

The Struggle for Syria

A Study of Post-War Arab Politics
1945 - 1958

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with a Foreword by
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1943, he met two young schoolmasters, inseparable since their Paris student days in the 1930s, who had recently launched among young people a left-wing Arab nationalist movement called the *Hizb al-Ba'th al-Arabi*, or Arab Resurrection party. They were Michel 'Aflaq, a Christian, and Salah al-Din Bitar, a Muslim. Hawrani did not at that time develop any official connexion with this group, but he raised questions in the Chamber on its behalf and was a frequent visitor at party headquarters. Their ties became still closer in the dramatic circumstances of the armed rebellion against the French in May 1945, in which the Ba'th leaders played an active role, calling on nationalist officers to desert from the French-led *Troupes spéciales*.

Hawrani's alliance with 'Aflaq and Bitar was later to produce one of the most dynamic forces in Syrian politics. But their revolutionary socialism sprang from vastly different roots. The Ba'th leaders were intellectuals, eager to apply at home the Marxist ideas they had learned at the Sorbonne. Hawrani's belligerency was rooted in personal resentment, not abstract theory; it had a sharp edge of rancour from which 'Aflaq and Bitar were free. But even a man like 'Aflaq, if less sanguinary than Hawrani, was not the meek and self-effacing poet and theorist that he at times appeared to be; in the tradition of the Damascus burgher, all docile amiability towards his Turkish overlord, he too, was seething with revolutionary ideas.

THE COOKING-FAT SCANDAL

In the search for a scapegoat after the Palestine catastrophe, the army blamed the politicians and some politicians the High Command. The appointment of Colonel Husni al-Za'im as Chief of Staff in the first month of the war checked for a moment the flood of mutual recrimination but did not end it. Soon the army was restive again as it daily became clearer that the Government had made no provision for the war: front-line troops had been given defective and insufficient arms and equipment; the lamentable failure of Captain Fu'ad Mardam's arms-purchasing mission was still very much in people's minds; allowances had been trimmed; food deliveries to the front were uncertain; at the same time the army's fighting qualities were under insulting attack in the Chamber from Faysal al-'Asali, a deputy from the town of Zabadani, who led a small but noisy right-wing faction called the Socialist Co-operative Party. This secondary personage would scarcely deserve a mention were it not that his strictures against the army degenerated into a bitter personal quarrel

between Za'im and himself. Never had the army been so insulted by a member of parliament. Many sources quote 'Asali's attacks as a factor which triggered the crisis and drove Za'im to revolution.⁶

Early in 1949 there occurred another bizarre incident to which, more directly even than Faysal al-'Asali's attacks, the timing of Za'im's coup may be attributed. When he took over command of the army in May 1948, Za'im naturally reshuffled a number of senior appointments. A notable newcomer as chief supply officer was Colonel Antoine Bustani, whom Za'im had known at school. Some months later, shortly after Khalid al-'Azm became Premier in December, President Shukri al-Quwatli and his new Prime Minister set off on a tour of front-line positions and supply points. The story has it that the two politicians noticed a pungent smell coming from a field kitchen. On making inquiries they were told that it came from burning cooking fat. Quwatli demanded that a new tin be opened and an egg cooked before him. The fat once more gave off a nauseating smell: the President tasted it and pronounced it of inferior quality. Samples were sent for testing and revealed that the fat was made from bone waste. To appreciate the shocking nature of this finding it must be observed that fat made from sour milk and known in Arabic as *samnah* is the unshakable basis of all Arabic cooking. No self-respecting Arab will cook in anything else, no Arabic food tastes right without it, and great health-giving qualities are imputed to it.⁷ That the heroes at the front should be defrauded of this essential ingredient was a hideous crime. Quwatli immediately ordered the arrest of Colonel Bustani on a charge of profiteering at the army's expense. But Za'im, instead of complying with the order, installed Bustani in an attic at the Defence Ministry, inspired, it would appear, either by loyalty to his old friend or by a desire to ensure that Bustani would be in no position to talk and perhaps implicate others in the affair.

⁶ Gen. Shawkat Shuqayr to the author, 18 Dec. 1960. See also a first-hand account by Lt. Col. Bahij Kallas in *Alif Ba'* (Damascus), 27 June 1949: 'The coup was contemplated on the day Faysal al-'Asali . . . attacked the army in parliament. The army commander gathered the senior officers around him at his Qunaytra headquarters and talked to them of the seriousness of the situation. . . . 'Asali was one of the first men to be arrested after the coup. His luxuriant head of hair, of which he was inordinately proud, was shaved clean on Za'im's orders. See also Communiqué no. 9 issued by Za'im after the coup (*al-Nasr*, 31 Mar. 1949): 'The motive for the movement undertaken by the army is the repeated assaults on and the disgrace brought to the army both inside and outside the Chamber of Deputies; and the ill-treatment of the army. . . .'

⁷ As any housewife will confirm, *samnah asliyah samnah hadidiyah*: genuine *samnah* is iron *samnah*.

The officers, moreover, were indignant at the suggestion that in the incident faulty corrupt politicians and officers should be blamed. Their noses were pinched when officers were seen smelling *samnah*. The army and the politicians in the Defence Ministry outside Damascus. They looked on Za'im's close mood of the officers as faced with the disaster.

Za'im himself made an emissary,⁸ sent by him as saying: 'Tell Za'im to tell all'. On this visit to the country but to blameless. When it advanced into Syria drawing Vichy authentic *Troupes spéciales*, v against the invaders at his disposal. But a situation confused, Za'im's end of the brief campaign Free French opponents arrested, brought to labour. Quwatli reinstated in the new.

Za'im was a heavy eye and the florid face at the turn of the century of Kurdish origin, his jocular manner of t

⁸ Ferzat al-Mamluk, an author owes many of the incident was, however, prominent banker and for that Quwatli had probably staged the scene in the f

army, was captured by the British in the First World War, before joining the *Troupes spéciales* during the Mandate, a force which formed an integral part of the French army of the Levant.

Men who knew Za'im agree that he was an adventurer with few ideals; that he was emotionally somewhat unstable and easily inflamed; that he was brave to the point of foolhardiness but that he had few gifts as a strategist. His military record in Palestine had not been dishonourable. His ambition, which later flowered extravagantly, found a ready instrument in the core of nationalist officers in the Syrian army who, after the Palestine campaign, came to take a high-minded view of their role as guardians of the country's welfare and among whom Akram al-Hawrani's influence was already dominant.

THE PUTSCH

Hawrani did not himself plan the coup but two of his warmest army supporters, Bahij Kallas and Adib al-Shishakli, became Za'im's most intimate fellow conspirators, with Hawrani joining in on the very first days of the new regime. Kallas was Za'im's second in command while Shishakli led the infantry and armoured units which were to carry out the coup. He marshalled his force at Qatana within twenty miles of the city, receiving orders to march on the capital at 2.30 a.m. on 30 March.⁹

There then took place a scene which was often to be repeated: one detachment of troops arrested the President in hospital where he was receiving treatment for a gastric ulcer and heart complaint; another the Prime Minister; a third secured the radio station; a fourth took over police headquarters; a fifth the headquarters of the *gendarmérie*; a sixth the central telephone exchange. Other units, each with its assigned objective, filtered through the sleeping city picking off the chief of police, the commandant of the *gendarmérie*, and a number of ministers and deputies, including Faysal al-'Asali, whose attacks in the Chamber the army chiefs had found so distasteful.¹⁰ Radio and telephone communications with the outside world were interrupted and the frontiers closed. Later that morning Colonel Antoine Bustani was released from prison and reinstated as army supply chief. The merchants who had supplied the inferior

⁹ Fadlallah Abu Mansur, *Asir Dimashq* (1959), p. 47.

¹⁰ Ahmad 'Isa al-Fil, *Suriya al-jadida f'il inqilabayn al-awwal wa'l-thani* (1949), p. 33.

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cooking fat were arrested and held responsible. The London *Times* reported that the revolution was 'bloodless, complete and successful'. The populace waking to the news greeted it with an explosion of joy, demonstrating yet again that it is a perennial civilian illusion to put one's trust in senior officers.

The old regime passed unregretted. It was made up of men whose political experience had been gained in resisting, obstructing, and tilting at the Mandate. They were not traitors as their successors were sometimes to call them, but they had had little opportunity of learning the craft of state-building. They were a group of politicians with few roots among the people, who had been denied a training in government by the policies of the Mandatory, and who since independence had shared power between them in traditional style, with little understanding of what a popularly-based, representative government really meant. No one was more surprised than Quwatli at the coup. It is said, although the story remains unconfirmed, that Za'im gave orders for the deposed President and Premier to tour the city concealed in an armoured vehicle to see for themselves the people dancing in the streets.

Za'im's successful *putsch* was the first intervention of the army in politics in the Middle East: it set a fashion which was to be widely followed. It demonstrated not so much the reforming zeal of the army—we have seen that Za'im's own motives were questionable—but the fragility of a western constitutional formula stretched like a new skin over the fissures of a traditional society. The Palestine experience showed up the incompetence of the old regime and sharpened the army's disaffection. But the movement which carried Za'im to the presidential palace was powered by the rise of radical pressure groups and political agitators on the left who undertook the political education of the young, in the army as outside it, giving them a new view of politics and wider ambitions for the Arabs in general.