

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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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*.

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The officers, meanwhile, far from rallying to Quwatli, were indignant at the summary treatment of one of their number, seeing in the incident further criminal meddling by incompetent and corrupt politicians in military matters. It was intolerable that army officers should be made out to be thieves. Street urchins held their noses when officers passed on the pavements as if to say what evil-smelling *samnah*. The issue grew into a trial of strength between the army and the politicians. Quwatli learned that Bustani was skulking in the Defence Ministry and demanded his transfer to Mezze prison outside Damascus. But in pressing the charges the President overlooked Za'im's close relationship with Bustani and misjudged the mood of the officers. Defeated in Palestine, ridiculed in parliament, faced with the disorder of civilian politics, this was the last straw.

Za'im himself may have been implicated in the *samnah* scandal. An emissary,⁸ sent by him to visit Bustani in prison, reports the latter as saying: 'Tell Za'im that if there is an inquiry I shall be obliged to tell all'. On this view Za'im carried out his coup d'état not to save the country but to save himself. His earlier career had not been blameless. When in June 1941 Imperial and Free French forces advanced into Syria to put an end to German infiltration, the withdrawing Vichy authorities entrusted Za'im, then an officer in the *Troupes spéciales*, with a mission to organize guerrilla operations against the invaders. A sum of about 300,000 Syrian pounds was put at his disposal. But as the Vichy cause seemed hopeless and the situation confused, Za'im preferred to abscond with the money. At the end of the brief campaign, Vichy exposed Za'im's defection to its Free French opponents (and compatriots) in a radio appeal. He was arrested, brought to trial, and sentenced in 1942 to ten years' hard labour. Quwatli released him at the end of the war when he was reinstated in the newly-formed Syrian national army.

Za'im was a heavy, thickly-built man with broad cheeks, a fierce eye and the florid face of a Latin American dictator. Born in Aleppo at the turn of the century into a relatively prosperous business family of Kurdish origin, he retained until the end of his life the boisterous, jocular manner of that city. He started his career in the Ottoman

⁸ Ferzat al-Mamluk, an 'Independent' deputy in the Syrian Chamber, to whom the author owes many of the details of the '*samnah* scandal'. The importance of the incident was, however, confirmed by Shawkat Shuqayr, by Edmond Homsi, a prominent banker and former minister, and by Khalid al-'Azam himself, who added that Quwatli had probably been tipped off about the inferior cooking fat and had staged the scene in the field kitchen: 'C'était de la mise en scène'.