

THE STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA (THE ROAD TOWARDS THE UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC)

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Syria has been an important centre for Arab nationalists for centuries and the Syrians see themselves as the natural leaders of Arab nationalism. By the time Syria gained its independence from the French in 1943, Syrian leaders were divided on how to pursue their goal of Arab unity. The country was full of political parties; the army was indoctrinated and politicized; social cleavages were extreme; the rich and influential Syrian families were opposed to any change in the status quo; the communists wanted a revolutionary Syria. Externally, Syria was the subject of constant outside intrigues: the West wanted to see a pro-Western Syria; the East worked hard to win Syrian friendship; for decades the Hashemite kings of Iraq and Jordan had wanted to bring Syria under their control.¹ However, the regional dimension played a decisive role and Egypt's stand was of supreme importance. The roots of the conflict lay not in the Syrian tilt toward the Soviet bloc but in the US attempts to dominate the region.

The overthrow of the Syrian military dictator Colonel Adīb Shīshaklī early in 1954 was followed by a restoration of the Constitution of 1950. The well-to-do politicians who had been displaced by the military *coup d'état* after the disgrace of the Palestine War now returned to power and, in the elections held in the fall of 1954, secured 70 per cent of the seats in the Chamber. But just as in the elections held under the French mandate a minority of "extreme" nationalists had often been able to dominate a Chamber composed of mainly disorganized moderates,² so now the political tone was set by a radical group, the Socialist Party of Arab Resurrection (the Ba'ṭ), although its sixteen deputies constituted only 11 per cent of the Chamber. Its leaders, Michel 'Aflaq, Ṣalāḥuddīn al-Bīṭār, and Akram al-Ḥawrānī, all about forty years of age, had drawn up a programme of Arab unity and social-economic radicalism, directed especially against foreign concessionaries and the great landlords – a programme that naturally appealed to those younger urban "intellectuals", including some army officers, who saw no great prospects for themselves under a regime of the conservative politicians. As in Iraq after the

¹ HASOU, Tawfiq Y.: *The Struggle for the Arab World*. London, KPI Ltd., 1985, p. 112.

² HOURANI, Albert H.: *Syria and Lebanon*. London, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 194.

overthrow of the military dictator Bakr Sidqi in 1937, the return to constitutionalism had not led to any lessening of political intrigue within the army;³ and the influence of the Ba'ṭ therein was contested by a rival radical National Social Party (al-Ḥizb al-qawmī al-ijtimā'ī),⁴ whose differences with the Ba'ṭ perhaps turned, in the last analysis, more on personalities than on principles. The Ba'ṭ had a strong point of influence with the army in the deputy chief of staff, Lt. Col. 'Adnān al-Mālīkī; but in the course of a series of conflicts between the Ba'ṭ and its opponents in various towns early in 1955, this officer was shot dead by a member of National Social Party.⁵ This party was thereupon outlawed, and some scores of its members were brought to trial. Three of the most prominent ones were given death sentences (at the same time, five more were similarly condemned *in absentia*); after being taken to the appeal court, these sentences went to the president of the republic for confirmation. However, the conservative Shukrī al-Qūwatlī (whose re-election to that office in 1955 had been opposed by the Ba'ṭ) was reluctant to seal this factional fighting with the finality of the gallows;⁶ and the Syrian political scene in mid-1956 was thus a precarious balance between the conservatives, among whom was the new chief of staff, Brigadier Tawfiq Nizāmuddīn, and the Ba'ṭ, which now held the portfolios of foreign affairs and national economy, as well as the important post of head of military intelligence in the person of the thirty-two-year-old Major 'Abdulḥamīd as-Sarrāj.

The international crisis which followed the Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal Company accordingly found both the Ba'ṭ and the Syrian conservatives (forced by necessity)⁷ staunchly supporting Egypt. The Syrian government had followed Egypt in establishing closer relations with the USSR and in recognizing communist China; and on 30 October 1956, the very day of the Anglo-French ultimatum to Egypt and Israel which precipitated the Suez crisis, president Shukrī al-Qūwatlī left Damascus on a three-day visit to Moscow. The Syrian government proclaimed its complete solidarity with Egypt in meeting the Anglo-French-Israeli aggression against her; and in the first days of November, the pumping stations on the IPC oil pipeline crossing Syrian territory were blown up – by units of the Syrian Army, according to IPC information.⁸

³ KHADDURI, Majid: *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*. London, Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 126.

⁴ It was before the Syrian National Party (Al-Ḥizb al-qawmī as-sūrī) under the leadership of Anṭūn Sa'āda.

⁵ TIBAWI, A.L.: *A Modern History of Syria including Lebanon and Palestine*. London, Macmillan, St Martin's Press, 1969, p. 393.

⁶ TORREY, Gordon H.: *Syrian Politics and the Military, 1945-1958*. Ohio State University Press, 1964, p. 311.

⁷ KIRK, George E.: *Contemporary Arab Politics. A Concise History*. New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1961, p. 93.

⁸ LENCZOWSKI, George: *Oil and State in the Middle East*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1960, pp. 235 and 289.

The Suez war was obviously an attempt to reassert British strength as the final decisive factor in Middle Eastern politics. It was an action which could succeed only if the other powers were willing to allow the Middle East to be a British preserve. Apart from the moral repugnance aroused by the manner of the action, it was a challenge to the essential interests of the Soviet Union and also of the United States. It therefore led inevitably to the intervention of the two great Powers.⁹ After Suez the USA and the USSR found themselves face to face in the Middle East. The former was there as Britain's heir, the latter pressed her way into the area over the previous two years by recognizing and enlisting Arab nationalism as an ally against the West, by arms deals, trade, and aid. Both Powers now sought to consolidate and legitimize their new positions of strength.

Washington had to take into consideration that Great Britain had virtually lost its role as a great power in the Middle East. Another fact was that USSR had intervened in the crisis, not with armed force but still strongly enough to show that it would take full advantage of the division among the Western allies. Hence the USA looked with alarm to the expansion of Soviet power in the Middle East and warned Moscow that any threat to the territorial integrity or political independence of the states of the area would be viewed "with the utmost gravity".¹⁰

On 21 November 1956, the Syrian delegate asked the UN General Assembly to pay immediate attention to "an imminent Anglo-French-Israeli aggression against Syria". Four days later, the Syrian press published the following communiqué from a military spokesman: "at the critical moment when all the units of the Syrian Army were on the move, at the side of the Egyptian and Jordanian units .. just at this critical moment, the Syrian military authorities came into possession of great quantities of important war material during an attempt to transfer it into Syria from a neighbouring Arab country. Thereupon an investigation was begun, and the culprits arrested who were preparing to stab in the back their nation, their fatherland, and their army as they stood ready to engage themselves in the fight. The first pieces of evidence revealed those with whom these lawbreakers were in league. We say with anguished mind and bleeding heart that it was a government on which we relied until recently to place itself at our side in the day of battle, in spite of its having taken the wrong road and been deceived by the policy of alliances and the imperialists."¹¹

In the first half of December, a National Parliamentary Front, pledged *inter alia* to see justice done against those involved in this conspiracy, was formed under the leadership of the Ba'ṭ and rapidly grew to include more than half the members of the Chamber. The conservative People's Party (Ḥizb ash-Sha'b), consisting mainly of well-to-do citizens of Aleppo and Homs, remained outside this

⁹ HOURANI, Albert H.: *A Vision of History: Near Eastern and Other Essays*. London, 1961, p. 140.

¹⁰ Department of State, United States Policy in the Middle East, September 1956-June 1957, Documents (Washington: G.P.O., 1957), pp. 419-420.

¹¹ *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 36 (1956), pp. 694-695.

Front, and on 22 December prime minister Šabrī al-ʿAsalī re-formed his Cabinet to exclude its former People's Party members.¹² On the same day, it was announced that among those awaiting trial for complicity in the alleged conspiracy were a number of ex-ministers and other notables of the People's Party, together with tribal shaykhs, members of the proscribed National Social Party, and relatives and supporters of ex-dictator ash-Shīshaklī. The Iraqi foreign minister and the deputy chief of staff were alleged to have furnished money and arms for the purpose of overthrowing the present Syrian government and replacing it with one more friendly to Iraq.¹³ Lebanese members of the National Social Party were said to be implicated, as well as the British military attaché in Beirut. The trial opened on 8 January 1957, in the largest public hall in Damascus, and not only the setting but the confessions of the accused were reminiscent of the political trials held in the "people's democracies" which the Baʿt seemed determined to emulate in their country.¹⁴ The hearings ended five weeks later, and the sentences were pronounced on 27 February: five death sentences, later commuted to penal servitude for life, and the rest long sentences of imprisonment. On the same day, thirty members of National Social Party were indicted on charges of inciting violent demonstrations at Aleppo against the government.¹⁵

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President Eisenhower stressed the objective to prevent the advance of Soviet power into the Middle East. That objective was implicit in the Truman Doctrine of 1947 and in the programmes of military and economic assistance carried on since that time. He declared that the "security frontiers" of the USA extended to the Middle East as they did to Europe and Asia.¹⁶ President Eisenhower made the specific proposals in his special message to Congress on 5 January 1957. He stressed the importance of the Middle East to the USA and warned of the danger that international communism posed to local governments. He got the authorization to employ the US armed forces to secure the political independence of indigenous states under attack by any communist-controlled regime.¹⁷ In the consequence the Eisenhower administration found itself in the next two years locked in a confrontation with the forces of radical Arab nationalism and the Cold War became fully extended into the Arab theatre.

¹² AL-MUʿALLIM, Walād: *ŠāriyT 1918-1958*. Nikosia, Sharikat BTbil li an-Nashr, 1985, p. 206.

¹³ BIRDWOOD, Lord: *Nuri as-Said*. London, Cassel & Co., 1959, pp. 246 and 261.

¹⁴ *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 37 (1957), pp. 112-113.

¹⁵ TORREY, op. cit., p. 330.

¹⁶ CAMPBELL, John C.: *Defense of the Middle East*. New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1961, p. 122.

¹⁷ The Middle East resolution, which later became known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, was adopted by the Senate and by the House of Representatives on 5 and 7 March. It was signed into law on 9 March 1957. In: Department of State Bulletin, 21 January 1957, pp. 83-87.

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.¹⁸

In the eyes of Arab nationalists, the Suez war had demolished the myth of the Soviet threat to regional security. They believed that the Eisenhower Doctrine's emphasis on the danger of international communism was misplaced. To them, Britain, France, and Israel were the main enemies. In this sense, the doctrine did not take into account Arab needs or fears; it was vague and unrelated to immediate problems in the area, such as economic development, political independence, and the Palestine question. The last of these "became a universal problem intruding into every political relationship".¹⁹

It is not surprising that the Eisenhower Doctrine met with lukewarm support in the Arab world. Egypt and Syria rejected the premise behind the doctrine that there was a vacuum in the Middle East. They contended further that the doctrine was directed against them rather than against any potential Soviet threat. In other words, the Eisenhower administration was fighting Arab nationalism under the guise of combatting communism. To the Egyptians and Syrians, the United States had taken on the imperial mantle of Britain and France; this was evident in the US government's refusal to recognize the right of small states to pursue independent policies and in its attempt to organize the region under US leadership.²⁰

Much to their dismay, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan could not identify publicly with the Eisenhower Doctrine. The regional environment imposed certain limitations and conditions that Arab rulers ignored at their peril. Jamāl 'Abdunnāṣir's ability to incite the crowds and to mobilize Arab public opinion deterred pro-Western Arab regimes from supporting the doctrine. For example, despite his dependence on US aid, king Ḥusayn went to great lengths to dissociate himself from Eisenhower's programme. He promised Jordanians he would not act unilaterally without Arab consensus.²¹

After the Suez war, US strategy was aimed at wooing Saudi Arabia away from the Egypt-Syria axis. King Sa'ūd was invited to visit the United States early in

¹⁸ In: Documents on International Affairs, 1957, p. 241.

¹⁹ HOURANI, op. cit., p. 137.

²⁰ AL-BITĀR, Ṣalāḥuddīn: *Bayna al-mabda' wa al-taḥqīq: as-siyāsa al-'arabiyya* (Between Principle and Application: Arab Politics). Beirut, Dār at-Ṭalī'a, 1960, p. 95-106.

²¹ MUTAWI, Samir: *Majmū'at khuṭab al-malik Ḥusayn. 25 'āmm min at-tārīkh. 1952-1977* (The Collected Speeches of King Hussein: 25 years of History). Vol. 1., London, 1978, p. 150.

1957: the atmosphere was cordial on both sides and the results were gratifying. King Saʿūd pleaded for US military and economic aid. After his return from Washington, during the Cairo meeting of Arab leaders in February 1957, king Saʿūd made clear to his Arab counterparts that he was against positive neutralism and in favour of a pro-Western policy.²² Meanwhile ambassador James P. Richards, Eisenhower's special envoy, was touring Middle Eastern capitals to explain the doctrine and to make agreements for the extension of military and economic aid which it authorized. Among the Arab states he visited were Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, where he and the doctrine received warm official praise; Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Sudan, which were polite but more restrained in their welcome; but not Egypt, Syria or Jordan, none of which invited him. It was in Jordan, at the very time that Amman was a logical next stop on Richards' timetable, that a crisis arose.²³

But if Richards was cold-shouldered by the Syrians, he received a warm welcome in Lebanon where president Kamīl Shamʿūn and his foreign minister, Charles Mālik, were committed to a policy of close relations with the western powers. Charles Mālik 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. However, dissatisfaction with the regime began in 1956 during the tripartite aggression, when Lebanon failed to give active support to Egypt and the government refused to sever diplomatic relations with Britain and France.²⁴ 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. Kamīl Shamʿūn and Charles Mālik saw themselves threatened by the twin forces of "nāṣirism" and communism. Hence their policy of intimate friendship with the United States, and more specifically, their acceptance of the Eisenhower Doctrine on 16 March 1957.²⁵

It was clear to both Egypt and her Syrian ally that American interference in Arab affairs in the name of anti-communism threatened 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 king Ḥusayn – with American aid – succeeded in ousting from power his political opponents by dismissing the government, dissolving the parliament suspending the constitution and imposing martial law. Crushing all opposition he established his own firm authoritarian rule and Jordan became a police state. On 29 April Jordan received from the USA 10 million dollars "in recognition of the steps taken by king Ḥusayn

²² AL-ʿAṢM, KhTlīd: *Mudakkirāt* (Memoirs). Vol. II, Beirut, 1973, p. 493.

²³ CAMPBELL, op. cit., p. 127.

²⁴ SHARABI, H.B.: *Governments and Politics of the Middle East in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, New Jersey, D. Van Nostrand Co. Ltd., 1962, p. 145.

²⁵ SALIBI, Kamal S.: *The Modern History of Lebanon*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, p. 199.

to maintain the integrity and independence of the nation".²⁶ In retrospect, this upheaval was the first major set-back for "nāṣirism" in the Arab East.

King Saʿūd firmly backed king Ḥusayn 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. King Ḥusayn, 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 and bitterness", seeing in it another link in the long chain of anti-Arab conspiracies.²⁷ 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 "US colonialism" was now waging open war against the Arabs.

The international response to the Eisenhower Doctrine was as unfavourable as the Arab response. In Soviet eyes, the doctrine was a calculated US move to replace British influence in the Middle East and to prevent any further communist advance; it was more dangerous than the Baghdad Pact because Washington was the driving force behind it, and Moscow was the main target. The Kremlin's response took two forms: first, it emphasized the right of Arab states to fill the vacuum left by Britain and France; and second, it defined Soviet policy in opposition to the United States.²⁸

The Soviets mounted a barrage of attacks against the doctrine, denouncing it as a manifestation of colonialism that would endanger the independence of indigenous states. This was consistent with overall Soviet strategy for the region after the Suez war. In contrast to the Eisenhower administration, the Kremlin leadership recognized Arab nationalism as a major force to be reckoned with in the area. Accordingly, the Soviets decided to cooperate with this bourgeois movement in order to extend their influence and gain further ground there. Small wonder that Soviet Middle East policy was perceived to be more responsive to local needs and concerns.²⁹ As mentioned previously, this new Soviet policy was a product of the changes in the Kremlin leadership and the changes in its global interests.

Despite these charges and the circumstantial evidence of widespread conspiracy against the Syrian state, political circles continued to be far from united in the face of the alleged peril. It was reported in March that the more conservative segments of the Cabinet and the army had attempted – though to no purpose – to obtain the transfer of Colonel ʿAbdulḥamīd as-Sarrāj and a large number of his radical following of young officers.³⁰ The conservative counterrevolution carried

²⁶ PERETZ, DON: *The Middle East Today*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963, p. 314.

²⁷ Foreign Minister Bitar's Press Conference, 31 May 1957 (BBC, no. 262, 3 June 1957).

²⁸ Zayavlenie TASS v sviazi s tak nazyvaemoi "doktrinoi Eisenhowera". In: SSSR i arabskie strany, 1917-1960. Dokumenty i materialy. Moscow, 1961, pp. 288-294.

²⁹ BEHBEHANI, Hashim S.H.: *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism*. London, KPI, 1986, pp. 155-156.

³⁰ TORREY, op. cit., p. 349-350.

out in April by king Ḥusayn in Jordan, with the support of the Saudi and United States governments,³¹ brought to Syria scores of Jordanian political refugees sympathetic to the Baʿṯ Party, and Akram al-Ḥawrānī himself addressed strong re-priminations to the Saudi deputy foreign minister when he visited Damascus at the end of June.³² The spectacular progress of Soviet influences was coupled with indignant denials of Western allegations by Syrian leaders.³³

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 Shukrī al-Qūwatlī and the moderate chief of staff, General Tawfīq Nizāmuddīn, to replace the radical ʿAbdulḥamīd as-Sarrāj as military intelligence chief failed owing to strong opposition from the Baʿṯ Party and the defence minister Khālīd al-ʿAzm. At by-elections in May the Syrian government and its left-wing supporters emerged triumphant, further strengthening their internal position.³⁴

After 1955 the political landscape in Syria underwent a radical metamorphosis. The balance of power shifted in favour of revolutionary groups composed of independents, Baʿṯists, and Communists. This "neutralist left, tending toward the communists, conquered the political initiative".³⁵ King Saʿūd's realignment with the Arab conservative forces and the West encouraged Shukrī al-Qūwatlī, who had pro-Western sympathies, to try to reverse the leftward trend in Damascus, but his efforts did not bear fruit. The fortunes of conservatives in Syria had been declining steadily, reaching their nadir in the disastrous defeat of the 1957 by-elections.³⁶

Syria's foreign policy underwent a corresponding radicalization. It came more and more under the influence of politicians who looked toward the socialist bloc for military, economic, and political support. Officially, Syrian leaders still subscribed to nonalignment and positive neutrality as the basis of their foreign policy. But in practice they made a major distinction between the United States, which they perceived to be imperialistic, and the friendly and pro-Arab stand of the Soviet Union.³⁷

In a stormy debate in the Parliament on 1 June the People's Party leader, Rushdī al-Kikhyā, was driven to threaten the mass resignation of his supporters in the Chamber. In a particularly provocative speech, the Communist Party leader, Khālīd

³¹ CAMPBELL, op. cit., p. 129.

³² Oriente Moderno, vol. 37 (1957), pp. 438.

³³ LAQUEUR, Walter Z.: *The Soviet Union and the Middle East*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959, p. 255.

³⁴ AL-MUʿALLIM, op. cit., p. 214.

³⁵ BATATU, Hanna: *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 686.

³⁶ TORREY, op. cit., p. 353.

³⁷ AL-BĪṬĀR, op. cit., pp. 105-107.

Baqdāsh, had delivered a long apologia for the Soviet Union and had attacked the People's Party as "lackeys and agents of imperialism". Rushdī al-Kikhyā rose immediately and accused Baqdāsh of aiming at shaking public confidence and at spreading chaos and corruption throughout the homeland. He accused the government of condoning Baqdāsh's statement by its silence.

Some observers in Damascus saw this move as an unsuccessful attempt to bring about the downfall of the Ṣabrī al-ʿAsalī 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.

The Syrian authorities claimed to have arrested on 8 June 1957 three members of an espionage organization providing the British with military and political information on Syria;³⁸ and on 1 July, a Damascus newspaper announced the discovery of a United States plot to subvert the Syrian government. The US ambassador and military attaché in Damascus were alleged to have organized the smuggling of arms into Syria from Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon with the complicity of the Iraqi deputy chief of staff (already cited in the conspiracy of the previous winter), Syrian fugitives (also involved in that conspiracy), and leaders of the recent Jordanian counterrevolution. All this, and more, was said to have been confirmed to an Arab diplomat by the head of the Syrian desk in the US Department of State.³⁹ After visiting Damascus, the assistant editor of the *New Statesman* reported that since the adoption by Washington of the Eisenhower Doctrine for the Middle East, US Intelligence was alleged to have been in contact with the Syrian senior field commanders under the chief of staff, Major General Tawfīq Nizāmuddīn, who were opposed to the radical policy followed by Colonel ʿAbdulḥamīd as-Sarrāj and the Baʿt.⁴⁰

The Syrian defence minister, Khālīd al-ʿAẓm resented US interference in Syria's internal and external affairs and wanted to counterbalance US hegemony in the region by obtaining military and financial aid from another source. In mid-July visited Italy and West Germany but without success.⁴¹ Then he turned eastwards and visited Prague and Moscow. On 6 August 1957 Khālīd al-ʿAẓm signed a wide-ranging economic and technical agreement with the Soviet leadership wherein the latter promised to supply Damascus with some arms and to help in the construction of a number of development projects.⁴² Soviet-Syrian relations began to flourish and Khālīd al-ʿAẓm became the main advocate of close ties with Moscow.

³⁸ *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 37 (1957), pp. 437 and 571.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

⁴⁰ JOHNSON, Paul: "The Struggle for the Middle East; Part I: America Takes Over". *New Statesman*, 6 July 1957, p. 21.

⁴¹ AL-ʿAẒM, op. cit., Vol. 3, p. 11.

⁴² LAQUEUR, op. cit., p. 256.

A week later, on 13 August 1957, the Syrian Government requested the immediate departure of the military attaché of the US Embassy, Lt.Col. R. Malloy, of a second secretary, H. Stone, and of a vice-consul, F. Jetton. They were accused of plotting with National Social Party and members of the armed forces to overthrow the government.⁴³ Ten Syrian officers were placed on the retired list, and the chief of staff was replaced by Brigadier ʿAfif al-Bizrī, an alleged communist. The US government replied by declaring the Syrian ambassador *persona non grata*, and a State Department official told the press that the Syrian tactics – of making unfounded charges that the US had plotted to overthrow the Syrian government and then subjecting the US embassy to the oppressive “protection” of a cordon of thirty to forty Syrian troops – was the type of thing that has gone on in areas” controlled by the USSR.⁴⁴

The Arab side, then, of the so-called American plot was much more a contest between rival groups of officers than a struggle between communists and their opponents. One would, indeed, have been hard put to find a single communist sympathizer in the Syrian general staff at that time, with the exception of Brigadier ʿAfif al-Bizrī, who was far from being the most influential member of the group. United States backing for Colonel Ibrāhīm al-Ḥusaynī, former chief of police, undoubtedly bred in his rival ʿAbdulḥamīd as-Sarrāj a fierce anti-Americanism which remained with him throughout his later years of supreme power. But this did not make him a communist. The recurrent American mistake – and the root cause of much unnecessary alarm – was to see what was essentially a local power struggle in cold war terms. In any event, the conspiracy never got beyond the stage of exploratory attempts at recruitment; it was nipped in the bud and the offending Americans – of whom Howard Stone appears in the commanding role – were expelled.⁴⁵

In the West the change was thus inevitably interpreted as a communist capture of the Syrian high command. Colonel ʿAbdulḥamīd as-Sarrāj, perhaps the most influential officer at the time, advanced a different explanation: “Al-Bizrī’s appointment had nothing to do with his supposed communist leanings (which in any case only emerged later) nor with Khālīd al-ʿAzm’s visit to Moscow. It was simply that we demanded from Tawfīq Nizāmuddīn the dismissal of a number of senior officers implicated in Ibrāhīm al-Ḥusaynī’s attempted coup. Tawfīq Nizāmuddīn refused. We then engineered his dismissal and his replacement by ʿAfif al-Bizrī who seemed a non-controversial figure; he had no personal following in the army and was connected with none of the major factions then feuding inside the general staff. His appointment was therefore acceptable to everyone.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Oriente Moderno, vol. 37 (1957), pp. 563-564.

⁴⁴ The New York Times, 22 August 1957, pp. 1 and 10.

⁴⁵ SEALE, Patrick: *The Struggle for Syria. A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958*. London, Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 294-295.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 295.

The turn of events in Damascus alarmed US officials and the news of these happenings caused consternation in Washington. In US eyes, as early as 1956, Syria had become another regional trouble spot like Egypt. In November 1956 the CIA concluded that the withdrawal of the tripartite forces from Egypt would leave a second power vacuum in Syria into which the Soviets would move even more openly than they had in Egypt.⁴⁷ Nerves were somewhat frayed by the months of vigilance and by the spectre, constantly evoked, of a communist assault on the Middle 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 takeover 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. By mid-August 1957 a full crisis erupted in US-Syrian relations. The immediate context was related to changes in the top hierarchy of the Syrian army. The State Department and the CIA perceived those changes to be paving the way for a communist takeover of the country.⁴⁸ Accusations and counter-accusations clouded the atmosphere and led to mutual expulsion of US and Syrian diplomats.

The internal Syrian developments were not of a nature to warrant American intervention under the terms of the Eisenhower Doctrine. Syria could hardly be said to be the victim of aggression "from a country controlled by international communism". The doctrine itself, with its carefully restrictive definition of the conditions for American action, was more of a straight-jacket than a deterrent. As Secretary 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.⁴⁹

These details are given here in order to show how ill advised, if not grotesque, was the panic with which the situation was viewed in Washington. Mr. Dulles was reported on 19 August to have held crisis talks with president Eisenhower and the British ambassador, sir Harold Caccia. It was thought that a new Soviet satellite had emerged in the Middle East. But it soon became evident that even if Syria had fallen under the Soviet control there was little, short of an armed attack, that the United States could do on its own about the supposed change. The doctrine was then evolved that it was up to Syria's neighbours to assess the situation and determine policy. In the meantime the direction of thinking among American Middle East specialists was towards the idea of putting Syria into "quarantine" – isolating the virus. "It is legitimate diplomacy for the United States to encourage all the anti-communist countries in the Middle East to use what pressure they can to

⁴⁷ Foreign Relations of the United States: Suez Crisis, 1956, Vol. XVI, p. 1101.

⁴⁸ EISENHOWER, Dwight: *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961*. New York, Doubleday, 1961, p. 196.

⁴⁹ SEALE, op. cit., p. 292.

restrain Syria.”⁵⁰ This hue and cry caused some understandable bitterness but little loss of nerve in Damascus. Khālīd al-ʿAzm declared that Syria’s policy would still be based on “positive neutrality” in spite of American provocations and attempts to overthrow the Syrian government as it have managed in Jordan.⁵¹ Undeterred by this warning, Washington pressed ahead with its efforts to mobilize Syria’s neighbours against the menace in their midst.

In August 1957 several occurrences involving Syria marked a sharp deterioration of the Western position and corresponding gains for the USSR. But looking a little more closely at the events beginning with Khālīd al-ʿAzm’s visit 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.⁵² The Russians had been unstinting in arms deliveries and in public assurances of support. But by mid-1957 a further consolidation of relations with Russia was thought necessary to counter America’s rather importunate attention and to strengthen Khālīd al-ʿAzm’s hand in the internal political struggle which he knew lay immediately ahead. There was also important business to transact. Arrangements had been 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.⁵³ Just as Khālīd al-ʿAzm 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.⁵⁴

On examining the evidence of the Syrian charges it is hard to dismiss them as fabrications. Convinced that Syria was “going communist”, the United States had been exploring ways of reversing the trend. Its officials had had clandestine contacts with members of the Syrian armed forces with a view to organizing the overthrow of the government. This, at least, is what emerges from the evidence.

⁵⁰ The New York Times, 22 August 1957, p. 1.

⁵¹ AL-ʿAZM, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, p. 16.

⁵² SEALE, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

⁵³ AL-ʿAZM, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, p. 16.

⁵⁴ SEALE, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

Half a dozen Syrian officers approached by American officials immediately reported back to the authorities so that the plot was doomed from the start.⁵⁵

The Syrian policy created in Washington an incorrect impression that Syria was rapidly going to reach the status of a Soviet satellite. The Eisenhower administration turned a blind eye to the internal dynamics and to local context in Syria. It lost sight of the fact that the Syrian officer corps of the 1950s was the "most politicized and faction-ridden in the Arab world".⁵⁶ The administration unleashed a massive propaganda campaign to destabilize the Syrian regime. On 24 August Eisenhower dispatched a high-level US envoy, Mr. Loy W. Henderson, deputy under-secretary of State for administration and one of the State Department leading Middle East experts, to discuss the Syrian situation with Turkish, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Lebanese officials. According to Secretary Dulles, the essence of US strategy was to encourage Syria's conservative Arab neighbours to join Turkey in undertaking decisive military action to topple the regime in Damascus. He added that the US government was prepared "to take grave risks that would assist in reversing the present trend in Syria".⁵⁷

On 24 August Henderson conferred in Ankara with the prime minister, Menderes, and with the kings of Jordan and Iraq who had journeyed there to meet him; he instructed the Turkish and Iraqi leadership to harass the Syrian government and ultimately to overthrow it. In this regard, the US administration expedited arms shipments to Turkey and Iraq and committed itself to protect their rear flank against any potential Soviet threat. This fact was confirmed by the then Iraqi foreign minister, Tawfīq as-Suwaydī, who asserted that the US envoy gave Iraq a green light to replace the military junta in Damascus with civilian administration. Iraq and Turkey needed little convincing, however. Both were very concerned about Syria becoming a communist base from which to export revolution to the region.⁵⁸ Then Henderson flew to Lebanon to see president Sham'ūn before returning to Turkey for further talks with Menderes, crown prince 'Abdulilāh of Iraq, and the Iraqi chief of staff, Rafīq 'Arif. He did not go to Syria or make contacts with the Syrian authorities.

His movements aroused a great storm of indignant comment. Moscow charged that the United States was preparing the ground for direct intervention. Cairo accused Henderson of planning the isolation and siege of Syria (which was no more than the American press expected of him). Having despaired of subverting Syria from the inside, America was now inciting Syria's neighbours against her. The plan, Cairo alleged, was to provoke a clash which would justify the applica-

⁵⁵ TORREY, op. cit., pp. 360-361.

⁵⁶ SEALE, Patrick: *Asad of Syria. The Struggle for the Middle East*. Los Angeles, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 49.

⁵⁷ PETRAN, T.: *Syria*. London, Ernest Benn, 1972, pp. 120-122.

⁵⁸ AS-SUWAYDĪ, Tawfīq: *Mudakkirātī. Niṣf qarn min tārīkh al-'Irāq wa al-qaḍīya al-'arabīya* (My Memoirs. Half a Century of Iraqi History and of the Arab Cause). Beirut, Dār al-kātib al-'arabī, 1969, p. 566.

tion of the Eisenhower Doctrine.⁵⁹ According to an official statement read to press correspondents on 5 September, Loy Henderson reported that the situation was extremely serious. His initial report to Secretary Dulles, the State Department announced, told of "deep concern" in the area lest Syria should become "a victim of international communism and, as such, become a base for further threatening the independence and integrity of the region".⁶⁰ Once again contrary evidence was swept under the carpet, such as a dispatch from Damascus on 31 August by a *New York Times* correspondent, Osgood Caruthers: "There is no sign either in Egypt or in Syria that the Soviet bloc, with its technical, economic, military and cultural missions, is trying to sovietize these two Arab countries or to stir up a classic Marxist revolution. What the Soviet Union has found are two friendly Arab countries who are willing to help block Western efforts ... So far it is known, there are no card-carrying communists among the officers of the Syrian armed forces."⁶¹

American belligerency had given the Russians great opportunities to leap to Syria's defence, to reiterate their claim to a voice in Middle Eastern affairs, and to denounce the "interventionist fever" of American imperialism. On 3 September – the eve of Henderson's return to Washington – the Soviet Union proposed for the third time, in a note to the United States, Britain, and France, a four-Power declaration renouncing the use of force in the area. Similar proposals had been made in notes on 11 February and 1 April.⁶² They had, of course, been indignantly rejected. Henderson's visit to Turkey served to underline the extent to which that country had become an instrument of American policy in the Middle East. The United States had long hoped that Turkey would provide an element of cohesion in organizing the area for defence. In American eyes, Turkey's role was to bridge the gap between the major NATO system and a subordinate Middle East regional defence arrangement. But these plans never fully matured owing to systematic Arab obstruction; with the sole exception of Iraq, the Arab response was wholly negative.⁶³

Since the middle 1950s Turkish "manoeuvres" had, in fact, become a standard method of putting pressure on Damascus. On several occasions Turkey had hinted that she might move into Syria if a communist or Soviet-controlled government

⁵⁹ CAMPBELL, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁶⁰ US Department of State, *American Foreign Policy: Current Documents*, 1957, p. 1037.

⁶¹ SEALE, Patrick: *The Struggle for Syria*, pp. 296-297.

⁶² Nota Sovetskogo pravitel'stva pravitel'stvu SŠA, 3.9.1957 (doc. 109); Nota Sovetskogo pravitel'stva pravitel'stvu Velikobritanii, 3.9.1957 (doc. 110); Nota Sovetskogo pravitel'stva pravitel'stvu Francii, 3.9.1957 (doc. 111); Noty Sovetskogo pravitel'stva pravitel'stvam SŠA, Velikobritanii i Francii, 11.2. 1957 (doc. 92); Iz zayavleniya Ministerstva inostrannykh del SSSR po povodu Bermudskogo soveshchaniya prezidenta SŠA Eisenhowera i prem'ier-ministra Velikobritanii Macmillana, 1.4.1957 (doc. 98); In: SSSR i arabskie strany, 1917-1960. Dokumenty i materialy. Moskva, 1961, pp. 304-357.

⁶³ AL-MUWĀFĪ, 'Abdulḥamīd Muḥammad: *Miṣr fī Jāmi'at ad-Duwal al-ʿArabīya* (Egypt in the League of Arab Countries). Cairo, 1983, p. 170.

took over. These scarcely veiled hints were dropped usually through the Turkish press. The hints were repeated in April and May 1957, when it seemed possible that the Syrian army might move to support the opposition to king Ḥusayn in Jordan. On each occasion Turkey backed up her words with unacknowledged but well-publicized movements of two or three divisions on the frontier. This was once more the case in the autumn of 1957.⁶⁴ This action was designed to place psychological strain on the Damascus regime in order to further destabilize it. The US government continued its relentless pressure on Syria. Secretary Dulles said he believed that the "Soviets had achieved a large measure of economic domination of Syria and Syria was on the road to losing its political independence". Eisenhower called upon the Syrian people to act to allay the anxiety of the international community – an invitation to them to topple their government.⁶⁵

Eisenhower expressed his intention to warn Syria against adventuring outside her frontiers and to strengthen the defences of her pro-Western neighbours. This led to an immediate stiffening in American attitude. Plans were accordingly announced on 5 September for an immediate airlift of American arms to Jordan and for the reinforcement of Iraq and Lebanon.⁶⁶ Reaction from Damascus was angry: Washington, an official spokesman said, had been "seriously misinformed" about the real situation. Syria did not intend attacking anyone; her armaments policy had been purely defensive. But she would not tolerate any threat to her security.⁶⁷ These acts and statements came close to committing the United States publicly to the overthrow of the Syrian regime.

On 7 September, Secretary Dulles gave an account of the findings of Loy Henderson. He had found "... deep concern at the apparently growing Soviet communist domination of Syria and the large build-up there of Soviet-bloc arms ... which could not be justified by purely defensive needs. There was particular concern over border incidents and intensive propaganda and subversive activities directed toward the overthrow of the newly constituted governments of Syria's Arab neighbours." This seemed to refer particularly to king Ḥusayn's regime in Jordan, and a supply of US war materials was sent to that country by air transport to accelerate the existing programme.⁶⁸ There were warnings from friendly diplomatic circles that these US moves (which had the "full support" of the British Foreign Office) might have the effect of hardening the Syrian attitude; Syrian and Egyptian official spokesmen confirmed that the consolidation of the influence of the young radical Syrian army officers had strengthened the relations between their two countries.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ TUGANOVA, Olga E.: *Politika SŠA i Anglii na Blizhnem i Srednem Vostoke*. Moskva, 1960, p. 109.

⁶⁵ TORREY, op. cit., pp. 364-365.

⁶⁶ New York Times, 5 September 1957.

⁶⁷ AL-MU^cALLIM, op. cit., p. 221.

⁶⁸ Statement by Secretary Dulles, 7 September 1957. In: Documents on American Foreign Relations, 1957, p. 234.

⁶⁹ New York Times, 9 September 1957.

From the Soviet point of view, the US-Syrian crisis presented another opportunity to gain prestige and expand influence in the Arab countries. Soviet policy makers moved quickly to take advantage of the situation by portraying themselves as friends and allies of a beleaguered Arab state. They made it clear that they were opposed to any outside intervention in Syria. For example, on 10 September Soviet premier Bulganin wrote to the Turkish prime minister: "The Soviet government cannot conceal its concern about the Syrian situation. It is well known that Syria and Egypt, while following their policy of national independence, have been exposed for some time to hostile political, economic, and military pressures from outside. In recent weeks the pressure on Syria has risen to a dangerous height. The recent journey of the American envoy Henderson to the Middle East clearly reveals the intention to organize a foreign armed intervention in the internal affairs of Syria... We have received with great alarm the news of Turkish military concentrations on the Syrian border... The USSR cannot regard these recent developments with indifference... if war should break out in Syria and spread to the Middle East, Turkey would have everything to lose by taking part in it ... An armed invasion of Syria would not be limited to that area alone."⁷⁰ Nikita Khrushchev also threatened to retaliate against Turkey if it initiated military hostilities.

Secretary Dulles retorted in the United Nations General Assembly on 19 September with the charge that it was Turkey who was in danger – threatened in the north by Soviet military power and in the south by the "major build-up of Soviet arms in Syria".⁷¹ He was answered the following day by General ʿAfif al-Bizrī in Damascus and by the Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, in the General Assembly who said, "Russia cannot remain indifferent and observe from afar the attempts that are being made to turn the Near and Middle East into a permanent hotbed of armed conflict".⁷² Notwithstanding these actions, Soviet officials showed much restraint; they were not interested in escalating tensions with the United States. On the contrary, they were more concerned with avoiding any strategic miscalculation with their superpower rival than with defending the sovereign rights of small states.⁷³ Next day, 21 September, as the Syrian foreign minister, Ṣalāḥuddīn al-Bīṭār, arrived in New York to put his country's case against Turkey before the General Assembly, two Soviet warships steamed into Latakia harbour to the plaudits of the Syrian press.

At this point it is useful to consider Washington's handling of the crisis. There had been no direct approach to the Syrians to learn their real position at

⁷⁰ Poslanie Predsedatelya Soveta Ministrov SSSR Premier-Ministru Turcii, 10.9.1957 (doc. 112); In: SSSR i arabskie strany, 1917-1960. Dokumenty i materialy. Moscow, 1961, pp. 358-363.

⁷¹ SEALE, op. cit., p. 300.

⁷² Iz vystupleniya ministra inostrannykh del SSSR A.A. Gromyko v obshchei diskussii na XII sessii Generalnoi Assamblei OON, 20.9.1957 (doc. 115); In: SSSR i arabskie strany, 1917-1960. Dokumenty i materialy. Moscow, 1961, pp. 375-379.

⁷³ DENKOS, Helen: *As-siyāsa as-sūfiyāliya fī ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 1955-1975* (Soviet Policy in the Middle East). Beirut, 1983, p. 65.

first-hand or to explore whether their anti-western sentiments could in any way be moderated. Loy Henderson had sought confirmation of Syria's communism rather than facts.⁷⁴ American policy had, in the event, succeeded in achieving the precise opposite of what had been intended. Putting pressure on Syria, arming her neighbours, branding her as threatening the peace, had strengthened rather than weakened the position of the men in power; it had made it far more difficult for pro-western voices to be raised in Syria; it had barred the Syrian government from peaceable communication with the West without risking loss of face and defeat at home; and it had driven the Syrians to seek comfort and aid in the Soviet camp.⁷⁵

Syrian officials denied the charge that they had become Soviet proxies and reaffirmed the nonaligned basis of their foreign policy. They saw the United States behaving like the old colonial powers – Great Britain and France. Syria's deep resentment against the paternalism of the colonial powers manifested itself in anti-Western sentiments. Leading Syrian politicians believed there was a US plot to overthrow their regime. Addressing the UN Security Council, Syrian Foreign Minister Ṣalāḥuddīn al-Bīṭār accused the US administration of promoting a conspiracy against his country.⁷⁶

As a result, Eisenhower and Dulles found it increasingly difficult to maintain the anti-Syrian front; the crisis nearly shattered the effort to build up a group of friendly Arab states as a means of checking the growing influence of the Soviet Union. Their predicament was accentuated by Egyptian and Syrian propaganda that portrayed Syria as the victim of a plot of imperialist agents and traitors. Hence pro-Western Arab governments, which had identified closely with the Eisenhower administration, felt compelled now to wrap themselves in the mantle of Arab solidarity and distance themselves from Washington. It became politically very risky for conservative Arab rulers to publicly support US policy. They could not seem to be collaborating with an external power against two sister Arab states.⁷⁷ The imperatives of Arab politics imposed certain limits that Arab leaders could disregard only at their own risk. They were constrained by political reality, by a yearning for national unity, and solidarity that was compelling. In conservative eyes, the likelihood of public revolt and political instability was a constant reminder of the pitfalls of entanglement with foreign alliances.

King Saʿūd was the first conservative Arab leader to change direction and abandon Washington's hard-line approach. To him US efforts to overthrow the government in Damascus threatened to bring Syria under Iraqi domination. This possibility was unacceptable to king Saʿūd because of the traditional rivalry between the Hashemite and Saudi royal families. It was in Saudi Arabia's interest to

⁷⁴ SEALE, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁷⁶ AL-BĪṬĀR, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

⁷⁷ JOHNSTON, C.: *The Brink of Jordan*. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1972, p. 78.

solve the crisis. Hence Saʿūd offered to mediate, travelling between Arab capitals in an attempt to defuse tensions.⁷⁸

King Saʿūd's shuttle diplomacy culminated in a visit to Damascus on 25 September 1957 where he publicly denounced aggression against Syria. Iraqi premier ʿAlī Jawdat al-Ajjūbī joined king Saʿūd the next day, after meeting with president Shukrī al-Qūwatlī, declared that complete understanding had been reached between the quarrelling Iraqi and Syrian governments. Jordan quickly followed suit when foreign minister Samīr ar-Rifāʿī gave assurances that it had no intention of interfering in Syria. Likewise, the Beirut government blamed outside meddling for the temporary misunderstanding in Syrian-Lebanese relations. Lebanese premier Sāmī aṣ-Ṣulḥ asserted that "all things which have caused misunderstanding in the past have been the doing of others".⁷⁹

The US administration was caught off guard and put on the defensive by the changed attitudes of its Arab allies. On 3 October Eisenhower stated that the situation in Syria was becoming less threatening, adding that the "original alarm of countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq and, to some extent Saudi Arabia, seems to have been quietened by what we have learned".⁸⁰ The president's statement was no more than a face-saving formula designed to prepare the ground for US retreat. It was not particularly convincing because it marked a retreat from Washington's previous position.

In mid-October the Syrian minister of foreign affairs sent a note to the UN Secretary-General asking to investigate the Turkish preparations for an attack on Syria.⁸¹ The Syrian army began to organize all students (including girls) for military training, ordering practice in street fighting, the digging of trenches, and the raising of roadblocks on all approaches to the city of Aleppo, thirty miles from the Turkish border. An offer of mediation by king Saʿūd was at first accepted by the conservative Syrian president Shukrī al-Qūwatlī, but (apparently under pressure from the radical officers) he then asked the king Saʿūd to withdraw the offer. The Soviet government denounced in a letter to the president of the General Assembly the Turkish threats and in the debate Andrei Gromyko supported the Syrian stance.⁸²

However, neither Washington nor Moscow alone could determine the course of events in Syria. The regional dimension played a decisive factor in the equation. In this regard, Egypt's stand was of supreme importance. From the onset of the crisis, Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir expressed solidarity with Syria and promised to

⁷⁸ SAFRAN, Nadav: *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1985, p. 84.

⁷⁹ JAWDAT, ʿAlī: *Ḍikrayāt, 1900-1958* (Recollections). Beirut, Maṭābiʿ al-wafāʾ, 1967, p. 324.

⁸⁰ New York Times, 4 October 1957.

⁸¹ *Politika SŠA na Arabskom Vostoke*. Moscow, 1961, p. 109.

⁸² Iz vystupleniya ministra inostrannykh del SSSR A. A. Gromyko v obshchei diskussii na XII sessii Generalnoi Assamblei OON, 20.9.1957 (doc. 115); In: SSSR i arabskie strany, 1917-1960. Dokumenty i materialy. Moscow, 1961, pp. 375-379.

support the regime in Damascus uncondition-ally against any external threat. "Any attack on Syria," asserted Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir, "would be considered an attack on Egypt." To him, the campaign against Syria was designed to force submission to US demands. The roots of the conflict lay not in the Syrian tilt toward the Soviet bloc but in the US attempts to dominate the region.⁸³

The Egyptian president agreed to place the two Arab armies under joint command. In mid-October 1957 at the height of the war scare generated by the Turkish army manoeuvres on the Syrian border, some two battalions of Egyptian troops had been sent to that border as a gesture of solidarity. Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir showed both his allies and opponents that neither the Iraqis nor the Saudis could bypass him or ignore his regional leadership. Thus the action of Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir should be viewed as part of his rivalry with both Nūrī as-Saʿīd and king Saʿūd. Furthermore, the Egyptian leader felt threatened by the growing communist influence in Syria. He told the US ambassador to Egypt, Raymond Hare, that the situation in Damascus had gone too far and was out of control. He was perturbed by the radicalization of Syrian politics and by its possible impact on Egypt.⁸⁴

Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir was suspicious of all great powers, regardless of their political orientation. The tripartite aggression against Egypt had convinced him that major powers could not be trusted. By taking an active role in the Syrian crisis, he hoped to allay US and conservative fears about the possibility of Syria falling under communist influence. Egyptian token presence in Syria was a sort of reassurance against such an eventuality. Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir also wanted to prevent Moscow from making further regional gains at Egypt's expense. He was worried the Soviet Union might seek to displace him as the undisputed leader of the Arab revolutionary movement.⁸⁵ Egyptian involvement in the Syrian crisis contributed to the relaxation of tensions, and Syria's slide to the left was temporarily halted.

The Syrian crisis is instructive in that it throws some light on the nature of the relationship between large and small states. For all its power and resources, the United States could not dictate the course of events in Syria. Local resistance, coupled with the defection of its friends from pro-Western positions, frustrated the Eisenhower administration's efforts to overthrow the Damascus regime. This finding is consistent with one of the main hypotheses of this project: the ability of the superpowers to control the actions of their regional allies – let alone their enemies – was limited due to structural context of the Cold War.

In his memoirs Eisenhower expressed his confusion at the turn of events in Syria. He said he could not grasp the reasons behind the sudden reversal of Saudi, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Lebanese attitudes. Eisenhower was particularly annoyed

⁸³ Ministry of Information: *Majmāʿat khuṭab wa tasrāʾīṭ wa bayʾnīṭ ar-raʾās Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir, 1952-1958* (The Collected Speeches, Declarations and Statements of President), Cairo, n.d., p. 722.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 725.

⁸⁵ US Department of State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957: Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1957, Vol. XVII, p. 785.

with king Sa'ūd, who accused Washington of creating much of the difficulty in Syria.⁸⁶ Eisenhower's puzzlement sheds light on another aspect of the Syrian crisis: he did not appreciate the complex web of inter-Arab relations and paid virtually no attention to regional dynamics and concerns. Eisenhower and the majority of his associates were overwhelmingly preoccupied with the Soviet threat.

The US administration saw the Middle East as a sphere of American vital interests from which the Soviets must be excluded. Any Soviet advance in the area was automatically interpreted as a serious threat to Western security interests.⁸⁷ The recommendations of the former US ambassador to Egypt, Henry Byroade, were ignored. Byroade averred that it was misleading to view Arab cooperation with Moscow as a threat to the West. Rather, Arab politicians were merely trying to meet basic national needs. In this regard, asserted the ambassador, Soviet leaders were more sympathetic toward local needs and aspirations than were their Western counterparts. Here lay the roots of Arab-Soviet collaboration.⁸⁸

Byroade warned his superiors against the tendency to judge Arab states solely on the basis of whether they were pro-US or pro-Soviet. He called on them to recognize the forces of local nationalism and neutralism and to stop regarding the latter as simply pawns in the East-West contest. Otherwise, Byroade warned, the Middle East would be lost.⁸⁹ The State Department failed to recognize the internal sources of conflict or distinguish the line between local and global rivalries and perceived "what was essentially a local power struggle in cold war terms".⁹⁰ This perception led sometimes to the internationalization of regional conflicts.

The US behaviour contributed to the expansion rather than to the contraction of Soviet influence in the area. The Soviet Union was one of the main beneficiaries of the Syrian crisis; its diplomatic support of Egypt and Syria enhanced its prestige in Arab eyes. Arabs generally came to view the Soviet Union as a friend and protector. In particular, Soviet status increased considerably in Syria, as did the membership in the Syrian Communist Party. This development, along with the gravitation of an important group of officers toward the communists, alarmed the Ba'athists. They felt threatened by the emergence of the communists as a formidable political force in Syria and feared being outmanoeuvred by them.⁹¹

Among those most ready to cooperate with the USSR, besides the chief of staff, Major General 'Afif al-Bizrī was the minister of defence and since mid-November of finance, Khālīd al-'Azm. This aristocratic landowner who had made a turn to the left became on 9 December deputy prime minister, in addition to the

⁸⁶ EISENHOWER, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201.

⁸⁷ CAMPBELL, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173.

⁸⁸ The Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, Cairo, 13 July 1956. In: US Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957: Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1956*, Vol. XV, p. 833.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 834.

⁹⁰ SEALE, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

⁹¹ BATATU, *op. cit.*, pp. 736-738.

two portfolios he already held. The Baʿṭ leaders, having disposed of National Social Party, their rivals, and having intimidated into submission the conservatives of the People's Party, now apparently feared being outmanoeuvred by a combination of the communists with Khālīd al-ʿAzm.⁹² They therefore renewed the overtures they had made early in 1956 for a federation with Egypt. The Egyptian revolutionary regime, for its part, badly needed some new injection of prestige to offset its alienation of king Saʿūd, the Lebanese government's acceptance of the Eisenhower Doctrine and successful handling of the elections of June, 1957, and king Ḥusayn's successful counterrevolution.

In spite of revolutionary zeal the Baʿṭists could not compete on their own with the communists, who were receiving assistance from the international socialist camp. To avoid being marginalized, Michel ʿAflaq and Ṣalāḥuddīn al-Bīṭār, the founders of the Baʿṭ Party, recognized the importance of closer cooperation and even of amalgamation with Egypt. With Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir's prestige behind them, they hoped to become the hegemonic ruling party in Syria. As a by-product, this would deprive the communists of their power base. The Baʿṭists had mistrusted the communists long before the Syrian crisis. They were suspicious of the communists' international affinities and also saw the communists as enemies of Arab nationalism. To the Baʿṭists, what had existed between them and the communists was a temporary concurrence of two otherwise incompatible lines of action.⁹³ The ultimate goal of the Baʿṭ Party was the establishment of a unitary Arab state.⁹⁴ Although by the end of 1957 the Baʿṭists had made major political inroads in Syrian politics, they had no illusion about gaining power at the polls or realizing their pan-Arab ideal. They turned to Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir instead to compensate for their electoral weakness. Rather than struggling for twenty-five years, it was tempting to let Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir do the job overnight.⁹⁵

Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir had one common objective with the Baʿṭists: to prevent the Syrian communists from assuming power. He was seriously concerned about the rise of communist influence in Syria. A communist-controlled Syrian foreign policy, albeit friendly, would have challenged his leadership of the Arab world; it also would have threatened his independent posture vis-à-vis the superpowers. For the Soviet Union to replace the United States as a patron was equally unacceptable to him. His strategy aimed to liberate the entire Arab arena from superpower control and to create a united regional front under Egyptian command.⁹⁶

In mid-November a visit to Syria by forty members of the Egyptian National Assembly headed by Anwar as-Sādāt was made the occasion for a joint session with the Syrian Chamber headed by the Baʿṭ leader Akram al-Ḥawrānī, who had

⁹² Oriente Moderno, vol. 38 (1958), pp. 101-106.

⁹³ PERLMANN, Moshe: *The Syrian Affair*. In: Middle Eastern Affairs, Vol. 8 (1957), p. 407.

⁹⁴ AL-BĪṬĀR, op. cit., p. 137.

⁹⁵ ʿAFLAQ, Miṣḥīl: *Fī Ṣabīl al-Baʿṭ* (For the Cause of the Baʿṭ). Beirut, 1975 (14th ed.), pp. 27-32.

⁹⁶ BATATU, op. cit., p. 816.

been elected president of the Chamber in mid-October; a unanimous resolution invited the two governments to negotiate a federal union of the two countries.⁹⁷

The Egyptian regime, however, seems to have been in no hurry to complete the transaction until in mid-January, 1958, president Shukrī al-Qūwatlī hurried to Cairo and persuaded the Egyptian president Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir that they should jointly announce the establishment of the United Arab Republic. Four days later, a plebiscite ratified this step toward Arab unity by the ritual majority of 99.9 per cent.

This convergence of interests between the Baʿṯ Party and the Egyptian regime brought about the Egyptian-Syrian union of 1 February 1958. Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir objected initially to the goal of unity, preferring instead a form of federation but the group of Syrian military officers who flew to Cairo in January 1958 to ask for union persuaded him that only a full merger could rescue the Syrian state of uncertainty and instability. Before giving his consent to a total fusion of the two countries, Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir imposed draconian conditions: liquidation of all political parties and depoliticizing the Syrian army.⁹⁸

Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir was sincere in his initial refusal to accept a full merger, however, the Egyptian leader was weary of the precarious political situation in Syria and of the destructive role that the Syrian army was playing in Syrian politics. He certainly did not want to commit his country and risk losing his prestige and influence unless he was given a free hand to run Syria as a dictator. He got precisely what he wanted: a full and unconstitutional mandate to rule Syria.

Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir's ability to dictate terms in the Arab theatre owed much to his enhanced status following the Suez and Syrian crises: he became a "regional hero". To restless and frustrated Arab nationalists he seemed a second Saladin turning the table on Western imperialism. The Eisenhower administration failed in its efforts to isolate Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir and undermine his domestic and local position through the application of overt economic and political pressures. Neither did president Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles succeed in their measures to strengthen his regional enemies. The weight of evidence suggests that such measures produced the opposite effect. The US government's attempt to overthrow the Syrian regime discredited the conservatives and bolstered the socialist and nationalist forces. With the help of the Baʿṯists, Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir stepped in to fill the leadership vacuum in the Arab East.

⁹⁷ Al-BAGHDĒDĒ, ʿAbdullaóáf: *Mudakkirāt* (Memoirs). Vol. II, Cairo, 1977, pp. 35-36.

⁹⁸ MARʿĪ, Sayyid: *Awraq siyāsīya* (Political Papers). Vol. II, Cairo, 1978, p. 399.