THE ASCENDANCY OF THE BA^CTH IN SYRIA (1963 – 1966)[1]

Karol R. SORBY
Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia
kaorkaso@savba.sk

On 8 March 1963 a military coup by a coalition of *Baᶜthist, Nāṣirist* and independent unionist officers brought down the "secessionist regime" in Damascus. When the army took over, it set up a National Revolutionary Council under the chairmanship of Lt-General Lu'ayy al-Atāsī which invited one of the leaders of the *Socialist Party of Arab Resurrection* (the Baᶜth Party) Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, to form a government of military and civilian ministers. One of the first actions of the new government was to issue a statement in which they declared that their aim was to lead Syria back to reunion with Egypt, this time in company with Iraq. At the same time General al-Atāsī declared that the army had been purged of secessionists, including former ministers. Shortly after, minority members in the Syrian officers' corps again increased strongly in numbers at the expense of the *Sunnites*. A principal reason for this was that the *Baᶜthist* military leaders who were involved in the coup had called up numerous officers and non-commissioned officers with whom they were related through family, tribal or regional ties, to quickly consolidate their newly achieved power positions.[2]

Key words: the Baᶜth Party; the army in politics, military coups, problem of Arab unity, sectarianism, minority problems

The military coup known as the "Baᶜth Revolution of 8 March 1963" was not wholly Baᶜthist even though its participants were largely members of the party's Military Committee which was at the time organically not a part of the party. The committee was only one of three military factions compelled by

---

[2] Ar-RAZZĀZ, Munīf *At-tajriba al-murra*. (Bitter Experience), pp. 158–159.

common weakness to act together to overthrow the Khālid al-ʿAzm government. Yet the *Baʿthist* officers soon won dominance. The coup did open the road to radical social change, a road that passed through many conflicts however, the social revolution expressed in *Baʿthist* thought did not occur.[3] Colonel Ziyād al-Harīrī, the leader of the coup initially set up an organization called "al-Majlis al-waṭanī li-qiyādat ath-thawra" (the *National Council of the Revolutionary Command* – NCRC), which became the supreme administrative authority. The NCRC was composed of ten officers, four independents, three *Nāṣirists* and three *Baʿthists*. Lt.-General Luʾayy al-Atāsī, an independent with pro-Baʿth sympathies, was elected president of the council. Plans to add ten civilians to the NCRC were hampered by the party's insistence that half of these be *Baʿthists*.[4]

The initial circumstances following the coup and its attendant difficulties urged the calling-up of a large number of reserve military (officers and non-commissioned officers), party members and supporters, to fill the gaps resulting from purges of opponents and to consolidate and defend the *Baʿth party's* position. This urgency made it impossible at the time to apply objective standards in the calling-up operation. Rather, friendship, family relationship and sometimes mere personal acquaintance were the basis of this procedure. Most of the military called up in this way were of minority background, especially *ʿAlawīs*, *Druzes* and *Ismāʿīlīs*, which is not surprising since most members of the *Baʿthist* Military Committee which supervised the activities of the military organization were themselves minority members.[5]

Contradictions were inherent in the very structure of the coup since each faction had its own goals. Ziyād al-Harīrī, lacking any politically precise strategy, was condemned to lose the competition for power. He was neither a real *Nāṣirist* to push Syria back into union nor a *Baʿthist* to propose a new party alternative. The Baʿth Military Committee had the advantage of being well organized and skilled in a secretive method of operation and it succeeded in eliminating first the *Nāṣirists* and then Ziyād al-Harīrī himself. Becoming masters of Syria, the *Baʿthist* officers were ready to challenge the party's traditional leadership despite the fact that they needed them because they had no

---

[3] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, p. 167.

[4] KERR, Malcolm H. *The Arab Cold War. Gamal ʾAbd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958 – 1970*, p. 45.

[5] According to one report, many ʿAlawīs were among those officers who, directly after the coup of 8 March 1963, were to fill the gaps in the army resulting from purges of political opponents. About half the approximately 700 officers who were dismissed were reportedly replaced by ʿAlawīs. Cit in: Van DAM, Nikolaos *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961 – 1978*, p. 43.

organization of their own outside the army and also wanted a link to the *Ba'th party* in Iraq. The Ba'th was never a united party, either ideologically or organizationally, and whenever it was in power, its internal personal and political conflicts were intensified.[6] The *Ba'thist* leaders now accepted the officers as fully-fledged party members and integrated the Military Committee into the party structure as the exclusive party military organization. As the Military Committee was allowed to retain its autonomous status, the created dual power-structure weakened the civilian leadership in face of the military contingent.

Ba'thist leaders participated in the NCRC, which under the new Provisional Constitution exercised real power. Beside them in the NCRC and the Cabinet were represented the officers of Ziyād al-Harīrī, and three small pro-*Nāṣirist* groupings.[7] The NCRC presidency and the post of Commander-in-Chief of the Army went to the insignificant Lu'ayy al-Atāsī, brother-in-law of the *Nāṣirist* Jāsim 'Alwān. Ziyād al-Harīrī, newly promoted to Major-General became chief-of-staff, Colonel Amīn al-Hāfiz, who had been exiled to Argentina as a military attaché by 'Abdalkarīm an-Nahlāwī, was brought back by the *Ba'thist* officers to assume the key posts of Acting Military Governor and Minister of the Interior.[8]

It should be noted that at the time of the coup five of the 14 members of the *Ba'thist* Military Committee were *'Alawīs*, so that it is hardly surprising that *'Alawī* officers subsequently played an important role in the army. Moreover, the highest leadership of the Military Committee lay in the hands of three *'Alawīs*, namely Muḥammad 'Umrān, Ṣalāh Jadīd and Ḥāfiz al-Asad.[9] The *Ba'thist* members of the government, as if by reflex and despite the fact that the domestic situation was in urgent need of attention, turned their eyes towards Cairo and to the man without whom little progress could be made towards unity. This time the Iraqis joined in the negotiations. Pro-*Nāṣirist* demonstrations occurred in many areas of Syria after the coup. They forced Damascus and the *Ba'th party*, which had the predominant position in the new regime, to hold negotiations with the Egyptians and the Iraqis about the possibility of establishing a tripartite union.[10]

---

[6] BE'ERI, Eliezer *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, p. 406.

[7] Al-HAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Hawrānī.* (The Memoirs of Akram al-Hawrānī), pp. 3158–3164.

[8] BIZZĪ, Nājī 'Abdannabī *Sūrīya. Ṣirā' al-istiqtāb, 1917 – 1973.* (Syria. The Struggle for Polarization), p. 333.

[9] Ar-RAZZĀZ, Munīf *At-tajriba al-murra*, p. 158.

[10] HAMRŪSH, Aḥmad *Qiṣṣat thawrat 23 yūliyū.* (The Story of the 23 July Revolution). Vol. III. *'Abdannāṣir wa al-'Arab.* ('Abdannāṣir and the Arabs), pp. 119–124; ABURISH, Said K. *Nasser. The Last Arab*, p. 215.

Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir agreed to hold discussions in March and April 1963. He was much more cautious this time and did not have much confidence in the *Baʿthist* leaders. In talks he subjected them to severe criticism and questioned their past behaviour, which he called deceitful and opportunistic. No agreement was reached and sensing that the *Baʿthists* were in retreat from the whole unity concept, he taunted them with going back on the ideals of democracy which they had preached while accusing him of personal dictatorship. [11] In these negotiations Syria and the *Baʿth party* in particular were at a disadvantage. On the one hand there were the intertwined rivalries among and within what can be considered the five major power centres in Syria at that time: the NCRC; the Ministry of Defence and higher military positions; the governmental structure of the premier and the cabinet; the Baʿth's Syrian Regional Command; and the Baʿth's National Command.

Within the *Baʿth party* itself there were four major conflicts. The first of these was between the Michel ʿAflaq – Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār wing (the old guard) which did not really want a full union, and the younger *Baʿth* members who wanted to organize "the masses against reactionary secessionism". Other conflicts were between the National Command and the Military Committee; between the National Command and both the Syrian and Iraqi Regional Commands; and between the Syrian Regional Command and the Military Committee. [12] Nevertheless, Syria went ahead with the Cairo Unity Talks, as the negotiations were called, even though few of the participants actually aspired to unity. These talks were held in three separate stages: trilateral negotiations in five meetings from 14 to 16 March; five Syrian-Egyptian meetings on 19 and 20 March; and ten meetings between 6 and 14 April, of which the first two were again Syrian-Egyptian and the last eight trilateral. [13]

A transcript of the talks was published and broadcast on Cairo radio. It provides a fascinating picture of the cut and thrust of argument and how Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir taunted the Syrians. He made it very clear that any union would be on his terms according to his new socialist precepts. His strong personality dominated the discussions and the Syrians and Iraqis tried lamely to defend themselves and to ward off his attacks. He obviously enjoyed his superiority and dominant position and his strength derived from the fact that he was still the only conceivable leader. Although little understanding was reached over the future political leadership or organization of the union a formal agreement was

---

[11] STEPHENS, Robert *Nasser. A Political Biography*, p. 405.

[12] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, pp. 55–56.

[13] Maḥāḍir džalasāt mubāḥaṭāt al-waḥda, mārs – abrīl 1963. (Protocols of the Tripartite Unity Talks), the first stage, pp. 5–88; the second stage, pp. 91–241; the third stage, pp. 245–602.

signed on 17 April with the stipulation that full implementation would have to wait for over two years.[14]

Nothing concrete really emerged from the talks until 19 March when Michel ᶜAflaq and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār both went to Cairo. It was then that Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir began putting on a show, taking advantage of the slow, deliberate conversational style of his rivals and the fact that they had come to him to get a new agreement and to stabilize their regime.

Despite this exhibition and after torrents of recrimination, double-talk and contradictions, the three countries signed an agreement on 17 April, under which the president (who would be Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir, of course) held virtually all power. However, it also provided for a transitional period of five months with 20 additional months before the implementation of full union.[15] The *Baᶜthists* were not fully reconciled to the idea of a union which would not allow them the free hand they sought in Syria. The internal situation remained troubled with dissension between those who supported Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir come what may and the *Baᶜthists*.

The leaders of the Military Committee were swiftly able to consolidate their newly achieved positions of power, thanks to their efficient organization and planning and to all the military supporters who had been called upon. Within a few months they succeeded in purging their most prominent *Nāṣirist* and independent unionist military opponents. These, once again, whether coincidently or not, happened to be mainly *Sunnīs*.[16] The climax of the Baᶜthists' power monopolization came on 18 July 1963, when a group of predominantly *Sunnite Nāṣirist* officers, led by Jāsim ᶜAlwān,[17] staged an abortive coup, but the *Baᶜthists* led by Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ bloodily put down. Most of the officers who suppressed this coup, not without bloodshed, were of minority backgrounds, and among them ᶜAlawites played a prominent role.[18] This was exploited as sectarianism by *Sunnite* political opponents of the Baᶜth, who resented the many minority members among the new rulers and tried to give the impression that the repeated purges of *Sunnite* officers were based

---

[14] HAYKAL, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn *Sanawāt ghalayān*. (The Years of Boiling), pp. 689–699.

[15] STEPHENS, Robert *Nasser. A Political Biography*, p. 405.

[16] The purged independent unionist officers Lu'ayy al-Atāsī and Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī, and the *Nāṣirist* officers Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣūfī, Rāshid al-Quṭaynī and Fawwāz Muḥārib, who had all been members of the NCRC set up as the supreme authority of the state after the 8 March 1963 coup, as well as Jāsim ᶜAlwān, Muḥammad Jarrāḥ, two leading *Nāṣirist* officers, were indeed all *Sunnīs*. In Van DAM, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 50.

[17] Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī*. Vol. IV., pp. 3200–3202.

[18] ABU JABER, Kamel S. *The Arab Baᶜth Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*, pp. 72–73.

primarily on sectarian motives. Some 800 people, largely innocent victims, were killed or wounded, 20 supporters of the coup were executed and hundreds more arrested. The patience of Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir was exhausted by these moves and he declared, "We do not consider that the UAR is bound to the present fascist regime in Syria by any common aim".[19]

The suppression of the coup left the *Baᶜth party* in power and General Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ – a *Sunnite* from Aleppo, from the lower middle class – as leader. He attempted to bring together the disparate elements in Syrian political life and, while not reconciling all, he at least gave some stability to the leadership of the Baᶜth. The Baᶜth Military Committee established tight control of the army; among its leading members were Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, an able *ᶜAlawī* from Latakia and Colonel Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, another *ᶜAlawī* who commanded the air force. The Committee gradually infiltrated the armed forces to ensure that the most important units were under its control and to strengthen its ability to forestall any counter coups. In this process several members of minority groups began to assume authority, particularly the *ᶜAlawīs, Druzes, Ismāᶜīlīs*, as *Sunnite* influence tended to diminish. This was a highly significant trend. The *Baᶜthist* officers of the *ᶜAlawī* minority might subsequently have seized the opportunity to purge the remaining (mainly *Sunnite*) *Nāṣirist* officers from the army. The distrust which such interpretations created among many of the *Sunnite* majority population against those *Baᶜthists* who originated from religious minorities, was difficult to neutralize after this stage.

Although the *Baᶜth Party* had consolidated its hold over Syria, it was still beset by internal difficulties. Besides the factionalism described above there was a lack of popular support for the regime. In an effort to increase its popular base, the *Baᶜth party* opened its membership ranks to many newcomers. This move had the far-reaching consequences of radically changing the social background of members and making the Michel ᶜAflaq and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār wing of the party a minority.[20] Concurrent with these changes, there emerged a group of young radical *Baᶜthists* which eventually included most of the unsatisfied members of the party, gathering support from old-line regulars, near-Marxists and newly recruited protégés of the Military Committee – the common determining feature of which was their opposition to the old guard.[21] By this

[19] Khiṭāb ar-ra'īs fī al-ᶜīd al-ḥādiya ᶜashara li-ath-thawra, 22 yūliyū 1963. (Speech of the President on the occasion of 11th anniversary of the Revolution). In Kitāb at-taḥrīr: Ḥadīth al-baṭal az-zaᶜīm Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir ilā al-umma. Al-juz' ar-rābiᶜ 1961–1963, al-ᶜadad 47–48, pp. 550–556.

[20] ABU JABER, Kamel S. *The Arab Baᶜth Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*, p. 78.

[21] KERR, Malcolm H. *The Arab Cold War. Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958 – 1970*, pp. 81–85.

time the Military Committee had complete control of the army and heavy representation in the Regional Command. With the support of the anti-ᶜAflaq members, the Committee also had virtual control of the party, a control which its members began using to accomplish one of their primary objectives – the ousting of Michel ᶜAflaq and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār.

The new left began to get its way. At the Syrian Regional Conference in September 1963 the leftists won a majority.[22] They began to introduce a more "socialist" ideology, with notions such as class struggle and collective farms which provoked opposition, particularly amongst the bourgeoisie. By this means, the *Baᶜthist* radicals won all eight seats in the Regional Command, plus the majority of the delegates to the Sixth National Congress which met in October. But the Sixth National Congress of October 1963 was concerned with more than a power play by the radicals. It was faced with devising an answer to a remark made by Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir during the Cairo Unity Talks and contained in the minutes of those talks. The President was quoted as saying that he had seen no particular ideological contribution by the *Baᶜth party* in recent years and that the differences between him and the party were political and personal. The Congress issued a report outlining the differences.[23]

The most striking feature of the Congress with its references to "scientific socialism" and "collective farms" provoked a near panic among the Syrian bourgeoisie, the disappearance of consumer goods from the market, and a new wave of opposition to the regime. Anyway, the introduction of new terminology was not relevant to existing political conditions in Syria and Iraq, two countries plainly not ready for the radical socialism envisaged by the report. Only a direct army takeover shielded the government from this crisis.

After the Congress, the Military Committee worked at consolidating its position by promoting Ṣalāḥ Jadīd to Major-General and appointing him chief-of-staff on 11 November 1963.[24] Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār resigned next day, and the

---

[22] The Arab world in the Baᶜth view is divided into regions (quṭr) not states (dawla), awaiting reunification. Therefore it held regional conferences, Syrian or Iraqi, and national ones which are pan-Arab.

[23] *Baᶜd al-munṭalaqāt an-naẓarīya*. (Some theoretical starting points). In *Niḍāl Ḥizb al-Baᶜth al-ᶜarabī al-ishtirākī ᶜabra muʾtamarātihi al-qawmīya (1947 – 1964)*. (The Struggle of the *Socialist Party of Arab Resurrection* through its National Congresses). Documentary Record, pp. 169–212.

[24] The Military Committee established a tight grip on the army. Step by step the Military Committee took command of all the military units essential for making and breaking coups. Lt-Col Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, an *ᶜAlawī*, commanded the Air Force; Major-General Muḥammad ᶜUmrān, also an *ᶜAlawī*, the 70th Armoured Brigade, stationed in Damascus, the strongest unit in the Syrian army; the *Druze* officer Ḥamad ᶜUbayd commanded the 5th Armoured Brigade; the *Druze* Salīm Ḥātūm the army's elite

Committee took advantage of this opportunity to install Brigadier Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ as premier and Muḥammad ᶜUmrān as his deputy. [25] Still, the new regime was immediately jeopardized by the 18 November coup in Baghdad which ousted the *Baᶜth party*. The new Iraqi leader was ᶜAbdassalām ᶜĀrif, who was on very good terms with Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir; thus Syria was once more isolated from its eastern neighbour. The Baghdad coup also deepened the rift between the moderate and the radical wings of the *Baᶜth party*, the former blaming the loss of Iraq on the radicalism of the Iraqi *Baᶜthist* regime and the latter, supported by the Iraqis who managed to get to Damascus, on there being insufficient socialism in Iraq. The radicals therefore claimed that in order to prevent the same thing from happening in Syria the party must undertake an immediate and radical transformation (inqilāb) of Syrian society. [26]

The Military Committee used its position as the autonomous and exclusive representative of the party military organization to build an "ideological army". Since the *Baᶜthists* in the army were relatively few in number, this effort involved not only intensive indoctrination but also extensive purges, mainly of *Sunnite* officers from the cities. To fill the vacancies, the Military Committee recalled to active service all *Baᶜthist* reserve officers and all officers with whom it was connected by family, clan, or sectarian relations. This brought an influx of *ᶜAlawī*, *Druze*, and *Ismāᶜīlī* officers, since both traditional army recruitment and *Baᶜth party* membership drew largely on the rural areas where these minorities live. The committee's enemies inevitably accused it of sectarian discrimination in promotions and transfers, and in acceptance of students in the Military Academy and of officers and NCOs in the party.

More important in terms of the *Baᶜth party* within the wider context of Arab politics was the downfall of the Iraqi *Baᶜth party* on 18 November 1963, which all but destroyed the idea that the *Baᶜth party* could become a power in pan-Arab politics and could rival Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir for leadership in the Middle East. [27] These internal dissensions, though a manifestation of broader conflicting

---

commando battalion which then guarded GHQ, and the Broadcasting Station; the *Ismāᶜīlī* ᶜAbdalkarīm al-Jundī the Artillery; and the *Sunnite* Aḥmad Suwaydānī Military Intelligence, to name only the most important officers.

[25] The government of Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ included members of both the National and Regional Commands, among the latter the "three doctors" and long-time party militants – Ibrāhīm Mākhūs, an *ᶜAlawī* from Latakia, and the *Sunnites* Dr Nūraddīn al-Atāsī of the influential Ḥumṣ family, and Yūsuf Zuᶜayyin, from a small town on the Iraqi frontier.

[26] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, pp. 173–174.

[27] *Niḍāl Ḥizb al-Baᶜth al-ᶜarabī al-ishtirākī ᶜabra muᵓtamarātihi al-qawmīya, 1947 – 1964. A Documentary Record.* (The Struggle of the Baᶜth Arab Socialist Party Through its National Congresses, *1947 – 1964*), p. 260.

social factors, caused not only the fall of the *Ba'th* Government in Iraq but also the demise of the *Ba'th Party*. No longer could this party command the respect it had before its brief tenure of office.[28] Iraqi President 'Abdassalām 'Ārif, who was not a *Ba'thist*, was able to get rid of the *Ba'thist* leaders in November 1963, to the satisfaction of Jamāl 'Abdannāṣir. In spite of this, Syria and Iraq continued their vehement rhetoric against Egypt. The fall of the *Ba'th party* in Iraq in November, following on a split in the party there, precipitated a new crisis within the Syrian *Ba'th party*. To the young militants the Iraqi defeat demonstrated the inconsequence of "old" ideology and slogans. Michel 'Aflaq, in turn, blamed the defeat on the young militants, many of whom he considered to be "crypto-communists". With the overthrow of the *Ba'th party* in Iraq, the Syrian forces fighting the Kurds had to be brought home. The heavy losses these forces had suffered could no longer be kept secret. The Kurdish expedition had a bad effect on army morale. The *Ba'thist* officers were more than ever determined to keep their hands on the helm.[29]

The radicals, however, still did not feel completely sure of themselves, partly because of differences within their own ranks. They decided to refrain from ousting the Michel 'Aflaq supporters in order to retain his legitimizing image. But as an indication of things to come, a resolution was introduced at the congress condemning those who had failed to seize power in Syria before 1958. Later on in the congress, only one-third of the nine Syrian and Iraqi positions on the National Command went to moderates. Michel 'Aflaq held one of these, but Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār was defeated in his bid. Supporters of Michel 'Aflaq held four more seats as representatives of smaller branches of the party.[30] Once again the army intervened. Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār was sacked as prime minister and Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ took over with colleagues from the new Ba'th. Opposition to the regime continued, now of a rather different nature. The *Ba'thist* government, considered by its opponents to be both secular and minority-led, was denounced as atheistic and non-Arab.

* * * * *

The *Ba'thists* were surprised by another manifestation of Jamāl 'Abdannāṣirs tactical genius. He reasserted his leadership by calling for a pan-Arab conference to meet in Cairo in January 1964 for the purpose of discussing what action the Arab states should take over the Israeli plan to divert water from the Jordan River for its own use.[31] The Syrian delegation to this conference was headed by Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ who called for war; he was very quickly put in his

---

[28] ABU JABER, Kamel S. *The Arab Ba'th Socialist Party*, p. 83.

[29] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, p. 174.

[30] OLSON, Robert W. *The Ba'th and Syria, 1947 to 1982. The Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State*, p. 85.

[31] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Ba'th*, p. 101.

place by the other delegates who understood the purpose of the meeting, namely, to put on a militant and united face, but to do nothing concrete whatsoever. When Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ returned to Syria, the radicals publicly criticized him for not pressing for war. The next day, 24 January 1964, the radicals succeeded in getting Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār expelled from the party because he had signed the resolution supporting secession from the United Arab Republic.[32]

But the radicals were really not as strong as these actions seemed to indicate. By the end of January 1964 they were faced with the potential opposition of both the Military Committee and the old guard, who, despite their differences, were ready to cooperate against the ultra-leftists whose actions had led to public discontent with the party and had aroused the ire of the not inconsiderable numbers of conservatives and religiously-oriented Syrians. In early February this odd coalition expelled the ultra-leftists by increasing the number of delegates to the Regional Congress and packing in enough of their supporters to vote the radicals out.[33]

An Emergency Regional Congress, held in February 1964 to discuss the reasons for the *Baʿth party's* defeat in Iraq, elected a new Regional Command in which the Military Committee demanded and secured seven of 15 seats. Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ was now a member of both the National and Regional Commands. Frightened by the fate of the party in Iraq, the National Command granted the Regional Command wide powers to appoint the leaders of the party branches and make a new purge. The Regional Command used these powers to get rid of supporters of the old guard and bring in its own men, eight civilian and seven military members. In this way the regionalists acquired a firm organizational base.[34] Continuing differences between the Regional and National Commands led Michel ʿAflaq to depart for Bonn in an effort to dramatize his disapproval.

By 1964 the business community in Syria had become totally dissatisfied with this deteriorating situation. As the target of any nationalization schemes, they were naturally against any socialist program. The business community was looking for an excuse to begin its struggle to topple the *Baʿthist* regime.[35] From early February through mid-May in 1964, there was constant tension between

---

[32] DEVLIN, John F. *The Baʿth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 285.

[33] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, pp. 101–102.

[34] BIZZĪ, Nājī ʿAbdannabī *Sūrīya. Ṣīrāʿ al-istiqṭāb, 1917 – 1973*, p. 333.

[35] The paradox of Baʿth weakness in the cities can be explained in terms of the general lack of organization of labour. On the other hand, the businessmen were well organized into professional organizations and had the means to influence the course of events. In ABU JABER, Kamel S. *The Arab Baʿth Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*, pp. 89–90.

the *Ba'th party* and the conservatives, mostly right-wing *Sunnites* because of their antagonism to the "rule of minorities" – that is, to the secularism of the *Ba'th party*. The Muslim Brotherhood and the *Nāṣirists* both influential among the *Sunnite* petit bourgeoisie of the cities, joined forces against the government. This tension often broke out into hard confessional clashes and anti-government riots, provoking in turn violent reaction from the *Ba'thist*-controlled army.[36]

The protest movement, changing in character, then spread to all the main cities where small and middle businessmen, striking for specific economic demands, were joined by engineers, lawyers, magistrates, students, teachers, and workers calling for restoration of public liberties, release of political prisoners, termination of the state of emergency, and immediate restoration of democratic life by free elections. At the end of April, all the main cities were on strike. The April riots marked the first appearance of the Workers' Militia, organized by the *Ismā'īlī* trade union leader Khālid al-Jundī, and armed by the government which contributed to saving the regime and became the basis for his rising political influence.[37]

General Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ attempted to conciliate the disaffected population. Hinting again at the need for a Government of National Union, he initiated the introduction of a new constitution.[38] On 24 April, after the troubles, the regime had introduced a new provisional constitution for Syria: it provided for the enlargement of the NCRC to include representatives of "peasants, workers, military intelligentsia and non-exploiting capital" and transformed the NCRC into a National Revolutionary Council (NRC) with legislative authority. The principal executive power of the state was vested in a five-man Presidential Council, to be chosen from among the members of the NRC. Some days later the new Presidential Council was established consisting of five members, led by Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ who was for the occasion promoted to Lt-General (farīq). The other members were Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, Muḥammad 'Umrān, Nūraddīn al-Atāsī, and the *Druze* leader Manṣūr al-Atrash.[39]

Although successful in extinguishing *Nāṣirist* activity in Syria, the *Ba'th party* had lost its moral strength and appeal in the area of inter-Arab politics. From its pre-eminent position in the movement for Arab unity, the *Ba'th party*,

---

[36] OLSON, Robert W. *The Ba'th and Syria, 1947 to 1982*, pp. 88–89.

[37] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, p. 176.

[38] Syrian Provisional Constitution. In ABU JABER, Kamel S. *The Arab Ba'th Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*. Appendix C, pp. 175–183.

[39] This line-up – two military *Ba'thists*, one regionalist, and two of old guard – reflected the power balance in Syria far more accurately than before. Except for Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, all members of the Presidential Council were members of the Regional or National Commands of the party. In DEVLIN, John F. *The Ba'th Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, pp. 290–291.

when in power, had succeeded only in isolating Syria from its fellow Arab states and itself from other unionist elements in those countries. The April disturbances compelled the party to try to break out of its isolation. In an attempt to soften some of the domestic criticism, the Ba°th and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, who was reinstated to membership after the ousting of the ultra-leftists, formed another cabinet on 14 May.[40] Moreover, a dispute became apparent within the party. This dispute marked the beginning of a behind-the-scenes conflict between Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and Muḥammad °Umrān. Due to it the latter, hostile to the emerging neo-Ba°th trend, after being accused of building a confessional bloc in the army and seeking a rapprochement with the *Nāṣirists*, moved into the old-guard camp.

This new arrangement helped soften or somewhat diffuse the internal unrest in the party. Thus by late June 1964, the Military Committee had decided it no longer needed Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār or the National Command. The military then began moulding the party more to its liking, which meant making it a tool to be used as the Committee saw fit.[41] Michel °Aflaq, realized this and understood what it meant for the future. He left Syria in an effort to put pressure on the Military Committee. Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār stayed behind to conduct a power struggle with the Military Committee and its civilian supporters, a battle which continued for three months. His was a loosing battle, because the Regional Command, controlled by the Military Committee, had readmitted large numbers of the Regionalists (al-quṭrīyūn) to party membership. This cooperation gave the two groups nearly complete control of the Syrian party structure. These Regionalists sided with the Military Committee against the National Command, which was now being called pan-Arab nationalists (al-qawmīyūn).[42]

Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār did not agree with these changes but he kept his post because of the approach of the Second Arab Summit Conference to be held between 5 and 18 September 1964 in Alexandria in which Syria hoped to improve its relations with other Arab states.[43] After this conference, on 25 September, the Regional Command voted "no confidence" in al-Bīṭār's government which was then forced to resign. Again becoming premier, General Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ constituted a government dominated by the regionalist militants. Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār and Manṣūr al-Atrash thereupon resigned from the Presidential Council to be replaced by General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd and Dr. Yūsuf Zu°ayyin, two radical Regionalists, a sequence of events which completed the

[40] Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī.* Vol. IV., pp. 3247–3248.

[41] DEVLIN, John F. *The Ba°th Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 292.

[42] HOPWOOD, Derek *Syria 1945 – 1986. Politics and Society.* London, p. 46.

[43] Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī.* Vol. IV., pp. 3270–3271.

radicals' takeover of the Council.[44] The Regional Command stripped General Muḥammad ᶜUmrān, who had associated himself with the National Command, of his party posts and sent him to Spain as ambassador.[45]

One of the issues at stake between the traditional leadership and the regionalists was the land reform and the regionalists wanted to speed execution of the reform. Another issue was the flight of capital out of the country which had reached staggering proportions. The middle class reacted by smuggling their capital out of the country and it is estimated that by the end of 1964 capitalists had smuggled nearly one billion Syrian pounds out of the country.[46] The regionalists intended to stop it, if necessary, by draconian measures. Colonel ᶜAbdalkarīm al-Jundī, a radically-minded *Ismāᶜīlī*, who became Minister of Agrarian Reform was determined to carry out the reform. In December 1964, a new kind of decree law in the Middle East prohibited the granting of any oil concessions and provided for Syria's own exploitation of its oil resources. This was the first oil nationalization decree in the Arab world.[47]

* * * * *

Michel ᶜAflaq returned to Damascus from self-exile in Bonn and tried to set up a joint meeting of the National and Syrian Regional Commands for the purpose of embarrassing Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ. The National Command, still under control of Michel ᶜAflaq, passed resolutions which declared the Regional Command's action illegal and suspended the Syrian Regional Command pending another regional congress. Much to their chagrin, the members of the National Command quickly discovered that the Military Committee was in such complete control of the Syrian *Baᶜth Party* that the National Command of the Party would have been powerless to oust them.[48] This development spurred Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and the Regional Command to take measures of economic nature aimed at strengthening their control and neutralizing the power of the upper middle class. During the first four days of January 1965, the regime nationalized 114 business concerns, from large companies to small workshops. Agrarian reforms were speeded up to increase support among the peasants and reduce the holdings of the landlords.[49] Reaction also came from the religious leaders who began advocating civil disobedience. Strikes were dealt with quickly and severely; some participants were sentenced to death as a deterrent to others, then quietly reprieved. By now the *Baᶜth Party* realized that it needed to control

[44] BIZZĪ, Nājī ᶜAbdannabī *Sūrīya. Ṣirāᶜ al-istiqṭāb, 1917 – 1973*, p. 337.

[45] DEVLIN, John F. *The Baᶜth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 29.

[46] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baᶜth*, p. 141.

[47] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, p. 178.

[48] OLSON, Robert W. *The Baᶜth and Syria, 1947 to 1982*, p. 92.

[49] Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī*. Vol. IV., pp. 3282–3286.

the 'ulamā'. It tried to accomplish this by decreeing on 28 January 1965 that the Presidential Council had the power to appoint and dismiss members of all religious hierarchies, whether Christian, Muslim or heterodox.[50]

While trying to neutralize the 'ulamā', the Syrian Ba'th Party held elections to the upcoming Regional Congress. That factionalism was still rampant within their midst was illustrated in elections, held between 10 and 24 January 1965, in which splits occurred along rural-urban, native-outsider and regional lines. It was obvious to the Regionalists and the Military Committee that the party machinery needed overhauling. As a result, they reduced the membership in the Regional Command of the Party to 11, six of whom held no other political or military posts so that they might devote all their time to the Command. This system was also adopted in the regional branches within Syria.[51] When the Regional Congress met, it commended the Regional Command for its performance and empowered it to nominate the members of the Presidential Council and the premier. The Congress also resolved that the regional secretary would automatically be chairman of the Council.[52] Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, who was already premier, and his supporters were in control of the Regional Command. They used their strength there to appoint Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ regional secretary, thus making him, chairman of the Presidential Council. He now held the three highest government positions simultaneously.

The Eight National Congress was to follow the Regional Congress (18 March – 4 April), but, in spite of their control of Syria, the members of the Syrian Regional Command were not happy about this prospect because their moderate rivals, led by Michel ʿAflaq, still constituted the majority bloc in the National Command of the Party. The problem and dissent arose because the top military and civilian posts went to selected members of the Military Committee, while the members of the Military Organization and certain founding members of the Military Committee got nothing. Consequently, the Regional Command tried to reach a reconciliation with the old guard at the National Congress, held at the end of April 1965, before the moderates found out about the schism. At the Congress, a committee composed of Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, Michel ʿAflaq and Munīf al-Razzāz, a Syrian-born Jordanian Ba'thist, drafted a report confirming the actions of the Regional Command in Syria in regard to the Military Committee and the Military Organization. But the report also reaffirmed the National Command's supervisory power over the Regional Command and transferred the power to nominate the premier, the members of

[50] RABINOVICH, Itamar Syria under the Ba'th, pp. 142–143.

[51] OLSON, Robert W. The Ba'th and Syria, 1947 to 1982, p. 93.

[52] BIZZĪ, Nājī ʿAbdannabī Sūriya. Ṣirāʿ al-istiqṭāb, 1917 – 1973, p. 337, RABINOVICH, Itamar Syria under the Ba'th, pp. 145-147.

the Presidential Council and the chief-of-staff from the Regional Command alone to a joint session of both the Regional and National Commands.[53]

Most important of the results of these congresses was the open eruption of the tension between Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and Ṣalāḥ Jadīd. Completely different in background and disposition, the two also had different power bases. Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ was generally supported by the Syrian populace, while Ṣalāḥ Jadīd was backed by most of the officers whose support was essential.[54] On the home front the Syrian Regional Congress, which had met in March and April 1965, reconvened in June to approve a temporary programme of action to be followed in Syria. This programme had been formulated by the Regional Command, but it underwent some changes before its final approval, because the National Command had resumed its activity in Syria and demanded some voice in the programme. The influence of the old guard was evident in several places and was especially heavy in the strongly anti-Marxist introduction. The programme was approved by a joint session of the Regional and National Commands and was released on 22 July 1965. Less than two weeks later, on 2 August, the National Command issued a programme designed for the party in general. These programmes were respectively known as the Temporary Programme (*al-barnāmaj al-marḥalī*) and the Party Programme (*al-minhāj al-ḥizbī*), of which the former was the most important insofar as Syria was concerned. The only importance of both programmes was that they showed the *Baʿth Party* had effectively gained political and economic control of Syria and was acting to give a *modus vivendi* to those in the middle class who were willing to be reconciled to the regime.[55]

The isolation of the party leadership (both national and regional) from the Syrian people and the party bases – a situation admitted by the new Secretary-General – encouraged new splits. A power struggle now developed between Generals Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and Ṣalāḥ Jadīd.

The latter proposed the abolition of the Presidential Council and it was taken up by a joint meeting of the Regional and National Commands of the Party in the last week of June 1965.

An Emergency Regional Congress, held in July 1965 to settle this conflict, elected a new Regional Command, seven of whose members were officers.

---

[53] *Taqrīr tajribat al-ḥukm fī Sūriyā.* (Report on the Governmental Experiment in Syria). In *Niḍāl al-Baʿth.* Collection of Documents. (The Struggle of the Baʿth). Vol. IX. *Al-muʾtamar al-qawmī ath-thāmin.* (The Eight National Congress), pp. 16–19. Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī.* Vol. IV., p. 3304.

[54] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, pp. 160–164; Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī.* Vol. IV., p. 3273.

[55] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, pp. 176–179.

Since half the new Command supported Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, and the other half Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, nothing was settled. Under pressure from Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd resigned as chief-of-staff, but he achieved dominance in the Regional Command. Exasperated by its inability to get either of the antagonists to budge, the entire Regional Command resigned.[56]

All of this infighting came at a time when the *Baʿth party's* relations with Egypt were again deteriorating, after having improved somewhat during late 1964 and early 1965. The problem was the perpetual inter-Arab question over how to deal with Israel. In this instance, Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir was saying that each Arab state should defend itself and its anti-Israeli projects. Syria, which had had some equipment used in its Jordan River diversion project destroyed by Israeli air raids, advocated mutual help. Following a May 1965 conference in Cairo where the Syrian position was rejected,[57] Damascus initiated a large-scale anti-Cairo propaganda campaign. The Egyptian media replied in kind, and the vituperation continued until the Syrians threatened to boycott the Third Arab Summit Conference in Casablanca (13-17 September) and all subsequent conferences. Knowing that the other Arab states wanted to continue the conferences and so would support Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir to ensure his continued cooperation, the *Baʿth party* had to back down. Otherwise, Syria would become even more isolated from its fellow Arab states than previously, a position in which it often found itself. Therefore, the Syrian delegation to the Casablanca conference, led by Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and Munīf al-Razzāz, acquiesced in all decisions made by the conference, including a resolution prohibiting any Arab state from making propaganda attacks on any other Arab state.[58]

Throughout these Syrian-Egyptian and Regional Command-National Command scenarios, the Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ Ṣalāḥ Jadīd struggle was continuing within the Syrian party branch and quickly became rather heated. Ṣalāḥ Jadīd struck first by winning over four of his adversary's supporters, including the minister of defence, General Ḥamad ʿUbayd, exploiting personal weaknesses and aspirations and the *Baʿthist* political system, which meant cementing

---

[56] Such an action required a Regional Congress, and the National Command, in an effort to strengthen its position in Syria, decided to increase the number of members on the Regional Command from 11 to 16. But the plan backfired because of ʿAflaq's obstinate insistence that nine of the 16 members be from among his supporters. As a result of his unreasonableness, the other Baʿthists reacted unfavourably and chose 16 men known for their opposition to Michel ʿAflaq. In DEVLIN, John F. *The Baʿth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 299.

[57] On a Syrian request to alter the Covenant met in Cairo between 26 and 30 May 1965 the extraordinary session of the Arab League Collective Security Pact. In HAYKAL, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn *Al-Infijār 1967*. (The Explosion 1967), pp. 205–207.

[58] BIZZĪ, Nājī ʿAbdannabī *Sūrīya. Ṣirāʿ al-istiqṭāb, 1917 – 1973*, p. 339.

political alliances on lines of confessional solidarity and distrust. Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, who had castigated the disgraced Muḥammad ʿUmrān for building an ʿAlawī bloc of officers, himself inherited ʿUmrān's ʿAlawī backing. In this regard it is interesting that Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ worked to rouse Sunnite support for himself by making an issue out of sectarianism but the ploy failed, chiefly because the Sunnites lacked the necessary cohesiveness. Most importantly, three of the four officers who left Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ for Ṣalāḥ Jadīd were not ʿAlawī but Druze. Not traditionally allies, the Druze and ʿAlawīs found common ground when Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ raised the cry of sectarianism and over-representation of minorities in the officer corps.[59]

Ṣalāḥ Jadīd and his faction seized this passivity as an opportunity to discredit Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and the National Command, who had the unenviable task of explaining the Casablanca decision in light of their past invective against both Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir and the Arab monarchs.

The Cairo and Casablanca Conferences discredited temporarily the leadership of Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, Michel ʿAflaq and, even, Munīf al-Razzāz.[60] The Regional Command then began a furious attack on Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, ostensibly for the friendlier attitude he had adopted towards President Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir in an effort to end Syria's isolation, but in fact because he had begun to stand with the National Command. Power shifted to the Ṣalāḥ Jadīd group through his careful manipulation of the Regional Command, which he controlled from his position as deputy-secretary, and through defections from the opposite camp. After his return from Casablanca, Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ was replaced on 23 September 1965 as premier by Yūsuf Zuʿayyin, a physician who had served as a volunteer in the Algerian revolution.[61] In an effort to strengthen his position, Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ tried to reinstate some of the men of Akram al-Ḥawrānī in the army. The government dominated by Ṣalāḥ Jadīd then arrested Akram al-Ḥawrānī and his leading supporters on charges of "collusion with a foreign power". Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ took the challenge and often visited Akram al-Hawrānī who was ill in prison, and in December he managed to get him

[59] PETRAN, Thabita Syria, p. 180.

[60] RABINOVICH, Itamar Syria under the Baʿth, p. 170.

[61] His cabinet consisted mostly of supporters of Ṣalāḥ Jadīd. Dr. Ibrāhīm Mākhūs, the only prominent ʿAlawī civilian in the Baʿth party and another veteran of Algeria, became deputy premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs. A Sunnī, Muḥammad ʿĪd al-ʿAshāwī, held the important Ministry of the Interior, and an Ismāʿīlī officer, ʿAbdalkarīm al-Jundī, headed the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, which soon would become an important post. In Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī. Vol. IV., p. 3316.

released so that he could go to Paris for medical treatment.[62]

Regionalist attacks drove Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ closer to the National Command. Mounting conflicts created a crisis atmosphere. Early in December 1965 the National Command decided to require officers in the Regional Command (but not in the National Command) to resign from the army. But the Regional Command controlled Syria and most army bases now supported the regionalist officers. Except for the popularity of Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ with the people, the National Command was isolated. In an effort to add greater control over the military to considerable civilian power, Ṣalāḥ Jadīd transferred "unreliable" officers to less sensitive posts. When this move was blocked by Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, who still wielded significant influence in the army, Ṣalāḥ Jadīd resurrected an old but still valid law which gave the Minister of Defence – Ḥamad ʿUbayd, who now supported Ṣalāḥ Jadīd – the power to transfer officers.[63]

Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ then received help from a very unlikely source when Muḥammad ʿUmrān, on leave from his post in Spain, was reconciled with Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ – a monumental task given their mutual animosity. By this move, Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ hoped to draw away some of the ʿAlawī support.[64] Unfortunately, the National Command was split over the efficacy of this reconciliation, its members feeling that they had neither enough political nor military support to be successful. It was this group which did not believe that the Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and Muḥammad ʿUmrān reconciliation could last.[65]

In answer to the National Command's order Ṣalāḥ Jadīd made a tactical error. He ordered the chief-of-staff of the Armoured Brigade stationed in Ḥumṣ, Lt-Col. Muṣṭafā Ṭalās – one of his partisans – to arrest its three commanding officers who were loyal to Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and take over the brigade for the regionalists. Unfortunately for Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, many officers were antagonized by this action and switched their allegiance back to the National Command.[66] Considering this act tantamount to a *coup*, the National Command decided to take over all authority, dissolving the Regional Command on the grounds that it had violated party statutes. But the National Command itself violated party statutes in taking this action without holding a party congress. This loss of support gave the Ṣalāḥ Jadīd-dominated Regional Command no choice but to acquiesce when the National Command of the Party voted on 19 December 1965 to dissolve the Regional Command and itself assume all military and

---

[62] Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī.* Vol. IV., pp. 3348 and 3360.

[63] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, p. 184.

[64] DEVLIN, John F. *The Baʿth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, pp. 301–302.

[65] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, p. 187.

[66] Ar-RAZZĀZ, Munīf *At-tajriba al-murra*, pp. 165–167.

political power in Syria.[67]

This decision was announced on 21 December, after which the Regional Command was replaced by a Supreme Party Command (al-qiyāda al-ḥizbīya al-ʿulyā) composed of the National Command and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār and four of his Syrian supporters, thus giving the anti-Jadīd faction a clear majority. Under the reorganization, civilian party members were included for the first time in the Military Bureau, and with the sole exception of service in the Ministry of Defence, officers could no longer hold military and government or party positions simultaneously. Party membership was also to be re-evaluated, since most branches were still loyal to the dissolved Regional Command.[68] For the time being Ṣalāḥ Jadīd and his supporters refrained from striking back, in spite of the fact that they had enough power to seize the government. Their opponents had not yet hit at the real bases of Jadīd's power, so he and his supporters tried to avoid intra-party rivalries which had persisted throughout the history of the Baʿth regime in Syria.

There was a tacit understanding that violent clashes likely to endanger the very existence of the regime should be avoided.[69] Additionally, an armed coup at that time would have had disastrous political consequences both domestically and internationally. So the Ṣalāḥ Jadīd faction instead undertook a relatively peaceful program designed to embarrass the new government. Their first action was to have Yūsuf Zuʿayyin, his cabinet and three of the five members of the Presidential Council submit their resignations, thereby creating a minor constitutional crisis because only the full Presidential Council, now reduced to two members, could accept the resignation of the cabinet. Six days later the Council was restored to full membership and the resignations were accepted.[70]

Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār was then asked to form another government, but even before he accepted he ran into difficulties, because the National Command of the Party was not unanimous in approving his nomination for the premiership. For one thing, there were still several supporters of Ṣalāḥ Jadīd on the Command, and for another, some of Michel ʿAflaq's supporters simply did not like Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār for personal reasons.[71] Eventually, though, Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār got down to the business of forming the government. One of his first actions was to bring Muḥammad ʿUmrān back from Madrid to be Minister of Defence – neither Michel ʿAflaq nor Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār wanted Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ's group to be the only military faction in the government. Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ

---

[67] DEVLIN, John F. *The Baʿth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 301.

[68] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, p. 181.

[69] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, p. 191.

[70] DEVLIN, John F. *The Baʿth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 301.

[71] Ar-RAZZĀZ, Munīf *At-tajriba al-murra*, pp. 180–181.

acquiesced in this move, but proposed that the two joint offices of Defence Minister and Commander-in Chief be separated with Muḥammad ʿUmrān holding the former and himself the latter. This was not done, and Muḥammad ʿUmrān got both posts, alienating not only Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ but neutral officers opposed to Muḥammad ʿUmrān's sectarianism.[72]

Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār's first order of business, as announced in his speech of 4 January 1966, was to end the isolation of the *Baʿth party* both within Syria and abroad, specifically by arranging a détente with Egypt. To end this seemingly constant isolation, he ordered the release of political prisoners, including the supporters of the *Baʿth party's* old comrade-in-arms, Akram al-Hawrānī. Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār also asked those discontented with the state of Syrian affairs to discuss problems with the government, and set up a committee to investigate nationalized industries, causing rumours of impending denationalization. But Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār made one foolish mistake: he publicly announced that, in accordance with an agreement reached with the army before he had agreed to accept the premiership, he intended to go through with the transfers of officers considered hostile to the new government.[73]

Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār was now in a dilemma. He could not transfer the officers he wanted without the possibility of a coup. On the other hand, his government would be seriously handicapped by the presence of a hostile military faction: members of which were in command of the army's key posts and the Syrian party machinery.[74] During the ensuing struggle for control of the military and the party organization in Syria, Ṣalāḥ Jadīd's faction had several imposing advantages. They still controlled most of the party machinery of the Regional Command, as well as most of the Syrian sub-branches. Well aware of this, they resorted to a legal tactic, reminding everyone concerned that the Eighth National Congress had required the summoning of a Regional Congress whenever a Regional Command was dissolved. As Michel ʿAflaq and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār knew only too well, such a Congress would support the recently dissolved Regional Command. To counteract such a move they planned to purge the party's branches in Syria and hinted at holding a Ninth National Congress before holding elections to the Regional Congress, a series of moves that would consume much time.[75] They were both "Convinced of their own rightfulness and regarding the ousted Regional Command as a product of an illegal conspiracy against the party, were not so much bothered by moral scruples as they were troubled by the accumulating political effect that such

---

[72] OLSON, Robert W. *The Baʿth and Syria, 1947 to 1982*, p. 103.

[73] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, p. 181.

[74] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, p. 191.

[75] Ar-RAZZĀZ, Munīf *At-tajriba al-murra*, pp. 180–181.

accusations (of not having moral scruples) seemed to have."[76]

With the general failure of these measures, Michel ʿAflaq and Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār decided to implement a largely unsuccessful policy which they dubbed "opening" (infitāḥ), an apparently twofold plan to free the party from its exclusivity and to "emphasize its popular quality" by opening the *Baʿth party's* ranks to mild unionists like the Socialist Union Movement.[77] Another move made about this time was the more successful restructuring of the NCRC by replacing 30 of its members and adding 39 additional members, thus bringing the total membership to 134. This move, and the limited success of "opening", gave the National Command of the Party the courage to call a Ninth National Congress and to prepare for the election of the Syrian delegates to that Congress.[78] The congress was postponed when the National Command realized it could not get its people elected without a purge of party branches. These moves, coupled with the transfer of several supporters of Ṣalāḥ Jadīd from sensitive posts near Damascus, would have seriously eroded the regionalist's power base. It should have been obvious to the National Command that what it was doing would certainly provoke Ṣalāḥ Jadīd to attempt a coup, especially when Muḥammad ʿUmrān and Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ were caught up in their personal feud and thus were not likely to join forces to stop Ṣalāḥ Jadīd.[79]

* * * * *

These decisions provoked Syria's bloodiest army coup in seventeen years on 23 February 1966. Its success was assured by the switch of General Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, the *ʿAlawī* Commander of the Air Force and a former supporter of Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, to the side of the insurrection. Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, Muḥammad ʿUmrān, Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, and other members of the National Command who did not manage to escape were imprisoned; Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Bīṭār, Michel ʿAflaq, and others were subsequently excluded from the party as "imperialist agents" and "traitors", and later the two historic leaders of the party were condemned to death. From this time, two *Baʿth parties* existed: the neo-Baʿth centred in Damascus, which soon built up branches in other Arab countries, and the old Baʿth based for the time being in Beirut.

The neo-Baʿthists, making their *coup* in the name of legality (the National Command having illegally dissolved the Regional Command), scrapped the

---

[76] Cit. In OLSON, Robert W. *The Baʿth and Syria, 1947 to 1982*, p. 105.

[77] RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, pp. 198–199.

[78] PETRAN, Thabita *Syria*, p. 182.

[79] DEVLIN, John F. *The Baʿth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 302; RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baʿth*, pp. 201–202.

1964 Constitution and did away with the complicated structure which had fragmented power in rival party and government institutions. All power was then vested in the Regional Command. The Head of State, the premier, and the Cabinet, all appointed and dismissed by the Regional Command, were to exercise legislative and executive power and later a new National Command was installed. General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, the strongman of the new regime, chose to rule from behind the scenes as Assistant Secretary-General of the Regional Command. General Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad remained Commander of the Air Force and became Minister of Defence. Aḥmad Suwaydānī, a *Sunnite*, was promoted to major-general and named chief-of-staff. The most prominent civilians in the new regime were the three doctors, Chief of State Nūraddīn al-Atāsī, Premier Yūsuf Zuᶜayyin, and Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister Ibrāhīm Mākhūs.

REFERENCES

ABU JABER, Kamel S. *The Arab Baᶜth Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*. New York: Syracuse University Press 1966.
ABURISH, Said K. *Nasser. The Last Arab*. London, Duckworth 2004.
Al-majmūᶜa al-kāmila li-khuṭab wa aḥādīth wa taṣrīḥāt Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir. Sanawāt al-waḥda. (Complete Collection of Speeches, Interviews and Statements of Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir. The Years of Union). Vol. III, Part II, 1st January 1960 to 5 October 1961. Beirut: Markaz ad-dirāsāt al-waḥda al-ᶜarabīya 1996.
BE'ERI, Eliezer *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*. London, Pall Mall 1970.
BIZZĪ, Nājī ᶜAbdannabī *Sūrīya. Ṣirāᶜ al-istiqṭāb, 1917 – 1973*. (Syria. The Struggle for Polarization). Damascus: Dār ibn al-ᶜArabī 1996.
DAWISHA, A. I. *Egypt in the Arab World. The Elements of Foreign Policy*. London: The Macmillan Press 1976.
DEVLIN, John F. *The Baᶜth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*. Stanford: Ca., Hoover Institution Press 1976.
Ḥadīth al-baṭal az-zaᶜīm Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir ilā al-umma. (Speech of the Hero, Leader, Jamāl ᶜAbdannāṣir to the Nation). Cairo: Kitāb at-taḥrīr, Vol. IV (1961 – 1963).
ḤAMRŪSH, Aḥmad *Qiṣṣat ṯawrat 23 yūliyū*. (The Story of the 23 July Revolution). Vol. III. *ᶜAbdannāṣir wa al-ᶜArab*. (ᶜAbdannāṣir and the Arabs). Beirut: Al-mu'assasa al-ᶜarabīya li-d-dirāsāt wa-n-nashr 1976.
HASOU, Tawfig Y. *The Struggle for the Arab World. Egypt's Nasser and the Arab League*. London, Boston, Sydney and Henley, KPI 1985.
Al-ḤAWRĀNĪ, Akram *Mudhakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī*. (The Memoirs of Akram al-Ḥawrānī). Vol. IV. Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī 2000.
HAYKAL, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn: *Sanawāt ghalayān*. (The Years of Boiling). Cairo: Al-Ahrām 1988.
HAYKAL, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn *Al-Infijār 1967*. (The Explosion 1967). Cairo: Al-

Ahrām 1990.

HOPWOOD, Derek *Syria 1945 – 1986. Politics and Society.* London: Unwin Hyman 1988.

KERR, Malcolm H. *The Arab Cold War. Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958 – 1970.* London, New York: Oxford University Press 1977.

MUḤAMMAD, Najāḥ *Al-ḥaraka al-qawmīya al-ᶜarabīya fī Sūriyā. 1948 – 1967.* (The Arab National Movement in Syria). Vol. I. Damascus, Dār al-Baᶜth 1987.

Niḍāl al-Baᶜth. Collection of Documents. (The Struggle of the Baᶜth). Vol. IV. *Al-mu'tamarāt al-qawmīya as-sabaᶜa al-ūlā.* (The First Seven National Congresses). Beirut, Dār aṭ-ṭalīᶜa li-ṭ-ṭibāᶜa wa-n-nashr 1970.

Niḍāl al-Baᶜth. Collection of Documents. (The Struggle of the Baᶜth). Vol. IX. *Al-mu'tamar al-qawmī ath-thāmin.* (The Eight National Congress). Beirut: Dār aṭ-ṭalīᶜa li-ṭ-ṭibāᶜa wa-n-nashr 1972.

NUTTING, Anthony *Nasser.* New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1972.

OLSON, Robert W. *The Baᶜth and Syria, 1947 to 1982. The Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State.* Princeton N. J.: The Kingston Press, Inc. 1982.

PETRAN, Thabita *Syria.* New York: Praeger Publishers 1972.

RABINOVICH, Itamar *Syria under the Baᶜth.* Jerusalem: Israel University Press 1972.

Ar-RAZZĀZ, Munīf *At-tajriba al-murra.* (Bitter Experience). Beirut: Dār ghandūr 1967.

STEPHENS, Robert *Nasser. A Political Biography.* London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press 1971.

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

ᶜUMRĀN, Muḥammad *Tajribatī fī ath-thawra.* (My Experience with the Revolution). Beirut 1970.

Van DAM, Nikolaos *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961 – 1978.* London : Croom Helm Ltd. Publishers 1979.

VERNIER, Bernard *Armée et politique au Moyen-Orient.* Paris 1966.