

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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F Soviet Muslims had announced
le East to rid the Holy Land of

height of the Suez crisis started
: Soviet satellization of Syria. It
a of alarmist reporting of Syrian
af regime, by Syria's reputation
and purposefulness of Soviet
to which reference was made in
n Arab opinion in neighbouring
dents in Beirut—of the views of

ries—but particularly in Britain,
md Israel—now published lurid
;t aircraft and tanks to Syria, of
icers and technicians, and of the
Evidence for these reports was
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:. Dissenting views were not
w York Times correspondent in
that he could find no confirma-
rge quantities of Soviet arms,
esident, the Premier, and other
nmunist' were equally ignored,
i of Communist infiltration in
al-Hawrani in February 1957;
the Syrian people's will to fight
is simply that Arab nationalists,
srlica's heavy-handed solicitude
in the attentions of the Soviet
:e of a 'power vacuum' in the
to abandon their claim to run
nentor on the local scene more
ten.⁸ But the longer Damascus

held out, the more Mr Dulles became convinced that he could
discern there the workings of a Soviet master-mind. As 1957 wore
on, the crusade against International Communism led the Secretary
of State into an unbecoming tussle with the Syrians which was an
important contributory factor to their eventual leap into union with
Egypt.

THE SUMMER CRISIS OF 1957

The Syrian-American quarrel came to a head in midsummer
1957, but the opening shots were exchanged several months earlier.
Syria was, in fact, the first Middle East state to attack the premises
on which American policy was founded. On 10 January, less than a
week after President Eisenhower's message to Congress, the Syrian
Government issued a statement rejecting the theory of the 'vacuum',
disputing the view that economic interests gave any Power a right
to intervene in the area, and denying that Communism presented any
immediate threat to the Arab world. Imperialism and Zionism were
the main dangers to which Arabs remained exposed.

It was clear to both Egypt and her Syrian ally that American
interference in Arab affairs in the name of anti-Communism threat-
ened to rob them of that local initiative for which they had fought
since 1955. Their resentment at American tutelage grew into open
hostility in the spring of 1957 when it became clear that Mr Richards's
tour was resulting in a redrafting of Middle East alliances hostile to
them. When the United States sprang to the support of King Husayn
during the April crisis in Jordan, Syrian and Egyptian indignation
knew no bounds. With American aid, Husayn succeeded in ousting
from power the political leaders ideologically akin to the radical
and revolutionary elements which were the mainstay of the Egyptian
and Syrian regimes. In their place, he established his own firm
authoritarian rule, based on the more traditional props of his
army and the old tribal organizations east of the Jordan. In retro-
spect, this upheaval was the first major set-back for Nasirism in Arab
Asia.

King Saud firmly backed Husayn in this resolute action, splitting
the four-Power alliance of Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan
which had been symbolized by a meeting of heads of state in Cairo
in February. Husayn, meanwhile, followed up his coup by demanding
the withdrawal from Jordan of Syrian troops stationed there since
the Suez crisis—a request which the Syrians received with 'distress

Inly indignant but amused, as is flush-
ing Lebanese woman writer, Leila
ping a young man reading a political
the party fills the vacuum in his life,
ugh to suggest 'the current American
where' (Leila Baalbaki, *Ana Ahya*
larbot (1961), p. 65).

and bitterness', seeing in it another link in the long chain of anti-Arab conspiracies.⁹

But if Richards was cold-shouldered by the Syrians, he received a warm welcome in Lebanon where President Sham'un and his Foreign Minister, Charles Malik, were committed to a policy of close relations with the western Powers. Malik had taken over the Foreign Ministry in November 1956 on the understanding that Lebanon had no future if she severed her links with the West; relations had accordingly been maintained with Britain and France throughout the Suez episode. This brought the Lebanese leaders under very sharp attack from Cairo and the Soviet bloc so that, by 1957, they were casting around anxiously for means of fortifying themselves in advance of the day of reckoning which they knew must come. Sham'un and Malik saw themselves threatened by the twin forces of Nasirism and Communism. Hence their policy of intimate friendship with the United States and, more specifically, their acceptance of the Eisenhower Doctrine on 16 March. By early summer, then, Cairo radio was in full blast not only against the Governments of Jordan (diplomatic relations were severed on 9 June), Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, but also against the United States on the charge that 'U.S. colonialism' was now waging open war against the Arabs.

Events inside Syria were meanwhile adding to American apprehensions. In mid-March an important contract for Syria's first oil refinery was awarded to the Czechoslovak Techno-Export Company after a fierce debate between left- and right-wing factions. Later that month, attempts by President Quwatli and the moderate Commander-in-Chief, Nizam al-Din, to replace the radical 'Abd al-Hamid Sarraj as military intelligence chief failed owing to strong opposition from the Ba'th and Khalid al-'Azm. At by-elections in May the Government and its left-wing supporters emerged triumphant, further strengthening their internal position.¹⁰

⁹ See Foreign Minister Bitar's press conference, 31 May 1957 (BBC, no. 262, 3 June 1957).

¹⁰ The by-elections were held in Damascus, Horns, Suwayda, and the Jabal al- Arab following the trial and conviction of four deputies, Munir al-'Ajlan, 'Adnan al-Atasi, Fadlallah Jarbu, and Hail al-Surur for complicity in the 1956 'Iraqi' conspiracy against the state. Left-wing candidates were returned in the first three constituencies while the fourth was a tribal area where party affiliations played no part. Over half the electorate abstained. The main trial of strength was in Damascus where the Ba'thist Riyadh al-Malki opposed the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Shaikh Mustafa al-Siba'i, and won by a short head. Sib'ai however, polled 47 per cent of the votes cast—demonstrating that Islam was far from being a spent force in Syrian politics—in spite of the fact that his opponent was backed by the Ba'th,

In a stormy debate in the Chamber on 1 June the People's Party leader, Rushdi al-Kikhia, was driven to threaten the mass resignation of his supporters in the House. In a particularly provocative speech, Khalid Baqdash had delivered a long apology for the Soviet Union and had attacked the People's Party as 'lackeys and agents of imperialism'. Kikhia rose immediately and accused Baqdash of aiming at shaking public confidence and at spreading chaos and corruption throughout the homeland. He accused the Government of condoning Baqdash's statement by its silence. In the ensuing tumult, he collected his papers and left the Chamber. This prompted another People's Party leader, Ahmad Qanbar, to accuse Baqdash of using the rostrum to disseminate Communist propaganda. He then charged the parliamentary majority with becoming arrogant and despotic: 'A great reign of terror prevails in this Chamber. I stand opposed to this terror and to the Government and I challenge it.'

Some observers in Damascus saw this move as an unsuccessful attempt to bring about the downfall of the 'Asali Government: the opposition was particularly anxious to deny the cabinet four months of undisturbed tenure during the approaching summer recess. Strong at home but ringed by hostile apprehensive neighbours, it was feared that the left in Syria might now attempt an outright bid for power. These, then, were some of the preliminary rumblings which heralded the approach of the crisis.

Three events in quick succession were then to precipitate it. On 6 August the Syrian Defence Minister, Khalid al-'Azm, signed a wide-ranging economic and technical agreement with the Soviet Union in Moscow; a week later, on 13 August, Syria expelled three American diplomats, who were accused of plotting to overthrow the regime; this was in turn closely followed by the retirement of the Commander-in-Chief, Nizam al-Din, and his replacement on 17 August by 'Afif al-Bizri, an officer of suspected Soviet sympathies. A dozen other officers were purged at the same time.

The news of these happenings caused consternation in Washington. Nerves were somewhat frayed by the months of vigilance and by the spectre, constantly evoked, of a Communist assault on the Middle

the Communists, and all the 'progressives', as well as by factions of the National and People's Parties—and benefited from the prestige of being 'Adnan al-Malki's brother. The Soviet Embassy is said to have intervened vigorously to secure the withdrawal of the Communist candidate in both Damascus and Homs in favour of a more generally acceptable left-wing candidate. (For this last point see H. A. R. Philby, *Observer Foreign News Service*, no. 12238, 30 Apr. 1957.)

East. It was a situation in which the United States could be said to have been mesmerized by a monster of its own creation. The danger of a Soviet take-over had been so explicitly heralded, a battle-drill of such precision had been prepared, resources of such magnitude had been deployed to guard against a surprise attack that, now that the enemy appeared to have struck, action could no longer be avoided.

The great question Mr Dulles and other leaders of Western diplomacy will face this week [the *New York Times* declared on 18 August] will be whether the United States and Syria's pro-Western neighbors can tolerate a Soviet satellite, or something very much like one, in the heart of the Middle East.

But were these internal Syrian developments really of a nature to warrant American intervention under the terms of the Eisenhower Doctrine? In what sense could Syria be said to be the victim of aggression 'from a country controlled by International Communism'? Was not the Doctrine, with its carefully restrictive definition of the conditions for American action, more of a straight-jacket than a deterrent? As Mr Dulles (under Democrat prodding in the Senate) wrestled with these problems, it was perhaps permissible to conclude that by reducing Syrian and Arab conflicts to a straight contest between the West and Communism the United States had robbed its diplomacy of much flexibility.

Looking a little more closely at the events of early August beginning with Khalid al-'Azm's mission to Moscow, it will be seen that there were many good reasons—political, economic, and personal—why he should have gone at this time. In the first place, the agreement which he negotiated was a natural climax to the growth of Syrian-Soviet relations over the previous two years. The Russians had been extremely helpful: their warm and continuous solicitude had helped the Syrians to stand up to equally persistent western pressure. The Russians had been unstinting in arms deliveries and in public assurances of support. At times of great anxiety, for instance during the battle over the Baghdad Pact in 1955 or the Suez war of 1956, they had given the Syrian public a new confidence that in the event of an armed attack on their country they would not stand alone. Khalid al-'Azm had been one of the principal architects of this rapprochement. He now, no doubt, felt justified in believing that it had paid handsome dividends in securing both Syria's continued independence and his own personal ascendancy. But by mid-1957 a

further consolidation of relations with Russia was thought necessary to counter America's rather importunate attentions and to strengthen 'Azm's hand in the internal political struggle which he knew lay immediately ahead. Hence his triumphant Moscow visit. There was also important business to transact. Arrangements had to be made for paying for the arms which the Russians had so liberally provided; Syria had a large grain surplus which she was keen to dispose of; most important of all, large-scale foreign credits and technical aid were required for the next stage of economic growth after the private enterprise heyday of the 1940s and 1950s. Just as Khalid al-'Azm had been one of the first Syrian statesmen to appreciate Syria's need to end the customs union with Lebanon and build a Mediterranean port of her own, so he also understood the need for dams and irrigation works to free her essentially agricultural economy from the vagaries of seasonal rains; for a modern transport system to move export crops to the sea from the new lands of the north-east; for domestically produced fertilizers to improve yields; for more systematic prospection for oil and other minerals. All this was provided for, on generous terms, in the agreement concluded with the Soviet Union. It was, then, a treaty fully justified on national grounds even if, in western eyes, it might seem to indicate the long-term subordination of Syria's economy to Soviet control.

But more immediately alarming was the announcement by the Syrian Government on 12 August of the discovery of an American plot to overthrow the regime. The following day three American diplomats—Lieut-Colonel Robert W. Malloy, the military attache, Howard E. Stone, a second secretary, and the vice-consul, Francis Jetton—were declared *personae non gratae*. They were the first United States diplomats since the Second World War to be officially accused of plotting to overthrow an Arab Government. Washington riposted by expelling the Syrian ambassador, Farid Zayn al-Din, and a member of his staff.

Were the Syrian charges well founded? On examining the evidence—confused and untidy though it is—it is hard to dismiss them as fabrications.¹¹ Convinced that Syria was 'going Communist', the

¹¹ Sec («) Statement by the Syrian Foreign Ministry on the discovery of an American conspiracy against the security of the State, 19 Aug. 1957 (Document 284 issued by the Bureau de documentations arabes, Damascus);

(b) Syrian Indictment in the American conspiracy case: statement by the military examining magistrate, 28 Sept. 1957 (Document 311);

(c) Proceedings of the Military Court, 11 Dec. 1957-12 Feb. 1958 (Document 318).