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**The Conflict between Political
Factions of the Syrian Military
Establishment, 1954-1958:
Coups and Political Pluralism****

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Introduction: Probing the Literature

How have researchers considered mid-1950s Syria?

The period between 1954 and 1958 in Syria witnessed the return to a pluralistic political life and parliamentarism, or to democracy, as some have described it. This raises many questions, when we scrutinize the phase using the tools of the field of democratic transition and civilian-military relations. During these years, the Syrian army was not at the helm of power. This is in contrast with the period of

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1949-1954, which saw, within five years, five successful coups and an additional failed one. After 1958, there were a total of nine coup attempts, some resulting in success, and others in failure. This means that coups had become the norm of Syrian political life, and anything else was an exception. This research study attempts to address the causes behind the exception represented by the period of 1954-1958.

Much has been written about the conflicts between political blocs inside the Syrian military. However, the question regarding their effects on political life during the period devoid of coups has not been raised yet, Is there a relation between the return to political life and the conflicts amongst military factions? It is worth noting that describing the army as being in a state of conflict is an indication of the existence of a changing military and political balance of power between the factions. Consequently, was the decrease in the incidence of coups and the return to political life in Syria between 1954 and 1958 the result of a return to an equilibrium to the balance of power between the conflicting factions of the military forces? This research study attempts to answer this question by revealing the nature of the internal conflict within the army, and by examining their forms. How did this struggle start to reach the point of internal discord inside the barracks? What is the nature of its relation to the political system, ideological currents and international conflicts?

Researchers have not examined the reasons behind the decrease in the number of coups in Syria. Instead, while describing this historical phase, they have attributed the exclusivity of civilian rule to the Army's reluctance in

practicing politics.¹ It regressed to the barracks, leaving power in the hands of civilians. We should note the existence of some literature referring to the military's interference in political life and the strife of its internal blocs.² On the other hand, some literature tackled the phase in a very succinct and incomplete manner, devoting lengthy pages to the study of the nature of conflicts between parties inside and outside Parliament, civil liberties, as well as regional and international tensions that engulfed Syria in the 1950s.³ This period has been retroactively described in romantic terms as the democratic experiment, notwithstanding its flaws, without questioning the concept. This is in contrast with the real tragedy Syria has experienced with Hafez Assad (1970-2000) and his son Bashar (2000-). In this context, this research study investigates the exceptional phase 1954-58 as well: was it a

¹ *Mumārasatu al-ḥukm wal istilā'a 'alayh, aw al-mushāraka fih, aw itikhādh al-qarār bi sha'anih*. [Governing and Seizing Government, Participation in Government, or Making Government-Related Decisions]. Azmi Bishara, *Al jaysh wal syāsa: ishkālyāt nadharya wa namādhij 'arabya* [The Army and Politics: Theoretical Problems and Arab Models] (Doha/Beirut: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2017), p.29.

² Some of the references include: Torrey, Gordon H. *Syrian Politics and the Military 1945-1958*, trans. by Mahmoud Fallaha, 2nd Edition (Damascus: Al-Jamahīr Publishing House, 1969); Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A study in Post-War Arab Politics (1945-1958)*, trans. by Samir Abdo and Mahmoud Fallaha (Damascus: Dar Tlass Publishing, 1986).

³ To name but a few: Ghassan Muhammad Rashad Haddad, *Min tārikh Sūrya al mu'aāsir: 1946-1966*, [From the contemporary history of Syria: 1946-1966] (Amman: Future Centre for Strategic Studies, 2001), pp. 87-128; Kamal Deeb, *Tārikh Sūrya al mu'aāsir: min al-intidāb ila ṣayf 2011* [Syrian Contemporary History from the Mandate till Summer 2011], 2nd Edition (Beirut: Dar An-Nahar Publishers 2012), pp. 148-170; Nashwan Al-Atassi, *Tatawwur al-mujtama'a al-sūri: 1831-2011* [The Evolution of Syrian Society: 1831-2011] (Beirut: Atlas Publishing, Translation And Cultural Production, 2015), pp. 216-218; Karim Atassi, *Syria, the Strength of an Idea: The Constitutional Architectures of Its Political Regimes*, trans.by Moeen Roumeeh (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2022), p. 17, p. 29 and pp. 217-224.

period of political pluralism⁴ and civil liberties? Or was it a democracy disfigured by the interventions of the military and others? This study presupposes the impossibility of describing a political system as democratic should there be a mixture between the army and politics. It espouses Robert Dahl's concept of a democratic system and its relationship with the military described as the control of civilians over government and state institutions. This occurs through elections and according to the constitution, with the military voluntarily and completely subordinating to the elected civilian authorities.⁵

The concept of coup refers to a group suddenly changing the system of government through the use of force, in our case a military group, within the constitutional framework.⁶ Whereas the equilibrium of power of military forces within the army, the central concept of this study, means the following:

(a) the ability of officers from political Current A to deter officers from political Current B from attempting a coup to impose their political vision, or their intervention to stop political transformations in opposition to them; and

⁴ The concept of pluralism the research adopts is from a theoretical descriptive approach: the pluralism that leads to a competition for power, influence amongst political groups and widespread ideological currents. See: Craig Calhoun (editor), *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, trans. by Moeen Roumeeh (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2021), p.219.

⁵ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 21.

⁶ Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb, *Al-dawla al-tasalutya fi al-mashriq al-'arabi al-mu'aasir* [The Authoritarian State in the Contemporary Arab Mashreq], 3rd Edition (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2015), p. 108; Azmi Bishara, *Fi al-thawra wal qabiliya lil-thawra* [On Revolution and Revolutionary Potential] (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2016), p.34.

(b) the ability of officers from Current B to stop officers from Current A from attempting to do the same

This is what we call a state of equilibrium within the politicized factions of the army, and it is not a necessary condition for this to be a solely bilateral matter. This concept is initially based on the supposition of the research study that the Syrian army, from its very first coup, cannot be considered a single militarily harmonious bloc. Indeed, it is composed of distinct groups with differing interests, ambitions and political orientations. These groups are spread across military sections and units.

This study attempts to answer the questions raised and test the stated hypotheses, through extrapolation and analysis by using a mixed methodology (Archives, Discourse Analysis, Process-tracing Method and Historical Sociology). As the focus here is on the Syrian military establishment and its coups, the study is principally based on the memoirs of Syrian officers and politicians, as well as the aforementioned literature. It is worth noting that investigating the Syrian military, and perhaps the Arab military in general, faces significant obstacles. This is a result of the lack of transparency and absence of information officially published by the State, describing the size of the establishment, its internal structure and the nature of relations inside it. This even applies to anterior historical phases. It is a real methodological hurdle faced by researchers in the field of civilian-military relations. That is why memoirs are a main, and sometimes only, source in the study of the Syrian military. This study uses them as principal materials to extract archival data and analyse the discourse present in the texts in order to answer the questions raised by this study and achieve its goals.

It is also an attempt to reconsider the importance of memoirs and biographies, which are, in the words of Wajih

Kawtharani, the reflection of individual actors' own Subjective history". the small details in the memoirs accumulates together to form events, resulting in the need to consider them as *historical documents*, subject to study and interpretation, becoming given facts of historical knowledge.⁷ The Process Tracing methodology or the harmonization of effect contributes to pinpointing the causal relationship between the factor (the equilibrium) and the decisions shaped by the political factions of the military forces.⁸ On the other hand, we make use of historical sociological practices to understand the formation of Arab states in the post-independence era, which is included in the case researched.⁹

This study focuses on three main topics. The first topic is concerned with a critique of the literature of civilian-military relations aiming at finding solutions to getting the military out of politics. We focus more on the literature that is concerned with analysing the reasons behind the decrease of the military coups' phenomenon. The research

⁷ Wajih Kawtharani, *Tārīkh al-ta'arīkh: ittijāhāt – madāris – manāhij* [History of Historiography: Trends, Schools, and Methods], 3rd Edition (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015), pp. 397-399.

⁸ Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*, trans. by Khalil Alhaj Saleh (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019) p.72; Hassan Al Haj Ali Ahmad, "Al qudra 'ala al-istidlāl" [The Ability to Reason], *Siyasat Arabiya*, no. 41, November 2019, pp.89-102.

⁹ Historical Sociology regards the political landscape as one of the social spaces composing the State, an arena where competing political players are vying for power, economic resources and social bases. In their strive for hegemony they create cultural and material components, and in our case here politicize the emerging military establishment. As a result of this politicization, a struggle to monopolize violence rises amongst military forces, aiming to take over the State, as the State is the only claimant to a monopoly on violence, in the Weberian sense of the word. See Adham Saouli and Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Arab State: A Historical Sociology Approach" (Omran, issue no.37, vol.10, Summer 2021), pp.7-36.

also highlights the limitations and gaps within this literature, without skipping it, instead building upon it and filling its shortcomings. The second topic studies the history of the first military coups in Syria, while paying special attention to the coup officers' military background – (Land/Air/Sea or Military Intelligence corps): this research study supposes that understanding the coups' mechanisms does help redraw and understand the history of coups, from the birth of the phenomenon to its decline.

The third topic explores the elements of conflict and the most significant blocs inside the army, the nature of relations between the army and political parties, as well as the extent of the army's influence on the political process. It also studies the relation between the return of political and parliamentary life to Syria and the conditions of the military establishment between 1954 and 1958. Lastly, this study concludes with most important findings from both historical and theoretical perspectives.

How have researchers reflected on the military establishment?

How can civilian leaders in a democratic system restrain the armed forces from interfering in the political process? Researchers have tried to think about pioneering new solutions to democratically reform civilian-military relations. It started with the publication of Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*¹⁰ in 1957, focusing on the backgrounds and political relations in the army and its officers. His critics founded new approaches focusing on the sociological and cultural backgrounds of the officers,

¹⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957).

like Morris Janowitz's book *The Professional Soldier*¹¹ and Samuel Finer's *The Man on Horseback*,¹² This literature has tried to provide answers to the question that still haunts comparative politics researchers today. Theoretical studies have succeeded each other, in completion of anterior works. Case studies later appeared with the third wave of democratic transition, in an attempt to come up with findings about reform experiments in the military of those countries. Most of the findings, which have reached the point of propositions and recommendations, focus on civilian processes to democratize the armed forces. Juan Linz went as far as saying that successful solutions to the military's interference in politics are found through active democratic governance led by major political players.¹³

Felipe Aguero's view is that democratic transition and strengthening is a result of the supremacy of the civilian establishment over the military. This is achieved in his opinion by excluding the military from positions of power and appointing civilians to the top posts of the military establishment.¹⁴ While Aurel Croissant and his colleagues, like their predecessors, believe that the domination of the civilian establishment over the military is achieved through spreading decision-making power, whereby civilian democrats hold the highest power and the exclusivity in

¹¹ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).

¹² Samuel E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1969).

¹³ Juan J. Linz, *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p.30.

¹⁴ Felipe Aguero, *Soldiers, Civilians and Democracy: Post-Franco in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore/ London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 17.

setting and executing governmental policies.¹⁵ This is not limited to researchers, as some actors have adopted the same theoretical approach, strangely enough, like Narcis Serra the former Spanish Minister of Defence and researcher in the field. He sees that non-interference of the army in politics is the result of a slow degradation of its powers, reduced by the authority of democratic civilian control, in a cautious long-term negotiating relationship.¹⁶

Recently, both Zoltan Barany¹⁷ and Abdel-Fattah Madi¹⁸ (at the present juncture, the latest to write in Arabic, and perhaps in all the field) have designed policies to enable civilian forces to reform the military and propose ways to get the army out of politics. This is done through extrapolating and analysing a large number of cases. These policies can be summarized to issues relating to overseeing military budgets, installing civilian control, governance of the security sector and the positions inside the Ministry of Defence and its institutions, constitutionalizing and drafting laws defining the authorities of military forces, etc.

We can summarise the problems of these studies in the following:

¹⁵ Aurel Croissant et al., “Beyond the Fallacy of Coup-ism: Conceptualizing Civilian Control of the Military in Emerging Democracies”, *Democratization*, vol. 17, no. 5 (2010), p.955.

¹⁶ Narcis Serra, *The Military Transition: Democratic Reform of the Armed Forces*, translated by Peter Bush (Cambridge/ New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 43-49.

¹⁷ Zoltan Barany, *The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas*, trans. by Nabil Khesheh (Doha/Beirut: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2018), pp.49-75.

¹⁸ Abdel-Fattah Madi, *Al-dimuqrāṭya wal bunduqya: al-‘alāqāt al-madanya al-‘askarya wa syāsāt taḥdīth al-quwāt al-musalaha* [Democracy and the Gun: civilian-military relations and military forces modernization policies] (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2021), pp.263-361.

- a. They assume the armed forces' implicit approval of the democratic political transition, and that civilian control will be exercised without rejection or concern.
- b. The processes of reform of civilian-military relations which these researchers build upon, occurred in a structural/historical context which is difficult to replicate in countries differing in time and space. In other words, in the cases of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Portugal and Spain, which represent *the historical bastion of military politics* as described by Philippe Droz-Vincent,¹⁹ democratic transition was achieved and later strengthened within the context of clear Western international support and regional influence, the setting of the Cold War, with the United States pushing countries towards democracy, in order to ensure their alignment against the Eastern Bloc. It was also achieved in the context of the implicit approval of democratization by the military establishment, forced by external pressures and constrained by an international system. In contrast, there are states, like the Arab countries, that are prevented regionally and internationally from conducting a democratic transformation. This makes it difficult to apply the researchers' solutions, because of the different contexts as well as the structural and radical difference in the composition of these armies, their relation to the State and society, and certain armies in the Arab region, like the Syrian army.
- c. It is clear that the literature studying the armed forces and the security sectors themselves is poor. In

¹⁹ Philippe Droz-Vincent, *Military Politics of the Contemporary Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp.288-289.

comparison, the dominant thinking on the issue of the military in politics is about political and civilian forces, external factors and their roles. Although they are important, this comes at the expense of a neglect of the power relations within the army. This methodological weakness is the result of researchers' lack of interest in studying the military apparatus itself, as Nancy Bermeo has observed.²⁰ The armed forces are considered a monolithic bloc, or more precisely an amorphous bloc, expressing a single opinion regarding democracy. It is necessary to deconstruct the army, at least theoretically, during the research, into brigades and platoons (Air/Sea/Land and Military Intelligence corps). This is in order to examine the relations between the units of the army, their forces and opinions regarding processes of political transition. That is what this research is going to do, taking the Syrian case as an example.

- d. These studies are multiple formulations using the same approach, in the sense that they offer solutions to civilians who need to pursue them in order to reach a strong democratic system. The most important problematic faced by most of them is that although it is true that democratic transition cannot happen without democratic political elites, as the reform of the military is based on a bilateral relationship, there has been no focus on the military forces themselves. The army may pave the way to democracy and political pluralism, through an

²⁰ Nancy Bermeo, "Surprise, Surprise: Lessons from 1989 and 1991", in: Nancy Bermeo (ed.), *Liberalization and Democratization: Change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p.198.

internal solution, and not exclusively through players outside the military.

In a more pronounced way, the phase of political pluralism/*democracy* that Syria experienced during 1954-1958, did not come about through as a result of civilian democratic forces keeping the military out of politics, and achieving four years of political pluralism. Rather, it was a phase of civilian-military duality, or as Hazem Saghieh has accurately described, a *semi-civilian, semi-military phase*.²¹ So how did Syria reach this phase of political pluralism without the conflict between of democratic civil powers?

It is worth recalling that the poverty or complete lack of answers in the literature is the result of a lack of serious institutionalized research focusing on the armies of the Arab Mashreq prior to the 1970s, or before the stabilization of the military and political regimes. This despite the publication of important and founding works, like the works of Anouar Abdel-Malek,²² Nazih Ayubi,²³ Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb²⁴ and Azmi Bishara²⁵. However, the lack persists. Recently,²⁶ at the time Arab researchers have sought to offer solutions to the issue of Arab political transition, they have tended to study armies from outside the Arab region. Therefore, the remark by Janowitz still holds after decades:

²¹ Hazem Saghieh, *Al-inhyār al-madīd: al-khalḡya al-tārīkhya li intifādāt al-sharq al-awsat al-‘arabī* [The long collapse: the historical background to the uprisings of the Arab Middle East] (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi Publishers, 2013), p.124.

²² Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Al-mujtama‘a al-maṣrī wal jaysh (1952-1973)* [Egyptian society and the army (1952-1973)] (Cairo: Markaz al-Mahrousa, 2005).

²³ Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, trans. by Amjad Hussein (Beirut: Arab Organization for Translation, 2010).

²⁴ Al-Naqeeb.

²⁵ Azmi Bishara, *Al-jaysh wal siyāsa* [The Army and Politics].

²⁶ Madi, pp. 133-260.

the “attention devoted to the armies of the Middle East is still very minute, in comparison with the studies about armies from Latin America and Africa.”²⁷

In order to reach a clearer vision of the case study, we need to examine the literature concerned with preventing coups, as the Syrian model that we are engaging to clarify is situated within phases of coups. In Theda Skocpol’s opinion, the role of the military establishment is second to none in the safeguard of a regime. As a result, ruling elites prioritize keeping the officers of the armed forces completely loyal.²⁸ This similarly applies to safeguarding regimes in the context of the Arab Mashreq in general, and to Syria in particular, in what researchers have labelled the development *Coup-Proofing* mechanisms which are a “set of processes regimes undertake to ensure the prevention of military coups.”²⁹ The processes identified by the researchers can be summarized as following:

- (a) The control of the army through the creation of a state of equilibrium and hegemony over the armed forces – Whenever there is a high probability of a coup occurring, the regime as personified by the leader divides the armed forces into competing groups (for example the Republican Guards, Paramilitary forces and Intelligence agencies). This is in order to thwart any chances the officer corps

²⁷ Morris Janowitz, *Military Conflict: Essays in the Institutional Analysis of War and Peace* (Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications, 1975), p. 148.

²⁸ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, trans. by Nabil al-Kheshen (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2021), pp. 473-487.

²⁹ James Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,” *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999), p. 133.

may have of coordinating a coup d'état against the regime.³⁰

- (b) Gaining the loyalty of these forces through heavy arming and training, raising levels of expenditure and the allocation of generous material benefits³¹
- (c) Regularly rotating the military positions of officers, in order to prevent them from forming factions or blocs inside any of their units
- (d) Monitoring the army units so as to confront any competitor from within the establishment, as well as preventing the flow of information inside the regime's military apparatuses,³² as information is made to flow solely towards the leader
- (e) Particularly in the cases of Syria and Iraq, the officers who stabilized their regimes built *ideological armies* based upon the complete loyalty towards the ruling Baath Party, through teaching the ideology upon which the regime was founded to the officers inside the military academies.³³
- (f) Investing in a network of relatives, sectarian and ethnic affiliations, in order to gain loyalty inside and outside the armed forces³⁴

³⁰ Aaron Belkin & Evan Schofer, "Coup Risk, Counterbalancing, and International Conflict," *Security Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January 2005), p. 143.

³¹ Michael Makara, "Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring," *Democracy and Security*, vol. 9, no. 4 (September 2013), pp. 336-337.

³² Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes*, Adelphi Paper 324 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998), pp. 18-20.

³³ Ayubi, pp. 517-520.

³⁴ Makara, pp. 336-337; Raymond Hinnebusch, "Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Middle East," *Middle East Critique*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Fall 2010), p. 209.

These networking processes inside the social components and the military/security apparatuses, became an essential pillar to prevent coups and safeguard power for the longest possible period. Though it is true that they are all parts of regime components, they are not interconnected, but directly connected to the leader and the close inner circles around him. They take the shape of a *pivoting and grinding* process,³⁵ making these networks and apparatuses alternatives to the State, working like a State, replicating the system of Praetorian guards in the Arab states' apparatuses.³⁶

The literature is problematic in the following ways:

- (a) It limits the coup-prevention processes to the last decades of the stabilization of Arab regimes, or after the 1970s. It may also help understand the consolidation of dictatorships before these phases, like the dictatorship of Adib al-Shishakli in Syria (1949-1954). However, it fails to explain the decline of the coups' phenomenon in Syria between 1954 and 1958. It does not answer the question: how did civilians come to spearhead government and not the army?

³⁵ Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 3.

³⁶ Azmi Bishara “*Al-dawla wal umma wa niḏhām al-ḥukm: al-tadākhul wal tamāyuz*” [The State, the Nation and the Regime: overlap and differentiation]. Paper presented to the eighth session of the social sciences and humanities conference “*Al-dawla al-‘arabya al-mu‘aāsira: al-taṣawur, al-nash‘a, al-azma*” [The contemporary Arab State: vision, foundation and crisis], Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha 21/3/2021; Hanna Batatu, “Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance”, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Summer 1981), pp. 331-344.

- (b) Some studies have mixed between the decrease of military coups and the causes behind the withdrawal of armies from politics (for example Zoltan Barany). There is a huge difference between the two issues. Controlling the army and creating processes to prevent coups does not mean that the army is out of politics. Most likely the side creating mechanisms to prevent coups is an officer who himself has reached power through a coup d'état and protected the regime with officers, so as to manage ruling with them. In reality the army is still in politics, still ruling, but the rest of the army officers have been contained and cannot execute a coup.
- (c) The most important theoretical gap in these studies is that they have looked at the causes and processes behind the decrease in coups as a designed situation, as defined by Quinlivan: "a series of measures taken by the regime." In other words, someone is behind their creation, and there is a supreme authority in control of all sides. This may be true in the case of the regime in Syria since the beginning of the 1970s, but it ignores the 1950s phase in Syria, which witnessed political turmoil and more precisely the spread of ideologies inside the Syrian armed forces. The phase of 1954-1958 did not experience an authoritarian regime aiming to fragment the army in order to keep on ruling. However, it was marked by the existence of military blocs struggling with each other, without a leader fomenting and enflaming competition between the factions of the army.

As such the military exception in this phase is unique throughout the history of Syria and maybe of other countries as well. It is the researcher's right to ask: Did these blocs form by chance? How did they emerge, if the academic opinion says that the

competition within the army is instigated by a higher power feeding on discord within the military forces? If we were to suppose this a result of chance, or born out of their political situation, how did they then direct their conflicts? Were there losers and winners?

We strive to answer these questions through a narrative and analytical reading of the military coups in Syria, and by examining the extent of the realism and effectiveness of the processes found by researchers.

Coups in Syria during 1949-1954: new sociological and military evidence and analysis

Heritage of the Mandate: sociological background of the Syrian army

In Syria, the controversies regarding the sectarian nature of the regime in general and of the military forces in particular have led to a renewed retrospective research on the sociological (class, regional, religious, or ethnic) backgrounds of the military coup officers in Syria between 1949-1970. They have interpreted them by describing them as reflections of these backgrounds.³⁷ Perhaps the majority of thoughts and judgements based on the analyses of class and religious/sectarian backgrounds are in fact highly accurate, but in comparison with the former, the analyses

³⁷ To mention but a few: Nicolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics 1955-1961*, 2nd Edition (Cairo: Madbouli Bookstores, 1995); Hanna Batatu, *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics*, trans. by Abdallah Fadel and Raed al-Naqshabandi (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014).

based on the ethnic backgrounds are not so precise. The first three coups were led by Arabized officers of Kurdish origin, pushing many researchers to point out the minoritarianism of these coups.³⁸ However, the practical exercise of power by the leaders of the three coups, regarding the structure of the army, of political institutions and the legal transformations of the status of these minorities, did not witness a *Kurdification* or *Circassianization* of state institutions. One of the most evident examples of this is the policies adopted by Adib al-Shishakli, who, at the end of his era, tried to minimize the influence of minorities inside the army, in the interest of maintaining the Sunni Arab character of the military despite his Kurdish roots (to his father's side) and Circassian roots (to his mother's side); this meant his identity was shaped by belonging to two minorities although he was not a minoritarian himself.

The minorities-based analysis is built upon a premise equally common amongst some Arab and Western researchers.³⁹ It states that the nature of the composition of the Syrian army is linked to the heritage of the French Mandate and the *Special Troops of the Levant* and is generally based on Syrian minorities; the French authorities are said to have prevented the recruitment of the sons of the Sunni Arab majority in the army. On the

³⁸ See Ghassan Salamé, *Al-mujtama'a wal dawla fi al-Mashriq al-'Arabī* [Society and State in the Arab Mashreq], 2nd Edition (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1999), p.162. The famous Damascene Airforce officer Mohammad Al-'Ashi reveals in his memoirs that the coup led by Husni al-Zaim was considered as an act reflecting the Kurdish identity by the French academics at the time, as witnessed by his brother Zuhair Al-'Ashi while studying. See: Mohammad Suhail Al-'Ashi, *Fajr al-istiklāl fi Suriya: mun'ataf khaṭīr fi tārikhiha* [The Dawn of Independence in Syria: a critical juncture in its history], 2nd Edition (Beirut: Dar Al Nafaes for Publications, 2019), p. 135.

³⁹ See for example Salamé, p. 162 and Torrey, p. 52.

other hand, researcher Nacklie Bou-Nacklie, in his solid study on the recruitment of Syrians during the Mandate, pointed to the fact that Sunni Arabs in these forces outnumbered minorities of all kinds.⁴⁰ He demonstrated that the matter was not limited to the issue of the general composition of the army, but that the presence of Sunni Arabs in the officer corps in 1947, or after the independence of Syria (1946), was much more pronounced than any other ethnic or religious background in the army.

Therefore, France did not systematically exclude whole population groups for sectarian or minoritarian reasons, but applied the policy chosen by Paris in its acts of recruitment, by choosing groups – sects, ethnicities, tribes and families – loyal to its policies. This was done through a screening process, excluding people, within both minorities and the majority, whose loyalty was dubious. In contrast, others have indicated that the policy chosen by Paris was to concentrate minorities – both ethnic and sectarian – into special forces in the army.⁴¹ Accordingly, within the Syrian army, the issue of proportionality in quantitative terms of the different social components and their strata does not wholly deny the minoritarian nature of French colonial policies.

As a result of the concerns and decades-long research polemic regarding the sociological backgrounds of officers, as well as their tribal, ethnic and sectarian roots, which

⁴⁰ Nacklie E. Bou-Nacklie, “Les Troupes Spéciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment, 1916-1946”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4 (November 1993), pp. 645-660.

⁴¹ Azmi Bishara, *Darb al-ālām nahwa al-hurriya: muḥāwala fī al-tārīkh al-rāhin* [Painful road of suffering towards freedom: an experiment in contemporary history], (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), p. 279.

have become very carefully documented,⁴² this research sees the necessity to study the military backgrounds of the coup officers. The army is after all a military institution representing factions, sectors, units and brigades (Air, Sea, Land and Military Intelligence corps) and relations of power, before being a representation of any other social institution. Ultimately, a military coup relies on the ability of officers to ensure the participation of the largest possible number of strike forces in the execution of coup operations. The aim is to succeed without incidences of clashes with parallel forces, which may lead to violence inside the army.

Accordingly, the question of the military backgrounds of officers is legitimate and interesting in some respects. As a starting point, we ask this question related to the saga of Syrian coups:⁴³ which military units and brigades executed coups in Syria before 1954? Before answering, we must

⁴² Fouad Ishaq al-Khoury, *Al-‘askar wal hukm fī al-buldān al-‘arabya* [The military and government in Arab countries], (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi Publishers, 1990), p. 7.

⁴³ Since the coup led by Husni al-Zaim of 30th March 1949 until Hafez Assad’s ‘Corrective Movement’ coup of 16th November 1970, there have been a total of 16 military coups in Syria, some successful and others failed. A surprising aspect is that the number of coups that occurred between the end of the year and the beginning of the new year, or between the last three months of the year and the first three months of the year was 12 coups, 9 successful and 3 failed. In the first quarter of the year (January, February and March) 7 coups occurred, 6 successful and 1 failed. In the fourth and last quarter of the year (October, November and December), 5 coups occurred, 3 successful and 2 failed. On the other hand, Syria did not witness any military coup during the second quarter of the year (April, May and June). I do not know if there is a temporal connotation to these coups, but through the reading and research of the memoirs of dozens of Syrian officers and politicians, it can be noticed that in numerous cases, coups have followed discussions in Parliament regarding the Army’s share of the State budget, and with politicians such as the President or the Minister of Defence. Nothing is certain, but it is a point that should raise the eyebrows of researchers. See *Table 11* regarding all military coups occurring between 1949 and 1970.

shed the light on the roots of politicization inside the army and focus on the reasons behind the first coups in Syria.

The roots of politicization in the army and the origins of coups

Azmi Bishara traces the roots of politicization and adoption of ideologies in the milieu of the Syrian army to 1945, with the first batch of Homs Military Academy graduates. At the time leftist and nationalist ideas spread among most army circles and expanded in the aftermath of defeat in the 1948 war.

With the birth of the first military coup movement in the country,⁴⁴ the rising ideologies and parties like the Arab Baath Party and the Arab Socialist Party, played a central role in politicizing the army through discourses espousing nationalism as well as defending the rights of workers, peasants and the proletariat. These ideas spread amongst soldiers of peasant or middle-class origins in both urban and rural areas, in opposition to the ruling classes of landlords, with the aim to forcibly apply a programme of agrarian reform.

Large numbers of soldiers and officers were attracted to Akram al-Hawrani, especially military from the city of Hama (his hometown), but his popularity also extending to the villages of Aleppo, Homs and Maarat al-Numan.⁴⁵ Officer Abdul-Ghani Qannout also played a central role in politicizing officers, together with Al-Hawrani, even pulling the latter towards coup movements. Al-Hawrani had previously believed in popular peasant movements and not

⁴⁴ Azmi Bishara, *Sūrya* [Syria], p. 280.

⁴⁵ Mohammad Harb Firzat, *Al-hayātu al-ḥizbya fī Sūrya* [Political life in Syria], 2nd Edition (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019), p. 239.

military movements.⁴⁶ The Baath Party and the Socialist Party merged at the end of 1952, and their interests and goals converged with some sectors in the army. The fracture of the liberal urban political elite like the National Bloc in the 1950s which split into the People's Party and the National Party in 1947, also paved the way for these marginal parties to expand.⁴⁷

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party⁴⁸ calling for Syrian patriotism and the unity of the *Fertile Crescent* countries, also gained some popularity amongst the army; it swayed the sympathy of Adib al-Shishakli during the first years of his rule (1949-1954). However, this popularity remained limited, with the rise of the Arab nationalist current in contrast to narrow Syrian patriotism. Consequently, with Syria embroiled into a series of power-grabbing coups, the Army or its sectors aiming at hegemony and staying in power for as long as possible, saw the necessity of allying with ideologies. Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb and Jack Woddis have gone on to state that whenever the Army exits the barracks, it cannot stay neutral with respect to ideological currents. As such, staying in power, or aiming at power, necessitated the alliance with one of the ideologies or dominant classes.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Mohammed Jamal Barout, "*Hawl al-chu'ubya ' al-Hawrānya ' fī Sūrya*" [About 'Hawranist' populism in Syria], *al-Fikr al-Dimūqrātī* [Democratic Thought], issue no. 11 (1990), pp. 94-95

⁴⁷Shams al-deen al-Kilani, *Madkhal fī al-hayāti al-siyāsīa al-sūrya* [Introduction to Syrian political life], (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017), pp. 34-38.

⁴⁸ Christopher Solomon recently wrote an extensive and important recently published study on the SSNP. See: Christopher Solomon, *In Search of Greater Syria: The History and Politics of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

⁴⁹ Al-Naqeeb, p.123; Jack Woddis, *Armies and Politics*, trans. by Abdelhamid Abdallah (Beirut: Arab Research Institute, 1982), pp. 44-49.

A number of converging factors pushed the Syrian Army to overthrow modern civilian rule, amongst them sociological and economic factors centred principally around class analyses. Most of the officers' roots lie in rural areas, and they saw agrarian reform and engaging in the peasants' causes attractive catalysts to overthrowing the politically/sociologically dominant classes (the urban bourgeoisie and large landowners).⁵⁰ Concurrently, international political factors, like Western attempts, especially by the United States, to stop the processes of politicization and drift towards the Left within the context of the Cold War and of policies preserving US security, played a primary role in Third World coups.⁵¹ At the same time, the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1948 war was the primary cause leading to the birth of the military coups' phenomenon in the Arab world. The officers' diagnosis of the reasons behind the defeat and their reaction to it intersected with their views of the current socio-political situation.⁵² Meanwhile, some people viewed ideological parties as being too weak to reach power, and thus were motivated to politicize the army and lead it to power, after their hopes of reaching power through popular forces⁵³ faded.

Within this political/ideological climate and social polarization, local events dominated the political landscape, and were the trigger for the clash between military and civilian forces. The shock of defeat pushed the region's military to believe that the reason behind the debacle lay in the weakness of civilian political leaders, their mismanagement, and negligence towards the military in

⁵⁰ Ayubi, p. 515.

⁵¹ Al-Naqeeb, p. 131.

⁵² Bishara, *Al-jaysh wal siyāsa* [The Army and Politics], p.80

⁵³ Halim Barakat, *Al-mujtama'a al-'arabī fī al-qurn al-'ishrīn* [Arab Society in the 20th Century] (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2000), pp. 575-578

terms of arms and training.⁵⁴ After the defeat, the military establishment was publicly humiliated and dishonoured by politicians. MP Faisal Al-Asali openly attacked and humiliated the army. President Shukri al-Quwatli jailed 13 army officers in the supply management sector after the adulterated cooking fat scandal, with Colonel Antoine Bustani, the close associate of Chief-of-Staff Husni al-Zaim,⁵⁵ at the top of the list.

This enraged large groups of Syrian army officers and soldiers. In an attempt to socially rehabilitate the military after defeat, on 30 March 1949, Husni al-Zaim's coup took place. The regional/international factor was also important in al-Zaim's coup: the agreement to construct an oil pipeline running through Syrian territory – the *Tapline* by Aramco, the Saudi-US company – had been rejected by both Parliament and Government; and the ceasefire agreement with Israel had remained unresolved. This pushed the United States into searching for a party to take care of its interests. And this is exactly what happened after the coup, as its leader Husni al-Zaim ratified and signed both agreements.⁵⁶

Officers' military backgrounds: The Armoured Corps

When coordinating the putsch in circumstances of wide discontent ripe for rebellion as al-Zaim's coup d'état, it was easy for its mastermind to convince both officers and non-

⁵⁴ Haitham al-Kilani, *Al-istrāṭījīyāt al-'askarya fī al-ḥurūb al-'arabya al-isrāīlīya: 1948-1988* [Military strategies in Arab-Israeli wars: 1948-1988], (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1991), p. 153.

⁵⁵ Seale, pp. 66-68.

⁵⁶ Fathallah Mikhail Saqqal, *Min dhikrayāt ḥukūmati al-za'īm Husni al-Za'īm: khawāṭir wa ārā'a* [Memories of the government of leader Husni al-Zaim: reflections and opinions], (Egypt: Dar Al Maaref Publishers, 1951), pp. 52-60.

commissioned officers alike to participate. This is because there was a near-unanimous feeling, within army ranks, of support to overthrow politicians and civilian government, as a result of the reasons aforementioned. Accordingly, it was a foregone conclusion that the strongest participation in the army would come from the Armoured Corps based in Qatana, as clarified by *Table 1*. This due to the fact that the secret of military coups and the arms reservoir of the Syrian army in 1949-1961 lay in the Armoured Corps, and its core the 1st Armoured Brigade, situated in Qatana, around 30 km away from the capital Damascus. For many years, this 1st Brigade was the primary fighting arena between the army blocs and the political forces, and no coup was ever successful without this force's participation. The Brigade is also the subject of pride of all officers and soldiers that served in it. One of its non-commissioned officers in the 1950s, and subsequently Minister of Defence, Mustafa Tlass, described in his memoirs this force's importance for the army, stating: "Merely being stationed in Qatana is a privilege only given to units and formations loyal to the leadership. Furthermore, serving per se in the military camps of Qatana, or Kiswa, or Qaboun, was for the Armoured Corps officers equivalent to adding an extra feather to their caps, distinguishing them over their peers in other units."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Mustafa Tlass, *Mirāt ḥayātī: al 'aqd al-awwal 1948-1958* [Mirror of my life: the first decade 1948-1958], 7th Edition (Damascus: Dar Tlass for Publishing, 2006), p.451.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS IN HUSNI AL-ZAIM'S COUP

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Husni al-Zaim	Chief-of-Staff	Brigadier General
Sami al-Hinnawi	Armoured Corps	Colonel
Aziz Abdelkarim	Artillery	Colonel
Sabhan Nasr	Commander of Samkh Area	Colonel
Fawzi Sello	Third Brigade	Colonel
Mahmoud Banian	Commander of Armoured Circassian Regiment	Colonel
Adib al-Shishakli	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Tawfiq Bashour	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Omar Khan Tamr	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Mahmoud Shawkat	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Krikor Manoukian	Artillery	Lieutenant Colonel
Bahij Kallas	Artillery	Lieutenant Colonel
Bassil Soya	Artillery	Lieutenant Colonel
Jamil Mamish	Cavalry	Lieutenant Colonel
Badi Bashour	Cavalry	Lieutenant Colonel
Rifaat Khankan	Cavalry	Lieutenant Colonel
Adnan al-Malki	Third Bureau	Lieutenant Colonel
Ibrahim Al-Husseini	Military Police	Lieutenant Colonel
Hussam al-Din Abdin	Damascus Site Commander	Lieutenant Colonel
Mohammad Nasr	Airforce	Lieutenant Colonel
Faisal al-Atassi	-	Lieutenant Colonel
Ihsan Shardham	-	Lieutenant Colonel
Mahmoud Shatra	Armoured Corps	Captain
Shwan	Armoured Corps	Captain

Stanis	Artillery	Captain
Mora	Infantry	Captain
Muwaffaq al-Qodsi	Infantry	Captain
Herant	Chief of the Gendarmerie	Captain
Issam Mreiwed	Airforce	Captain
Bakri Qotrash	Commander of Armoured Kurdish Regiment	Captain
Mustafa Hamdoun	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant
Mahmoud al-Solh	Military Police	Lieutenant

Source: compiled by researcher

However, the recurrence of coups, without the presence of the right political climate (local/regional/international), like in the first coup, drove the subsequent coup officers to increasingly rely on striking forces or “firing groups” –such as the armoured corps--(as described by Steven Haber)⁵⁸ in the army to support them militarily. This was clarified by the second coup led by Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi four months after the first coup, as shown in *Table 2*. It was even more evident in the third coup led by Colonel Adib al-Shishakli approximately four months after the second coup, as shown in *Table 3*. This is why, with every coup in Syria, there was an increase in reliance on the Armoured Corps, as shown in *Table 4*.

⁵⁸ Steven Haber, “Authoritarian Government,” in: Donald Wittman & Barry Weingast (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 693-707.

TABLE 2
PARTICIPANTS IN SAMI AL-HINNAWI'S COUP

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Sami al-Hinnawi	Armoured Corps	Colonel
Alam al-Din al-Qawwas	Armoured Corps	Colonel
Izzat al-Tabbaa	Signal Corps	Colonel
Bahij Kallas	Artillery	Colonel
Mahmoud al-Banian	Commander of Desert Brigade	Colonel
Amin Abu Assaf	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Akram Akar	Commander of Signal Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Farid Seyyed Darwish	Armoured Corps	Captain
Khaled Jada	Armoured Corps	Captain
Khaled Issa	Armoured Corps	Captain
Abdelghani Dahman	Armoured Corps	Captain
Yaqoub Moubayed	Armoured Corps	Captain
Mohammad Maarouf	Infantry	Captain
Hassan al-Hakim	Artillery	Captain
Mohammad Diab	3rd Bureau	Captain
Issam Mreiwed	Airforce	Captain
Mahmoud al-Rifai	Airforce	Captain
Ziad al-Atassi	Damascus Garrison	Captain
Tawfiq al-Shoufi	Damascus Garrison	Captain
Damen Qantar	Armoured Corps	1st Lieutenant
Antoine Khouri	Armoured Corps	1st Lieutenant
Fadlallah Abu Mansur	Armoured Corps	1st Lieutenant
Mahmoud Issa	Republican Guards	2nd Lieutenant
Abdo Jahat	Republican Guards	2nd Lieutenant

Jamil Assaad	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant
Mustafa Kamal al-Malki	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant
Nur al-Din Kanj	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant
Bakri al-Zobri	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant
Mustafa al-Dawalibi	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant
Ghaleb Shaqfeh	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant
Hussein Hiddeh	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant
Hussein al-Hakim	Armoured Corps	2nd Lieutenant

Source: ibid

TABLE 3
PARTICIPANTS IN ADIB AL-SHISHAKLI'S COUP

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Fawzi Sello	-	Brigadier General
Anwar Banoud	Deputy Chief-of-Staff	Brigadier General
Adib al-Shishakli	Armoured Corps	Colonel
Amin Abu Assaf	Armoured Corps	Colonel
Aziz Abdelkarim	Artillery	Colonel
Mahmoud Banian	Commander of Desert Brigade	Colonel
Tawfiq Nizam al-Din	General Staff	Colonel
Shawkat Shukayr	General Staff	Colonel
Said Hobbi	Airforce	Colonel
Ibrahim al-Husseini	2nd Bureau	Lieutenant Colonel
Alaa al-Din Stasis	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel

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Bakri Qotrash	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Abdelghani Qannout	Armoured Corps	Captain
Fadlallah Abu Mansur	Armoured Corps	Captain
Abdelhaq Shehadeh	Armoured Corps	Captain
Hussein Zaynieh	Armoured Corps	Captain
Alexi Shbeya	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant
Hussein Hiddeh	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant
Mustafa al-Dawalibi	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant
Bakri al-Zobri	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant
Ghaleb Shaqfeh	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant

Source: ibid

TABLE 4
MILITARY BACKGROUNDS
OF PARTICIPANTS TO SYRIA'S COUPS IN 1949

COUP	HUSNI AL-ZAIM	SAMI AL-HINNAWI	ADIB AL-SHISHAKLI
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	32 Officers	32 Officers	21 Officers
MILITARY UNITS	10 Armoured Corps 5 Artillery 2 Airforce 1 Third Bureau 1 Third Brigade 2 Infantry 3 Cavalry 2 Military Police	19 Armoured Corps 2 Artillery 2 Airforce 1 Third Bureau 1 Desert Brigade 1 Infantry 2 Signal Corps 2 Republican Guards	13 Armoured Corps 1 Artillery 1 Airforce 1 Second Bureau 1 Desert Brigade 3 General Staff
MILITARY RANKS	1 Brigadier General 5 Colonels 16 Lieutenant colonels 8 Captains 2 Lieutenants	5 Colonels 2 Lieutenant colonels 12 Captains 3 First Lieutenants 10 Second Lieutenants	2 Brigadier General 7 Colonels 3 Lieutenant colonels 4 Captains 5 Lieutenants

Source: *ibid*⁵⁹

⁵⁹ The researcher relied principally upon the memoirs of officers who participated in coups, in order to determine the names of officers as well as their ranks and units, taking into consideration how close each officer was to a coup. For example, we find an officer stating that another officer's rank was Lieutenant colonel, whereas another officer close to the same officer being researched may say he was a Captain. This is valid throughout the whole research, where we find discrepancies in the names of participants, their units or military corps. This is why, in our information collection and corroboration, we relied upon the degree of closeness of each officer to the other: he may either be a comrade in arms, or a graduate of the same class,

The quantitative data included in *Table 4* shows the level of importance of the Armoured Corps in comparison with other Syrian Army Corps. However, this data needs more details, in order to clarify the features of what the research claims to be the weight of this Corps in each coup d'état. We may notice a decrease in the number of participants from the Armoured Corps in the case of Adib al-Shishakli's coup, in comparison with al-Hinnawi's coup. However, the actual and only executor of the third coup operation in Syria was the Armoured Corps. Al-Shishakli's movement was dubbed the *Colonels' Movement*, although upon execution, it only included two officers at the rank of Colonel (al-Shishakli and Amin Abu Assaf), while the rest of the officers came from diverse corps, like the Artillery, Airforce and Bureau

or from the same city or sect, or an officer working in the Second Bureau. Following is a list of the memoirs and books that we relied upon, ordered by degree of importance. See: Ahmad Abdelkarim, *Haṣād sinīn khuṣba wa thimār murra* [Harvest of fertile years and bitter fruits] (Beirut: Bissan for Publishing and Distribution, 1994), pp. 131-138, pp. 170-171; Amin Abu Assaf *Dhikrayātī* [My memoirs] (Damascus, 1996) p. 214, pp. 230-243, pp. 272-287; Al-'Ashi, pp. 127-132; pp. 141-143, pp. 147-152; Fadlallah Abou Mansour, *A'aṣīr Dimashq* [Damascus Hurricanes] (Damascus, 1959), pp. 60-66, pp. 84-86; Mohammad Maarouf, *Ayyām 'ishtuha 1949-1969: al-inqilābāt al-'askarya wa asrāruha fī Sūrya* [Days that I have been through 1949-1969: military coups and their secrets in Syria] (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2003), pp. 101-106, pp. 119-129; Mustafa Ram Hamdani, *Shāhid 'ala ahdāth sūrya wa 'arabya wa asrār al-infisāl* [Witness to Syrian and Arab events and secrets of the secession] (Dar Tlass Publishing, 1999) pp. 93-94; Motī' al-Samman, *Waṭan wa 'Askar: qabla an tudfan al-ḥaqīqa fī al-turāb: mudhakarāt 28 aylūl 1961 – 8 ādhār 1963* [Fatherland and Army : before the truth is buried in the sand: memoirs between 28 September 1961 and 8 March 1963], (Damascus: Bissan for Publishing and Distribution, 1995), pp. 319-320, pp. 330-331, pp. 337-338; Seyyed 'Abd al-'Al, *Al-inqilābāt al-'askarya fī Sūrya 1949-1954* [Military Coups in Syria 1949-1954] (Cairo: Al Madbouli Bookstores, 2007) p. 9, p. 37, p. 317, p. 389; Bashir Zain al-'Abdain, *Al-jaysh wal siyāsa fī Sūrya: dirāsa naqḍya* [The Army and Politics in Syria: a critical study], (London: Dar al-Jabieh Publishing, 2008), pp. 148-149, p. 175, p. 187.

commanders.⁶⁰ They retracted their support one day before the coup date, and after their last meeting inside Colonel Aziz Abdelkarim's home; who also quit, followed by Colonel Tawfiq Nizam al-Din. In fact, events accelerated with al-Hinnawi's realization of the importance of this corps pushed him to issue the order to transfer the Armoured Corps commander Amin Abu Assaf to the Desert Brigades corps and appoint Lieutenant Colonel Sobhi Abbara in his stead.

As a result of the changing circumstances and the retraction of units and other ranks from participating prior to zero hour, al-Shishakli backed off from the coup. But the pressure from Abu Assaf and his heavy insistence that the Armoured Corps could mount the operation all alone, pushed al-Shishakli into agreeing to the execution.⁶¹ The same day the order to transfer the Armoured Corps commander had been issued, the Armoured Corps toppled all of its officers, as a reaction to this order of Sami al-Hinnawi, the leader of the second coup.

Al-Shishakli came to power in Syria on 19th December 1949 under the slogan of *protecting the Republican system and independence* from the dangers of the *colonial enterprise*,⁶² in other words opposing the Fertile Crescent project supported by Britain competing for influence in Syria with the United States. Al-Hinnawi's coup had come about with

⁶⁰ The Syrian Army is composed of bureaux like the French model: The 1st Bureau is Personnel, the 2nd Bureau is Intelligence, the 3rd Bureau is Operations and the 4th Bureau is Logistics.

⁶¹ Abu Assaf, pp. 276-282

⁶² Mohammed Jamal Barout, *Al-takawun al-tārikhī al-ḥadīth lil jazīra al-sūrya* [Modern historical formation the Syrian Jazirah region] (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), p. 620.

the support of the People's Party which was allied to pro-British Hashemite Iraq.⁶³

The Adib al-Shishakli Era: from stabilization of the regime to downfall

Al-Shishakli's rule persevered until 24th February 1954, or for more than four years. Most of the time he ruled from behind the curtains, with civilian frontmen like Premier Hashem al-Atassi and military frontmen like his colleague Fawzi Sello.⁶⁴ On 6th April 1952, al-Shishakli founded a ruling party he named the *Arab Liberation Movement*, in his search for a popular base and to give legitimacy to his regime, after his decision to dissolve all parties.⁶⁵

In Syria, throughout two decades of the coups' era, no officer enjoyed the stability of rule such as Adib al-Shishakli did. From the perspective of the army, what is behind the stabilization of the regime of this politicized officer, despite the regional-international polarization, the conflicts of axes and the local circumstances that coincided with his phase? It became apparent that coup d'états in Syria need first of all the participation of the Armoured Corps officers. Al-Shishakli realized that officers such as Amin Abu Assaf and Fadlallah Abu Mansur were the pillars of the first coup movements in Syria, so he distanced them from their units. He also created his own sort of military organization inside the army, introducing young officers with strong bonds to him to the ranks of the military forces and the armoured

⁶³ Abdallah Hanna, *Ṣafahāt min tāriḫ al-aḥzāb al-siyāsīa fī Sūrya* [Pages from the history of political parties in Syria] (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018), pp. 138-142.

⁶⁴ Hazem Saghih, *Al-Ba'ath al-sūrī: tāriḫ mūjaz* [Syrian Baath: a brief history] (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi Publishers, 2012), p. 23.

⁶⁵ Ferzat, pp. 245-246

corps. Al-Shishakli's base grew due to the great attention he devoted to the officer ranks of Lieutenant colonel, Captain and Lieutenant. This was because of his acumen: these three ranks are usually at the head of army battalions and companies. They deal with soldiers, their officers and their problems on a daily basis and in a continuous fashion; in other words, they are the officers most in control of the forces inside the barracks.

According to the memoirs of politicians and the military, al-Shishakli treated these officers as a father would treat his own children. In contrast, he ensured the loyalty of some higher ranks without trusting or respecting any of them.⁶⁶ Since he did not have confidence in any of them, he focused the interest of the Military Intelligence and Military Police towards the Army and its officers, closely monitoring many of them. This resulted in budgets suffering from the weight of deficits.⁶⁷ The amount allocated to Intelligence reached 20 Million Syrian Pounds per year,⁶⁸ in order to ensure that the workflow of the Second Bureau be based on precision and *professional* intelligence. How is it then that with all these strict military and security conditions, al-Shishakli's dictatorship did come to fall, despite his highly visible hegemony over the corps that led coups in Syria?

Many Syrian researchers and politicians have mentioned a series of political and military factors that led to the coup against al-Shishakli's regime. The first one of these factors being his cancellation of the privileges granted to tribal chieftains and national figures. As a result of these policies,

⁶⁶ Regarding the relation between al-Shishakli with the army and its officers, see: Akram al-Hawrani, *Mudhakarāt Akram al-Hawrānī* [Memoirs of Akram al-Hawrani], (Cairo: Madbouli Bookstores, 2000), 2nd Edition, pp. 1514-1515.

⁶⁷ See *ibid*, p. 1544.

⁶⁸ Abu Assaf, p. 419.

the leader of the Great Syrian Revolt Sultan Pasha Al-Atrash, was pushed into involvement in opposition activities. Therefore al-Shishakli ordered his arrest,⁶⁹ causing the outbreak of protests and shootings in Sweida, leading to bloody confrontations and the fall of hundreds of Syrian Druze victims.⁷⁰

Secondly, al-Shishakli adopted a policy of dismissal and exclusion against army officers of Circassian, Christian and Alawite origins. In the second half of 1953 he noticed a deep transformation in the structure of the Syrian army, with the predominance of Kurdish, Circassian, Alawite and Christian minorities at the core army base. So, he decided to apply a *quota* for each minority, whether ethnic or sectarian, in line with the nature of the Sunni Arab majority in Syria.⁷¹ He forcibly retired scores of officers from minorities, and transferred others outside the capital Damascus. His era witnessed the *Sunnification* and Arabization of the army, and the dismantlement of the influence of the Kurdish and Christian minorities in it.⁷²

Thirdly, al-Shishakli's abolition of political life, the repression of the media, and his negligence of the cause of the peasants, which he had promised to solve, turned his old intimate friend Akram al-Hawrani into an enemy.⁷³ Al-Shishakli exiled the leaders of the Arab Socialist Baath Party outside of Syria, in addition to his disagreements with the People's Party and Hashem al-Atassi. He thereby contributed to uniting the endeavours of these political and

⁶⁹ Bishara, *Sūrya* [Syria], p. 278.

⁷⁰ Al-Hawrani, vol.2, pp. 1597-1599.

⁷¹ Ahmad Abu Saleh: (*Shāhid 'ala al-'agr, al-juzu'u al-awwal*) [Witness to an Era: Part 1], Al Jazeera 18/8/2013, accessed on 20/11/2020 at <https://bit.ly/3aDNoKD> (minutes 31-33).

⁷² Bishara, *Sūrya* [Syria], p.280.

⁷³ Deeb, p. 131.

military factions to overthrow him, while his conflict with the Druze was the most violent, because it had turned into a military intervention.

From a military point of view, al-Shishakli's overthrow was sudden, even for the ones leading the coup against him on 24th February 1954. Traditionally, coups have usually been led in the capital and followed by Communiqué n.1. However, this time, the exception came from the city of Aleppo. Al-Shishakli fell with the urban blockade against the Damascene city of the famous radio station, General Staff headquarters, Parliament, and sovereign institutions of the Syrian state. Al-Shishakli had fortified his regime in Damascus and absolutely mastered its forces, but he had not realized the process of transformation Syria had gone through under his rule. It had now become possible to carry a coup from another city. Aleppo was the centre of the economic and political conflicts of the Syrian bourgeoisie, but it had also become the centre of military conflicts as well, after the founding of Radio Aleppo, and the rise of the readiness level of the Second Brigade stationed in the city. After all, it was not possible for a coup d'état to succeed without a radio station beaming its Communiqué.

This, if we understand coups to be a "coordination game," as described by American researcher Naunihal Singh in his important book about military coups, *Seizing Power*:

Because the generation of common knowledge can lead to collective action, having control over the means of creating such knowledge is very important for those who hold power or those who hope to pry it from them [...] Making a fact is commonly done by seizing the main radio or other broadcast facility and making a broadcast to the other players. Conversely, to foil the coup attempt, an incumbent government needs to do

the opposite: either hold on to broadcasting facilities in the first place or displace the challengers from them and then make a government broadcast to create expectations of the continued survival of the government and the failure of the challengers. Indeed, the officers interviewed were emphatic that controlling the radio station is almost always necessary for coup success and that without it the coup will usually be doomed to failure.⁷⁴

Democracy or political pluralism? Strife within the military 1954-1958

Factions within the Syrian army and military comradeship

As soon as al-Shishakli's regime fell, the coup officers and Syrian politicians began a purge against remnants of the old order within state institutions. Scores of ministerial and police employees were forced into retirement, political prisoners were released from jail, and officers dismissed by al-Shishakli were reinstated in the army, with at their head Colonel Adnan al-Malki. However, the military establishment, the base of the previous regime, did not witness any purge of al-Shishakli's supporters. This is due to fears of confrontation with his officers, who held enough military strength to carry a counter-coup and reassert their grip on power again, as they were based in the Armoured Corps units, as indicated by *Table 5*.

⁷⁴ Naunihal Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Military Coups* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 7-8.

TABLE 5
LIBERATION BLOC (AL-SHISHAKLI'S OFFICERS)

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Ahmad Abdelkarim	Armoured Corps – 1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Jado Ezzeldin	Armoured Corps – 1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Ahmad Huneidi	Armoured Corps – 1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Amin al-Naffouri	Armoured Corps – 1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Hussein Hiddeh	Armoured Corps – 1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Bakri al-Zobri	Armoured Corps – 1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Abdallah Jassoumeh	Signal Corps – 1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Ghaleb Shaqfeh	1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Moti al-Jabi	1st Brigade in Qatana	Lieutenant Colonel
Toime al-Awdat Allah	Armoured Corps – Daraa Brigade	Lieutenant Colonel
Ziad al-Hariri	Land forces	Lieutenant Colonel
Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj	Second Bureau	Lieutenant Colonel
Akram Deiri	Military Police Commander	Lieutenant Colonel
Jawdat al-Atassi	Military Attaché in Jordan	Lieutenant Colonel

Source: ibid

The Liberation Bloc, officers who had graduated from the same class, were considered ideologically neutral forces, but they formed a militarily cohesive bloc, with some political leanings against other ideological military factions that had emerged within the army. It was a bloc based on

the brotherhood of arms and the companionship of the same graduating class, shaping the loyalty to this comradeship. This was the pillar upon which the bloc of al-Shishakli's officers was founded. Comrades in the army are born out of fortune, not of personal preferences. They are individuals chosen by the system, which aligns them next to each other, according to either alphabetical order or geographical distribution. It is stochastic, yet strong, as soldiers spend all their time with their comrades: awakening, sleeping, eating, training, military missions in war and peace, or as expressively described by Samuel Hynes: "They spend more time with each other than most men do with their wives."⁷⁵ Through this military experience, an intimate group is formed, which is the basis of the feeling of comradeship, driven to reject the presence of an absolute leader within it, as the group members are all equal to each other.⁷⁶

We can largely say that the al-Shishakli's bloc of officers were the only model unit and the most cohesive collaborative unit in the Syrian army's history. In Syria between 1949 and 1970, ten coup groups managed to execute successful coups; and with the exception of al-Shishakli's bloc, all the rest fragmented and turned on each other. Every single high-ranking officer in each group turned against his own faction or attempted to turn against it. As for the officers of *the Liberation Bloc*, they did not witness a single conflict or internal coup; the reasons behind the loyalty to this military bloc, exceptional in the history of units and blocs of the Syrian army, are an issue worth researching and exploring on its own.

⁷⁵ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: War, Memory, and Memoir in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Fallah Rahem (Beirut: Dar al Tanweer for Printing and Publishing, 2016), pp. 28-29.

⁷⁶ Bishara, *Al-jaysh wal siyāsa* [Army and Politics], pp. 81-82.

Al-Shishakli's bloc was different from any other, and its formation cannot be interpreted through the most common explanations. On one hand, it was not born out of an institutional organization or common combat experience during war. The latter is prevalent among the organization of small military groups in many armies, the result of external factors outside their control. The mere presence of officers together in a single military unit by pure chance does create strong bonds between them, built upon the military culture of modern states, and the centrality of providing brotherly support between soldiers to ensure the safety of their lives on the war fronts, "as the military is perfectly aware of the importance of the unity of small groups"⁷⁷ on the battlefield. This was not the case with al-Shishakli's group. On the other hand, the group's loyalty was not based on a common ideology or on a sectarian/ethnic group, and was not born out of any of them, like in the case of many military blocs in Syria. It is worth noting that the bloc was firstly formed by Colonel Adib al-Shishakli. Although the group lost the leadership, also the charisma, of its founder after his departure, it still preserved its internal loyalty.

In contrast officers of the same graduating class needed a legitimacy based on something other than force to be survive within the establishment after some of them had been discredited. The right moment for those officers was when the army became divided against itself, with the emergence of six blocs, most of which had a strong military presence in the army units. The bases of these blocs were ideological, doctrinal and regional affiliations. For example: the Baath and Socialist officers' bloc (*Table 6*), the Communist officers' bloc (*Table 7*) and the Syrian Social Nationalist officers' bloc (*Table 8*).

⁷⁷ Sinisa Malesevic, *The Sociology of War and Violence*, trans. by Tareq Othman (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2022), p. 314

TABLE 6
BAATHIST AND SOCIALIST OFFICERS' BLOC

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Mustafa Hamdoun	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Abdelghani Qannout	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Bashir Sadeq	Third Bureau	Lieutenant Colonel
Jamal al-Soufi	Navy	Lieutenant Colonel
Amin al-Hafiz	Armoured Corps – Military Academy	Lieutenant Colonel
Abdelghani Ayyash	Armoured Corps	Captain
Mohammad Omran	Armoured Corps	Captain
Salah Jadid	Signal Corps	Captain
Hassan Hiddeh	Armoured Corps	Captain

Source: ibid

However, the weight of the Communist Bloc and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party's bloc was heavy in the army, especially the latter, amongst non-commissioned officers and soldiers, and less so amongst the higher-ranking officers.

TABLE 7
COMMUNIST OFFICERS' BLOC

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Afif al Bizri	Armoured Corps Commander	Colonel

Source: ibid

TABLE 8
SYRIAN SOCIAL NATIONALIST PARTY OFFICERS' BLOC

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Ghassan Jadid	Military Academy Commander	Lieutenant Colonel
Badi Makhlouf	-	Captain
Younes Abdelrahim	Military Police	Sergeant

Source: *ibid*

A regional bloc of Damascene officers, centred around essential sectors and units of the army (see *Table 9*) and tentatively named the *Damascene Officers' bloc*, does not resemble any other bloc whether organizationally or politically. If we want to be precise, we may describe it as the cluster of Damascene officers, aggregated together to safeguard their interests and strength, and not in order to embark on coups like the other factions.

TABLE 9
DAMASCENE OFFICERS' BLOC

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Sohail al Achi	Commander of 3rd Brigade in the South	Colonel
Tawfiq Shatila	Brigade commander in Qatana	Colonel
Abdelghani Dahman	Armoured Corps	Colonel
Haidar al-Kuzbari	Desert Guards	Colonel
Hicham Samman	Infantry	Colonel
Taleb al Daghestani	Commander of Brigade in Quneitra	Colonel

Hicham Abd Rabbo	Infantry-Mechanized	Lieutenant Colonel
Omar Qabbani	Houran Garrison commander	Lieutenant Colonel
Hassan al-Abed	Military Academy trainer	Lieutenant Colonel
Mohib al Hindi	Military Academy trainer	Captain

Source: ibid

Another bloc, which we can call *Officers Opposed to Malki and al-Baath*, was formed, but it was quickly eradicated (see *Table 10*).

TABLE 10
OFFICERS OPPOSED TO AL-MALKI AND THE BAATH

NAME	MILITARY UNIT	MILITARY RANK
Salman al-Sharani	Commander of the Brigade at the Front	Colonel
Ezzeldin al-Shoufi	Armoured Corps	Lieutenant Colonel
Jamil Zahr-el-Din	Commander of Jisr Banat Yaqoub regiment	Lieutenant Colonel
Hussein al-Hakim	Infantry	Lieutenant Colonel
Abdelmassih Daghoun	-	Lieutenant Colonel

*Source: ibid*⁷⁸

⁷⁸ The researcher relied on a number of specific inputs from officers, refining them using the same methodology of *Table 4*. It is worth noting that the military units the research bases itself upon in the categorization are the

The six blocs were under the umbrella of three alliances, despite the huge contrasts inside each alliance. However, the most prominent amongst these three central alliances was the first under the leadership of Colonel Adnan al-Malki (Director of the First Bureau), which included the Damascene officers, the al-Shishakli officers and the Communist officers⁷⁹. The second alliance was under the leadership of Brigadier General and Chief-of-Staff Shawkat Shukayr and included some of the Syrian Social Nationalist

ones in which officers spent the most time for the period researched. Many of them, in the previous year and a half, prior to the last unit, changed their location and unit within the framework of maintaining strength in the army. It is also worth mentioning that the names listed in these blocs are not exhaustive. Certainly, these blocs have bases of non-commissioned officers and soldiers inside the army, but these are the names that we managed to collect for all the blocs, in other words the most prominent names only. See: Sami Jom'a, *Awraq min daftar al-waṭan 1946-1966* [Notes from the Motherland's diary 1946-1966] (Damascus: Dar Tlass for Publishing, 2000) p. 159, p.171, p. 186; Al-Ashi pp. 173-177, pp. 181-184; Ahmad Rateb 'Armouh, *Rihlatu al-'umr: al qarya al-chāmya – al-ḥayāt al-'askarya – al waḥda wal infisāl* [Journey of a lifetime: Damascene village – military life – union and secession] (Beirut: Dar al-Nafes for Publishing, 2013), pp. 115-117, p. 128, p. 135, p. 145; 'Abdelkarim, p.200; 'Abd al-'Al, p. 399; Zain al-'Abidain, pp. 263-264; Hussein al-Hakim, *La'anatu al-inqilābāt min 1946 ila 1966* [The curse of coups from 1946 to 1966] (Damascus: Al-Daoudi Printing, 1999), p. 171; Fawzi Shueib, *Shahid min al-mukhābarāt al-sūrya 1955-1968* [A witness from Syrian Intelligence 1955-1968], (London: Riad al-Reyyes Books and Publishing, 2008), pp. 69-70; Batatu p. 298; Amin al-Hafiz, *Shāhid 'ala al-'aṣr, al-juzu'u al-rābi'* [Witness to an Era: Part 4], Al Jazeera, 16/4/2001, accessed on 18/11/2020 at <https://bit.ly/3kKzFF9> (minutes 12-14).

⁷⁹ Adnan al-Malki being a charismatic and relatively neutral figure, made all the warring factions of the army agree on him. However, his name was also closely associated with the Damascene officers rather than with the Baathist officer bloc, despite the closeness of some of them to him, since his brother Riyadh was not only a Baathist, but one of the political symbols of the Baath, and he explained Adnan's political alliances within the army in his memoirs, see: Riyadh Al-Malki, *Dhikrayāt 'Ala Darb Al-kifāh wa Al-hazima* (Damascus: Al-thabāt Publishing, 1971).

Party officers and the officers opposed to al-Malki and the Baath. The third alliance was comprised of the Baathist and Socialist officers: it expanded and evolved at a super speed, to become one of the prominent blocs in the military and political conflict in Syria, in particular following the elimination of one bloc after the other.

Politically, the army *withdrew* from politics, bringing back power to civilian forces. Numerous governments were formed, several parliamentary elections and presidential rounds were held in this *democratic* phase. However, it is dubious to assume that a politicized army accustomed to the movement of change in the armed forces, and to overthrowing its own military faction each time, could go back to the barracks on its own; all this without trying to reform the civilian-military relationship. This withdrawal came between coup phases and not through natural evolution or *democratic* conflict, as indicated by *Table 11* which shows the number of both successful and failed coup attempts in the history of Syria.

The memoirs and narratives of Syrian officers and politicians regarding this phase show the number of times the military blocs attempted to dominate the army. The same phase corresponds to the period that each of these factions/blocs needed to strengthen itself and its network to overcome its competitors and grab power. Concurrently, politicians were subjected to threats and blackmailed by the army on numerous occasions. On the political level it fell within the second case of the four categories of civilian-military relations as described by Finer, when officers threaten civilians with sanctions or blackmail to reach their goals⁸⁰. The officers were so embroiled in political and state

⁸⁰ Gerassimos Karabelias, *Civil-Military Relations: A Comparative Analysis of the Role of the Military in the Political Transformation of Post-War*

affairs that the President of the Republic had to ask their permission to allow his personal physician into Syrian territory.⁸¹ Consequently, we can say that the presence of civilians in the political space between 1954 and 1958 was a façade for the officers' internal competition over the strong army units.

TABLE 11
SUCCESSFUL AND FAILED COUPS IN SYRIA: FROM HUSNI
AL-ZAIM TO HAFEZ AL-ASSAD

	COUP	DATE	RESULT
1	Husni al-Zaim	30 March 1949	Success
2	Sami al-Hinnawi	14 August 1949	Success
3	Adib al-Shishakli	19 December 1949	Success
4	Adib al-Shishakli 2	19 November 1951	Success
5	Anwar Bannoud	28 December 1952	Failure
6	Faisal al-Atassi – Mustafa Hamdoun	24 February 1954	Success
7	Ghassan Jadid and Mohammad Maarouf	31 October 1956	Failure
8	Command Council – union with Egypt	12 January 1958	Success
9	Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi	28 September 1961	Success

Turkey and Greece: 1980-1995, Final Report Submitted to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), June 1998, p. 10.

⁸¹ Al-Azm, vol. 2, p. 272.

10	Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi 2	28 March 1962	Success
11	Jassem Alwan	31 March 1962	Failure
12	Ziad al-Hariri – Baath and Nasserists	8 March 1963	Success
13	Jassem Alwan 2	18 July 1963	Failure
14	Salah Jadid	23 February 1966	Success
15	Salim al-Hatum	8 September 1966	Failure
16	Hafez al-Assad	16 November 1970	Success

Source: ibid

Conflicts between Officers (1954-1958)

On the military level, in the last quarter of 1954, the officers opposed to the Baath and al-Malki, at the behest of Shawkat Shukayr, attempted to overthrow Adnan al-Malki, but at the very last moment Shukayr realized that the attempt would mean his own demise, should he be implicated. Thus, he forcibly retired the officers. Shawkat Shukayr, the Chief-of-Staff, did not have the power to move the forces affiliated to his bloc, because his strength was drawn from his ability to manage the equilibrium inside the military establishment. This was evidenced in his forced resignation in July 1956 when he was given the option to either conduct transfers inside the army or resign.⁸²

In April 1955, Colonel Adnan al-Malki, one of the most prominent and unanimously respected army officers, was

⁸² Jom'a, p. 198.

assassinated. The Syrian Nationalists were accused of his murder, and another bloc was eliminated from the army. It was necessary for the officers to obtain the approval of President Atassi for some decisions concerning the eradication of Syrian Nationalists from the country. But because of his refusal and their heavy insistence, he suffered from a partial facial stroke, and it took him two weeks to come back to normal.⁸³ Following the assassination, the bond that held together the alliance of blocs under al-Malki was broken. The Damascene Officers' bloc was weakened after the loss of al-Malki (its most prominent unifying figure). However, the return of President Shukri al-Quwatli from Cairo later on did rehabilitate its status.

Colonel Adnan al-Malki played a *democratic* role in curtailing coup-leaning military forces, by elaborating permanent agreements between the conflicting military factions, in light of his authority and wide popularity amongst Baathist, Damascene and pro-Shishakli officers. But his experience was aborted with the assassination. As Juan Linz has pointed out, whenever a charismatic officer with evident political skills emerges, he is rejected by the military forces or one of its factions.⁸⁴

The events that shook Syrian in 1956 pushed its army and politicians to ride the leftist wave and side with Gamal Abdel Nasser. In February arms deals were signed with the Soviet Union, following Khaled el-Azm's efforts, and Syria stood in political and military solidarity with Gamal Abdel

⁸³ Abdallah Fikri al-Khani, *Sūrya bayn al-dimūqrāṭya wal ḥukm al-fardī* [Syria between Democracy and Autocracy], (Beirut: Dar al-Nafaes for Publishing, 2004), pp. 134-135.

⁸⁴ Juan Linz, "The Future of an Authoritarian Situation or the Institutionalization of an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Brazil", in: Alfred Stepan (ed.), *Authoritarian Brazil: Origins, Policies, and Future* (New Haven/London: Yale University press, 1973), p. 241.

Nasser after the tripartite aggression against Egypt in September. Additionally, the massing of Turkish and Iraqi troops on the borders of Syria and the Egyptian President's position on the matter expanded the latter's popularity in Syrian society and elevated his position amongst Baathist and leftist officers in the army.⁸⁵ Moreover, in October word spread of a coup attempt led by dismissed officers Mohammad Safa, Ghassan Jadid and Mohammad Maarouf, with generous Iraqi financial support⁸⁶ and international/British patronage. This was revealed by the Second Bureau under the leadership of Lieutenant colonel Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj, a few days before zero hour. However, this failed attempt, which did not take place, does not deny the decline of the phenomenon of army coups, as demonstrated by the research. It also did not lead to any changes in the military equilibrium inside the army, as there had been a previous political and military eradication of the coup-leaning factions from the state institutions, ever since the assassination of al-Malki.

In the summer of the same politically enflamed year, a small confrontation occurred in the army, as its factions were trying to increase their weight in the military establishment through the domination the Armoured Corps in Qatana, in particular the 31st Armoured Battalion, the battalion most capable of executing military coups.⁸⁷ The conflict over the brigade and battalion surfaced with Amin al-Hafiz's attempt to appoint all the Baathist graduates from the Homs Military Academy class of 1956 specifically in the Armoured Corps. But the bargaining between the factions prevented

⁸⁵ Khulud al-Zughayr, *Sūrya al-dawla wal hawya* [Syria, the State and Identity] (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020), pp. 67-68.

⁸⁶ Maarouf, pp. 227-251.

⁸⁷ As clarified by Ahmad 'Armoush, the officer that served in the same battalion. See: 'Armoush, p. 143.

the appointment of his list, and new lists containing all the sides of the conflict were drawn up.⁸⁸

In March 1957, President al-Quwatli pressed Chief-of-Staff Tawfiq Nizam al-Din into issuing a decision to forcibly retire one hundred Baathist officers, send some of them as Military attachés to Syrian embassies abroad, and distance others from the Armoured Corps and the Bureaux. This in order to strengthen the Damascene Officers' bloc inside the army. The news was leaked from the General Staff to the Baathist officers. Consequently, Akram al-Hawrani and Mustafa Hamdoun⁸⁹ saw the necessity of conducting military mutinies inside the barracks. The Baathist officers' block then declared a state of military mutiny inside the Qatana encampments on 17 March 1957.⁹⁰ At the same time the other blocs declared a military mutiny in the Qaboun encampments, in opposition to the Baathist officers. Everyone was found in a situation of confrontation which could lead to armed conflict between the military sectors. At this point the high-ranking officers agreed, after bargaining amongst themselves, to end the mutinies inside the encampments and calm down the troops.⁹¹

Mutinies constitute for the army an alternative to military coups. The former aims to use the threat of military action

⁸⁸ Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi: *Shahid 'ala al-'asr, al-juzu'u al-thānī* [Witness to an Era: Part 2], Al Jazeera, 31/1/2010, accessed on 15/11/2020 at <https://bit.ly/3uNgS0v> (minutes 19-20).

⁸⁹ Mahmoud Riad, the Egyptian ambassador to Damascus, relayed Abdul Nasser's message to Baathist officers to continue the mutiny. According to an interview conducted by researcher Ibrahim al-Baidani with Mustafa Hamdoun in 1988, Abdul Nasser wanted the mutiny to continue and for it to transform in a military coup if possible. See: Ibrahim Said al-Baidani, *Al-siyāsatu al-amīrīkya tijāh Sūrya* [American policy towards Syria], (Amman: Amwaj for Publishing and Distribution, 2015), p. 311.

⁹⁰ Al-Hawrani, vol. 3, pp. 2353-2358.

⁹¹ Al-Azm, vol. 2, pp. 500-503.

outside the barracks, it is executed by some army units challenging civilian authorities or high-ranking military, solely in order to reach a stated goal and achieve specific demands. In other words, it is a type of protest that may be resorted to by the whole army or by some of its sectors. The mutinies of Qatana and Qaboun, the first military mutinies in the history of the Syrian army, exemplified the military equilibrium of the army blocs. The factions realized the military parity situation, and the fact that no force was able to tip the scale. This prevented any bloc from carrying out a coup.

The officers unanimously agreed to appoint Afif al-Bizri as Chief-of-Staff as a replacement for Tawfiq Nizam al-Din. A *Command Council* comprised of 23 officers was formed, representing the conflicting forces, namely the Damascene officers, the Socialist Bloc, and the Liberation Bloc (Shishakli's officers), to act on behalf of the rest of the army sectors and resolve crises between them. Another Council comprised of 5 officers⁹² also acted on behalf of the Command Council in the meetings of the Council of Ministers on a periodical basis,⁹³ as a liaison with politicians and government. In August 1957, the US plot affair (led by Howard Stone, the Military attaché of the US Embassy in Damascus) implicating the unproven contact with the Damascene Officers, led to their ouster from the conflicting blocs. Al-Shishakli's officers left their quasi-open alliance with the Damascene officers⁹⁴ and turned to the

⁹² They were: Afif al-Bizri (Chief-of-Staff), Amin al-Naffouri (Deputy Chief-of-Staff), Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj (Head of Second Bureau), Ahmad Abdelkarim (Head of Third Bureau), and Mustafa Hamdoun (Head of First Bureau).

⁹³ Al-Azm, vol. 2, pp. 500-503; Jom'a, pp.244-253.

⁹⁴ This plot/'attempted coup' was not added to the table of coups in Syria, either successful or failed, because it was based on a rumour and claim by

side of Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj and Afif al-Bizri. Although the former was originally part of their group, he did not really side with anyone.

Al-Sarraj was an officer with the Signal Corps, graduate of a General Staff course in Paris. He was a central pole in the institutional conflict situation, as each faction thought that he was on its side. Prior to al-Malki's assassination, al-Sarraj had enjoyed his trust; the Baath party thought that al-Sarraj was one of its supporters; as did Shawkat Shukayr. In fact, he was the liaison between the factions and the military/party balancing point that did not side with anyone. The importance of al-Sarraj grew with his appointment as Director of the Second Bureau in the middle of 1955, and following the Commander of the Signal Corps' 1st Brigade reformation of the Bureau. He demonstrated the strength of the apparatus and its readiness to confront external interventions after discovering several international *plots* against Syria. With al-Sarraj, the Second Bureau grew from its infancy to become one of the key institutional apparatuses that changed the face of Syria during the last century. Street-peddlers (spies) spread and turned into a feature of Abu Rummaneh Street and the Embassies Street. This started with the efforts of al-Sarraj in Syria.⁹⁵

Military Intelligence. It is not proven either in the investigation report or in the memoirs of the Damascene officers.

⁹⁵ Salah Jadid later played a similar role with the March 1963 coup, he was also a Signal Corps officer and another graduate of a General Staff course in Paris. It is notable that the officers that changed the political, military and social map in Syria during the last century were from the same Signal Corps, and that both had been trained in Paris. It is also worth noting that they shared some traits that distinguished them from the rest of the officers: they spoke few words and listened extensively, and were extremely calm, their anger was invisible to others. They also did not trust people and were very disciplined military. Regarding the personal characteristics of al-Sarraj,

Non-violent coups

Non-violence was one of the most marked characteristics of Syrian military coups starting from Husni al-Zaim's putsch in 1949 until the secession from the union's coup in 1961. This is because when officers planned a coup, one of the issues they agreed upon was avoiding bloodshed, as well as limiting as much as possible the use of weapons and the fall of casualties. Perhaps the case of the assassination of the leader of the first coup Husni al-Zaim and Mohsen al-Barazi was an exception within the phase. This bearing in mind that Husni al-Zaim's handing over Antoine Saadeh, the leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, to the Lebanese government, had left many officers resentful and vengeful against al-Zaim. Still, al-Hinnawi's officers agreed not to kill any soldier or civilian in the operation to control sovereign centres in case pro-regime forces confronted them. Al-Hinnawi's coup was well-planned, and usually "one of the goals of a well-planned coup is the minimization of chances of bloodshed, or what is worse: the outbreak of an armed conflict."⁹⁶

In light of this agreement, we are puzzled with the toughness of officer Issam Mreiwed and his audacity to kill al-Zaim and al-Barazi on the Mazzeh highway. Sami al-Hinnawi's feared the possibility of his coup failing, and he looked for a lifeline should his Iraqi-supported coup attempt fall apart. The only officer able to safeguard al-Hinnawi was Airforce officer Issam Mreiwed, and it was

with the need to underline the family enmity, see: Ghassan Zakaria, *Al-sultān al-aḥmar* [The Red Sultan], (London: Dar Arados Publishing, 1991), p. 23.

⁹⁶ Barbara Geddes and others, *How Dictatorships Work*, trans. by Abderahman Ayyash (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2021), p.71.

agreed with him to move al-Hinnawi to Iraq, should the coup not succeed.

This analysis and differentiation on the tactical (micro) level between violent and non-violent coups, requires a deeper analysis on the macro level. There was a difference in the ideology of the last coups in comparison with the first coups, which were not as doctrinal in level as the Baath coups. In the latter case, it was no longer a matter of removing a ruler and replacing him with a military ruler. The demand had become the *eradication* of national and class enemies, and this is common in ideological movements with political activities marked by blood.

In contrast, we may consider the other coup attempts as bloodless coups. This is why we see the care officers took in the conflictual phase after the downfall of al-Shishakli and until the union with Egypt, in refraining from carrying out a coup to dominate the army and eradicate other blocs. Their coups were characterized by non-violence, or the fear of a coup shedding the blood of Syrian officers. This pushed them to always look for other mechanisms in order to satisfy each faction in the army by sometime forming a Military Council to manage conflicts, declaring mutiny in military encampments or even accusing other blocs of attempting to carry out a coup, in order to delegitimize them. In order to end the state of fragmentation within the army, to protect Syria from external threats and the conflicts of alliances (the Baghdad Pact), and in light of the disintegration of Syrian political and social elites, the only solution left to the officers was the union with Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt.⁹⁷

Consequently, the imposition on the ground of the will of each faction in the army depended on the strength of its

⁹⁷ Bishara, *Sūrya* [Syria], p.281.

weight in the Armoured Corps. This is why Syrian political life at the time witnessed political pluralism and not democracy, as a result of the parity of the strength of the conflicting military factions inside the army. This was a cautious and temporary parity where each faction was waiting for the chance to carry out a coup against all others. Minister of Defence Khalid al-Azm described this phase:

The shiny face of vanity and pride was accompanied by a scary depressing ghost; as envy and jealousy between officers was growing in proportion with the increase of their powers, and one started to wish evil upon his colleague, and this bloc started to plot against the other to entrap it. The axe of dismissal from the army started to fall upon the neck of one officer after the other. The more a bloc grew in strength, the more it aimed the machine gun of forcible retirement against other blocs. That is if it did not use the weapons of treachery, assassination, imprisonment, and exile outside the country.⁹⁸

The army and political life

The army interfered in politics, while some of the processes of the exercise of democracy were practiced at the time, such as presidential and parliamentary electoral processes and the formation of ministries. Seven governments were formed within four years, yet not a single one of them lasted ten months. The anger within the army and its pressure behind the scenes caused the fall of the first Sabri al-Asali government after the coup. It did not last more than

⁹⁸ Al-Azm, vol. 2, p. 272.

100 days. This followed the exclusion of the Baath from government, as a result of Iraqi pressure.⁹⁹

With the formation of the second government under the premiership of Said al-Ghazzi, it was decided to hold parliamentary elections on 20 August 1954. However, with the People's Party declaration that it would boycott the electoral process because of the army's intervention in politics and its attempts to steer results, the election date was postponed till 24 September.¹⁰⁰ The truth of the matter was that the army, represented by Chief-of-Staff Shawkat Shukayr, had warned civilian forces that if the People's Party rose and won the Presidency later on, this would trigger a military coup.¹⁰¹ The third government headed by Fares al-Khoury (29 October 1954 -13 February 1955) fell as a result of a tripartite alliance between al-Azm, al-Asali, and al-Hawrani in an attempt to save Syria from the Baghdad Pact. Rumours spread that had al-Khoury's government not resigned, then Colonel Adnan al-Malki would have attempted to overthrow it through a military coup supported by the Baath.¹⁰² This paved the way for a Mutual Defence Pact with Egypt and Saudi Arabia in 1955. In the meantime, a new government under the renewed leadership of al-Asali was formed (13 February 1955 - 13 September 1955). But at the beginning of April 1955 and before the signature of the Pact, and after the return of Syrian politicians from Cairo, Shukayr's faction (and implicitly al-Sarra) proposed that "al-Asali dissolve Parliament and rule with the support of the Army. It is said that the proposal was accompanied by a coup threat in case

⁹⁹ Amal Bashour, *Dirāsa fī tārikh Sūrya al-siyāsī al-mo'asir* [Study of Syrian contemporary political history], (Tripoli, Lebanon: Jarouss Press, 2003), pp. 276-277.

¹⁰⁰ Seale, pp. 227-230.

¹⁰¹ Al-Azm, vol. 2, p. 285.

¹⁰² Seale, p. 313.

the Pact was not signed immediately.”¹⁰³ However, the Pact was signed, and this proposal was shelved.

The influence of the army did not stop at overthrowing one government after the other. It reached the point of threatening MPs through the Presidential elections in August 1955, with the return of President Quwatli from Cairo. His opponent Khalid al-Azm was nicknamed *the Red Bourgeois*. The United States expressed its irritation at al-Azm’s participation in the Presidential elections, so the army withdraw its support for him. According to the latter, there is evidence that many of the representatives had received threats from army officers, should they have voted for him.¹⁰⁴

The interference of the army vis-à-vis prerogatives and political life increased in the context of the union with Egypt. After the officers’ meeting on the night of 12 January 1958, thirteen officers travelled to Cairo to finalize the union with Abdul Nasser. On that night Jassem Alwan wrote the minutes of meeting before travelling, in order to send them to the government in the morning with Colonel Amin al-Naffuri. The Minister of Defence, Khalid al-Azm, then read the minutes and asked: “Would it not have been more appropriate for you to inform the government? This is a coup d’état.” To which al-Naffuri replied: “What’s done is done.” After returning from Cairo, al-Azm asked the same question to Chief-of-Staff Afif al-Bizri, and his reply was: “We did not have time to inform the government.”¹⁰⁵ Whilst President Shukri al-Quwatli described the actions of al-Bizri

¹⁰³ Torrey, p. 297.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Azm, vol. 2, p. 288.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, vol. 3, pp. 123-127.

and the officers as a military coup, in front of the Egyptian Ambassador to Damascus, Mahmoud Riad.¹⁰⁶

Abdul Nasser prered from the officers the dissolution of all political parties and the withdrawal of the Syrian army from politics. The officers accepted all the conditions of Abdul Nasser. When it became apparent that some politicians did not agree to the formula of the union, in which the officers ceded Syria's sovereignty and independence, the officers gave the politicians two choice: one of them leading to al-Mazzeḥ (the famous political prison), and the other to Cairo. The government opted for the road to Cairo.¹⁰⁷ The increasing feelings of arrogance and pride of belonging to the armed forces or *the chosen profession* led to superiority complexes, disdain for civilians and sentiments of tutelage towards them.¹⁰⁸

The description by the Minister of Defence at the time, Khalid al-Azm, is an expression of the bitterness felt on that day: "They drove us – the officers – like sheep and let us board a plane that took us all – the President of the Republic and the ministers – to Cairo. Meetings there were held in the Qubba Palace, ending in the signature of the union deed"¹⁰⁹ on 21st February 1958. With this, the army carried out the eighth coup in modern Syria's history¹¹⁰.

¹⁰⁶ Adeed Dawisha , *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Abdelwahed Louloua (Doha: Forum for Arab and International Relations, 2019), p. 165.

¹⁰⁷ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs, a History*, trans. by Mohammad Ibrahim al-Jundi (Cairo: Hindawi for Education and Culture, 2011), pp. 393-394.

¹⁰⁸ Woddis, p. 43; Azmi Bishara, *Al-intiqāl al-dimuqrāṭī wa ishkālyātah: dirāsa nadharya wa taṭbīqya muqārana* [Democratic Transition and its Problematics: theoretical and applied comparative study], (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020), p. 115.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Azm, vol. 3, p. 198.

¹¹⁰ The researcher unequivocally describes the event as a coup. Its date is set as the day the officers visited Cairo, and not the day the union was agreed.

The army officers' acts of threats brought down the reluctant legitimate government. Coups do not necessitate the army going into the streets but may be carried out behind the scenes.

The blocs did not find a solution to the crisis and unstable situation with the victory of one bloc over the others, or by conducting a coup inside the army. Their solution was a coup against politicians when they agreed to the union with Abdul Nasser, but only at the beginning. Later on, Abdul Nasser dismantled these blocs and dissolved them by scattering officers in political posts and missions abroad or sending them to the Southern region – Egypt – to execute their military functions. Meaning that ultimately the military blocs conducted a coup against themselves. Consequently, the internal conflict was resolved through an external actor, and not through the army itself.

Conclusion

After researching the Syrian army in 1949-1958, starting from Husni al-Zaim's coup and ending with the merger of Syria with Egypt into the *United Arab Republic*, while heavily concentrating on the period of 1954-1958; and after going through the literature that sought to analyse the reasons behind the decline of the military coups' phenomenon in the Arab Mashreq, especially in Syria, the research concluded that the stated reasons failed to explain why Syria was free of coups during 1954-1958. This shortcoming is not merely specific to the aforementioned literature, as the field of Syrian history suffers from larger and deeper limitations. There is another chasm affecting all of this literature: Syrian history and civilian-military relations. The analysis of sociological backgrounds has come at the expense of the interest given to the military

establishment and its internal relations of power through the study of military units, or the military backgrounds of the officers. This is what the research has aimed to do, by closing the theoretical and historical gaps of the literature, through focusing on the causal relations between the factor proposed by the research, and the decisions of the military and political players in Syrian history. The research has reached a series of results:

- (a) The research cautioned against describing the Syrian experience of the 1950s as a *democratic political system*, owing to the duality between the army and politics, and the intrusion of the military in political life throughout the whole period. This duality breaches the requirements of a democratic system as conceptually embraced by the research. On the other hand, this period was marked by its political and ideological diversity, multi-partyism, civil liberties, free media and organized synodical action. Therefore, we may describe it as a phase of political pluralism.
- (b) After looking at the functional differences in the sectors and units of the Syrian army, and focusing on the corps that led coups in Syrian in the phase prior to 1954, and the backgrounds of the officers' blocs in the phase of political pluralism, we can state that the phase of political pluralism after the fall of the al-Shishakli regime was a result of the parity of the political military factions inside the Armoured Corps. This corps was the standard-bearer responsible for planning and executing all coups in Syria during 1949-1961. To complement this military equilibrium, the general non-violent nature of military coups in Syria played a role in suppressing the struggling factions and blocs in the army and preventing coups that may have led to

shedding the blood of Syrian soldiers, officers and indeed civilians. Consequently, we can deduce that the military balance between the army's political factions in the armed forces may explain the waning of coups in the period of 1954-1958. We can also consider it as one of the military coups' prevention mechanisms. However, it is not a process created by a higher authority, or a mechanism designed by a particular actor, instead it is a mechanism that surfaced as a result of political circumstances and the public state of severe military and political fragmentation.

- (c) The concept of military equilibrium opens up the possibility of thinking of democratically reforming the military establishment from within; in other words, through solutions that may be found by the military establishment itself, and not by the civilian establishment. Nevertheless, this does not mean that what has occurred in Syria at the time is seen by the research as a solution. But it does open up the opportunity of researching historical or contemporary cases of democratization mechanisms from within the armed forces.
- (d) As a result of the state of military equilibrium between the military sectors diverging on ideological lines and political alliances, as well as the non-violent character of coups in Syria prior to 1963, external factors were neutralized. To be more precise the impact of existent international support for a military coup became marginal. Iraq, Egypt, Britain and other international and regional actors sought on numerous occasions to support military coups in Syria, for their own interests, yet they failed. Coup d'états are simultaneously field operations and theatres of operations. Accordingly,

in case any international or regional side decided to support a particular faction against another in a putsch, how would it succeed if the internationally and financially supported faction was equal to its adversaries on the ground, from the standpoint of military strength, and it did not have the necessary force for the coup to be successful? The force of external players is distant and is in no way equivalent to the visible and concrete strength.

- (e) The state of military equilibrium opened a temporal window for civilian forces to exercise their political work within the state, and practice some of the aspects of procedural democracy, like the parliamentary and presidential electoral processes. Any democratic tradition or institution needs time¹¹¹ in order to develop. However, the period of 1954-1958 revealed a structural flaw in the Syrian political system of the time: the weakness and fragmentation of political elites, its drift away from consolidating the pluralistic experience and transforming it into a real democracy. It would have been possible for political forces, in particular ideological forces – assuming that they did have a real democratic agenda – to curb the role of the army and its interventions in political life; as these forces which did possess militarily significant wings did have ideological authority over the officers loyal to them inside the armed forces.

Ideology is a condition that dominates individuals, making them obedient to leaders, whether military or civilian, the important point is that it does

¹¹¹ John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, trans. by Mohammad Aziz (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2021), pp. 15-16.

dominate its followers. For instance, populist and dynamic¹¹² politician Akram al-Hawrani, had the power of public speaking and charisma over his grass-roots of both civilian and military extraction, and was striking in his entanglement of the army in politics. He could possibly have played a role in supporting the reform of civilian-military relations and the consolidation of Syria's pluralistic experience, had he been a democrat. The leader as charismatic character has the potential to redefine standards, and always change the rules of the game. Additionally, nobody at a lower level of the leadership hierarchy can practice power except by pretending to follow the leader's standards.¹¹³ Similarly, Colonel Adnan al-Malki did play a *democratic* role within a short time-span, but he was quickly assassinated. Consequently, the state of equilibrium and the conflict between political factions in the army does open a temporal window, or a political opportunity, to enable the democratic reform of the military establishment and to make the political plurality phase permanent. But it does require the presence of democratic political elites.

- (f) The conflict between factions leads to a situation of loss of sovereignty. A number of researchers¹¹⁴ believe that the biggest flaw in Syria post-

¹¹² Saghih, *Al-inhyār al-madīd* [The long collapse], p.125.; See one of the earliest and important studies about the birth of the populist phenomenon in Syria: Barout (*Hawl al-chu'ubya 'al-Hawrānya' fi Sūrya*) [About 'Hawranist' populism in Syria], pp. 81-98.

¹¹³ Claude Welch, "Two Strategies of Civilian Control of the Military: Theory and Cases from Developing Countries," in: Claude Welch (ed.), *Civilian Control of the Military Theory and Cases from Developing Countries* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1976), p. 141.

¹¹⁴ Al-Zughayr, pp. 89-106; Al-Atassi, *Taṭawur al-mujtama' al-sūrī* [The Evolution of Syrian Society], pp. 193-206.

independence is the fragmentation of the *identity* of political movements, as a result of the differences regarding the (legitimate) ideological reference, and its intermingling on the ground with the flaws of tribalism and ethnicism. This as well as the divergence of interests of the new ruling bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie of feudal origins, including the conflict between the Damascus Bloc and the Aleppo Bloc, and the issue of identity and national belonging as a subject of division and conflict between political parties. As a result, there is no consensus on the rules administering the political process, and on building state institutions for all citizens.

What can also be construed from this is that the political infighting, in which the army played a major part, led to Syria losing one of the key pillars of the state during the pluralistic political phase. It lost the sovereignty of its political choices regionally and externally. This bearing in mind that the notion of sovereignty is a pre-requisite for a state to exist. As a result of these leanings and (natural) affiliations, Syria was subjugated to the wishes and preferences of regional and international powers. This was demonstrated by the formation of the first government after the fall of al-Shishakli which excluded the Baath out of Iraqi fears. Similarly, it was seen in the withdrawal of army support to Khalid al-Azm during presidential elections because of US grievances against him since he had made efforts to strengthen relations with the USSR. Lastly, it was evidenced in the submission to Abdul Nasser's conditions for the sake of the union.

The research hopes to have contributed to the study of modern Syrian history and to the approaches to civilian-

military relations. It has built its theories and complete approaches upon research studies as well as rigorous and partial approaches. This in order for it as a whole to form a knowledge and indeed political base that may benefit people endeavouring to establish civilian monitoring of the armed forces within a strong democratic system.¹¹⁵ Additionally, the results reached by the research may be tested upon historical and perhaps also contemporary cases. They may contribute to the discovery of other results and factors that may supplement the approach and the same theoretical output that the research itself aimed to produce. The case of Turkey in the phase between 1986 and 2016 deserves to be reviewed and studied by Arab researchers. The beginning of the period saw the entry of political/religious groups and movements into Turkish military and police academies, thereby forming a parallel faction to the general secular movement of the armed forces.¹¹⁶ The end of the period in 2016 witnessed the failure of a coup d'état, as a result of internal conflicts inside the military, security and judicial state institutions.

¹¹⁵ Madi, p. 198.

¹¹⁶ Murat Aygen, "Türkiye ve Darbeler: 15 Temmuz Örneği", (Turkey and Coups: the 15 July example) *Firat University Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 28, no. 1 (July 2018), p. 243.