Secretary is appointed by the superior Branch. The party's 13 Branches in Syria are each composed of two to five Subbranches and are structured according to the administrative division of the

state. The Branch's Congress elects both a Command and a Secretary. The Command operates through Bureaus (*maktab*, pl.*makatib*) such as The Workers Bureau (*maktab al-'ummal*), The Bureau of the Secretariat (*maktab al-imana*), and so on.

The Military Organisation (*at-tanzim al-askari*) is made up of Branches modelled after the civilian ones. Unlike the civilian sector of the Syrian Ba'th, the Military Organisation is run by a separate Military Bureau (*maktab 'askari*).

The Military Organisation and the civilian sector converge in the Regional Congress (*mu'tamar qutri*). The active membership of the Congress is made up of representatives from the Branches while other party functionaries participate as observers. The Congress elects a Regional Command, a Regional Secretary, and a Regional Tribunal. It evaluates the party's performance since the previous Congress and formulates its broad policies for the coming period. The length of that period is determined by the incumbent Regional Command. The Regional Command operates through Bureaus and meets for regular weekly sessions.

#### *The National Organisations*

The National Organisation (*at-tanzim al-quami*) is made up of the party's regional organisations. The party's organisation in most Regions (*aqtar*) reaches only the level of a Branch or a Subbranch. The National Congress attended by their representatives is the highest authority in the party. It elects the National Command, the party's secretary-general, and the National Tribunal, and determines the party's policies and procedures. The National Command, too, operates through Bureaus and its regular sessions are monthly. Between National Congresses the National Command is accountable to the National Consultative Council (*al-majlis al-istishari al-quami*), a forum composed of delegates representing the party's Regions according to size.

Source: Rabinovich, Itamar (1972), *Syria under the Ba'th 1963-66*, Jerusalem: Israel University Press, p 230-231.

