

## 2 Coups, Coup-Proofing, and Regime Formation in Egypt and Syria

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I asserted previously that autocrats prioritize coup-proofing over all other considerations, including military performance on the battlefield. Every Egyptian regime from the Free Officers onward stands as a case in point. Consider Gamal 'Abdul Nasser, for instance. Shortly after seizing power in 1952, the Egyptian strongman secured the appointment of his lifelong friend 'Abdul-Hakim 'Amer as commander of the armed forces. That 'Amer was not fit to lead and had failed to transform the Egyptian military into an effective fighting force was made blatantly clear by his lackluster performance in the October 1956 Suez War. Throughout the crisis, 'Amer shifted from euphoria to defeatism, and Nasser suspected that his lieutenant's predilection for hashish was affecting his mood and mental capacities.<sup>1</sup> Nasser could have replaced him in the wake of Suez, but that which served Egypt's national security purposes undercut the coup-proofing imperatives of the regime, and these proved overriding. 'Amer stayed at the top of the military echelon long enough to transform the armed forces into a personal fiefdom, and then he led the Egyptian armed forces into yet another debacle in the Six-Day War of 1967. Significantly, the memoirs of Egyptian Field Marshal Mohammad 'Abdul-Ghani al-Gamasy reveal that intelligence services under Nasser, including Military Intelligence (MI), were more concerned with spying on Egyptian officers than on Israel in order to keep the armed forces under control. Egypt headed to the Six-Day War with very little understanding of Israel's military capacity, though the converse was not true.<sup>2</sup> And despite efforts to improve the professional competence of the military in the wake of the war, coup-proofing remained paramount; the memoirs of officers Madkur Abul-'Iz, Amine Huweidi, and Mohammad Fawzi show that even

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Nutting, *Nasser* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), 177.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad 'Abdul-Ghani al-Gamasy, *Mudhakkarat al-Gamasy, Harb October 1973* (San Francisco, CA: Dar Buhuth al-Sharq al-Awsat al-Amirikiyya, 1977), 75–76.

during Egypt's darkest hours, Nasser invariably prioritized regime security (*al-ta'min al-dhati*) over national security (*al-'amn al-qawmi*).<sup>3</sup>

The same was true in Syria, where politics were particularly contentious and the country itself especially coup-prone. First, fierce ideological animosities pitted leftists against conservatives, secularists in opposition to Islamists, and supporters of Greater Syria against Arab nationalists. It was perhaps inevitable that a nascent postcolonial entity would struggle to funnel the polarization ensuing from these mutually exclusive views via a tentative democratic order with shallow roots. Second, Syria was severely and negatively affected by the merciless struggle for supremacy in the Arab world, in which Egypt and Iraq – and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia – vied to control decision-making in Damascus. From independence in 1946 till the rise of Hafez al-Asad to power in 1970, each Arab contender for leadership supported clients willing to do his bidding in Syria. Consequently, regional quarrels reverberated directly in Damascus, further complicating its politics and destabilizing the country.

<sup>3</sup> Amine Huweidi was war minister for a brief period after the Six-Day War in 1967. Huweidi maintains in his memoirs that merging the positions of war minister and commander of the armed forces had disastrous consequences on Egypt's civil-military relations, and was particularly deleterious to the principle of military subordination to civilian authority. But Egypt's generals did not want to answer to a civilian minister of defense and Nasser was keen on keeping them loyal. Except for a few months in 1967, the commander of the armed forces served also as war minister throughout Nasser's tenure, though the negative consequences of the arrangement were plain to see.

For his part, Field Marshal Mohammad Fawzi – who followed Huweidi as war minister – notes in his memoirs that the Egyptian leadership actively discouraged educated Egyptians from joining the armed forces, though they were badly needed to absorb the sophisticated weaponry which the Soviet Union had made available to Egypt. The reason again pertained to coup-proofing: graduates from Egypt's schools and universities were more likely to be political than the masses of illiterate peasants who formed the bulk of Egypt's army – and, thus, potentially more problematic from a political perspective. Fawzi also notes that the Egyptian Special Forces (aka al-Sa'iqa, lit. “the Thunderbolt Unit”) were equipped with heavy weaponry, which had little to do with their original mission – to be a light force capable of striking behind enemy lines – because al-Sa'iqa was deemed politically loyal and potentially useful, should a coup be staged. Likewise, anti-tank divisions were deployed to check any bid for power by mechanized brigades, not by potential enemy invasions. As for Madkur Abul-'Iz, Nasser appointed him commander of the Egyptian Air Force after it was largely destroyed by the Israelis in the Six-Day War. Rebuilding the air force became the most indispensable condition for Egypt's military recovery, and Abul-'Iz had a crucial need for new pilots. Yet Abul-'Iz relates that Nasser ordered him to dismiss ten accomplished trainers from the air force when it was discovered that they had relatives who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood. Such a revelation stained these officers politically, which trumped strict military concerns. See Amine Huweidi, *Al-Foras al-Da'i'a, al-Qararat al-Hasima fi Harbay al-Istinzaf wa-October* (Beirut: al-Sharika al-'Arabiyya li-l-Tawzi' wa-l-Nashr, 1992), 130 and 242; and Mohammad Fawzi, *Harb al-Sanawat al-Thalath, 1967–1970, Mudhakkarat al-Fariq, Mohammad Fawzi Wazir al-Harbiyya al-Asbaq* (Cairo: Dar al-Wihda, 1988), 55–56, 63, and 247–248; and Mohammad al-Gawadi, *Mudhakkarat Qadat al-'Askariyya al-Masriyya, 1967–1972, fi A'qab al-Naksa* (Cairo: Dar al-Khayyal, 2001), 119.

With sectarian and parochial hostilities added to this unstable backdrop, it became difficult to stop military interventionism in politics once the Pandora's box of military coups was opened. From 1949 until 1970, putsches were ubiquitous to the point of becoming an ordinary way of doing politics. The Ba'ath Party coup in 1963 proved to be a turning point of particular importance because it put Hafez al-Asad on the road to power. The roots of the regime still in control of Syria go back to the crucible decade of the 1960s.

In what follows, I dwell briefly on coups under Nasser and the Ba'ath Party, and study the coup-proofing methods of their regimes. The years during which the Free Officers and the Ba'athist Military Committee held sway were transformative for civil-military relations in Egypt and Syria, respectively. Below, I show how the ruling elite fashioned systems of political control with long-term consequences for military politics in both countries.

### Coups under Nasser

In his authoritative work on the Free Officers regime, Ahmad Hamrush suggests that Nasser was obsessed with the fate of Hosni al-Za'im and Sami al-Hinnawi, the Syrian military leaders who seized power, only to be overthrown soon afterward and killed. The former was executed by fellow officers, and the latter was assassinated in Beirut.<sup>4</sup> These fears were anything but paranoia. Nasser successfully grabbed power in July 1952, and only a month later, a plot by Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) was discovered and crushed, followed in December by an equally unsuccessful conspiracy among air force mechanics. Both were relatively small attempts to challenge the new regime, but they heralded much more serious rebellions that were soon to unfold.<sup>5</sup> Artillery officers plotted against the regime in January 1953, and thirty-five of them were arrested for conspiring against the revolutionary command. The next threat to the new regime came from the armored brigades and escalated against the backdrop of Nasser's power struggle with Mohammad Neguib. Nasser had banked on Neguib's popularity to garner the commitment of the officer corps to the 1952 coup, and his gamble paid off. After the seizure of power, Nasser hoped Neguib would leave decision-making in his hands, but the latter refused to be a figurehead. On February 23, 1954, Neguib resigned, but his supporters in the street and the armed forces

<sup>4</sup> Hamrush, *Thawrat Yulyu*, 324.

<sup>5</sup> Owen L. Sirrs, *The Egyptian Intelligence Service: A History of the Mukhabarat, 1910–2009* (London: Routledge, 2010), 35.

brought him back to power. Nasser weathered the storm by promising democratic reform but quickly reneged. His coalition in the armed forces eventually gained the upper hand for several reasons. First, the officers in the revolutionary command council had tasted power, and the majority of them were not ready to give it back; they worked effectively to block democratic transition.<sup>6</sup> Second, officers appointed in civilian positions were benefitting from their plum jobs and were equally unwilling to give up on them; they were ready to fight for their newfound privileges.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Neguib had only ideational links with his supporters (i.e., the promise of democracy), Nasser could muster both ideology (i.e., radical transformation) and material rewards to expand his coalition in the officer corps.<sup>8</sup> Third, officers in the Military Police (MP) had been heavy-handed in their dealings with political opponents and worried about retribution should military rule crumble. They knew they had little to worry about as long as Nasser was in power. Fourth, Nasser had lobbied for his friend 'Amer to become commander of the armed forces. 'Amer used his position to appoint loyalists in strategic positions, which tilted the correlation of forces in the officer corps in favor of military rule, allowing him to quickly secure the loyalty of the military, with the exception of the armored brigades.

On February 26 of the same year, 300 officers in the armored brigades attended a meeting in which they openly called for restoring the parliament and ending military rule. The officers criticized the concentration of power in the hands of an unelected body (i.e., the revolutionary command council) and military interference in politics. Nasser attended the meeting and feared for a moment that a coup was unfolding as the officers debated.<sup>9</sup> Only weeks later in March, Nasser led a counter-coup, after mustering enough support to tame the armored brigades. To do so, however, Nasser was forced to free imprisoned artillery officers to secure the backing of their colleagues against his new opponents. Nasser's supporters in the artillery, infantry, air force, and MP laid siege to the mechanized brigades' headquarters, whose officers braced to defend themselves. Simultaneously, troops stationed in Alexandria declared their support for the mechanized brigades and parliamentary rule. The army came close to splintering and Egypt to civil war before the crisis was

<sup>6</sup> Riad Sami, *Shahed 'ala 'Asr al-Ra'is Mohammad Neguib* (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Masri al-Hadith, 2004), 42–43.

<sup>7</sup> Jamal Hammad, "Qissat al-Sira' 'ala al-Sulta bayna Mohammad Neguib wa-'Abdul Nasser," in *Man Yaktob Tarikh Thawrat Yulyu, al-Qadiyya wal-Shahadat*, ed. Faruq Juaida (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2009), 207.

<sup>8</sup> Jamal Hammad, *Asrar Thawrat 23 Yulyu*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dar al-'Ulum, 2011), 1086.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 909.

diffused – though not for long. A coup plot by armored brigade officers was discovered on April 26, only a day before the time set for execution. The coup-plotters had decided to attack military headquarters and Nasser's house, dismiss the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), keep Neguib as president, and restore parliamentary rule. The plot failed, and twenty-six officers in the armored brigades were imprisoned.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, a ring of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in the military was dismantled. Two additional coup plots were nipped in the bud in 1957 and 1958.<sup>11</sup>

The next military conspiracy was more successful. Nasser had scored his major foreign policy success in 1958, when Egypt and Syria merged into the United Arab Republic (UAR). Nasser's prestige in the Arab world reached its zenith, but the experiment was short-lived. In September 1961, Syrian officers staged an anti-unionist putsch, and the UAR quickly crumbled. The blow was severe for Nasser's regime, the legitimacy of which stemmed in part from commitment to unionism and Pan-Arabism. Also, Nasser worried that the success of the coup in Syria might inspire similar attempts in Egypt. As it turned out, his concerns were not idle. Only four months after the Syrian coup, a secret movement was discovered in the Egyptian armed forces, headed by Hasan Rif'at, an army captain. Rif'at was arrested in January 1962, and confessed he had been planning to stage a coup in order to save Egypt from communism – and from Nasser, who had “betrayed the revolution.” Rif'at's group had infiltrated the Republican Guard, and decided to use it in its attempt to seize power. In the wake of the trials, twenty-five officers were struck from the lists, including one who belonged to 'Amer's staff. The officers involved in the coup attempt had hoped to replace Nasser with their commander, though the latter was not implicated in their scheme.<sup>12</sup>

The most severe threat to Nasser's authority came from 'Amer, however. Following the breakup of the UAR in 1961, Nasser decided to reshuffle his regime in order to limit 'Amer's influence over the armed forces. In 1962, the latter resigned, in an open challenge to Nasser. The latter was forced to bring him back to commandership of the armed forces and to appoint him vice president under pressure from the top brass, who assembled at the military commandership in Cairo and threatened mutiny.<sup>13</sup> Heikal, Nasser's chief propagandist,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>11</sup> The 1957 conspiracy was allegedly supported by the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). See Hamrushi, *Thawrat Yulyu*, 361 and 496.

<sup>12</sup> 'Abdul-Latif al-Baghdadi, *Mudhakkarat 'Abdul-Latif al-Baghdadi*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Maktab al-Masri al-Hadith, 1977), 171 and 177.

<sup>13</sup> Fawzi, *Harb al-Sanawat al-Thalath*, 34.

Table 2.1 *Major coup plots under Nasser (1952–1970)*

Date	Leading officer involved	Outcome
(1) July 1952	Free Officers, led by Gamal 'Abdul Nasser	Success
(2) January 1953	Artillery officers	Failure
(3) February 1954	Armored brigades officers, led by Khaled Muhieddin	Success
(4) March 1954	Gamal 'Abdul Nasser	Success
(5) April 1954	Armored brigades officers	Failure
(6) September 1961	Anti-UAR Syrian officers, led by 'Abdul-Karim al-Nahlawi	Success
(7) January 1962	Hasan Rif'at	Failure
(8) September 1967	'Abdul-Hakim 'Amer	Failure

labeled the 1962 crisis a “peaceful coup d’état.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it was, and the event only heightened the mistrust between the military and civilian wings of the ruling elite. After the 1967 debacle, 'Amer again rebelled against Nasser. At the height of this crisis, Nasser revealed to the aforementioned General Abul-'Iz that he was expecting to “be taken away by the armed forces.”<sup>15</sup> In reality, the shock of the military debacle and Israeli occupation of Sinai kept Egyptian officers focused upon military affairs, and momentarily distracted from palace intrigue.<sup>16</sup> This, combined with Nasser’s skillful maneuvering, tilted the correlation of forces in his favor. The rivalry between Nasser and 'Amer continued until the latter reportedly committed suicide in September 1967.<sup>17</sup> In sum, while never losing power to a competitor, Nasser faced the challenge of military opposition virtually from the first days of his ascendancy to the last years of his tenure as Table 2.1 shows.

### Coup-Proofing under Nasser

To coup-proof his regime, Nasser combined ideational and material elements with counterbalancing as I show below.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, *Egypt’s Uncertain Revolution*, 93. <sup>15</sup> al-Gawadi, *Mudhakkarat*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>17</sup> On the Nasser-'Amer interaction throughout the Suez Crisis, see al-Baghdadi, *Mudhakkarat*, 351–376. See also the memoirs of Fawzi, *Harb al-Sanawat al-Thalath*, 38–43; and Faruq Fahmi, *I tirafat Shams Badran wa-Mu'amarat* 67 (Cairo: Mu'assasat Amun al-Haditha, 1989).

*Ideology and Fostering Shared Aversions*

Nasser used Arabism and left-wing discourse to wed officers ideologically to his regime. War Minister Mohammad Fawzi mentions in his memoirs that officers' training under Nasser was not merely technical. The military academy aimed to create the ideal Egyptian "revolutionary officer," i.e., one who shared the worldview of the Nasserite regime and was ready to be an "executive tool for achieving revolutionary goals." Nasser himself never tired of repeating to his officers that their role was not over after 1952, and that he believed in their capacity to lead Egypt because he has had throughout his life "faith in militarism." Each of them, Nasser hammered repeatedly, was to be "a revolutionary cell" among the mass of the people.<sup>18</sup>

The claims Nasser consistently conveyed to the officer corps and his countrymen at large centered around three fundamental arguments. First, Egypt was under permanent threat from within and without. Foreign powers and local forces were conspiring to keep the country underdeveloped and subjugated. Second, Egyptian parties had failed to tackle the challenge of national rebirth successfully. At best, they were incompetent, and at worst, complicit in conspiring against their own nation. Egyptians themselves were unprepared for the modernizing mission ahead for Egypt, and vulnerable to the manipulation of regressive forces. A pro-Nasser propaganda piece bluntly asserted in 1954 to be "unsatisfied with the level (*mustawa*) of the people," though it hoped the regime would raise its awareness and understanding.<sup>19</sup> Third, redistribution at home, combined with defiant radicalism abroad, represented Egypt's path to modernization and means of overcoming archaism. The military's role in achieving these goals was indispensable according to Nasser. To be sure, King Faruq never gave the armed forces an ideological mission to achieve prior to 1952, though clearly, he hoped to turn as many officers as possible against his rivals in the Wafd Party. But the Free Officers repeatedly framed the armed forces as the "vanguard and shield of the revolution" – and a protector in charge of the defense of the nation

<sup>18</sup> Fawzi asserted in this regard: "When I took over this job, I took upon myself developing what I termed as national and political awareness, stemming from the logic that the target of fighting by the armed forces is, after all, a political one, and whoever will be sacrificing himself to the nation has to understand the politics and be convinced by it." See 'Abdallah Imam, *Al-Fariq Mohammad Fawzi, al-Naksa, al-Istinzaf, al-Sijn* (Cairo: Dar al-Khayyal, 2001), 31 and 17. See also Ahmad Hashem, "Al-Jaysh wa-l-Dawla fi Masr: Tashabok al- 'Askari wa-l-Madani," Al Jazeera Center for Strategic Studies, June 1, 2015, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2015/05/201553111285692330.html> (accessed July 7, 2015); and Sassoon, *Anatomy of Authoritarianism*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Sharif Yuness, *Nida' al-Sha'b, Tarikh Naqdi li-l-Ideologia al-Nasiriyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2012), 128.



“against internal exploitation and domination.”<sup>20</sup> Nasser asserted tirelessly the task of the populist regime was pedagogical, not merely political or economic, and the military would provide Egyptians with a model to follow and a norm to which they could aspire. Though the “reactionaries” (read: the king, the Wafd Party, the aristocratic landowners, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Communists) were able to hoodwink swathes of the Egyptian people, they failed to fool the officers. And when the people cried out for saviors, the officers heard the call and intervened to redeem Egyptians from their enemies – and, ultimately, themselves. The military was Egypt’s critical “reform-minded organization.”<sup>21</sup> Because the officers created the new order, they were entitled to lead it. And because their patriotism and dedication shielded them from the corruption and decadence pervasive in Egyptian society, the latter would follow the former on the path of national salvation and economic modernization, not the other way around. In the words of Lacouture, civilians were to play “second fiddle to the men in khaki.”<sup>22</sup>

Liberating Egyptian soil from occupation was a major goal the new regime set to accomplish in the wake of the coup. The British agreed in October 1954 to complete the evacuation of the Suez Canal Zone, which gave the officers a legitimacy boost. True consecration came, however, in 1956, with the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Nasser snatched political triumph from the jaws of military defeat after France, the UK, and Israel invaded the Sinai, but were later forced into a humiliating retreat. Fifty-five British- and French-owned firms were nationalized in the wake of the Suez Crisis, an additional act of defiance that announced the beginnings of the state’s massive interference in the economic sector.<sup>23</sup> Nasser’s militancy had seemingly transformed Egypt almost overnight into a regional power: one capable of standing up successfully to Western hegemony, whose influence over the Middle East had shaped its destiny and politics for so long. Redeeming Egyptian pride and establishing Egyptian preeminence over the Arab world struck a deep emotional

<sup>20</sup> See Baker, *Egypt’s Uncertain Revolution*, 48; and P. J. Vatikiotis, *The Egyptian Army in Politics: Pattern for New Nations?* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1961), 239. Quoting Nasser: “You, men of the armed forces, were on the march on 23 July . . . to save the people from their woes and fulfill their hopes . . . you will force reactionaries to stop . . . the people has always suffered, and yelled and whispered, and were lost among different ideologies and goals . . . they have often entrapped the people . . . but you have always believed in principles and higher ideals . . . which is why you were never led astray the way the people were.” Yuness, *Nida’ al-Sha’b*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Lacouture, *The Demigods: Charismatic Leadership in the Third World* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), 102.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society: The Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser* (New York: Random House, 1968), xiv.



cord within the population at large and the officer corps in particular. Nasser knew that Faruq's tarnished nationalist credentials made him vulnerable to opposition. When Nasser and his colleagues conspired against him, they were able to credibly depict him as a sellout. The same would not hold true for disaffected officers after 1952. His militant stance and series of early foreign policy successes made Nasser unassailable from a nationalist perspective and, therefore, less vulnerable to domestic opposition – including the military type he feared the most.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to stoking enmity against foreign adversaries, Nasser also fostered resentment against “the enemy within,” i.e., political parties. In one diatribe after another, the Nasserite discourse presented parties as divisive, corrupt, occupied strictly with narrow gains, and open channels for foreign interference in Egyptian affairs. The armed forces were to save Egypt from divisive partisanship (*hizbiyya*). Particularly guilty were the Communists and the Muslim Brotherhood. Nasser construed communism as the main enemy of Arab unionism, and no word was harsh enough in his invectives against the Communists – especially during the early years of his tenure – whom he considered stooges of Zionism and were headed in Egypt by a “Jewish woman”; they were morally loose, and worked diligently to spread chaos on behalf of Israel.<sup>25</sup> As for the Muslim Brothers, they were dangerous because their Islamic credentials placed them at a higher level than the Communists as Nasser's main competitors for Egyptians' loyalty and support. The Brothers were particularly worrying because they had long proved capable of infiltrating the officer corps, the military at large, and also the police. So well implanted were the Brothers in the armed forces, in fact, that they tipped off Nasser about an early conspiracy against him within NCO ranks in August 1952 – something his own services had failed to discover.<sup>26</sup> As the new regime and the powerful Islamist formation later became mortal enemies, Nasser argued that the Brothers transformed Islam into “a [drug] to numb the senses of this faithful people.”<sup>27</sup> Nasserite propaganda relentlessly construed the Brothers as fanatics bent on using Islam instrumentally for political reasons; their true and only goal was seizing power. They, too, were a reactionary force, whose claim to have

<sup>24</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood did criticize Nasser for the moderation of his regime vis-à-vis Israel in his early years in power. The Brotherhood was also critical because Nasser conceded in the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty that Britain and Egypt would be allies should an outside power invade the region and that Britain would have the right to reoccupy the canal zone should war erupt. Nasser's realpolitik was decried as treason by the Brotherhood. The latter failed, however, to delegitimize Nasser outside its direct circles.

<sup>25</sup> Yuness, *Nida' al-Sha'b*, 119.

<sup>26</sup> Sirrs, *The Egyptian Intelligence Service*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Yuness, *Nida' al-Sha'b*, 78.

a monopoly over religion was tantamount to “heresy and exploitation,” and whose secretive military organizations were fundamentally antidemocratic. In sum, the Nasserite regime, supported by the armed forces, was to be Egypt’s guarantee against succumbing to religious reaction, colonial powers, and atheist communism.

The memoirs of the officers who surrounded Nasser suggest they accepted the mission he entrusted the armed forces with, and believed in his incorruptibility, fundamental integrity, and dedication to Egypt. Sami Sharaf, a Free Officer who worked as Nasser’s personal assistant, referred adoringly to his late boss in his memoirs as a “father and a teacher” whose very name “means freedom, and socialism, and unity.”<sup>28</sup> The previously mentioned Abul-‘Iz spoke of the Egyptian leader as a “giant” in his memoirs and highlighted his own emotional distress at seeing Nasser defeated in the wake of the military debacle in 1967.<sup>29</sup> ‘Abdul-Latif al-Baghdadi, a founding member of the Free Officers who exited the political stage in 1964 over a disagreement with Nasser, wrote in his memoirs that the Ra’is (Nasser) “captured my soul” (“*malaka ‘alayya nafsi*”) and that he felt ready to die for him (“*kunto ‘ala isti‘dad li-l-tadhia binafsi fi sabilihi*”), when Nasser was facing the tripartite attack on Egypt in 1956 against overwhelming odds.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that even officers whose careers suffered under Nasser referred to him respectfully in their memoirs. Ahmad Isma‘el, who served as Egypt’s war minister during the 1973 war, was twice dismissed from the military under Nasser. In 1967, Nasser sacked him in the wake of the Six-Day War. After returning him to service as chief of staff, Nasser discharged him yet again, following a successful Israeli raid in the Red Sea in September 1969. Isma‘el had few reasons to love Nasser. Indeed, Sa‘ad al-Din al-Shazli, who served as chief of staff under Isma‘el in 1973, wrote that the latter “abhorred Nasser immensely” for firing him twice.<sup>31</sup> And yet in his memoirs, penned following Nasser’s death and published decades later, Isma‘el stressed Nasser’s “patriotism and incorruptibility,” and paid the Ra’is an emotional tribute:

I believed that no human being could do what this man did . . . Nasser was a seasoned, skillful man, and we have no one like him, for he comes first, and whoever comes second after him is a far second. Thus, when I heard Nasser had died, I imagined at first that he had been assassinated. And then I learned he died of a heart attack, so I wept. I wept for the lost friend, and I wept for Egypt and

<sup>28</sup> Sami Sharaf, *Sanawat wa-Ayyam ma‘ ‘Abdul Nasser, Shahadat Sami Sharaf, al-Kitab al-Awwal* (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Masri al-Hadith, 2014), 12 and 14.

<sup>29</sup> al-Gawadi, *Mudhakkarat*, 117. <sup>30</sup> al-Baghdadi, *Mudhakkarat*, 354.

<sup>31</sup> al-Shazli, *Harb October, Mudhakkarat al-Fariq Sa‘ad al-Din al-Shazli* (Cairo: Ru‘ya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi‘, 2011), 227.

Egypt's misfortune. I wept because God did not give him time to take Egypt out of its quagmire, and he was the only who could.<sup>32</sup>

Other, similar examples abound. This is not to suggest that officers' memoirs were never critical of Nasser – they often were. The accounts, however, generally imply that officers did, indeed, believe that Nasser stood for something greater than himself. Eric Nordlinger pinpoints, in this regard, the “emotion-charged support” that Nasser elicited.<sup>33</sup> Simply put, Nasser's unquestionable personal integrity and his overall ideological justification of his rule worked. This was certainly true until 1967. It is also true, of course, that Nasser counted upon more than shared beliefs to keep the Egyptian armed forces on his side.

### *Promoting the Material Interests of the Military Elite*

Under Nasser, the Egyptian officer corps began its decades-long transformation into a caste – one shielded by social clubs, cooperative stores, high-cost allowances, and military transportation, to name only a few privileges, from the travails that civilians in Egypt suffered in everyday life. Shortly after seizing power, the Free Officers increased military wages. Senior officers may have received as much as twice the salary of a minister, but mid-ranking and junior officers benefited from better pay, as well.<sup>34</sup> Scores were able to acquire sequestered properties that belonged, under the monarchy, to the Egyptian upper class or foreign nationals driven out of Egypt after 1952.<sup>35</sup> The military budget skyrocketed: defense expenditures multiplied sevenfold between 1960 and 1965, rising from 3.9 percent of the gross national product in 1950 to 12.3 percent in 1965.<sup>36</sup> The new regime also made sure to provide the armed forces with advanced weaponry delivered by the Soviets and their allies. Nasser said explicitly that he was channeling better equipment to the military so officers wouldn't “lose faith in the government.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, the Institute of

<sup>32</sup> Magdi Gallad, ed., *Mushir al-Nasr, Mudhakkarat Ahmad Isma'el, Wazir al-Harbiyya fi Ma'rakat October 1973* (Cairo: Dar Nahdat Masr, 2013), 102–103. Salah Nasr, too, was sacked by Nasser from his position as director of the GID following the 1967 defeat. He was tried and sentenced to jail for twenty-five years. And yet Nasr opined in his memoirs that Nasser was incorruptible and “. . . the greatest Egyptian of all time” (*a'zam man anjabat Masr*). See 'Abdallah Imam, *Salah Nasr Yatadhakkar, al-Thawra, al-Mukhabarat, al-Naksa* (Cairo: Dar al-Khayyal, 1999), 122.

<sup>33</sup> Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics*, 115.

<sup>34</sup> Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution*, 57; and Fawzi, *Harb al-Sanawat al-Thalath*, 56.

<sup>35</sup> John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 337.

<sup>36</sup> Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Hashim, “The Egyptian Military, Part One,” 5.

Higher Studies of National Defense was created to provide advanced courses in strategic studies. The creation of the rank of army general (*fariq awwal*) inflated the number of senior officers in the military.

Nasser also promoted the interests of the officers' caste in the government. The fact that two officers (Neguib and Nasser) had become the first presidents of the nascent republic, and that all vice presidents hailed from the armed forces, provided the most ostentatious symbols of military control of the state. Other signals of military supremacy in the Nasserite regime abound, however. As of June 1953, RCC members were occupying the most pivotal positions in the cabinet: the premiership (Neguib), the ministry of interior (Nasser), and the ministry of war (al-Baghdadi). The trend proved enduring: of all eighteen cabinets formed under Nasser between 1952 and 1970, only two were headed by civilians. Also, of all ministers appointed after 1954, 36.6 percent were officers, and Nasser himself occupied the premiership eight times.<sup>38</sup> Officers were appointed to ministries as diverse as foreign affairs, planning, culture, tourism, social affairs and labor, municipal and rural affairs, health, industry, culture and national guidance, and waqfs.<sup>39</sup> So pervasive was the presence of the military that in some cabinets, half the ministers hailed from the armed forces. The Sudqi Suleiman cabinet, installed in September 1966, and the Nasser cabinet, formed in June 1967, stand as cases in point, with 55.2 and 65.4 percent of ministers being ex-officers, respectively.<sup>40</sup> Tables 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 show the extent to which first-rank positions in the Egyptian state were militarized in the wake of the 1952 coup.

Beyond cabinet positions, a progressive militarization of the bureaucracy began immediately after the 1952 coup, when RCC members stipulated that each of them would monitor the work of one or more ministries.<sup>41</sup> In order to make sure their directives were being implemented – but also to build a personal clientele inside the armed forces – the members of the RCC appointed hundreds of fellow officers as “advisors” and “representatives” in the bureaucracy. Diplomatic positions were particularly prized by the top brass. As of 1962, most Egyptian ambassadors to Europe hailed from the armed forces. Officers occupied 72 percent of Egyptian diplomatic positions overall.<sup>42</sup> The members of the Free Officers organization were especially privileged in their access to prized civilian jobs. Nasser promoted second- and third-ranking Free Officers to

<sup>38</sup> Imad Harb, “The Egyptian Military in Politics: Disengagement or Accommodation,” *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 269–290.

<sup>39</sup> Vatikiotis, *The Egyptian Army in Politics*, 54–55. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

<sup>41</sup> Khaled Muhieddin, *Wa-l-Ana Atakallam* (Cairo: Markaz al-Ahram li-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1992), 196.

<sup>42</sup> Fahmi, *I'irafat Shams Badran*, 20.

Table 2.2 *The background of prime ministers under Nasser (1952–1970)*<sup>43</sup>

Prime minister	Professional background
ʿAli Maher	Civilian
Mohammad Neguib	Military officer
Gamal ʿAbdul Nasser	Military officer
Nur al-Din Tarraf	Civilian
Kamal al-Din Hussein	Military officer
ʿAli Sabri	Military officer
Zakaria Muhieddin	Military officer
Mohammad Sudqi Suleiman	Military officer

Table 2.3 *The background of ministers of interior under Nasser (1952–1970)*

Minister of interior	Professional background
Gamal ʿAbdul Nasser	Military officer
Zakaria Muhieddin	Military officer
ʿAbbas Radwan	Military officer
ʿAbdul-ʿAzim Fahmi	Police officer
Shaʿrawi Gomʿa	Military officer

high civilian positions, including positions in the nationalized enterprises.<sup>44</sup> When Shams Badran, Field Marshal ʿAmer’s chief secretary, became minister of defense in 1966, a memo was sent to all public administrations and companies forbidding them to fill vacant positions without prior authorization from the commander of the armed forces, ʿAmer, who would only agree to appoint civilians if he himself had no military candidates in mind for job openings. Local government was especially militarized: in 1964, for instance, twenty-two of Egypt’s twenty-six governors were officers (i.e., 84.61 percent).<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> I collected the data in Tables 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 from various sources, especially memoirs of Egyptian officers I read. Particularly instructive were the memoirs of al-Baghdadi, Muhieddin, Hamrush, and Hammad, all of which I cite in this book.

<sup>44</sup> Be’eri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, 247.

<sup>45</sup> Richard H. Dekmejian, “Egypt and Turkey: The Military in the Background,” in *Soldiers, Peasants, and Bureaucrats: Civil-Military Relations in Communist and Modernizing Societies*, ed. Roman Kolkowicz and Andrzej Korbonski (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 222. See also al-Baghdadi, *Mudhakkarat*, 172.

Table 2.4 *The background of ministers of war under Nasser (1952–1970)*

Minister of war	Professional background
Mohammad Neguib	Military officer
‘Abdul-Latif al-Baghdadi	Military officer
Hussein al-Shaf i	Military officer
‘Abdul-Hakim ‘Amer	Military officer
‘Abdul-Wahab al-Beshri	Military officer/engineer
Shams Badran	Military officer
Amine Huweidi	Military officer
Mohammad Fawzi	Military officer

Nasser’s intervention in Yemen (1962–1967) also proved useful as an occasion to keep the officers happy. Jesse Ferris notes that the Yemen war created a “privileged class of soldiers and civilians” who benefited so much from it, they developed an interest in its prolongation. The long list of material rewards bequeathed on servicemen fighting in Yemen included: travel bonuses, double-pay, preferential treatment in hospital care, access to vehicles, and country club membership. Veterans also benefitted from precedence in land grants from the state, including real estate confiscated during the campaign against “feudalism,”<sup>46</sup> as well as preferential treatment in public jobs. A governor reported in 1964 that 40 percent of open positions in state institutions within his governorates were reserved for Yemen war veterans and their families. In addition, returning soldiers could bring with them scarce consumer goods for their own use or for commercial purposes. Large-scale smuggling and black-market trade flourished.<sup>47</sup> Naturally, the biggest gains from the war went to Field Marshal ‘Amer and his allies in the officer corps, for whom it was a financial windfall.<sup>48</sup> Nasser was aware that the officers were taking advantage of their military positions for personal gain. He didn’t mind,

<sup>46</sup> The redistribution of confiscated property to military officers who constituted the Nasserite regime’s main pillar of support gives credence to Zakaria Muhieddin, the prominent RCC member and longtime patron of Egyptian intelligence under Nasser. He argued that agricultural reform, expropriating private property from “reactionary” Egyptians, and the overall drive toward socialist transformation aimed, above all, at the “consolidation of political power by controlling the economy.” See Ashraf al-Sharif, “Kamal al-Din Hussein wa-Wujuh Dawlat Yulyu al-Muhafiza,” *Mada Masr*, October 1, 2015, [www.madamasr.com/ar/opinion/politics](http://www.madamasr.com/ar/opinion/politics) (accessed October 4, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> See Jesse Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 199–205. See also Imam, *Al-Fariq*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> See also Hashim, “The Egyptian Military, Part One,” 6.

as long as they were loyal. If anything, Nasser reckoned that the more corrupt an officer, the less likely he would pose a threat should he decide to sack him.<sup>49</sup>

### *Counterbalancing*

Nasser counterbalanced the military with security and civilian organizations headed by loyalist barons such as 'Ali Sabri in the ruling Arab Socialist Union (ASU), Zakaria Muhieddin and Sami Sharaf in the intelligence apparatus, and Sha'rawi Gom'a in the ministry of interior. These barons enjoyed some degree of organizational support in their respective power bases. They competed with one another, but mainly with 'Amer, for power. With that said, of all four pillars of the regime – the military, the ASU, the ministry of interior, and the intelligence services – the armed forces were the most powerful player in the game. Until his downfall in 1967, 'Amer was the main contender capable of mounting a serious challenge to the presidency.

Nasser's first counterbalancing moves began early in his tenure. In June 1953, the Republican Guard was founded and placed under the direction of a loyalist officer, 'Abdul-Mohsen Abul-Nur. A National Guard was also established, and provided military training for Egyptians eager to fight British occupation. In effect, the National Guard gave the new regime supervision over a partisan militia trained by military officers.<sup>50</sup> The most fundamental innovation was in restructuring intelligence agencies, however. Immediately after 1952, Nasser asked the Soviet Union for help in reorganizing the intelligence apparatus. The Soviets, at the time, suspected Nasser of right-wing militaristic tendencies, and they turned him down. Nasser had more luck with several German spies who had participated in the Second World War. They were invited to Cairo, where they taught their Egyptian counterparts the basics of intelligence-gathering and organization. In 1953, the CIA agreed to help, as well.<sup>51</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Zakaria Muhieddin, RCC member and a close associate of Nasser, was appointed head of MI after the coup. Muhieddin quickly emerged as a capable spy chief and candidly told his subordinates that the main mission of the MI was to secure the new regime.<sup>52</sup> Under his leadership, MI officers monitored political

<sup>49</sup> Nutting, *Nasser*, 304.

<sup>50</sup> Abul-Nur 'Abdul-Muhsen, *Al-Haqiqa 'an Thawrat 23 Yulyu, Mudhakkarat 'Abdul-Muhsen Abul-Nur* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Masriyya li-l-Kitab, 2001), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Abul-Fadl 'Abdul-Fattah, *Kunto Na'iban li-Ra'is al-Mukhabarat* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2001), 176–179.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



opponents of the nascent order as well as one another. A whole section of the MI directorate was occupied by Hasan al-Tuhami, a shadowy figure of the Egyptian intelligence apparatus charged with sensitive missions under Nasser, and later Sadat. As it turned out, Nasser had asked al-Tuhami to keep the telephone conversations of his companions in the RCC under surveillance, which he did.<sup>53</sup>

The General Intelligence Service (GIS), a civilian spy agency, was created in 1954 and staffed with military officers loyal to the new regime. In its formative years, the GIS was headed by Muhieddin, Sabri, and Salah Nasr – all staunchly loyalist officers. Sabri was Nasser's aide-de-camp when he was appointed director of the GIS, and Nasr was 'Amer's. The appointment of these specific men to lead the GIS reflected not only its rise to power, but also the importance placed by the new regime on building a reliable Mukhabarat apparatus.<sup>54</sup> Yet another, new intelligence agency was the Office of the Commander in Chief for Political Guidance (OCC), also staffed with pro-regime officers whose task was to create a network of officers/informants to monitor political opinions within the military, report on suspicious officers, and make sure that loyalist officers were rewarded.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the Special Section was renamed the General Investigations Directorate (GID) and expanded. These agencies spied upon military and civilian opponents of the regime as well as one another, thus performing the typical function of counter-balancing apparatuses in authoritarian regimes. Unsurprisingly, there was little love lost between the military and the organizations counter-balancing it, especially the GID.<sup>56</sup> Still, by 1955, the Nasserite regime could boast an "effective counter-intelligence service" skilled at infiltrating the ranks of both military and civilian enemies of the new order, according to a US report.<sup>57</sup>

Another innovation was the creation in March 1955 of the Presidential Information Bureau (PIB) (*Secretaria al-Ma'lumat*), a powerful intelligence apparatus under Nasser's direct control. This was headed by his trusted aide Sharaf, a former MI officer. Nasser gave him broad leeway to collect information from and on any state institution or source, domestic or foreign. Sharaf recruited experts from various bureaucracies to work in the bureau.<sup>58</sup> Originally a modest subdivision of the presidency

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. <sup>54</sup> Imam, *Salah Nasr*, 53. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen*, 75.

<sup>57</sup> Sirrs, *The Egyptian Intelligence Service*, 38.

<sup>58</sup> Sharaf's recruits included Nasser's daughter and GID operative Huda 'Abdul Nasser, as well as Nasser's son-in-law, Ashraf Marwan, the husband of Mona 'Abdul Nasser. Marwan eventually became a spy for Mossad, Israel's intelligence service. On Ashraf Marwan, see Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Angel: The Egyptian Spy Who Saved Israel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

employing only three people, the bureau expanded into a vast network of analysts, diplomats, informants, and translators working around the clock to keep the flow of information streaming.

That the bureau had been created chiefly to keep an eye on the armed forces was not lost on 'Amer, who ordered Sharaf to steer away from the military top brass and from the MI. Sharaf did not comply, and quietly cultivated a network of loyalist officers who became Nasser's eyes and ears in the military institution. 'Amer also instructed the MI not to provide Sharaf with information unless previously authorized to do so by himself or his close associate Badran. The relationship between the PIB and the military commandship under 'Amer remained icy, at best. The same was true of the interaction between the bureau and the GIS when Nasr, an ally of 'Amer, was appointed to lead it in 1957.<sup>59</sup> Nasser was aware of interinstitutional rivalries pitting the armed forces, the intelligence organizations, and the civilian bureaucracies against one another. He fanned the competition between the different agencies of his regime as an additional guarantee for political survival.<sup>60</sup>

In 1962, the above-mentioned Arab Socialist Union (ASU) was established. Sharaf admits in his book on Nasser's ruling methods that the Egyptian president had become alarmed by the military's political influence and created the ASU as a civilian "counterweight to the armed forces."<sup>61</sup> Because the ASU was not, strictly speaking, a political party, but instead a mass popular organization open to all sectors of society, military personnel were allowed to join. Ostensibly, the ASU would devote itself to the revolution's great ideological missions, i.e., socialism, anti-imperialism, and Arab unity. In effect, however, the ASU had different purposes. First, as of 1964, running for parliament, professional orders, and even local community councils had become a function of ASU membership. This signaled to ambitious Egyptians that the regime was seeking to build a power base outside the military, and that a civilian route toward joining the ruling circles had opened. In other words, no longer was access to the power elite restricted to officers. This, in itself, pitted the ASU against the military, as both were competing for regime patronage. Second, the ASU quickly devolved into a massive surveillance organization, adding yet another layer to Nasser's sprawling security empire. In fact, the ASU even spied on the GIS, which caused the leader of the latter agency to complain to Nasser.<sup>62</sup> The ASU's leadership did

<sup>59</sup> On the formation of the Presidential Information Bureau, see Sharaf, *Sanawat*, 29–46.

<sup>60</sup> Imam, *Salah Nasr*, 171.

<sup>61</sup> Sami Sharaf, *Abdul Nasser: Kayfa Hakama Masr* (Cairo: Madbuli al-Saghir, 1996), 228–229.

<sup>62</sup> Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen*, 58.

not take its coup-proofing mission lightly. In 1964, the organization's youth branch chose the following topic to ponder during its summer camp: "How should ASU youth resist a possible coup?"<sup>63</sup> Only a year later, ASU informants discovered a Muslim Brotherhood plot to overthrow the regime.

In July 1963, the Arab Vanguard (*al-Tali'a al-'Arabiyya*) was created and modeled after the League of Communists in the former Yugoslavia. The Vanguard was a secret organization into which only the most committed members of the ASU were admitted. Nasser asked his close associates to form small cells of individuals committed to his regime so they could comprise the nucleus of the Vanguard. These operatives, in turn, were instructed to create additional cells until the numbers multiplied. Under the supervision of intelligence organizations capable of monitoring and vetoing adherence to the secret organization, the latter expanded to cover all Egyptian provinces as well as ministries, the parliament, universities, and youth organizations. Marxist intellectuals were allowed to join after communist organizations agreed to dissolve themselves. The founding documents of the Vanguard indicated that members were to receive military training in preparation for revolutionary struggle.<sup>64</sup> Some members became full-timers, and received salaries in exchange for their services to the Vanguard – and, by extension, the Nasserite regime. The main task of the Vanguard was to write reports denouncing "deviations" and "counter-revolutionary" tendencies in Egyptian institutions at large, but especially in the armed forces. In 1970, when the Ba'ath Party succeeded in recruiting officers in the armed forces and General Intelligence, Nasser blamed the Vanguard for negligence – a clear indicator of its coup-proofing and counter-espionage mission. In fact, the Vanguard's internal regulations were explicit about the report-writing duties of its operatives, and competition among them was fierce in this regard. Adherents could show zealotry if they uncovered conspiracies that others failed to expose.<sup>65</sup> Nasser instructed the leadership of the Vanguard, as well as its members at large, to write reports not just on the regime's opponents, but also on its leading figures. The Ra'is had little trust in his own men, and they, in return, distrusted and spied upon one another.<sup>66</sup> 'Amer was suspicious of Nasser's intentions, and

<sup>63</sup> Risa Brooks, *The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 76.

<sup>64</sup> 'Abdul-Ghaffar Shukr, *Al-Tali'a al-'Arabiyya, al-Tanzim al-Qawmi al-Sirri li-Gamal 'Abdul Nasser, 1965–1986* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyya, 2015), 41.

<sup>65</sup> Nazih al-Ayubi, *Al-Dawla al-Markaziyya fi Masr* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyya, 1989), 122.

<sup>66</sup> Kamal Khaled, *Rijal 'Abdul Nasser wa-l-Sadat* (Cairo: Dar al-'Adala, 1986), 295–296.

tried to infiltrate the new organization by planting his loyalists in sensitive Vanguard positions. Amer also maneuvered to keep the ASU away from his fiefdom in the armed forces, and tried to create his own “revolutionary organization” called al-Do‘at (i.e., the Proselytizers). The clash between the Proselytizers and the Vanguard was immediate, and the former had to dissolve itself in 1966.<sup>67</sup>

The tug-of-war between the civilian and military wings of the Nasserite regime heightened following 1967, and the ASU argued that the defeat reflected a lack of revolutionary zeal in military ranks. For the ASU, the antidote to bureaucratization was the creation of an ideological military genuinely committed to the regime’s revolutionary pan-Arab cause, and thus ready to die for it. In essence, the ASU was promoting a reinforced indoctrination of the armed forces via an Egyptian commissar system modeled along communist lines. The commissars would naturally hail from the Vanguard and the ASU at large, and the correlation of forces between officers and civilians would tilt decisively in favor of the latter. Though the defeat weakened the armed forces, this scenario was a nonstarter as far as the generals were concerned.

The counterbalancing mission of the ASU/Vanguard had never been lost on the top brass. As the ASU became publicly critical of the armed forces’ performance in the Six-Day War, the animosity between it and the military intensified. Eventually, the ASU had to tone down its raw criticism, lest outraged officers turn on its patron – Nasser himself. Still, the ASU’s attacks on the military and the pervasive popular resentment following the defeat restructured civil–military relations in a manner favorable to Nasser until his death in 1970.<sup>68</sup>

### Coups under the Ba‘ath Regime (1963–1970)<sup>69</sup>

The March 1963 coup that brought Ba‘athist officers to power was a watershed in the history of Syria. The same was true of Hafez al-Asad’s takeover in November 1970. Between these two putsches, Syrian officers hatched seven other plots, raising the number of coup attempts throughout the period to nine. Successful military interventionism during that time

<sup>67</sup> al-Ayubi, *Al-Dawla al-Markaziyya*, 121. <sup>68</sup> Dekmejian, “Egypt and Turkey,” 34.

<sup>69</sup> Note that some Syrian authors prefer to use the expression “neo-Ba‘ath,” in reference to the post-1963 party, to make a distinction between the original organization, co-founded by Michel Aflaq and Salahaldin al-Bitar, and the later party, dominated by officers from minority backgrounds. To the best of my knowledge, Muta‘ al-Safadi was the first to coin “neo-Ba‘ath,” but the expression became common later in the literature on Syria. See Muta‘ al-Safadi, *Hizb al-Ba‘ath, Ma’sat al-Mawled, Ma’sat al-Nihaya* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1964), 193. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will avoid the label “neo-Ba‘ath” in what follows.

bore the signature of the Ba'athist Military Committee, established in early 1960 in Cairo. Three Alawi officers (Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad 'Omran, Major Salah Jdid, and Captain Hafez al-Asad) and two Isma'ilis (Major Ahmad al-Mir and Captain 'Abdul-Karim al-Jundi) were the Committee's original members. Ten more officers were added progressively, until the number was capped at fifteen in the summer of 1963. To a certain extent, the military politics of Syria in the 1960s – and perhaps politics tout court – revolved around the struggles pitting the members of the Committee against their enemies – and one another.

To seize power in 1963, Ba'athist officers were forced to strike an alliance with their Nasserite peers and independents. Scores of Ba'athists had been purged from the armed forces between 1961 and 1963. Consequently, the Committee that masterminded the coup was in no position to challenge the status quo alone, and needed to coalesce with allies. At the same time, it never intended to share power – certainly not with Nasserites, whose plans to reestablish the UAR were anathema to Ba'athist officers. Lest we forget, the April 1962 Nasserite-Ba'athist coup foundered because the Nasserites called for instant union with Egypt, and the Ba'athists immediately withdrew their support because they did not subscribe to such a goal. The two sides collaborated better in March 1963, but the contradictions inherent to their alliance quickly escalated into renewed military activism. Only weeks after the March power grab, the Committee mounted a velvet coup, sacked scores of Nasserite officers from the armed forces, and drove the Nasserite defense minister and deputy chief of staff out of power.<sup>70</sup> Having thus overcome opposition, the Committee turned on itself in a deadly contest for power. In 1966, Field Marshal Amin al-Hafez decided to purge thirty officers of minority background from the military, but a coup ousted him from the chairmanship of the presidential council. Al-Hafez was not an original member of the Committee, but his seniority and background made him useful to its members, who needed a Sunni straw man in 1963. To a certain extent, al-Hafez was to the Committee what Neguib was to the

<sup>70</sup> There is a general agreement in the literature that Ba'athist officers positioned themselves to take control of fighting brigades and field positions in the armed forces after March 1963, whereas Nasserites were content to hold prestigious (but less operational) sinecures. Such divergence explains in part why the Ba'athists drove the Nasserites out of the armed forces, and not the other way around, although the latter may have technically outnumbered the former. Nabil al-Shueiri claims, in this regard, that the Ba'ath Party threatened Ba'athist officers with expulsion, should they have accepted administrative instead of field positions. See Saqr Abu Fakhr, *Suria wa-Hutam al-Marakeb al-Muba'thara, Hizwar ma' Nabil al-Shueiri, 'Aflaq wa-l-Ba'ath wa-l- Mu'amarat wa-l-'Askar* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2005), 297. See also Mustafa Tlass, *Mer'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thani, 1958–1968* (Damascus: Dar Tlass li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2006), 373.

Egyptian Free Officers in 1952. By 1966, however, al-Hafez had outlived his usefulness, and was overthrown.<sup>71</sup> His downfall, combined with that of General Mohammad ‘Omran,<sup>72</sup> a founding member of the Committee who defected to its Ba‘athist civilian rivals, left only two players jockeying for the top job: Salah Jdid and Hafez al-Asad, both original members of the Committee. In 1970, the latter won the contest for supremacy – yet again via a military coup.

Five botched coup attempts under the Ba‘ath Party are equally important to mention. Probably the most serious endeavor to overthrow the Committee and reestablish union with Egypt in the wake of the March 1963 coup was Colonel Jassem ‘Alwan’s failed putsch in July 1963. After the coup fizzled, military courts swiftly ordered the execution of twenty-seven mutinous officers while ‘Alwan was exiled to Egypt in 1964.<sup>73</sup> Shortly after the fall of al-Hafez in February 1966, his supporters convinced senior Druze officer Hamad ‘Ubayd to trigger a coup against the Committee. Originally a member, ‘Ubayd had become disaffected with it, and tried unsuccessfully to oust his former associates from power in March 1966. Against the backdrop of a growing Alawi–Druze polarization as well as heightened confrontation between Ba‘athist officers and the party’s civilian wing, two other putsches were prepared in 1966. The first plot was led by Druze Major General Fahd al-Sha‘ir, who built a military organization open to officers from different sects but excluding Alawis. And the second coup was mounted by Druze Major Salim Hatum, who recruited almost exclusively from his community and allegedly tried to assassinate Hafez al-Asad, Jdid, and other members of the Committee in 1965.<sup>74</sup> Both attempts failed. Major General Ahmad Suwaydani, the former chief of staff who was sacked in February 1968, tried to seize power in August of that year, but he, too, was unsuccessful. Suwaydani fled to Iraq, but was returned to Syria, where he was arrested. Tables 2.5 and 2.6 provide additional data on these coups and the officers of the Committee.

<sup>71</sup> On the coup d’état mounted against Amin al-Hafez, see Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba‘ath, 1963–1966: The Army–Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1972), 195–202. See also a series of Al Jazeera interviews with Amin al-Hafez, aired in July 2001; especially, interviews 14 and 15, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWKFz8TAaE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWKFz8TAaE) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Enjyc6uSooA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Enjyc6uSooA) (accessed April 7, 2017).

<sup>72</sup> ‘Omran was assassinated in Tripoli, Lebanon, in 1972. It is widely believed that Hafez al-Asad ordered his intelligence to liquidate his former associate.

<sup>73</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 81–83. For more on the confrontation between Nasser and the Ba‘ath Party, see Suleiman al-Firzli, *Hurub al-Nasiriyya wa-l-Ba‘ath* (Beirut: Naufal, 2016).

<sup>74</sup> Tlass, *Mer‘at Hayati, al-‘Aqd al-Thani*, 563–565.

Table 2.5 *Coups under the Ba'ath Party (1963–1970)*<sup>75</sup>

Coup leader	Date	Outcome	Center of conspiracy
Ziad al-Hariri/Mohammad 'Omran/Salah Jdid	March 1963	Success	Damascus
Mohammad 'Omran/Salah Jdid/Hafez al-Asad	April 1963	Success	Damascus
Jassem 'Alwan	July 1963	Failure	Damascus
Salah Jdid/Hafez al-Asad /Salim Hatum	February 1966	Success	Damascus
Hamad 'Ubayd	March 1966	Failure	Aleppo
Fahd al-Sha'ir	August 1966	Failure	Damascus
Salim Hatum	September 1966	Failure	Damascus
Ahmad Suwaydani	August 1968	Failure	Damascus
Hafez al-Asad	November 1970	Success	Damascus

Table 2.6 *Officers in the Ba'athist Military Committee*<sup>76</sup>

Officer	Sect	Birthplace	Membership date
Mohammad 'Omran	'Alawi	Al-Makhrum, Hama	Original member (1960)
Salah Jdid	'Alawi	Doueir Ba'abda, Lataqia	Original member (1960)
Hafez al-Asad	'Alawi	Al-Qerdaha, Lataqia	Original member (1960)
'Abdul-Karim al-Jundi	Ismaili	Al-Salamiyya, Hama	Original member (1960)
Ahmad al-Mir	Ismaili	Masiaf, Lataqia	Original member (1960)
Salim Hatum	Druze	Al-Suweida	Joined between 1961 and March 1963
Hamad 'Ubayd	Druze	Al-Suweida	Joined between 1961 and March 1963
Muhammad Rabah al-Tawil	Sunni	Lataqia	Joined between 1961 and March 1963

<sup>75</sup> I collected the data in this table from Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath Party* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996); and Seal, *Asad*.

<sup>76</sup> I collected the officers' sects and birthplaces from Zein al-'Abidin, *Al-Jaysh wa-l-Siasa*, 368. I obtained the membership dates from Seal, *Asad*, 61 and 500. For more on the Committee, see Tlass, *Mir'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thani*, 154–155. Note that the five founders of the Committee, who remained its true leaders until the end, all hailed from minority backgrounds. Also note that most Sunnis who joined the Committee belonged to the rural lower classes. To a certain extent, the Committee represented a nexus between minority officers and poor rural Sunnis. Not a single officer from Damascus was ever recruited into the Committee.



Table 2.6 (*cont.*)

Officer	Sect	Birthplace	Membership date
Ahmad Suwaydani	Sunni	Huran	Joined between 1961 and March 1963
Musa al-Zu'bi	Sunni	Huran	Joined between 1961 and March 1963
Suleiman Haddad	'Alawi	Beit Yachout, Lataqia	Joined after the March 1963 coup (summer 1963)
'Othman Kana'an	'Alawi	Iskandarun	Joined after the March 1963 coup (summer 1963)
Mustafa Haj-'Ali	Sunni	Huran	Joined after the March 1963 coup (summer 1963)
Hussein Melhem	Sunni	Aleppo	Joined after the March 1963 coup (summer 1963)
Amin al-Hafez	Sunni	Aleppo	Joined after the March 1963 coup (summer 1963)

Why did coups remain pervasive under the Ba'ath Party, just as they had been in the previous era? Beyond the inevitable lust for power on the part of the officers, several variables converged to keep putsches ubiquitous in the Syria of the 1960s. Ideology was certainly one such factor – specifically the attitude toward the UAR. On one end of the spectrum, the separatist officers had smashed the union between Egypt and Syria, and were committed to the newly restored independence of their country. On the other, the Nasserite officers aimed to reinstate the UAR.

The Ba'athists played a complex game. Ideologically, they were unionists, and could not ally themselves with the separatist regime that stigmatized them. Instead, they pursued a rapprochement with the Nasserites and disaffected independents. All shared common enmity toward the traditional politicians back in power under the separatist regime. The UAR had proven a harrowing experience for the Ba'ath Party, after Nasser forced the party's Syrian branch to dissolve itself and rewarded its leaders with insignificant political sinecures. In essence, Nasser pushed the Ba'ath Party from the center to the margins in Syria. Consequently, trust between the two major forces in pan-Arab politics was irreversibly shattered. In sum, the Damascene separatist officers espoused a vision of

Syria ruled once more by the old order; the Ba'athists favored a radical hotbed; and Nasserite officers wanted Syria to be subsumed yet again under the UAR. These three projects were fundamentally incompatible, and the forces behind them were stuck in a zero-sum game. In the context of the time, coups were the natural consequence of a polarized political process lacking minimal ideological overlap between its components.<sup>77</sup>

Interestingly, the Ba'ath Party takeover did not heal Syria's ideological quarrels and power struggles. Internal Ba'athist fractures pitted a military wing – whose officers became the real masters of Syria after their successful coup in March 1963 – against civilians who argued that the party should control the gun, not the other way around.<sup>78</sup> The latter faction counted in its ranks the co-founders of the Ba'ath Party, Michel Aflaq and Salahaldin al-Bitar, as well as some supporters in the officer corps. The historical legitimacy of Aflaq and al-Bitar did give them weight as they jockeyed for power with officers, but the 1963 coup was strictly a military affair. Ba'athist civilians were barely informed that the military wing was mounting a takeover, and did not participate in the planning of the

<sup>77</sup> On the politics of the era and momentary alliance followed by intense confrontation between Nasserite and Ba'athist officers, see the work by a historical founding figure of the Ba'ath Party, Jalal al-Sayyed, *Hezb al-Ba'ath al-'Arabi* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1973), 172–184.

<sup>78</sup> Munif al-Razzaz, the secretary general of the Ba'ath Party who was ousted in 1966, gives a fascinating account in his memoirs on the internal power play that pitted the civilian leadership of the party against Ba'athist officers in the 1960s. According to al-Razzaz, the military wing of the party had always been poorly institutionalized, and consisted of officers who harbored Ba'athist sympathies but could still act independently of party leadership. On a strictly ideological level, the Ba'ath Party believed that the popular masses, not officers, were the driving force of progressive transformation. From a practical perspective, however, militaries were bursting irrepressibly into Arab politics, and the Akram al-Hurani faction in the Ba'ath Party was eager to seize power in collaboration with officers. The putschist roots of Nasser's regime had legitimized the idea of a coup in Syria, or so radical Ba'athists argued in the 1950s. Al-Razzaz maintains that the Ba'ath Party was reluctant to accept military interventionism, yet tempted by the possibilities it created for a party struggling to reach power democratically. The Ba'ath Party reckoned it could establish a middle ground by acknowledging that the party had military sympathizers, and by allowing Akram al-Hurani to cultivate them without officially creating a military organization under party control. Consequently, according to al-Razzaz, the Ba'athists were active as individuals in the armed forces, but the Ba'ath as a party was not. Arguing along similar lines, Ba'athist leader Mansur al-Atrash noted that the historical co-founders of the party, Michel Aflaq and Salahaldin al-Bitar, did not actually know the names of Ba'athist officers in the armed forces – only al-Hurani did. This means that Ba'athist civilian control over the military wing had been feeble from the start. It became weaker still following al-Hurani's break with the party after 1961. Al-Atrash states that Ba'athist civilians like himself initially believed that the officers would remain faithful to the party's mission and legitimate leaders out of sheer ideological commitment – an assumption he deemed “naïve,” in retrospect. See Munif al-Razzaz, *Al-Tajriba al-Murra* (Beirut: Dar Ghandur li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 1966), 33–36. See also Mansur al-Atrash, *Al-fil al-Mudan, Sira Dhatiyya* (Beirut: Riad al-Rayes, 2008), 235–236 and 345–346.

putsch, let alone its execution. This did little to strengthen them in the intra-party struggles of the 1960s.<sup>79</sup>

Friction between the two wings of the Ba‘ath Party translated into intra-military tension, and escalated progressively until the February 1966 coup consolidated the officers’ hegemony over the party and state. In the wake of the catastrophic 1967 defeat, the ruling Syrian elite became divided into two camps yet again. On the one hand, militant leftists led by Syria’s strongman, Jdid, still advocated combative “anti-imperialism” abroad and revolutionary socialism at home, even at the price of alienating conservative Arab regimes and the local bourgeoisie. Another faction, headed by then minister of defense Hafez al-Asad, maintained that Syria needed to prioritize the strategic necessities of war with Israel over left-wing doctrinaire purity. The al-Asad camp was ready to collaborate with Arab regimes and social classes deemed “reactionary” by the radicals, should that prove helpful to Syria in shifting the correlation of forces with Israel in its favor. As the two rival groups traded insults and became embroiled in a bitter contest for supremacy, the stage was set for the November 1970 putsch that delivered Syria durably to Hafez al-Asad.<sup>80</sup>

It may be that collision between ambitious officers all competing for supremacy was inevitable, irrespective of the ideational divergences mentioned above. Indeed, it could be argued that the vehement sloganeering characteristic of the time served as a mere veneer for self-centered considerations, and that the true substance of the fervent ideological quarrels was political rivalry. It is difficult to weigh the exact influence of both factors – i.e., high-minded convictions and lust for power – though undoubtedly, they do not have to be mutually exclusive.

It is also certain that sectarian dynamics and identity politics did not lurk too far below the ideological surface. Think again of the relationship between Nasserite and Ba‘athist officers as a case in point. While both Nasser and the Ba‘ath Party preached Arab socialism, the former essentially appealed to Arab Sunnis in Syria, whereas the latter fared better with minorities.<sup>81</sup> Syrian Alawis were not generally enthusiastic about the UAR, which reduced them to demographic insignificance and trapped them once again in an overwhelmingly Sunni entity, only decades after their

<sup>79</sup> al-Atrash, *Al-ʿil al-Mudan*, 342. It should be added that the fear of a Nasserite counter-coup also strengthened the military wing in the Ba‘ath Party after 1963, as Ba‘athist civilians were dependent upon the party’s officers remaining in power.

<sup>80</sup> On the differences between Salah Jdid and Hafez al-Asad, see Hashem ‘Othman, *Tarikh Suriya al-Hadith, ‘Ahd Hafez al-Asad, 1971–2000* (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2014), 37–41.

<sup>81</sup> Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba‘ath*, 14.

emancipation from the Ottoman Empire. In the words of Alain Chouet, Alawis felt swindled under the UAR and marginalized as a minority.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps understandably, Ba'athist officers in the Committee who hailed from predominantly minority backgrounds were in no hurry to hoist Nasser's flag once again in Damascus after the breakdown of the UAR.<sup>83</sup> In addition, minority officers had played a role in their country's affairs via the Ba'ath Party and the rightist Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) prior to union with Egypt, and had seen their activism curtailed after Nasser gutted Syrian politics and banned parties in the UAR. Consequently, Alawi officers had their own reasons for opposing unionism, especially against the backdrop of pervasive hostility toward unionism among their co-religionists.<sup>84</sup> While Ba'athist officers were not exclusively Alawi and some Nasserite officers were not Sunnis, the cleavage between the two political camps corresponded largely with – and, in turn, reinforced – the dividing line between Alawis and Sunnis in Syria.<sup>85</sup>

While foreign intervention did not play a major role in the coups of the 1960s, it is certain that the separatist coup had the sympathy, and possibly the backing, of conservative regimes in Saudi Arabia and Jordan.<sup>86</sup> Whether Riyadh and Amman knew in advance that the Damascene officers were plotting to overthrow the UAR, and actually provided them with intelligence or financial support, isn't clear. The other coups appeared to be purely internal to Syria; indeed, to the Ba'ath Party. Martin Seymour noted, for instance, that nothing suggests that the

<sup>82</sup> Alain Chouet, "Impact of Wielding Power on 'Alawi Cohesiveness,'" *Maghreb-Machrek*, no. 147 (January–March, 1995): 5.

<sup>83</sup> Matti Moosa goes so far as to assert that Alawi officers in the Committee were motivated by "full consciousness of communal solidarity and sectarianism." If Moosa is right to argue that such officers used the Ba'ath Party and its ideology instrumentally, then it is no wonder they proved to be anti-unionists from their first days in power. Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 297.

<sup>84</sup> Al-Razzaz argues that antagonism toward Nasser was stronger among Ba'athist officers than in the party's civilian ranks, because the former lost more influence under the UAR and felt particularly persecuted by the Nasserite regime. Al-Razzaz, *Al-Tajriba al-Murra*, 87.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Gubser, "Minorities in Power: The Alawites of Syria," in *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East*, ed. R. D. McLaurin (New York: Praeger, 1979), 37–41. See also Hazem Saghih, *Al-Ba'ath al-Suri, Tarikh Mujaz* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012), 35; Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba'ath*, 61; and Itamar Rabinovich, "The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918–45," *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 4 (October 1979): 699. Note that Mustafa Tlass mentions in his memoirs that Christians in Aleppo were deeply distressed when news of the pro-Nasser coup spread in the city in April 1962. Misgivings vis-à-vis the UAR were not confined to Alawis among Syrian minorities. Tlass, *Mer'at Hayati, Al-'Aqd al-Thani*, 220–221. Note also that Syrian minorities are no exception, in this regard. Iraqi Kurds never applauded Arab unionist projects, nor did Lebanese Christians.

<sup>86</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 67. See also Rabinovitch, *Syria under the Ba'ath*, 149–150.

Russians were behind the 1966 coup.<sup>87</sup> This, in fact, is true of the 1968 and 1970 putsches, as well. Domestic politics were the main driving force behind putsches, the struggle for power, and political change.

### **Coup-Proofing under the Ba'ath Party (1963–1970)**

The main coup-proofing tactics under the Ba'ath Party were counterbalancing and ethnic stacking. Favoritism along identity lines was not itself new in Syria. Hosni al-Za'im, Syria's first military dictator, cultivated Circassians and Kurds, while Adib al-Shishakli, the strongman in Damascus from December 1949 until 1954, favored Sunnis from Hama. Sunnis hailing from large urban centers – especially Damascus – were also favored under the AUR regime between 1958 and 1961. Still, the sheer scale of manipulation of ethnic loyalties that began with the 1963 Ba'athist rise to power was unprecedented as I show below.

#### *Counterbalancing*

In June 1963, the Ba'ath Party created the National Guard (al-Haras al-Qawmi), a para-military organization whose mission was to terrorize opponents in the streets and keep an eye on potential opposition in the military – especially from Nasserite quarters.<sup>88</sup> Mustafa Tlass states in his memoirs that the National Guard played a direct role in countering the failed military putsch mounted by Nasserite officers in July 1963.<sup>89</sup> In the late 1960s, after Hafez al-Asad, then minister of defense, secured his grip over the armed forces, his rival Jdid beefed up the Ba'athist commando organization al-Sa'iqa as well as the national security and General Intelligence services as a counterweight to the military. At this stage, counterbalancing was still in its infancy in Syria. It would later take different proportions under Hafez and Bashar al-Asad.

#### *Ideology and Fostering Shared Aversions*

Shortly after seizing power in 1963, Syria's new rulers began an extensive purge of the military. It is estimated that up to 700 officers were dismissed

<sup>87</sup> Martin Seymour, "The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 16, no. 1 (January 1970): 42.

<sup>88</sup> See Gad Soffer, "The Role of the Officer Class in Syrian Politics and Society" (PhD diss., American University, 1968), 135. Note that the name of the organization was later changed to the Popular Army (al-Jaysh al-Sha'bi).

<sup>89</sup> Tlass, *Mer'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thani*, 431–432.

from the armed forces in the wake of the Ba'athist coup.<sup>90</sup> Sunnis were over-represented among cashiered officers, while Alawis formed at least 50 percent of their replacements; it has been argued, in fact, that this figure was closer to 90 percent, including poorly trained reserve officers and Ba'athist school teachers.<sup>91</sup> Purges were particularly systematic in the armored brigades, the air force, and navy, where professional officers were almost completely replaced by new Ba'athist recruits.<sup>92</sup> The king-making forces crucial to coups, notably the Seventieth and Fifth Brigades, became particularly stacked with Alawis. By 1965, Sunni officers controlled only 25 to 30 percent of military units; but the ratio would further diminish later on.<sup>93</sup> The Committee also opted to create under its supervision a secretive Ba'athist Military Organization, in charge of penetrating important sectors of the armed forces. Trustworthy Ba'athist officers were coopted into the Organization, which gave the Committee control over hundreds of supporters spread in all regiments. This was especially concentrated around Damascus.<sup>94</sup> Two other purges followed the successful putsch mounted in 1966 against Amin al-Hafez and the failure of Major Salim Hatum's attempt to seize power that same year. Another massive dismissal of Sunni officers from Huran followed former chief of staff Suwaydani's botched coup attempt in 1968.<sup>95</sup> The number of al-Hafez, Hatum, and Suwaydani supporters sacked from the officer corps, the overwhelming majority of whom were Sunnis and Druze, is estimated at 400. They, too, were essentially replaced by Ba'athist Alawis.<sup>96</sup> Anti-

<sup>90</sup> Syrian intelligence officer Khalil Mustafa maintains in his memoirs that up to 85 percent of Syrian officers were dismissed, imprisoned, or executed in the immediate years that followed the March 1963 coup. The ratio may be exaggerated, though there is consensus in the literature that Ba'athist purges of the armed forces were, indeed, massive. See Khalil Mustafa, *Suqut al-Julan* (Cairo: Dar al-I'tisam, 1980), 22.

<sup>91</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 32. See also Mustafa, *Suqut al-Julan*, 30.

<sup>92</sup> al-Safadi, *Hizb al-Ba'ath*, 339.

<sup>93</sup> Alasdair Drysdale, "Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps: A Conceptualization," *Civilisations* 29, no. 3/4 (1979): 368.

<sup>94</sup> Provided they remained loyal, Ba'athist officers in the Military Organization could aspire to be rewarded with generous financial perks, promotions, and appointments in much-desired political or diplomatic sinecures. Sami al-Jundi mentions in his book that Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jdid appointed loyalist officers as military attachés in foreign countries whose language they ignored; several military attachés assigned to Paris were actually not conversant in French. Officers in perfect health were also sent on medical leaves to Paris, and reaped generous salaries for the duration of their stay abroad. Sami al-Jundi, *Al-Ba'ath* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1969), 156.

<sup>95</sup> Suwaydani himself was a Sunni from Huran and had a power base among his co-religionists from the region.

<sup>96</sup> Overall, in the decade preceding the 1967 war with Israel, more than 2,200 professional officers were sacked from the Syrian armed forces. Half were dismissed during the UAR, and half after the Ba'ath Party's 1963 putsch. This number amounted to about two thirds of the Syrian officer corps, which counted around 3,000 men in its ranks in 1963. Zein al-

Sunni discrimination in the officer corps also included practices such as stationing Sunni officers away from the capital and discriminating against Sunni applicants to the Military Academy in Homs. As sectarian engineering of military companies trickled down to the level of NCOs and soldiers, some units became all-Alawi from top to bottom.<sup>97</sup> All these practices were to endure, and would result in long-term effects upon Syria's politics and armed forces.

Until he was overthrown in 1966, President Amin al-Hafez tried to secure his grip on power by cultivating a Sunni base to counterbalance the rising minority officers. The latter's overt sectarian tactics did help al-Hafez cultivate his image as the Sunnis' champion and ultimate protector in the armed forces. At the same time, Sunni mobilization eased Jdid and Hafez al-Asad's drive to build a minority coalition that included most influential Alawi, Druze, and Isma'ili officers. To be sure, a handful of Druze officers, and even some Alawis, remained loyal to al-Hafez; and a few Sunnis threw in their lot with the Alawi-dominated faction. The officers' personal interests and vagaries of incessant power plays sometimes facilitated cross-sectarian alliances. And yet sectarian polarization and loyalty remained, nonetheless, the defining factor of Syrian military politics at the time. Minority officers were aware that they were increasingly overrepresented in the military, including its upper echelons. Had the Alawi camp lost to al-Hafez, the sectarian imbalance would have to be corrected – and possibly even flipped in favor of Sunnis. The risk of an al-Hafez triumph, for Alawi officers, was simply too big to be acceptable. In the words of Nikolaos Van Dam, and Munif al-Razzaz, respectively:

During the power struggle between al-Hafiz and Jadid, the manipulation with sectarian, regional, and tribal loyalties caused the tension within the Syrian armed forces to increase to such an extent that far-reaching polarization resulted between Sunnis and members of religious minorities. Sectarian contradistinction among the military consequently began to overshadow almost all other differences.<sup>98</sup>

When al-Hafiz and Jdid jockeyed for power, sectarian divisiveness became public in the ranks and sectarian antagonism grew increasingly violent, which left its marks on the armed forces, as all other contentious factors vanished, to be

'Abidin, *Al-Jaysh wa-l-Siasa*, 414. See also Be'eri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, 335.

<sup>97</sup> See al-Razzaz, *Al-Tajriba al-Murra*, 158–159. See also al-Safadi, *Hizb al-Ba'ath*, 339–340 and 349; and Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 32–36. Note that Alawi officers were also purged when their patrons (e.g., Mohammad 'Omran and Salah Jdid) lost the factional struggle for power. Many, however, were returned to service after pledging loyalty to Hafez al-Asad, who emerged triumphant in the intra-Alawi conflicts that pitted leading Alawi generals against one another in the second half of the 1960s.

<sup>98</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 44.



replaced exclusively by the sectarian dimension (*yahull al-miqias al-ta'ifi mahall ay miqias akhar*).<sup>99</sup>

Should Ba'athist ideological claims and the party's purported efforts to create an "ideological military" (i.e., *jaysh 'aqa'idi*) count as coup-proofing, as well? I have argued in the theoretical section of this book that ideational beliefs can, indeed, weld officers to one another – and militaries to the ruling elite. The Ba'ath Party did stand for a unionist message that resonated with public opinion, in Syria and beyond in the Arab world. In the wake of the successful 1963 coup, the Committee devoted time and energy to building a network of party cells entrusted with the task of spreading Ba'athist ideology and messages in the armed forces. Minister of Defense Hafez al-Asad took an old Arab nationalist philosopher and ideologue, Zaki al-Arsuzi, out of retirement, and arranged for him to visit military barracks and lecture the men on Arab nationalism and the foundational beliefs of the Ba'ath Party. Relentlessly, Ba'athist officers claimed to be the standard-bearers of their proclaimed political faith, an avant-garde committed to building an ideological army as well as a unionist and anti-imperialist state. But whether officers took their own rhetoric seriously is questionable. Mohammad 'Omran, a co-founder of the Committee, argued candidly in his memoirs that the politics of Ba'athist officers following the 1963 turning point stood in direct contradiction to their ideology and professed beliefs.<sup>100</sup> 'Omran's observation is accurate on several important levels. For instance, Ba'athist ideology promotes Arab unionism, but the Ba'ath Party turned out to be more staunchly separatist than the regime it ousted. Once they captured power in Syria, the officers kept it – and that, in effect, meant that the UAR was not to be restored, and unionism was to remain a mere slogan. On the other hand, the party is ostensibly above sectarianism as well as against it. And yet Ba'athist officers used identity politics and manipulated sectarian loyalties as they struggled to keep their grip on power. For instance, Mohammad 'Omran recruited his faction almost exclusively from minority officers and stated explicitly that "Fatimid" officers must play their role in Syria and the armed forces ("*inn al-Fatimiyya yajib an ta'kudha dawwaha*").<sup>101</sup> Jdid, al-Hafez, and Hatum, all prominent Ba'athist officers, also competed for the loyalties of their

<sup>99</sup> al-Razzaz, *Al-Tajriba al-Murra*, 160.

<sup>100</sup> Mohammad 'Omran, *Tajribati fi al-Thawra* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil li-l-Tab' wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 1970), 23.

<sup>101</sup> By "Fatimid," 'Omran meant heterodox Muslim sects, i.e., Alawis, Druze, and Isma'ilis. See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 39.

sects (the Alawis, Sunnis, and Druze, respectively), and recruited military factions along confessional lines.

Mustafa Tlass relates in his memoirs how Sunni Ba'athist officers were inclined to support their fellow Sunni al-Hafez against the Alawi Jdid, out of sectarian solidarity.<sup>102</sup> In 1967, Sunni Ba'athists from the eastern Deir al-Zur asked Jdid to favor Sunni chief of staff Suwaydani over his Alawi rival, then minister of defense Hafez al-Asad, lest they accuse Jdid of sectarianism and spread rumors that a secretive supreme council of the Alawi sect controlled the agency of Alawi officers, who supposedly hid their true loyalties behind a veneer of Ba'athist loyalty.<sup>103</sup> Later on, as Jdid and Hafez al-Asad became locked in a bitter power struggle in the late 1960s, Ba'athist officer 'Izzat Jdid tried to mediate between the two, and urged them to tame their rivalry in the name of sectarian unity between fellow Alawi officers ("*maslahat al-ta'ifa taqtadi alla yatakhsam abna'uha*").<sup>104</sup> Tlass, a Hafez al-Asad loyalist, accused Jdid (but not Hafez al-Asad) of favoring Alawis.<sup>105</sup> I will show later on, however, that Hafez al-Asad filled the officer corps with Alawis and pushed sectarian stacking to an unprecedented level in the armed forces. Simply put, the Ba'ath Party's ostensive secularism did not prevent its officers from using identity politics as just another way of seizing power and keeping it. Consequently, the party became vulnerable to charges of ideological hypocrisy.<sup>106</sup> For instance, Muta' al-Safadi, a former Ba'athist, accused the party of framing as a class struggle what was, in essence, sectarian conflict targeting Sunnis:

The party of unity became the bastion of minorities (*husn al-aqalliyat*), stimulating their separatist tendencies and isolationism and putting them on the offensive against the majority of the masses.<sup>107</sup>

Such indictments gained increasing traction after the Ba'ath Party broke with Nasser in the early 1960s, which did not help it acquire legitimacy or give credence to the officers' alleged pan-Arab unionist commitment. The depth of Sunni resentment was palpable in a series of sectarian incidents and violent mobilizations in the mid-1960s, which pitted regime opponents against Alawi civilians, or pro-regime forces, in Baniyas (Lataqia), Hama, and Homs. Also, Ba'athist Syria's underperformance in the conflicts with Israel did not strengthen Ba'athist officers' claims to

<sup>102</sup> See Tlass, *Mer'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thani*, 513–514. <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 865.

<sup>104</sup> See Tlass, *Mer'at Hayati, al-'Aqd al-Thaleth*, 347. <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> For an interesting analysis of the interplay between egoistic, sectarian, and ideological motivations in structuring the agency of Ba'athist officers, see Seymour, "The Dynamics of Power," 40–41.

<sup>107</sup> See al-Safadi, *Hizb al-Ba'ath*, 54.

be the shield and armor of the Arab world – certainly not in the Six-Day War. Add to this that the appeal of Arab socialism had receded progressively with the demise of Nasserism. Consequently, the Ba'athist regime in Syria appeared to be the champion of an increasingly decrepit ideology that party leaders themselves did not act upon.<sup>108</sup> If coup-proofing proved effective nonetheless – so much so that the regime was able to survive the 1967 debacle unchallenged – it was for reasons other than the alleged pan-Arab ideological commitment and purity of the party.

### Conclusion

The putschists who founded the Free Officers and Ba'athist regimes were determined not to lose power the same way they seized it, and their coup-proofing methods delivered and subsequently endured. In Chapter 3, I ponder the evolution of coup-proofing in Egypt and Syria, and show in chapter 4 that its institutional legacy structured the militaries' response to the 2011 uprisings in both countries.

<sup>108</sup> Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien* (Paris: Editions Kharthala, 2006), 284.