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# Turbulent from the Start: Revisiting Military Politics in Pre-Ba'ath Syria

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## Abstract

This article reconsiders military politics in Syria prior to the 1963 Ba'ath power grab in light of new sources. I undermine the presumptions that Ba'ath tactics of sectarian favoritism in the armed forces were unprecedented in post-independence Syria. I make the following arguments: first, attempts by the Sunni power elite to tame Syrian minorities were part of a broad sequence of events that spanned several regimes and informed politics in the Syrian officer corps; second, the various military strongmen who ruled Damascus intermittently from 1949 until 1963 distrusted minority officers and relied mainly on fellow Sunnis to exert control in the armed forces; and third, the combination of minority marginalization in Syrian politics and Sunni preferentialism inside the armed forces bred enmity and polarized sectarian relations in the officer corps.

**Keywords:** Syria; Military; Officers; Coups; Sunnis; Minorities

A series of new memoirs published over the last 25 years have opened fresh windows onto Syria's turbulent decades following independence. Some accounts were written by Syrian military officers, others by civilians.<sup>1</sup> The material made available in such recollections is highly informative—and still mostly untapped. In this article, I combine evidence garnered from these chronicles to revisit military politics in pre-1963 Syria. Furthermore, I interrogate classical understandings according to which the post-independence decades were a golden age during which sectarianism and parochialism were crumbling under the twin assault of nationalism and secularism. This article will show that such narrative requires serious revision.

<sup>1</sup>For officers, see Fawzi Shu'aybi, *Shahid Min al-Mukhabarat al-Suriyya, 1955–1968*, (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis Books, 2008); Mustafa Talass, *Mir'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thani, 1958–1968* (Damascus: Dar Talass li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 2006); Hanna Tawfiq Bashur, *Min Dhakirat 'Abi, Dhikrayat al-'Aqid Tawfiq Bashur* (Damascus: CAP Press, 2004); Muhammad Ma'ruf, *Ayyam 'Ushtuha, 1949–1969, al-'Inqilabat al-'Askariyya wa 'Asraruha fi Suriyya*, (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2003); Mustafa Talass, *Mir'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thalith, 1968–1978* (Damascus: Dar Talass li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 2003); Sami Jum'a, *Awraq Min Daftar al-Watan, 1946–1961*, (Damascus: Dar Talass li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2000); Husayn al-Hakim, *Suriyya wa La'nat al-'Inqilabat, min 1946 ila 1966*, (Damascus: Matb'at al-Dawudi, 1999); Mustafa Ram Hamdani, *Shahid 'Ala-Ahdath Suriyya wa 'Arabiyya wa Asrar al-Infisal, Mudhakkirat Mustafa Ram Hamdani*, (Damascus: Dar Talass, 1999); Amin Abu 'Assaf, *Dhikrayati*, (N.p., 1996); Muti' al-Samman, *Watan wa-'Askar, qabla an Tudfan al-Haqiqa fi al-Turab*, (Beirut: Bissan, 1995); Ahmad 'Abd al-Karim, *Hasad Sinin Khasba wa Thimar Murra, Mudhakkarat Ahmad 'Abd al-Karim* (Beirut: Bisan, 1994); Mustafa Talass, *Mir'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Awwal, 1948–1958* (Damascus: Dar Talass li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 1990); Khalil Mustafa, *Suqut al-Julan*, (Cairo: Dar al-'Itisam, 1980); 'Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din, *Mudhakkirati 'an Fatrat al-Infisal fi Suriyya, ma bayn 28 Aylul 1961 wa 8 Adhar 1963*, (Beirut: N.p., 1968); and Fadl Allah Abu Mansur, *A'sir Dimashq*, (Beirut: N.p., 1959).

For civilians, see Mansur al-Atrash, *Al-Jil al-Mudan, Sira Dhatiyya* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2008); Saqr Abu Fakhri, *Suriyya wa Hutam al-Marakib al-Muba'thara, Hiwar ma' Nabil al-Shuwayri, 'Aflaq wa-l-Ba'th wa-l-Mu'amarat wa-l-'Askar* (Beirut: al-Mu'assassa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2005); Muhammad Jamal Barut, *Shu'a' qabl al-Fajr, Mudhakkirat Ahmad Nuhad al-Sayyaf*, (N.p., 2005); Naziha al-Humsi, *Al-Janna al-Da'i'a, Mudhakkirat Naziha al-Humsi, Haram Akram al-Hawrani*, (Tripoli: Maktabat al-Sa'ih, 2003); Nusuh Babil, *Sahafa wa Siyasa fi Suriyya al-Qarn al-Ishrin* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis Books, 2001), and Akram al-Hawrani, *Mudhakkirat Akram al-Hawrani* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2000), vol. II.

I will expand on this particular point in the first section of this study. For now, suffice it to say that not only were pre-Ba'ath politicians generally riven with prejudice, but military officers themselves did not break the spell of group loyalty and sectarian affiliation. It is true of course that modernization theorists once argued that the militaries of newly independent nations represented a source of anti-communal sentiment in multi-ethnic societies. Morris Janowitz famously maintained in this regard that the military socialization of armed forces personnel would eventually dilute primordial ties, and replace these with a modern notion of citizenship.<sup>2</sup> The recent history of the armed forces in heterogeneous societies does not corroborate these conjectures—and Syria is no exception. Contra Janowitz' speculations, communal consciousness permeates the memoirs of the Syrian officers, as I will show below.

In this piece, I neither subsume agency under primordial affiliation nor dismiss identity as an epiphenomenon of class-dynamics or a mere byproduct of wider material forces. Instead, I endeavor to show how sectarian attachments intertwined with regional parochialism, class, and party loyalty to drive the agency of Syrian officers. The literature on Syria tends to stress sectarian preferentialism under the French mandate or under the Ba'ath from 1963 onward. Furthermore, few scholars have studied identity politics in the pre-Ba'ath officer corps, in comparison to pondering the same topic under the French mandate or the al-Asad dynasty. I contend that sectarianism permeated politics and civil-military relations during the post-independence decades and undermine the notion that identity politics was waning in pre-Ba'ath Syria, only to be rekindled with the rise to power of 'Alawi officers in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

The organization of this piece proceeds as follows. First, I briefly engage the literature pertaining to sectarianism and nationalism in Syria. Second, I study the friction pitting the Sunni power elite against minority aspirations for devolution and autonomy in post-independence Syria. A key premise of the analysis is that officers are only but a subsystem within a broader social configuration—they do not exist in a vacuum. Consequently, pondering societal dynamics operating outside the barracks is a precondition for analyzing military politics. Third, I flesh out the mechanisms driving identity politics in the Syrian officer corps from independence until the 1963 Ba'athi coup. Finally, I conclude with brief reflections on Syrian identity politics, in past times and present.

### Paradise lost? Rethinking Sectarianism and Nationalism in pre-ba'ath syria

In his pacesetting work on ethnic conflicts, Donald L. Horowitz defines ranked systems as societal hierarchies construed along “clearly understood conceptions of superordinate and subordinate status.”<sup>4</sup> The Ottoman world was such an order in which one group (Sunni Muslims) enjoyed a superior status as the

<sup>2</sup>Morris Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 63.

<sup>3</sup>A recent piece published by Syrian intellectual Yasin al-Hajj Salih is the latest example of an interpretation of Syrian history framing Pre-Ba'ath Syria as a modernizing entity in which sectarianism carried little weight. According to al-Hajj Salih: “The entire minority-versus-majority narrative in Syria is one that the [al-Asad] regime carefully crafted long before the uprisings of 2011 began—indeed, since the 1970s. It fashioned this narrative on a pattern inherited from colonial powers, which had earlier cast themselves as protectors of minorities throughout the Levant.” In this excerpt and throughout the piece, al-Hajj Salih develops the idea that there were only two culprits who used identity politics instrumentally in Syria: the French mandate; and the al-Asad regime. By contrast, in Pre-Ba'ath Syria “Urban Sunnis composed a majority in the political class, but there was no Sunni rule” and “...the outcome of social forces was in favor of greater progression toward equality and citizenship”. This argument is not unique to al-Hajj Salih; in fact, it is quite common among opponents of the Syrian regime such as al-Hajj Salih himself. In this article, I take issue with this interpretation of Syrian history and the “golden age” myth of national unity in the post-independence decades. See Yasin al-Hajj Salih, “The Dark Path of Minority Politics,” (New York: The Century Foundation, April 18, 2019); available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/dark-path-minority-politics/?agreed=1>. Note, on the other hand, that the literature on Syrian military politics has tended to focus on the French mandate, or the Hafez and Bashar al-Asad tenures, while the 1946–1963 period is under-studied. See, in this regard, the dissertation of N.E. Bou Nacklie, “Les Troupes Spéciales Du Levant: Origins, Recruitment And The History Of The Syrian-Lebanese Paramilitary Forces Under The French Mandate, 1919–1947”, The University of Utah, (1989); and Michal Eisenstaedt, “Syria’s defense companies: Profile of a Praetorian Unit”, Unpublished paper (1989); and Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath Party*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996); and Hicham Bou Nassif, “Second-Class: The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015). Van Dusen’s excellent dissertation is a notable exception to the rule in the sense that it is mainly centered upon post-independence military politics in Syria. See Michael Hillegas Van Dusen, “Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict In The Syrian Army,” The Johns Hopkins University (1971).

<sup>4</sup>Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 22. For more on hierarchical societies and group status, see Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Conflict, Fear, Hatred, And Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially chapter 3 “Resentment”, 40–61.

community of power, and others occupied lower echelons on the ladder, whether they be non-Muslim (e.g. Christians, Jews), or heterodox Muslims (e.g. Shia, Druze, 'Alawis). Albert Hourani and Stephen Longrigg are worth quoting at length in this regard, respectively:

But it is not surprising that there should during the thousand years of almost unchallenged Moslem supremacy have been periods of persecution, nor that the ordinary Moslem should have come to feel a certain contempt for the Eastern Christians who were the only Christians he knew: the contempt which he who knows himself to be strong feels for those in his power, and which he who believes himself to possess the truth feels for those who have rejected it... Since for Moslems and Christians alike consciousness of belonging to a religious community was the basis of political and social obligation, both were very conscious of not belonging to other communities; and the sense of distinctiveness led easily to suspicion and dislike. This was true also of every Christian sect in its relations with the others, for each sect formed a separate 'millet'; and for the orthodox Moslems in their relations with the heterodox.<sup>5</sup>

By their greatly preponderant numbers and, in a manner fundamental to the Islamic-Turkish system of government, by their relation to the State, and perhaps also by their superiority-complex which these things engendered, the Sunni majority must necessarily provide the fore for any countrywide movement. Meanwhile, in the Administration everywhere (save in autonomous Lebanon) they held nine-tenths of the posts, the official schools were theirs, and they almost alone supplied officers to the Army and Gendarmerie, and judges to the Courts.<sup>6</sup>

It goes beyond the limits of this article to engage the voluminous literature on identity and group formation comprehensively, but some conceptualization is nonetheless in order. I define sectarianism as a sense of "we-ness" that transcends religious distinctiveness to include what Stuart Kaufman labels the "myth-symbol complex," i.e. a combination of values, lore, and understanding of status and history glorifying the in-group, and reifying out-groups as permanent others.<sup>7</sup> Due to the demographic preponderance of Sunnis in the Middle East, but also to the fact that the great Islamic empires of the region were Sunni (with the notable exceptions of the Isma'ili Fatimids, and the Shi'a Safavids), much of the minority groups "we-ness" was construed against a backdrop of hostility to, and atavistic fear of Sunni Islam. The latter, in turn, tolerated minorities as *dhimmis*, i.e. groups allowed to dwell in the realm of Islam provided they accepted their constrained position in a hierarchy suffused with overtones of domination and subordination. To be sure, incidents of physical violence against non-Sunnis were the exception rather than the rule. But the religious and political inferiority of *dhimmis* was a foregone conclusion from a Sunni perspective; the notion of equality in the body politic irrespective of creed was foreign to the traditional understanding of society and state.<sup>8</sup>

Against this backdrop, many foreign observers who dwelled or studied the region maintained that the "Orient" was imbued with a religious essence that made it hopelessly impervious to the modern concept

<sup>5</sup>A. H. Hourani, *Syria And Lebanon, A Political Essay* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 62–64.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Longrigg, *Syria And Lebanon Under French Mandate* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 7.

<sup>7</sup>Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds, The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 25.

<sup>8</sup>The reaction of the 'ulama' to the personal status law that the French high commissioner in Syria decreed in 1938 suggests that this understanding of the inter-communal hierarchy did not change after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. The Christian communities in Syria had demanded throughout the 1930s a religiously neutral state with a secular personal status law applicable to all Syrians alike, irrespective of religious affiliation. Indeed, the high commissioner issued a decree along similar lines in 1938, but Sunni reaction was immediate and virulent. The association of Muslim 'Ulama' in Damascus retorted to the high commissioner's decree that "the Syrian land is an Islamic land inhabited by a Muslim majority" (*bilad Islamiyya yaqtunuha akthariyya Muslima*), and that treating Sunni Muslims as just one sect among others in Syria (*ta'ifa ka baqqiyyat al-tawa'if*) represented an unacceptable break with tradition. As far as the Sunni religious establishment was concerned, Islam was to set the norms that the state had to follow, not the other way around. On the personal status law controversy see Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East, The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), chapter 6, especially 186–88. Note that traditionalist opposition to secularism and egalitarian nationalism perceived to be alien to Islam was already palpable under the Arab Government of King Faysal in Damascus (1918–1920). In this regard, see James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties, Nationalism And Mass Politics In Syria At The Close Of Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 185–86, 220.

of secularism. The following excerpt from a diplomatic missive that the French general consul in Syria, E. de Lesseps conveyed to the Quai d'Orsay in August 1856 is an eloquent example in this regard:

Religion is involved in everything and is to be found everywhere in Oriental societies. Religion suffuses public ethics, language, literature, and all societal institutions. The Oriental man does not belong to the country in which he was born—the Oriental has no country—but to the religion that is his. And just like a man in the West belongs to a country, his Oriental counterpart belongs to religion. The nation of the Oriental is the group of people who share his faith and whoever doesn't is a foreigner to him.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps in reaction to the essentialism of such Orientalist accounts that remain alive in Western political discourse and journalistic accounts on the Middle East, scholars generally tend to underplay the importance of sectarian identity in shaping political consciousness in the region. The eminent Syrianist Philip Khoury is a case in point. His seminal book, *Syria And The French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945*, is built on the premise of the rise of Arab nationalism in reaction to the imposition of European and Christian rule after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. Not only did nationalism provide cohesion in the face of the French occupier, but it allegedly became the “dominant political ideology in Syria” whereas Islam “lost much of its power owing to the spread of secularism.”<sup>10</sup> In another work, Khoury maintained that parochial ties pertaining to sect or religion or ethnicity were corroded in post-Ottoman Syria by “the rise of new loyalties” centered upon modern nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Along similar lines, Michel Provence argued that the 1925 revolt against French rule in Syria was a turning point that gave way to a nationalist feeling transcending sectarian attachments and parochialisms:

The way one conceives or imagines the community obviously differs from person to person. But it is the common notion of membership that is important, not the common understanding of what membership means. At moments of intense collective crisis, this notion of common membership can expand dramatically, almost overnight, and erase or subordinate differences between members of a single national community. The Syrian revolt of 1925 was such a moment of crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Patrick Seale, for his part, does not explicitly say that particularisms were vanishing in pre-Ba'ath Syria, but pays them almost no attention, especially in his first book, *The Struggle For Syria*, indirectly suggesting that they played only a peripheral role in shaping politics and structuring outcomes. The same is true of other classical studies of Syria, including Itamar Rabinovich, Raymond Hinnebusch, or Gordon H. Torrey.<sup>13</sup> On the opposite end of the spectrum, Nikolaos Van Dam puts sectarianism and parochial loyalties at the center of his approach to Syria. Whereas Khoury and Provence contend that modern nationalism united the various Syrian sects behind a common identity and purpose, Van Dam maintains that the old rift opposing Sunnis to religious minorities actually “widened during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”<sup>14</sup> Joshua Landis argues for his part in a study on Jabal Druze that though minority separatism was defeated following independence, “ethnopolitics in Syria were very much alive” in the 1950s. Landis reaches a conclusion diametrically opposed to Khoury's, and Provence's:

<sup>9</sup>Zayn Nur al-Din Zayn, *Nushu' al-Qawmiyya al-'Arabiyya, ma' Dirasa Tarikhiyya fi al-'Alaqa al-'Arabiyya al-Turkiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1986), 185.

<sup>10</sup>Philip S. Khoury, *Syria And The French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>11</sup>Philip S. Khoury, “A Reinterpretation of the Origins and Aims of the Great Syrian Revolt, 1925–1927”, in George N. Atiyeh and Ibrahim M. Oweiss, eds., *Arab Civilization, Challenges and Responses*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 242–43.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt, and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>13</sup>See Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria, Revolution from Above*, (New York: Routledge, 2001); Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria Under The Ba'ath 1963–66, The Army-Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1972); Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle For the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Patrick Seale, *The Struggle For Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1965); and Gordon H. Torrey, *Syrian Politics and the Military* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1964).

<sup>14</sup>Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 3.

The creation of an independent Syrian state, far from sounding the death knell for traditional loyalties to family, tribe, region, and sect, merely cordoned off a new political arena in which Syria's traditional communities had to contend for national prominence. The battle to elaborate a common national identity, as often as not, infused new cultural and political meaning into the old loyalties and sacred values, which had long defined each Syria group's sense of who they were and how they should behave with each other.<sup>15</sup>

In brief, there are two orientations pertaining to identity politics in Syria. The first gives, at best, oblique attention to sectarianism which it downplays in favor of an alleged modern nationalism transcending particularisms (Khoury, Provence); or geopolitics and Syria's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict (Seale); or socioeconomics and class analysis (Hinnebusch). Another puts ascriptive loyalties at the heart of its approach to Syrian politics and is skeptical of a reflexive tendency among many scholars to dismiss sectarianism as irrelevant or vanishing (Van Dam). I contend in this article that the memoirs published in the last decades do not justify the claim that nationalism triumphed in pre-Ba'ath Syria, while sectarianism and other sub-national particularisms were eclipsed. The supposed golden age of national unity never existed and pre-Ba'ath Syria was not one. The military in particular was not a bastion of unity and modern nationalism; sectarianism was central to the dynamics of power struggle within the armed forces and society at large. I develop these observations in the rest of this article.

### Center and periphery: contending visions of pre-ba'ath syria

Sunni Muslims dominated the ruling classes of the Ottoman Arab provinces for centuries. This observation may seem too obvious to mention, but it is nonetheless a necessary starting point to understanding post-Ottoman Syrian politics. Under the French mandate in Syria, Sunni notables worked assiduously to reproduce the same power hierarchies of old. In contrast, powerful 'Alawi chieftains such as Jabir al-'Abbas and Ibrahim al-Kanj, respective leaders of the large Khayyatin and Haddadin tribal confederations, openly favored the creation of an independent entity in Jabal al-Nusayriyya, the 'Alawi stronghold in northwestern Syria. Ultimately, however, the 'Alawi elites were neither unanimous nor consistent in pursuing separatism. Whether driven by self-interest, a genuine change of heart, or a loss of faith in the cause of independence, a number of important 'Alawi figures advocated for the establishment of a decentralized Syria that they hoped would provide for minority self-rule.<sup>16</sup> Several Druze chieftains in Southern Syria—as well as the Christians and Kurds in the eastern Jazira—harbored similar ambitions ranging from autonomy to independence, though other leading members of the community favored Syrian unity. Meanwhile, the landed Sunni notables (*a'yān*) loosely united in the pro-independence National Bloc were adamant in their efforts to perpetuate their traditional predominance. Such conflicting ambitions structured the background of inter-communal relations during the mandatory years, and beyond.

Independence in 1946 did little to assuage such frictions. One anecdote is telling in this regard. Salih al-'Ali and Sultan al-Atrash, respectively an 'Alawi and a Druze chieftain, had led two early uprisings against mandatory authorities in Syria. When the Syrians celebrated the French departure in April 1946, al-'Ali came to Damascus to participate in the festivities. The government arranged for him to stay at a lowly two-star hotel in the capital, which was perceived as a deliberate affront to him and his 'Alawi constituency. As for al-Atrash, he boycotted the event altogether to signal his displeasure with the policies of the Sunni notables toward himself and his community.<sup>17</sup> The demands of 'Alawi and Druze leaders at the time were twofold: first, a decentralized political system in which 'Alawis and

<sup>15</sup>See Joshua Landis, "Shishakli and the Druzes: Integration and Intransigence" (1998). Available at: [http://joshualandis.oucreate.com/Joshua\\_Landis\\_Druze\\_and\\_Shishakli.htm](http://joshualandis.oucreate.com/Joshua_Landis_Druze_and_Shishakli.htm).

<sup>16</sup>For two highly informative studies on 'Alawi politics at the time see Hassan al-Qalish, *Qitar al-'Alawiyyin al-Sarī, al-Wā'i al-Siyasi 'ind al-'Alawiyyin, al-Nash'a wa-l-Tatawwur* (Beirut: al-Mu'asassa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2017); and Muhammad Hawwash, *An al-'Alawiyyin wa Dawlatihum al-Mustaqilla* (Casablanca: al-Sharika al-Jadida li-l-Matabi' al-Muttahida, 1997). See also Stefan Winter, *A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 257–60; and Gitta Yaffe Schatzmann, "Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 1, (1995): 28–38.

<sup>17</sup>Al-Qalish, *Qitar*, 333.

Druze could enjoy autonomy in their respective regions under the control of autochthone governors; and second, substantial political representation in the central government in Damascus. The Sunni leaders ignored both demands. In so doing, they were supported by British officials who combined their ascendancy following France's defeat in the Second World War with indifference to Syrian minorities perceived to be pro-French.<sup>18</sup> And so the notables lost no time after independence in decreasing, and then eliminating, communal representation in the parliament, which the French mandate had guaranteed for Syrian minorities. In the very first years of independence, the representation of Christians in the parliament decreased from fourteen to nine seats, and that of 'Alawis and Druze from seven and five to four and three, respectively. The Jewish community lost its only seat in the parliament, and so did the Kurds, Circassians, and Turkomans. Minority representation dwindled further under the Adib al-Shishakli regime (1949–1954), and indeed was completely abolished in 1953, together with special jurisdictional rights that Druze and 'Alawis had previously enjoyed. And in successive governments prior to the 1963 Ba'ath coup, minority influence remained negligible and sometimes altogether absent.<sup>19</sup> What classic scholarly work on Syria has labeled a Sunni, "intolerance of local particularism," failure to "demonstrate sensitivity," to the anxieties of minorities, or commitment to an assimilation process carried out "hastily and tactlessly," only served to heighten tension in intra-communal relations.<sup>20</sup> The 'Alawis in particular closed ranks in common disapproval of the National Bloc, as even supporters of union with Syria gradually became alienated from the ruling elite.

The Sulayman al-Murshid affair crystallized the confrontation between the Sunni power structure and 'Alawis. Al-Murshid had risen from humble peasant origins to become in the 1930s an influential politician considered by many 'Alawis as "the most efficacious of temporal masters."<sup>21</sup> In addition to his political standing, his supporters venerated him as a religious figure endowed with supernatural powers. Al-Murshid spearheaded the 'Alawi opposition to the National Bloc, which had him arrested and sentenced to death in 1946, marking the first political execution in independent Syria. Al-Murshid's 'Alawi supporters were then subjected to a harsh collective punishment: their houses were plundered and properties confiscated, while scores were imprisoned and labeled as bandits and traitors to Syria. In the meantime, several Sunni leaders threatened 'Alawis with expulsion from their mountainous stronghold, or suggested that imams in 'Alawi villages should be replaced with Sunni imams. In 1952, al-Murshid's son, Mujib, who had taken up his father's cause, attempted a failed revolt. Adib al-Shishakli, Syria's strongman at the time, eventually ordered him killed.<sup>22</sup> The execution of al-Murshid and his son sent a chilling message to his constituency, prompting even rivals to lament the bloodshed. As one chieftain declared:

As an Allaouite leader, I regret that we could not get together and unite to present a consolidated front against the Government. As a consequence, the Government has been chopping us up piece-meal, one by one. First it was Kanj, now it is Suliman. The Abbases will be next. You cannot understand how much the Moslems of the interior hate us... We must stand together to come up again on

<sup>18</sup>Itamar Rabinovich, "The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State," *Journal of Contemporary History* 14 (1979): 706.

<sup>19</sup>'Alawis were particularly on the margin in terms of ministerial appointments. Nikolaos Van Dam has shown that of all 458 ministers appointed to Syrian cabinets between 1942 and 1963, only 11 (2.4 percent) were 'Alawis. R. Bayly Winder's study indicates that 27 Syrian politicians were appointed prime minister between 1920 and 1958—none of whom was 'Alawi, Druze, or Ismaili. Only one was a Christian; the rest were all Sunnis. See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 82; and R. Bayly Winder, "Syrian Deputies and Cabinet Ministers, 1919–1959," Part I, *Middle East Journal* 16, no. 4, (1962): 409–19.

<sup>20</sup>See Khoury, *Syria And The French Mandate*, 534; Rabinovich, "The Compact Minorities", 699; Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon*, 214; and Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, 248.

<sup>21</sup>Jacques Weulersse, *Le Pays des Alaouites*, (Tours: Arrault et Cie, 1940), 336.

<sup>22</sup>For a firsthand account of the al-Murshid affair, see the memoirs of Ahmad Nuhad al-Sayyaf in Muhammad Jamal Barut, *Shu'a' Qabl al-Fajr, Mudhakkirat Ahmad Nuhad al-Sayyaf* (N.p., 2005), 170–71. Al-Sayyaf (p. 151) writes on Sunni attitudes in the city of Latakia toward the neighboring 'Alawi Mountain: "...the population in the city is suspicious of the Mountain, as if it were a jungle of savages where inhabitants are dirty, treasonous, and prone to sympathizing with external forces as well as atheism. This attitude...considers the city to be a symbol of national redemption, endowed with a right to encroach upon the Mountain's resources and honor, and to treat the Mountain as a market for sexual slaves and prostitutes (*markaz li taswiq al-jawari wa-l-ghaniyyat*) within a hierarchy in which city-dwellers are masters, and rural people vassals and sexual slaves." See also al-Qalish, *Qitar*, 332, 340; and the memoirs of officer Husayn al-Hakim, *Suryya*, 149.

a clear day. Suliman had not the wisdom to see what I meant. He did not know that while the Syrians were negotiating with him they were preparing their forces to strike.<sup>23</sup>

But dealings between the Sunni elite and the Druze were even more tumultuous. In the late Ottoman era, the Druze rose several times in rebellion against central authority when it encroached upon their traditional autonomy and attempts to force their religious leaders to convert to Sunni orthodoxy. A fascinating tranche of documents from the Ottoman archives recently translated by historian ‘Abd al-Rahim Abu Husayn highlights the extent to which Ottoman officials distrusted the Druze of Syria, labeling them in various reports as “treacherous,” “corrupt,” “killers,” “barbarians,” and so forth. Damascenes also largely shared this negative impression of the Druze. In the capital, Ottoman campaigns against the minority group were celebrated, and the power and firmness of Ottoman authorities were partially seen as a function of their capacity to repress the Druze.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned previously, some Druze leaders viewed the French mandate as an opportunity to achieve independent statehood for their sect. These aspirations caused a great deal of concern in Damascus. In December 1938, future Syrian president Shukri al-Quwatli asked the Syrian government in a fiery speech at the Parliament to bring separatist Druze leader ‘Abd al-Ghaffar al-Atrash “in chains” to the Syrian capital. In reaction, Druze mobs in Jabal al-Druze clamored for cutting all ties with Syria and declaring the Jabal’s immediate independence. A year later in 1939, Druze separatists in the Jabal rioted again, expelled officials appointed by the central government and declared the independence of their mountain under French protection.

This troubled legacy formed the backdrop of Druze relations with Damascus in the wake of independence. As early as 1945, a Syrian newspaper reported that President al-Quwatli had labeled the Druze a “dangerous minority”; the iconic leader Sultan al-Atrash threatened to unleash his warriors on Damascus and occupy it in retaliation.<sup>25</sup> For his part, Hasan al-Atrash, the paramount Druze leader at the time, doubted that his community could ever be treated fairly in Syria. In a meeting with the British ambassador in Damascus, he lamented:

The Druzes, as a religious minority, are doomed to constant persecution in Muslims lands where no foreign power exist to protect them... Under the spur of Muslim hostility, the clans of the Jabal (are) now united and the young men (are) demanding revenge by force of arms... The Druze elders would like to emigrate to some land where they would not be subject to religious persecution.<sup>26</sup>

The memoirs of Syrian politician Muhsin al-Barazi are telling of the extent to which the ruling elite in Damascus felt uneasy about the Druze—and intended on subduing them. The minority issue was a central theme in a series of conversations in Riyadh between al-Barazi and the Saudi King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. Al-Barazi, who was dispatched by Syrian President al-Quwatli to Saudi Arabia as a special envoy in August 1947, boasted repeatedly that Damascus had finally gained the upper hand over Syria’s restless minorities, namely the Druze:

Our problems are now solved, or on their way to [being solved]. The Latakia governorate [the ‘Alawi stronghold] was once unruly, but has been pacified after the death of Sulayman al-Murshid. Things are heading in the right direction in Jabal al-Druze, as well. The Al-Atrash clan was threatening the government, but then came meekly to Damascus, asking the president to intervene in Jabal al-Druze

<sup>23</sup>See Kurt Lee Mendenhall, “Class, cult and tribe: the politics of ‘Alawi separatism in French Mandate Syria,” Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, (1991), 236.

<sup>24</sup>See ‘Abd al-Rahim Abu Husayn, *Bayn al-Markaz wa-l-Atraf, Hawran fi al-Watha’iq al-Uthmaniyya, 1842–1918* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Turath al-Durzi, 2015), especially pages 295, 308, 376, 399, 400, 432, and 435. Note that according to groundbreaking work of Brigitte Shepler, “...the hatred of the Druze among the Hawranis [the Sunni inhabitants of Hawran], Damascenes, and Circassians endured, and generated the Ottoman campaigns against them in 1896 and 1910.” See Brigitte Shipler, *Intifadat Jabal al-Druze/Hawran min al-‘Ahd al-Uthmani ila Dawlat al-Istiqal, 1850–1949* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2004), 144–47; and Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria Under The French Mandate, Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 47.

<sup>25</sup>See Landis, “Shishakli and the Druzes.”

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

for things to settle there....We have never been stronger toward the Druze than we are today. Their disunity puts us in a position to impose our will on them in a way that not even the Ottomans were capable of.<sup>27</sup>

The polarization of post-independence party politics further complicated inter-communal relations. On one hand, minorities and rural Sunnis were over-represented in the new parties such as the Ba'ath or the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP). On the other, the traditional power structure was essentially Sunni and urban; and Sunni religious leaders relentlessly denounced the supposed godlessness of the secular parties. In one incident, Aleppo's 'ulama' tried to prevail upon authorities to forbid Ba'athi leaders from even visiting their city during the 1954 parliamentary electoral campaign. The 'ulama' maintained that the mere presence of Ba'athis in overwhelmingly Muslim Aleppo represented a slur to Islam. Meanwhile, the 'ulama' of Damascus called electors to vote for those who "practice and defend Islam" and supporters of the Muslim Brothers maintained, "*man qatala Ba'athiyyan duminat lahu al-Janna*" (He who kills a Ba'athi is guaranteed to go to Paradise).<sup>28</sup> Thus, energized by such vehement sentiments, the alliance between traditional and religious Sunni leadership posed a tremendous obstacle to the new parties. Minorities and rural constituencies rooting, say, for the Ba'ath, or the SSNP, were condemned to remain on the margins as long as ruling elite were chosen via electoral procedures.<sup>29</sup> In effect, Damascus thwarted 'Alawi and Druze aspirations for independence or autonomy under the mandate, and subsequently reduced them to political irrelevance. Such was the fraught, contentious backdrop against which military politics unfolded. It could not have fostered harmony in the officer corps; indeed, it did not.

### Minority officers and politics in pre-ba'ath syria

Though militaries stand as quintessential symbols of national pride and statehood, the Sunni elite were generally unenthusiastic about the nascent Syrian armed forces under the mandate (*Les Troupes Spéciales*). To be sure, more Sunnis enlisted in the military after 1936, as Iraq and Egypt gained control over their internal affairs and Syria appeared to be heading in the same direction. The trend stepped up after independence in 1946. While minorities made up 37 percent of officers who graduated that year, that figure dropped to 17 percent in 1947.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, the military still had, at the time, some minority representation in its officer corps and an 'Alawi majority in the lower ranks. Neither factor endeared the armed forces to the traditional power structure.

Lest we forget, the 1936 coup in Iraq sent shockwaves through Syria after the military overthrew the civilian prime minister, Yasin al-Hashimi. The Syrian elite worried about a possible contagion effect. It wasn't lost on them that al-Hashimi was an urban Sunni notable whose background mirrored that of his

<sup>27</sup>Khayriyya Qasim, *Mudhakkirat Muhsin al-Barazi, 1947–1949* (Beirut: al-Ruwad li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 1994), 24, 37.

<sup>28</sup>That a Christian, Michel Aflaq, had co-founded the Ba'ath fanned the flames of sectarian hatred against the party. In 1943, when Aflaq gave a lecture at Damascus University on Muhammad and the birth of Islam, Sunni notables in the city objected. Later on, in the 1960s, when the Ba'ath clashed with Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, Aflaq's religious background was instrumentalized politically, and his very name ridiculed. An ally of 'Abd al-Nasser, President Sallal of Yemen, mocked Aflaq's Christian name: "What a strange name; we are genuine Arabs, what do we have to do with Michel?" According to Patrick Seale, 'Abd al-Nasser launched a propaganda campaign that taunted Aflaq for allegedly being a "Cypriot Christian" delusional enough to aspire to lead the Arabs. Furthermore, when Arab unionist and Ba'athi officers clashed in Baghdad in 1963 and Aflaq rushed to mediate between them, he was unceremoniously sent back home. The interference of a Damascene Christian in Iraqi affairs was deemed, in the words of Seale, an affront to "Muslim sentiment" and Iraqi patriotism. Note that Aflaq reportedly converted to Islam in his waning years and changed his name to Ahmad, though some Ba'athis argue that Saddam Hussein falsified documents pertaining to Aflaq's alleged conversion to show that he, a Muslim Ba'athi, had never followed a non-Muslim leader. See Seale, *Asad*, 31, 82, 91; Rabinovich, *Syria Under the Ba'ath*, 72; Saqr Abu Fakhr, '*Ayan al-Sham, wa Faqat al-'Almaniyya fi Suriyya*' (Beirut: al-Mu'assassa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2013), 58–59; and Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria, The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 175. See also Abu Fakhr, *Suriyya wa Hutam al-Marakib al-Muba'athara*, 26, 104, 189; and Sayyid 'Abd al-'Al, *al-Inqilabat al-'Askariyya fi Suriyya, 1949–1954* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2007), 418.

<sup>29</sup>Jonathan Owen, *Akram al-Hawrani, Dirasa hawla al-Siyasa al-Suriyya ma bayn 1943–1954* (Homs: Dar al Ma'arif, 1997), 284. See also Abu Fakhr, *Suriyya wa Hutam*, 160; and Gad Soffer, "The Role of the Officer Class in Syrian Politics and Society," Ph.D. dissertation, American University, (1968), 90.

<sup>30</sup>Van Deusen, "Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict," 59.



Syrian peers, whereas the coup leader, General Bakr Sidqi, hailed from the Kurdish minority. The presence of minority officers in the Syrian officer corps made the Iraqi affair particularly worrying.<sup>31</sup> Yet another Iraqi coup in 1941 raised the specter of military interventionism in politics again, heightening the fears of the Syrian elite.<sup>32</sup> And so it was perhaps understandable that Premier al-Jabiri would argue in 1943 that his cabinet was not ready to wrest the Syrian military from the French. When Syria did eventually gain control of the armed forces in 1945, National Bloc MPs maintained that funds earmarked for the military would be better spent on social issues. As debates pertaining to the armed forces raged in parliament, a National Bloc MP, Hilmi al-Atassi, suggested derisively that closing down the military academy and disbanding the armed forces altogether would provide a radical solution to the matter. Meanwhile, Premier Faris al-Khuri declared that he “was not interested” in the fate of the military academy.<sup>33</sup> Revealingly, the first defense minister after independence, Nabih al-‘Azmi, promised in 1945 to eradicate the “puppets of imperialism” and the “retrograde elements” from the armed forces. These were epithets typically used by radical Sunnis to refer to ‘Alawis and minorities in general.<sup>34</sup> A year later, clashes erupted at the Homs Military Academy between Sunni soldiers and their ‘Alawi colleagues; the latter feared being sacked from the armed forces in the wake of independence.<sup>35</sup>

Ill-feeling went both ways. Minority officers were affected by the rising communal polarization, and were increasingly inclined to support new parties such as the SSNP, and, later, Akram al-Hawrani and the Ba‘th, rather than the National Bloc. The fact is officers overall did not cease identifying with their fellow ‘Alawi and Druze simply because they replaced their civilian garb with military fatigues. The memoirs I used for this article repeatedly show that officers cared deeply about the prospects of their respective communities in post-independence Syria. For instance, Amin Abu ‘Assaf bemoans that his fellow Druze were always “besieged by the animosity and hatred of everyone around them.”<sup>36</sup> Abu ‘Assaf adds that the Druze neither recognized Damascus as their capital nor felt a sense of belonging to the Arab nation precisely because of the entrenched bias against them. For his part, Muhammad Ma‘ruf clearly shows in-group sympathy to Murshidis as fellow ‘Alawis.<sup>37</sup> And in a similar vein, Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali rails against the persecution of the Murshidis under al-Quwatli, al-Shishakli, the United Arab Republic, and the separatist regime that held sway in Syria between 1961 and 1963.<sup>38</sup> To be sure, scores of minority officers belonged to the Ba‘th and the SSNP, which were explicitly anti-sectarian. But the actual behavior of minority officers did not always align with the ideology of their parties. Ba‘thi officer ‘Izzat Jadid is a case in point. When leading officers Hafiz al-Asad and Salah Jadid vied in a deadly struggle for power in the latter half of the 1960s, ‘Izzat Jadid reminded them that they both were ‘Alawis and urged them to put aside their rivalry in the greater interest of ethno-religious unity: “*maslahat al-ta’ifa taqtadi alla yatakhasam abna’uha*” (the interest of the sect requires that its members do not quarrel among themselves).<sup>39</sup> Other similar examples abound in the memoirs.

Apart from generalized feelings of concern for the sect as a whole, more concretely, minority officers felt uncertain about their own individual prospects in the post-independence Syrian military as well. Husni al-Za‘im’s brief tenure (March–August 1949), but especially al-Shishakli’s (December 1949–February 1954), heightened their fears, as both leaders preferred to appoint Sunni officers to higher-command positions in the armed forces. The Muhammad Nasir affair compounded anxieties. Colonel Nasir was the commander of the Syrian Air Force in the late 1940s and headed, together with Colonel ‘Aziz ‘Abd al-Karim, a faction of ‘Alawi officers opposed to al-Shishakli. In early 1950 the officers

<sup>31</sup> Al-Qalish, *Qitar*, 335.

<sup>32</sup> Owen, *Akram al-Hawrani*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Bou Nacklie, “Les Troupes,” 366.

<sup>34</sup> See al-Qalish, *Qitar*, 357–59.

<sup>35</sup> Van Deusen, “Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict,” 61.

<sup>36</sup> See Hourani, *Syria*, 214; Abu ‘Assaf, *Dhikrayati*, 15; Hasan Amin al-Ba‘ayni, *Druze Suriyya wa Lubnan fi ‘Ahd al-Intidab al-Faransi, 1920–1943* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-‘Arabi li-l-Abhath wa-l-Tawthiq, 1993), 295–96; and Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 180. See also Ma‘oz, “Attempts at Creating,” 399.

<sup>37</sup> See Ma‘ruf, *Ayyam*, 67.

<sup>38</sup> Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali relates his interaction with Murshidis in an especially interesting part of his memoirs, “Qissati ma’ al-Murshidiyyin”; see *Hayati wa-l-Idam*, (N.p., 2003), 243–374.

<sup>39</sup> See Talass, *Mir‘at Hayati, al-‘Aqd al-Thalith*, 347.

initiated contact with the Iraqi embassy in Damascus and asked for support as they plotted a putsch. On February 15, 1950, the Iraqi ambassador sent the following cable to Baghdad:

“Husni al-Barazi visited me today and revealed that a feud is brewing between Colonel Muhammad Nasir, Colonel ‘Aziz ‘Abd al-Karim, and the ‘Alawi officers, on one hand, and al-Shishakli, on the other.... Al-Barazi asserts that the first group is ready to work with us if we provide financial support to them...”<sup>40</sup>

Al-Shishakli had Muhammad Nasir assassinated in July that year and replaced him with a fellow Sunni officer from Hama, Rashid al-Kilani. The plot against al-Shishakli subsequently unraveled but the affair poisoned inter-sectarian relations in the officer corps.<sup>41</sup> In 1955, the assassination of another leading officer, Deputy Chief of Staff Colonel ‘Adnan al-Maliki, polarized the armed forces further. Al-Maliki was an independent Sunni officer. The motives behind his assassination were perceived to be ideological and sectarian in nature. The fact is the SSNP figures said to have masterminded the assassination, Ghassan Jadid and Georges ‘Abd al-Masih, were, respectively, an ‘Alawi officer, and a Lebanese Christian party leader. In addition, Yunis ‘Abd al-Rahim, the sergeant who murdered al-Maliki, was ‘Alawi. ‘Abd al-Rahim was convinced that al-Maliki was biased against his sect and had sacked officer Ghassan Jadid from the armed forces because of his ‘Alawi communal background.<sup>42</sup> The SSNP militants who were tried in person for their role in the assassination, namely Fu‘ad Jadid—Ghassan Jadid’s brother—Badi‘ Makhluḥ, and ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Dabussi, were also ‘Alawis. On another hand, al-Maliki was the most prominent officer from Damascus at the time, and several of his fellow Damascene officers considered his death a plot to undermine their political clout. The affair unleashed a torrent of ideological, sectarian, and regional animosities in the military, and even society at large—it was no coincidence that in the wake of al-Maliki’s assassination, the chief of the Military Intelligence Bureau, ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj, would investigate the background of non-commissioned-officers (NCOs) in the armed forces. He was astonished to find that at least 55 percent of them were ‘Alawis.<sup>43</sup> Nor was it a coincidence that scores of SSNP ‘Alawi officers from Latakia were sacked in the ensuing trials, which only further exacerbated intra-military sectarian tensions.<sup>44</sup>

Unsurprisingly in that context, when Colonel ‘Aziz ‘Abd al-Karim was passed over as chief of staff in 1956, even though he served as assistant chief of staff since 1951, it was widely rumored that his ‘Alawi background had prevented his promotion to the pinnacle of military leadership.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, officer Muhammad Ma‘ruf reports in his memoirs an earlier conversation with ‘Abd al-Karim, who thought, perhaps correctly, that his sectarian background would disqualify him from becoming chief of staff, and confided to Ma‘ruf, “*La tansa annani min ta’ifa mu’ayyana*” (Don’t forget that I belong to a certain sect).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, all three officers who led the failed 1956 coup attempt hailed from minority backgrounds: Ghassan Jadid and Muhammad Ma‘ruf were ‘Alawis, while Muhammad Safa was Shi‘a. The three officers had mainly recruited to their cause discharged ‘Alawi soldiers and NCOs who had served previously in *Les Troupes Spéciales* under the French. Ma‘ruf mentions in his memoirs that several important ‘Alawi clans in Latakia, including supporters of the slain leader Sulayman al-Murshid, planned on backing their movement and rebelling against Syrian authorities once the coup unfolded.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>40</sup>This cable and further details on the Nasir affair are published in the memoirs of Akram al-Hawrani, *Mudhakkirat*, vol. II, 1233–34.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>See Jum‘a, *Awraq*, 157; al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 190. Note that former defense minister General Mustafa Talass denies that al-Maliki discriminated against ‘Alawis. Talass mentions that 100 cadets were admitted to the military academy in 1954. This was when al-Maliki reached his zenith in the armed forces after the downfall of al-Shishakli. Seventy of them were Ba‘this, including 40 ‘Alawis. See Talass, *Mir‘at Hayati, al-‘Aqd al-Awwal*, 481–82.

<sup>43</sup>See Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 157.

<sup>44</sup>Van Dusen, “Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict in the Syrian Army,” 332.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>46</sup>See Ma‘ruf, *Ayyam*, 151.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 243,234. See also Bashir Zayn al-‘Abidin, *Al-Jaysh wa-l-Siyasa fi Suriyya, (1918–2000), Dirasa Naqdiyya* (London: Dar al-Jabiyya, 2008), 283–84.

Druze officers also played an important role in early putsches. Civilian Druze leaders frequently spurred them to action in order to defend the group, although Druze officers had their own reasons to involve themselves in such schemes.<sup>48</sup> To the best of my knowledge, only three Druze officers who served in the Syrian armed forces published political memoirs, namely, Fadl Allah Abu Mansur (1959), ‘Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din (1968), and Amin Abu ‘Assaf (1996). All three of them accused the Sunni leadership in no uncertain terms of sectarian bias and discrimination against Druze officers in the armed forces. It is important to pinpoint here that antagonism between Damascus and the Druze did not subside after coups replaced the traditional ruling elite with military strongmen. The latter, it quickly became clear, were not any better predisposed toward the community. Still, no Druze actually mounted a coup or threatened to seize power for himself—possibly because Druze officers believed at the time that only a Sunni could credibly lead a putsch in Syria.<sup>49</sup>

In his memoir, Druze officer Amin Abu ‘Assaf maintains that he and other Druze in the military officers were treated as “foreigners” (*ghuraba*) under al-Za‘im, and that he himself was denied fair promotion because of his sectarian background. Abu ‘Assaf suspected al-Za‘im of plotting to arrest and then execute prominent Druze leader Sultan al-Atrash, putting him to the same fate as Sulayman al-Murshid.<sup>50</sup> For his part, Fadl Allah Abu Mansur claimed that al-Za‘im abhorred his sect and hated him personally because of his Druze background: “*kana yakhuss al-Druz bi karahiyya shadida*” (he [al-Za‘im] harbored a particular abhorrence of the Druze).<sup>51</sup> Inevitably, al-Za‘im’s perceived anti-Druze bias turned Druze officers against him. Indeed, they figured noticeably in the ranks of conspirators who planned to kill him. Druze leader Hasan al-Atrash actually lobbied Druze officers to assassinate al-Za‘im, whose intention to move an armored unit to the Jabal al-Druze prompted his downfall. The same scenario repeated itself under al-Shishakli, only more violently. In January 1954, al-Shishakli launched a military campaign against the Druze, who may have suffered more than a hundred casualties during confrontations with Syrian armed forces in al-Suwayda. The military campaign naturally alienated Druze officers, whose presence was, again, conspicuous in the February 1954 putsch that led to al-Shishakli’s overthrow.<sup>52</sup> I show below that, ‘Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din, the third Druze officer mentioned above, held grievances similar to Abu Mansur’s and Abu Assaf’s.

The rise of the United Arab Republic (UAR) heightened minority alienation. By and large, Syrian minorities feared the loss of demographic weight in an even more overwhelmingly Sunni population under the UAR, which, it appeared, would only amplify their political marginalization.<sup>53</sup> In addition, minorities had been particularly disaffected under al-Shishakli. Several of his officers had successfully reinvented themselves as stalwarts of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser and occupied conspicuous positions of authority under the UAR, including ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj, Tu‘mi al-‘Udallah, Akram Dayri, and Ahmad Hunaydi.<sup>54</sup> The seeming kinship between ‘Abd al-Nasser’s regime and al-Shishakli’s was problematic for many in Syria, especially the Druze.

Minority officers also had their own, more personal reasons to reject the UAR. First, the Nasserist authorities favored the Sunni element in the officer corps, as the next section shows. And second, prior to union with Egypt, minority officers had used the Ba‘th, the SSNP, and the military as tools of political influence—but the UAR regime banned parties and prevented military interventionism in politics. Munif al-Razzaz, the former secretary general of the Ba‘thi National Command, argues in his memoirs that antagonism toward the UAR was stronger among Ba‘thi officers than in the party’s civilian ranks, because the former lost more influence after Syria’s union with Egypt and felt particularly

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 280. Note that Kurdish officers operated along similar lines. See Jum‘a, *Awraq*, 146.

<sup>49</sup>Abu ‘Assaf, *Dhikrayati*, 279, 281.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 206–07, 231. See also Rathmell, *Secret War*, 51.

<sup>51</sup>Abu Mansur, *A‘asir*, 52.

<sup>52</sup>So much al-Shishakli feared the Druze that he famously asserted: “My enemies are like a serpent: the head is in the Jabal, the stomach in Homs, and the tail Aleppo. If I crush the head, the serpent will die.” See Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 234. See also, al-Atrash, *Al-Jil al-Mudan*, 196–98, 208; and ‘Abd al-‘Al, *al-Inqilabat*, 101. For an informative new study on the al-Shishakli years in power see Kevin W. Martin, “Speaking with the “Voice of Syria”: Producing the Arab World’s First Personality Cult,” *The Middle East Journal* 72, no.4, (2018): 631–53.

<sup>53</sup>Alain Chouet, “Impact of Wielding Power on Alawi Cohesiveness,” *Maghreb-Machrek*, (Jan-March, 1995): 5.

<sup>54</sup>See the memoirs of al-Humsi, *al-Janna al-Da‘i’a*, 209.

persecuted by the new regime.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, according to the memoirs of Naziha al-Humsi, Akram al-Hawrani's widow, the Ba'ṯhi officer Muhammad 'Umran had urged her husband to support an anti UAR coup only months after the unification of Egypt and Syria in 1958.<sup>56</sup> The fact is 'Umran and other minority officers had self-centered reasons for opposing unionism in addition to the pervasive hostility toward the UAR among their co-religionists. Indeed, none of the original members of the famous Ba'ṯhi military committee that seized power in 1963 were Sunni, and none wanted to restore Nasserist rule in Damascus. And while Ba'ṯhi officers did not hail exclusively from minority backgrounds, and not all Nasserist officers were Sunnis, the cleavage between Ba'ṯhists and Nassrists corresponded largely with—and reinforced—the dividing line between minorities and Sunnis in Syria.<sup>57</sup>

### Sunni officers and politics in pre-ba'ṯh syria

In the wake of independence, Sunni officers were frequently at odds with the Sunni power apparatus in Damascus. Contrary to widespread perceptions, Arab Sunni officers were already predominant numerically in the Syrian military under the French mandate.<sup>58</sup> But only a few Sunni officers hailed from the urban aristocracy. The scions of the ruling families looked down upon officers as social inferiors and did little to hide their contempt of those who served the French. For instance, when Jamil Mardam Bey, the minister of defense who hailed from a great Damascene Sunni family, visited troops stationed in the Syrian desert in 1948, he only shook hands with a junior officer (a military doctor from Damascus) but completely ignored other officers, who quipped that Mardam Bey may have been suffering from paronychia.<sup>59</sup> On another occasion, the same Mardam Bey criticized what he deemed to be shortcomings in military training during a visit to troops stationed on the Daughters of Jacob Bridge, over the upper Jordan River, and publicly slapped Colonel Tawfiq Bashur who had dared defend the armed forces during a tense discussion between the two men.<sup>60</sup> Premier Khalid al-'Azam, another Sunni aristocrat from Damascus, would summon the commander of the armed forces, Husni al-Za'im, to his office, keep him waiting for hours, and sometimes dismiss him without meeting with him.<sup>61</sup> Al-Za'im also had to kiss the hands of Syrian president Shukri al-Quwatli to show loyalty and keep his favor. Ascendant officers resented the arrogance of the landowning elite and chafed at civilian disrespect towards them. This friction along class lines did little to assuage civil-military relations in the first years of independence. Table 1 below recapitulates coup attempts in post-independence Syria. Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 review the backgrounds of officers who staged the three successful putsches of 1949, as well as the velvet coup that paved the way to the creation of the UAR in 1958, and the coup that triggered the UAR's breakdown in 1961. I chose to investigate these military takeovers specifically because each was a turning point of particular importance in the history of Syria. The tables debunk the notion that minority officers were always pervasive in the Syrian armed forces because they had been favored by the French throughout the mandate years. The simple fact is Sunni officers were preponderant in the Syrian military from its inception, until 1963. Indeed, that most Syrian coups from 1949 until the Ba'ṯh power grab in 1963 were led by Sunni officers attest to their preeminence in the armed forces.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Razzaz, *al-Tajriba*, 87.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Humsi, *al-Janna al-Da'ira*, 259. Al-Humsi also maintains that 'Umran had argued in favor of escalating the 1954 Qatana mutiny into a full-blown military coup. But Akram al-Hawrani thwarted such ambitions.

<sup>57</sup> See Hazim Saghiyya, *al-Ba'ṯh al-Suri, Tarikh Mujaz*, (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012), 35. Note that Mustafa Talass mentions in his memoirs that Christians in Aleppo were deeply distressed when news of the pro-'Abd al-Nasser coup spread in the city in April 1962. Similarly, officer Husayn al-Hakim notes in his memoirs that his Kurdish, Circassian, and Armenian peers in the Syrian armed forces were ready to fight and die for Syria, but were nonetheless estranged from Arab nationalism and unionist projects. These accounts suggest that misgivings *vis-à-vis* the UAR or Pan-Arabism were not confined to 'Alawis among Syrian minorities. See Mustafa Talass, *Mir' at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thani*, 220–221; and al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 76.

<sup>58</sup> 279 officers graduated from the Syrian military academy under the French mandate between 1921 and 1946. 128 of these officers (i.e. 45.8%) were Arab Sunnis. In contrast, only 6.1% were Druze and 5.7% were 'Alawis. See Van Dusen, "Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict," Appendix One, 375–414.

<sup>59</sup> Ma'ruf, *Ayyam*, 85.

<sup>60</sup> Bashur, *Min Dhakirat 'Abi*, 127. See also al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 50.

<sup>61</sup> Babil, *Sahafa*, 421.

**Table 1.** Coups in Post-Independence Syria (1946–1963)<sup>62</sup>

Coup Leaders	Date	Outcome	Center of Conspiracy
Husni al-Za'im	March 1949	Success	Damascus
Sami al-Hinnawi	August 1949	Success	Damascus
Adib al-Shishakli (1)	December 1949	Success	Damascus
Muhammad Nasir	July 1950	Failure	Damascus
Bahij Kallas	September 1950	Failure	Damascus
Adib al-Shishakli (2)	November 1951	Success	Damascus
'Adnan al-Maliki/Anwar Bannud	December 1952	Failure	Damascus
Mustafa Hamdun/Faysal al-'Atassi	February 1954	Success	Aleppo
'Abd al-Haq Shihadi/ Husayn Hidda	February 1954	Failure	Damascus
Muhammad Safa	September 1955	Failure	Damascus
Ghassan Jadid/ Muhammad Ma'ruf/Muhammad Safa	October 1956	Failure	Beirut
Hisham al-'Azmi	April 1957	Failure	Damascus
Adib al-Shishakli (3)	August 1957	Failure	Damascus
'Aff al-Bizri	January 1958	Success	Damascus
'Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi (1)	September 1961	Success	Damascus
'Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi (2)	March 1962	Success	Damascus
Badr al-'Asar	March 1962	Success	Homs
Jasim 'Alwan (1)/Lu'ay al-'Atassi	March/April 1962	Failure	Aleppo
'Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi (3)/Sidqi al-'Attar	January 1963	Failure	Damascus
Muhammad 'Umran/Salah Jadid/Ziyad al-Hariri	March 1963	Success	Damascus
Muhammad 'Umran / Salah Jadid / Hafez al-Asad	April 1963	Success	Damascus
Jasim 'Alwan (2)	July 1963	Failure	Damascus

That Syria was coup-prone is, of course, well known. Perhaps what is less recognized is the extent to which identity politics loomed large in the coup-proofing efforts of each new regime after usurping power. Consider, for instance, Husni al-Za'im, the leader of the first successful putsch in Syria. Following his successful putsch in March 1949, al-Za'im moved swiftly to dismiss scores of Druze officers and to reshuffle their appointments away from sensitive positions. According to officer Fadl Allah Abu Mansur, a Turkish delegation that al-Za'im commissioned to write a report on the Syrian military warned him that minority officers were overrepresented in leading operational positions, and advised al-Za'im to replace them with Sunni Muslims.<sup>63</sup> It was also alleged that al-Za'im was planning to create all-Kurdish and all-Circassian units, and station them in Damascus while deploying regular troops on the front with Israel. In addition, al-Za'im considered counter-balancing the military with a presidential guard manned by Yugoslav Muslims, who would have little connection with the rest of the troops and would be, therefore, less likely to engage in military intrigue.<sup>64</sup> While it was relatively easy for al-Za'im to discharge rival officers, he did not last long enough in power for his other plans to materialize. But the combination of identity politics, purges, and counterbalancing foreshadowed decades of future practices in Syria unfolding along similar lines.

Consider also Adib al-Shishakli. After rising to power, the colonel quickly dispatched Druze and 'Alawi officers to far-flung assignments away from the capital and filled their vacant positions in

<sup>62</sup>I collected the data in this table from the memoirs of officers I mention in this book. A succinct but especially informative overview of several coups in Syria is available in the memoirs of Syrian intelligence officer Khalil Mustafa, *Suqut al-Julan*, 19–25.

<sup>63</sup>Abu Mansur, *A'asir*, 51.

<sup>64</sup>Ma'ruf, *Ayyam*, 126. See also Fansa, *Ayyam Husni al-Za'im*, 58; and 'Abd al-'Al, *al-Inqilab*, 55, 91–92.

**Table 2.** Leading Officers Involved in the first Syrian Coup (March 1949)<sup>65</sup>

Name	Rank	Sect	Birthplace	Political Affiliation
Husni al-Za'im	Brigadier	Sunni (Arabized Kurd)	Aleppo	Independent
Sami al-Hinnawi	Colonel	Sunni	Aleppo	People's Party
Anwar Bannud	Colonel	Sunni	Aleppo	People's Party
Fawzi Sallu	Colonel	Sunni (Arabized Kurd)	Damascus	-
Adib al-Shishakli <sup>66</sup>	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Hama	SSNP, then Akram al-Hawrani
Bahij Kallas	Lieutenant-Colonel	Christian	Hama	Akram al-Hawrani
Mahmud Shawkat	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni (Arabized Kurd)	Homs	-
Ibrahim al-Husayni	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Mahmud Buniyan	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Jayrud	-
Muhammad Nasir	Lieutenant-Colonel	'Alawi	Jabla	-
Ihsan Shardam	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni (Arabized Circassian)	Damascus	-
'Adnan al-Maliki	Major	Sunni	Damascus	Independent
Bakri Qutrash	Captain	Sunni (Arabized Kurd)	Damascus	Independent
Hani al-Sulh	Lieutenant	Sunni	Damascus	-
'Abd al-Ghani Qannut	Lieutenant	Sunni	Hama	Al-Hawrani/ Ba'th

Damascus with Sunnis.<sup>67</sup> In 1951, al-Shishakli had 35 Druze officers and soldiers arrested on charges of espionage for Israel; several officers were later found guilty and executed.<sup>68</sup> Colonel Jasim 'Alwan claimed that al-Shishakli instructed him to prioritize the entrance of Arab Sunni Muslims to the Homs Military Academy, and to keep the number of cadets hailing from religious and ethnic minorities to an "absolute minimum."<sup>69</sup> Al-Shishakli also told 'Abd al-Razzak al-Dardari, a Sunni general who later became a Hafiz al-Asad loyalist, that no minority officer should be recruited into the armed forces, just as observant Catholics alone were allowed to be officers in Argentina.<sup>70</sup> Al-Shishakli indeed favored young officers who were fellow Hamawis—among whom was one 'Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj, who would later become Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's trusted lieutenant in Syria under the UAR.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, officer Mustafa Hamdun—who was also from Hama—refers to al-Shishakli as a "*Hamawi muta'ssib, lamm al-Hamawiyya hadul hawalayh*" (a fanatical Hamawi who surrounded himself with Hamawis).<sup>72</sup> Al-Shishakli, however, also appointed a Lebanese Druze officer, Shawkat Shuqayr, as chief of staff.

<sup>65</sup>Especially informative for this table were the memoirs of Najib Fansa, *Ayyam Husni al-Za'im, 137 Yawman Hazzat Suriyya*, (Beirut: Manshurat Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1982), 21; and Abu Mansur, *A'asir*, 47. Data pertaining to sect and hometown for this and the other tables is available in the appendix of the Van Dusen dissertation, cited above.

<sup>66</sup>Many believe that Adib al-Shishakli hailed from Kurdish stock. But his grandson, also named Adib al-Shishakli, contends that such assumptions are erroneous. See in this regard an article published by *Orient Net* on December 29, 2019. Available at: [https://orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/175600/0](https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/175600/0) آل-العابد-والشيشكلي-يدين-في-ان-وي-يوضح-ان-ن-حن-عرب-ولسنا-الافراد

<sup>67</sup>Abd al-'Al, *al-Inqilab*, 372.

<sup>68</sup>Landis, "Shishakli and the Druze".

<sup>69</sup>Alwan said he rejected al-Shishakli's demand though he himself hailed from Arab Sunni stock. See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 29.

<sup>70</sup>Interview with a former Syrian deputy prime minister who wished to remain anonymous. Beirut, December 22, 2016.

<sup>71</sup>Al-Samman, *Watan*, 344; see also al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 170.

<sup>72</sup>See Mustafa Hamdun's interview on *Al-Jazeera*, (August 29, 2003). Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/privatervisit/2005/1/10/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%89-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86>.

**Table 3.** Leading Officers Involved in the Second Syrian Coup (August 1949)<sup>73</sup>

Name	Rank	Sect	Birthplace	Political Affiliation
Sami al-Hinnawi	Brigadier General	Sunni	Aleppo	People's Party
Bahij Kallas	Colonel	Christian	Hama	al-Hawrani
'Alam al-Din Qawwas	Colonel	'Alawi	Antioch	-
Amin Abu 'Assaf	Lieutenant-Colonel	Druze	Salim	Independent
Muhammad Diyab	Captain	Ismā'ili	Salamiyya	-
'Issam Mariyud	Captain	Sunni	Damascus	SSNP
Mahmud Rifa'i	Captain	Sunni	Homs	-
Muhammad Ma'ruf	Captain	'Alawi	Matur	Independent
Ziad al-Atassi	Captain	Sunni	Homs	-
Tawfiq al-Shufi	Captain	Druze	Salkhad	-
Khalid Jada	Captain	Sunni (Arabized Circassian)	Homs	-
Khalid 'Issa	Captain	Sunni (Arabized Circassian)	Damascus	-
Husayn al-Hakim	Captain	Ismā'ili	Masyaf	Independent
Bakri al-Zubari	Second Lieutenant	Sunni	Aleppo	-
Antwan Khuri	Second Lieutenant	Christian	Latakia	-
Fadl Allah Abu Mansur	Second Lieutenant	Druze	Salkhad	SSNP
Mustafa al-Dawalibi	Lieutenant	Sunni	Aleppo	People's Party
Nur al-Din Kanj	Lieutenant	Druze	Majdal Shams	-
Mustafa al-Maliki	Lieutenant	Sunni	Damascus	-

Allegedly, al-Shishakli reckoned that Shuqayr's background would prevent him from building a power base in the military, and thus make him pliable.<sup>74</sup>

That said, Husni al-Za'im and Adib al-Shishakli were not alone in favoring Sunni officers in the Syrian armed forces. Civilian presidents, too, used identity politics in managing civil-military relations. According to Akram al-Hawrani, President Shukri al-Quwatli, for example, began cultivating in the late 1940s the loyalty of a Damascene power base in the officer corps, and followed the same tactic in the 1950s when he was back to power.<sup>75</sup> In 1957, President al-Quwatli and his Damascene Sunni supporters tried to reduce the influence of Ba'thi/al-Hawrani officers by purging them from sensitive positions in the mechanized brigades, the artillery, and the air force; an immediate mutiny of troops stationed in the Southern city of Qatana forced al-Quwatli to deescalate the confrontation lest military sedition spiral into a full-blown coup.<sup>76</sup> As a result, al-Quwatli instructed Chief of Staff Tawfiq Nizam al-Din to rescind his decisions to replace Ba'thi/al-Hawrani officers with Damascene Sunnis. The Ba'th and al-Hawrani triumphed because their faction in the armed forces was stronger than al-Quwatli's, but the struggle between Damascene Sunni officers and their Ba'thi foes was to remain a fixture of civil-military relations in Syria for years to come.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup>Especially informative for this table were the memoirs of Ahmad 'Abd al-Karim, *Hasad Sinin Khasba*, 138; and Babil, *Sahafa wa Siasa*, 441.

<sup>74</sup>Al-Samman, *Watan*, 39. See also al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 156.

<sup>75</sup>Al-Hawrani, *Mudhakkirat*, vol. II, 898.

<sup>76</sup>Jum'a, *Awraq*, 196. See also Zayn al-'Abidin, *al-Jaysh*, 272–73.

<sup>77</sup>Al-'Ashi, *Fajr al-Istiqlal*, 189–90.

**Table 4.** Leading Officers Involved in the Third Syrian Coup (December 1949)<sup>78</sup>

Name	Rank	Sect	Birthplace	Political Affiliation
Adib al-Shishakli	Colonel	Sunni	Hama	SSNP/ al-Hawrani
Fawzi Sallu	Brigadier	Sunni (Arabized Kurd)	Damascus	-
Anwar Bannud	Brigadier	Sunni	Aleppo	People's Party
'Aziz 'Abd al-Karim	Colonel	'Alawi	Jabla	-
Mahmud Buniyan	Colonel	Sunni	Jayrud	-
Amin Abu 'Assaf	Colonel	Druze	Salim	Independent
Tawfiq Nizam al-Din	Colonel	Sunni	Qamishli	-
Shawkat Shuqayr	Colonel	Druze	Arsun (Lebanon)	-
Muhammad Nasir	Colonel	'Alawi	Jabla	-
'Ala' al-Din Statis	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni (Arabized Circassian)	Qunaytra	-
Fadl Allah Abu-Mansur	Captain	Druze	Salkhad	SSNP
Husayn al-Hakim	Captain	Isma'ili	Masyaf	-

Consider finally the United Arab Republic (UAR) regime. Between 1958 and 1961, during the reign of the UAR, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser sacked politically untrustworthy officers or transferred them to Cairo, where they vegetated, removed from any position of power.<sup>79</sup> According to the memoirs of the above-mentioned 'Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din, the scale of 'Abd al-Nasser's purges in the officer corps was unprecedented in the history of the Syrian military at the time.<sup>80</sup> Zahr al-Din hints that the UAR regime in Syria favored Sunni officers from Damascus, who were spared the purges and promoted to leading positions in the military. Zahr al-Din also claims that a senior Druze officer was not appointed commander of the First Army (the UAR's troops stationed in Syria) because he wasn't Sunni.<sup>81</sup> As for Akram al-Hawrani, he says explicitly in his memoirs that 'Abd al-Nasser privileged Damascene Sunni officers at the expense of Ba'this. Al-Hawrani maintains that the tactics of the Egyptian intelligence under the UAR regime heightened sectarianism in Syria, and claims that he warned 'Abd al-Nasser that Damascene officers could threaten the union between Egypt and Syria because of their bourgeois background and sympathy for the Muslim Brothers.<sup>82</sup> For his part, Egyptian Free Officer Ahmad Hamrush wrote in his seminal work on the 'Abd al-Nasser era that for an officer to be assigned to leadership positions (*marakiz qiyadiyya*) in the upper echelons of the UAR's military he had to be religious (*mutadayyin*).<sup>83</sup> Hamrush's assertions corroborate the claims of Nabil al-Shuwayri, a Ba'thi leader, who noted in his memoirs that Egyptian officials during the UAR objected to allowing Syrian Christian officers to occupy sensitive positions in the armed forces. Allegedly, several Egyptian officials argued that 'Alawis and Druze needed to be converted to Islam and have their religious leaders trained at al-Azhar, the center of Sunni Islamic teaching and scholarship in Cairo.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>78</sup>Especially informative for this table was Abu Mansur, *A'asir*, 84–85.

<sup>79</sup>Among other positions, Syrian officers were appointed as ministers of interior as well as positions in social affairs, agriculture, and transportation. See Zayn al-'Abidin, *al-Jaysh*, 293.

<sup>80</sup>Zahr al-Din, *Mudhakkarati*, 18.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid, 22, 43.

<sup>82</sup>Akram al-Hawrani, *Mudhakkarat Akram al-Hawrani* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2000), vol. IV, 2,742–43 and 3,015.

<sup>83</sup>The other condition for being promoted was non-partisanship (*laysa hizbiyyan*). See Ahmad Hamrush, *Qissat Thawrat 23 Yulu, 'Abd al-Nasir wa-l-'Arab*, (Beirut: al-Mu'ssassa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 1976), 64.

<sup>84</sup>See Abu Fakhr, *Suriyya wa Hutam*, 293–95. According to Zayn al-'Abidin, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser was determined to weaken minority officers in the military in order to reduce the risk of a coup supported by 'Alawi or Druze tribes, but also to undermine



**Table 5.** Leading Officers in the Collective Commandership of the Syrian Military on the Eve of the Velvet Coup that Paved the Way to the Creation of the Uar in 1958<sup>85</sup>

Name	Rank	Sect	Birthplace	Political Affiliation
'Afif al-Bizri	Major-General	Sunni	Sidon (Lebanon)	Independent/Marxist
Amin al-Nafuri	Brigadier-General	Sunni	al-Nabak	al-Shishakli/al-Quwatli
'Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Hama	al-Shishakli/'Abd al-Nasser
Mustafa Hamdun	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni (Arabized Kurd)	Hama	al-Hawrani /Ba'th
Tu'ma al-'Udallah	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Dir'a	'Abd al-Nasser
Ahmad 'Abd al-Karim	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Mutbin	Ba'th
Bashir Sadiq	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	Ba'th
Akram Dayri	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	Independent/Arab Nationalist
Jadu 'Izz al-Din	Lieutenant-Colonel	Druze	Rudayma	Independent/Arab Nationalist
Ibrahim Farhud	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Raqqa	-
Ahmad Hunaydi	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Dayr al-Zur	-
Amin al-Hafiz	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Aleppo	Ba'th
'Abd al-Ghani Qannut	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Hama	al-Hawrani /Ba'th
Lu'ay al-Shatti	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Zuhayr 'Uqayl	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Aleppo	-
Yasin Farjani	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Tadmur	-
Jasim 'Alwan	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Dayr al-Zur	'Abd al-Nasser
'Abd Allah Jasuma	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	al-Bab	Ba'th
Husayn Hiddi	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Ghalib al-Shaqfi	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Hama	-
Bakri al-Kuzbari	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Jamal al-Sufi	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Homs	Ba'th
Mustafa Ram-Hamdani	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Homs	-

In sum, Sunni officers enjoyed preferential treatment in the pre-Ba'thi Syrian armed forces, especially under al-Za'im, al-Shishakli, and the UAR. Some Sunni cliques were particularly influential and coup-prone. For instance, three coups out of the five triggered in the "separatist era" following the breakdown

<sup>85</sup>Alawi and Druze separatist tendencies in Syria. In strengthening the Sunni element, 'Abd al-Nasser was seemingly trying to replicate al-Shishakli's methods of coup-proofing, which was made easier by the fact that several supporters of al-Shishakli switched their loyalty to 'Abd al-Nasser. See Zayn al-'Abidin, *al-Jaysh*, 299–300. Note that in contrast with these views, officer Muti' al-Samman denies in his memoirs charges of Sunni favoritism under the United Arab Republic regime. See al-Samman, *Watan*, 39–40. Note also that accusations of sectarian favoritism were mutual between and his Syrian foes. For instance, 'Abd al-Nasser publicly criticized the Syrian Ba'th in July 1963 for practicing what he labeled "racial discrimination" (*tamyiz 'unsuri*) and favoring minorities (*al-aqaliyyat*) in Syria. See Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's speech on July 22, 1963, during a conference commemorating the Free Officers' coup of 1952. The speech is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIB8sRy6AcQ>.

<sup>85</sup>Especially informative for this table was 'Abd al-Karim, *Hasad*, 291. See also Zayn al-'Abidin, *Al-Jaysh*, 276.

**Table 6.** Leading Officers Involved in the 1961 “Separatist” Coup<sup>87</sup>

Name	Rank	Sect	Birthplace	Political Affiliation
‘Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	Muslim Brothers Sympathizer
‘Abd al-Ghani Dahman	Brigadier-General	Sunni	Damascus	-
Faysal Sirri al-Husayni	Brigadier-General	Sunni	Damascus	-
Muwaffaq ‘Asasa	Brigadier-General	Sunni	Damascus	-
Haydar al-Kuzbari	Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Muhammad Mansur	Colonel	Sunni (Arabized Kurd)	Damascus	-
Haytham al-Mahayini	Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Muti‘al-Samman	Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Zuhayr ‘Uqayl	Colonel	Sunni	Aleppo	-
Muhib al-Hindi	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Fayiz al-Rifa‘i	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-
Hisham ‘Abd Rabbu	Lieutenant-Colonel	-	-	-
Fakhri ‘Umar	Lieutenant-Colonel	Sunni	Damascus	-

of the UAR were mounted by the al-Nahlawi Damascene faction in the officer corps, as Table 1 above makes clear. The Damascene faction certainly held the upper hand immediately following the separatist coup of 1961 and lost no time in cashiering 63 officers from the armed forces, many of them Ba‘thi officers hailing from minority background.<sup>86</sup>

However, the activism of the Damascene faction triggered a backlash, as partisan, sectarian, and regionalist polarization deepened in the officer corps. On March 28, 1962, a coalition of Nasserist and Ba‘thi officers rebelled in Aleppo. The mutineers executed four officers—two majors, and two captains—before their movement fizzled out. Because the officers associated with the killing were ‘Alawi Ba‘this, namely, Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, and Muhammad ‘Umran, while the slain officers were Damascene Sunnis, the violence in Aleppo took a sectarian undertone and caused a deep consternation in Damascus.<sup>88</sup> In April 1962, senior officers met in Homs to discuss the turbulence in military affairs, and agreed to purge the military of al-Nahlawi and his Damascene supporters. Several factions that otherwise had little in common converged in shared animosity against the Damascenes. Indeed, in the wake of the Homs meeting, al-Nahlawi and five of his top aides left Syria to be appointed military attachés abroad. It is telling of the intra-military polarization pervasive at the time that a Sunni officer from Damascus, Muti‘ al-Samman, asked at the Homs conference that six non-Damascene officers be dismissed from the military in exchange for the cashiering of six Sunnis from Damascus (i.e. al-Nahlawi and his five loyalists). In January 1963, al-Nahlawi instructed his remaining supporters in the armed forces to stage a mutiny, and came back from exile to lead it. The affair ended in failure. Yet another round of Damascene Sunni officers were dismissed or stationed away from the capital, only to be replaced with officers who, in the significant words of general ‘Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din, “*la yudmirun Iia Dimashq wa ahliha illa al-hiqd wa-l-karahiya*” (who felt nothing but loathing and hatred toward Damascus and the Damascenes).<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup>Al-Jundi, *al-Ba‘th*, 88.

<sup>87</sup>Especially informative for this table was ‘Abd al-Karim, *Hasad*, 420; Hamdani, *Shahid*, 195; Zahr al-Din, *Mudhakkirati*, 51; and Shu‘aybi, *Shahid Min al-Mukhabarat*, 133–34, 156.

<sup>88</sup>Al-Humsi, *al-Janna al-Da‘i’a*, 257. See also al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 298. Note that Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali was sentenced to death on January 1963 for his role in the Aleppo killings, but the Ba‘th coup of March 1963 saved him.

<sup>89</sup>Zahr al-Din, *Mudhakkirati*, 215, 372.

Longtime defense minister Mustafa Talass wrote for his part that 25 Damascene officers were cashiered and imprisoned following the third al-Nahlawi coup attempt. He observed quite candidly that the March 1963 putsch that delivered Syria to the Ba'th would not have unfolded so bloodlessly and easily had al-Nahlawi and his followers not been sacked from the armed forces following their failed movement in 1962.<sup>90</sup> Along somewhat similar lines, officer Muti' al-Samman noted that all officers responsible for the failed mutiny in January 1963 hailed from Damascus. When they were sentenced to jail following the breakdown of their movement, a void was created that "others used to seize power."<sup>91</sup> These "others" were Hafiz al-Asad and his colleagues, by then well poised to take advantage of the situation, following the successive elimination of their rivals.

A word here is due on the intense factionalization that was a feature of Sunni politics in the armed forces prior to 1963. The memoirs I used for this article suggest that Sunni officers were essentially divided into five groups following independence, some regionally rooted, others based on political affiliation: Hamawis, Damascenes, Nasserists, independents, and Ba'this. The Hamawis were especially powerful in the early 1950s. But the rivalry between Adib al-Shishakli and Akram al-Hawrani—both of whom hailed from Hama—pitted some Hamawi officers against others in a bitter struggle for supremacy. Notably, when al-Shishakli lost power in 1954 it was a Hamawi supporter of al-Hawrani, Mustafa Hamdun, who led the rebellion against him.<sup>92</sup> The fall of al-Shishakli weakened one faction of Hamawi officers. The marginalization of Akram al-Hawrani under the UAR sapped another faction as scores of Hawranists left the armed forces including, most importantly, Mustafa Hamdun, and 'Abd al-Ghani Qannut. The aforementioned Naziha al-Humsi notes in her memoirs that Akram al-Hawrani was apprehensive about transferring Hamdun and Qannut to civilian positions in the UAR government, but was unable to obstruct 'Abd al-Nasser's decisions in this regard.<sup>93</sup> For a while, some Hamawis remained prominent in the military such as 'Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj, and the independent officer Ziyad al-Hariri. The latter did try to position himself as the new Hamawi champion in the armed forces but only a handful of fellow Hamawis recognized him as such. His clique remained weak.<sup>94</sup> And the Hamawis never regained the clout they once enjoyed as a faction under al-Shishakli.

The Damascenes, for their part, were bereft of a charismatic leader following the violent demise of 'Adnan al-Maliki in 1955. To be sure, their presence was numerically significant. In addition, they still counted among their ranks influential officers such as Muti' al-Samman, and boasted powerful allies such as Chief of Staff Tawfiq Nizam al-Din. But the aftermath of the aforementioned Qatana mutiny in 1957 weakened the Damascenes—especially after the downfall of Nizam al-Din and his replacement with the leftist 'Afif al-Bizri. Nizam al-Din was not the only victim of Qatana in fact; the triumphant al-Hawrani/Ba'th faction also secured the sacking of several senior Damascene officers, including such prominent figures as Colonels 'Umar Qabbani, Suhayl al-'Ashi, and Hisham al-Samman.<sup>95</sup> The Damascenes remained leaderless for a while and the void that al-Maliki's death created persisted until the rise of 'Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi. The latter was certainly Syria's most influential officer from the breakdown of the UAR in September 1961 until the abovementioned Homs conference in April 1962. And yet al-Nahlawi's power was quickly curtailed because he suffered from a twofold weakness: first, his faction was almost strictly Damascene, and second, not all Damascene officers recognized him as their leader—Colonel Haydar al-Kuzbari, for example, led a mutiny targeting al-Nahlawi in 1962. Thus, Chief of Staff 'Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din was able to maneuver against al-Nahlawi and exile him in 1962, and al-Nahlawi's lack of a wide base of support similarly prevented him from seizing back power when he tried to do so in 1963.<sup>96</sup> From here on, Damascene officers lost relevance just like the Hamawis had been marginalized before them.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>90</sup>See Talass, *Mir'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thani*, 216, 349.

<sup>91</sup>See al-Samman, *Watan*, 262. See also Jum'a, *Awraq*, 277.

<sup>92</sup>See Mustafa Hamdun's interview on *al-Jazeera*, *ibid*.

<sup>93</sup>Al-Humsi, *al-Janna*, 292.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid*, 343.

<sup>95</sup>See Mustafa, *Suqut*, 20.

<sup>96</sup>On the exile of al-Nahlawi, his return to Syria and failed attempt to seize power see al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 300–304.

<sup>97</sup>It goes beyond the limits of this study to engage regionalism in Syria in further depth. But Van Deusen's piece on the topic can be consulted usefully. See Michael H. Van Deusen, "Political Integration and Regionalism in Syria", *Middle East Journal* 26, no. 2, (1972), 123–36.

On the other hand, a significant number of Sunni officers were active Nasserists, including most notably ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj, and Jasim ‘Alwan. Even after the collapse of the UAR, Nasserist officers boasted a significant presence in the armed forces—perhaps constituting the largest faction vying for power.<sup>98</sup> But the regime that held sway in Syria from 1961 until 1963 considered Nasserist officers as enemies and purged many of them. The failure of Jasim ‘Alwan’s coup attempts in 1962 and 1963, and subsequent retaliations against his fellow Nasserists, further debilitated his faction. Independent Sunni officers such as Ziyad al-Hariri or Ba‘this like Amin al-Hafiz, applauded the demise of their Nasserist rivals. And yet it is clear in retrospect that Nasserist power posed at the time the only serious challenge inside the Syrian armed forces to the ascendant minority officers of the Ba‘thi military committee. Al-Hariri and al-Hafiz belonged to separate military camps. Even had they joined forces, it is questionable whether they could have stopped the irrepressible rise to power of Salah Jadid, Hafiz al-Asad, and their colleagues in the military committee. In any event, the committee successfully neutralized al-Hariri in April 1963, and al-Hafiz in February 1966, effectively ending the age of Sunni power in the Syrian armed forces.

### Conclusion

I argued above that obscuring underlying tensions that made sectarianism salient in pre-Ba‘th Syria is unwarranted. The interpretation of Syrian history romanticizing the post-independence decades as a golden age of national unity is deeply flawed and ignores the malaise of minorities in the nascent entity. As I showed in this study, when Muhammad Nasir plotted against Adib al-Shishakli in 1950, he did so as the leading figure of an ‘Alawi faction in the officer corps. Similarly, Ghassan Jadid, Muhammad Ma‘ruf, and Muhammad Safa banked mainly on ‘Alawi support in Latakia for their conspiracy in 1956. Muhammad ‘Umran, Salah Jadid, and Hafiz al-Asad all hailed from ‘Alawi background and the military committee they founded in the late 1950s in Cairo was originally restricted to, and continued to be led by, minority officers. Similarly, ‘Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi’s faction in the early 1960s was strictly Sunni—and almost completely Damascene. The records suggest there were no Sunni officers hailing from, say, Hama, or Dayr al-Zur, among the “separatists” of 1961. In contrast, al-Shishakli favored Hamawis, and al-Za‘im Circassians and Kurds. Sects were never unified actors, but sectarian affiliation undeniably informed agency. Such were the parameters of identity politics in the Syrian officer corps.

Pondering Syria’s recent history sheds light on her contemporary dynamics. Syrians from various sects and backgrounds suffered in the last harrowing years of war and continue to do so, but Sunnis are the first victims of the ongoing crisis. The fact is the ragtag opposition never commanded the firepower that the regime mustered and the latter resorted to chemical and aerial bombing to pound Sunni communities indiscriminately; the ongoing tragedy in Idlib is only the latest example in this regard. ‘Alawi loyalty to Bashar al-Asad allowed him to mete out overwhelming violence to his opponents. Since 2011, al-Asad has pushed inter-sectarian polarization to extremes, fostered ‘Alawi fear, and instrumentalized it politically. Yet the embattled autocrat did not create ‘Alawi distress and insecurity out of thin air—there was little in the post-independence decades that could have made a prospective return of Sunni power in Damascus appealing for ‘Alawis. Considering the scale of Sunni suffering, the Sunni nostalgia for pre-1963 Syria is understandable. But the contention that Syria had made great strides on the road to secularism and modernization until the al-Asad rule re-introduced sectarianism is factually problematic; it also serves implicitly a political argument: if the Sunni elite were to regain power and resuscitate the pre-1963 order, the national unity of old would be restored. Nothing in the contemporary history of Syria corroborates this claim though the monstrosity of the al-Asad regime, and the legitimacy of Syrian democratic aspirations, are beyond debate.

<sup>98</sup>Al-Hakim, *Suriyya*, 306.