
The Awakening of the Syrian Army:
General Husni al-Za'im's Coup and Reign, 1949

Origins of the Syrian Army's Enduring Role in Syrian Politics

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Introduction

30 March 2011. As I write, the Middle East is in turmoil. Beginning with Tunisia in December 2010 and spreading to Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, revolutions in the form of popular protests and demonstrations have taken over news headlines and political discussions. In Syria, government forces have reacted with violence and force. As of 29 March 2011, Amnesty International has estimated nearly one hundred people killed.¹ Syria is not the only Middle Eastern country to respond to protests with force. But in a different light, Syria certainly stands out. The spirit of protest and revolution that has swept other Arab countries took much longer to stir Syria. Why did Syrians, living in a country notorious for gross human rights abuses, rampant corruption, and political repression, begin protests significant enough to garner a government response, in March, months after most other countries? Although this thesis is not attempting to answer this question, it does seek to provide a background so that one may better understand current events in Syria today.

The first military coup in Syria, carried out by Brigadier General Husni al-Za'im in 1949, was a turning point in Syrian history and starting point for the historical trajectory that has led to the present day. Bridging the decades between 1949 and 2011 is a vast leap, and countless political, economic, and social developments have made present-day Syria an utterly different place from what it was in 1949. Nevertheless, this thesis suggests that Za'im's coup and subsequent reign in 1949 ushered in a new phase in Syrian history that remains unfinished today. For this reason and several others, the details of Za'im's coup and reign deserve careful examination and analysis.

¹ Amnesty International, "Syrian authorities urged to lift repressive laws amid violence," accessed 28 March 2011, <http://www.amnesty.org/>.

This thesis is an attempt to explain how Za‘im’s efforts to accomplish short term goals—justifying the army’s takeover, legitimizing its authority, and implementing reforms—also had long term implications, as Za‘im perhaps unwittingly created a critical and enduring place for the army in Syrian politics. In so doing, he set the stage for the gradual transformation of the Syrian political scene into one where the army’s approval became a *sine qua non* for governance and authority. He also set a precedent where the threat of using force was a common means of enforcement. This thesis hopes to distinguish itself from the existing literature that involves Husni al-Za‘im, military coups, or Syrian history in general by honing in on specific details of Za‘im’s rule and coup. Ultimately, it hopes to add to the current understanding of the consequences of Za‘im’s time in power by posing the idea that the army possessed consciousness as an institution and saw itself as distinct—politically, morally, and otherwise—from the government and the civilian politicians that led it. This consciousness contributed to the army’s refusal to return to the barracks throughout subsequent Syrian history.

Za‘im’s coup has yet to be fully explored in the existing literature on Syria. Although Za‘im’s coup is widely recognized as a turning point and “an event presaging the rise of the military as the controlling force in Syrian politics,”² the coup and reign have mainly been subordinated to larger narratives dealing with broader themes about Syrian politics and history, such as in Patrick Seale’s *The Struggle for Syria* and Gordon Torrey’s *Syrian Politics and the Military*.³ Other works that briefly include Za‘im’s coup consider it necessary historical

² Richard F. Nyrop, ed., *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington D.C: The American University Foreign Area Studies, 1979), 165.

³ See Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Seale’s main argument is that Syria was the centerpiece of post-war Arab politics, and whoever controlled Syria controlled the Middle East. As a result, his premise puts Za‘im’s coup in the context of this struggle. See also Gordon H. Torrey, *Syrian Politics and the Military: 1945-1958* (Ohio State University Press, 1964).

background to Syria in the latter half of the 20th century, but do not expound on it.⁴ Za‘im’s coup and reign have also been treated as pieces in a larger puzzle rather than as puzzles in their own right, especially in broad works on general Syrian history.⁵ The decision to place Za‘im in the context of a larger schematic narrative is by no means a flawed choice. Rather, it simply means that existing scholarship on modern Syria could benefit from a more detailed exploration of the coup and reign of Husni al-Za‘im.

Another problem with the historiography of this topic is a lack of objectivity. Some works try to blame Za‘im for destroying a fledgling democracy led by politicians who were still finding their bearings in state governance but had the potential to lead Syria to become a modern, democratic state.⁶ Other works simply lack objectivity or historical specificity. In *Revolutions and Military Rule In the Middle East: The Arab States*, which would appear to be an extremely useful source for this thesis, George Haddad distinctly favors National Bloc politicians and is critical of army officers to the extent that he distorts what he considers the causes of military coups and undermines what are at times valid points about the Syrian army.⁷ Lack of objectivity, rigid categorization, and excessive reliance upon emotional frameworks without consideration of more historically appropriate factors undermine Haddad’s arguments.

No one disputes the fact that the army has played a significant part, direct or indirect, in Syrian politics. The difficulty lies in explaining how the Syrian army built and maintained a position of political authority. The most frequent and simple explanation is that power-hungry

⁴ See Amos Perlmutter, “The Syrian Army and the Ba’th Party,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Dec., 1969): 827-845; Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Safouh al-Akhrass, *Modernization in the Arab World: A Case From Syria* (Damascus, 1972); Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁵ See Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: the History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); A.L. Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1969).

⁶ See Sami M. Moubayed, *Damascus Between Democracy and Dictatorship* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2000).

⁷ George Haddad, *Revolutions and Military Rule In the Middle East Vol. 2, The Arab States, Part 1: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan* (New York: Speller and Sons, 1971).

Syrian army officers were frustrated with the ineptitudes of civilian politicians. While this explanation holds truth, it answers only part of the question of why they tried to become involved in politics, and it does not even address the question of how they succeeded.

The numerous coups and turnovers in government that followed Za'im's rule will not be covered in depth but will be discussed to the extent that they can demonstrate how the army remained a key player in Syrian politics. One important note is that the army has not necessarily always ruled Syria; its involvement in politics has ranged from direct military intervention or dictatorship to behind-the-scenes influence. Za'im's coup matters in this context because it initiated the process that allowed these varied roles to develop and because with it, the army ceased to be subject to the decisions of civilian politicians and instead became a political force in its own right.

The first section of the thesis will give the historical context of Za'im's coup, including the French Mandate, Syrian independence, a brief history of the Syrian armed forces, and Za'im's relevant personal history. The second section will use memoirs and newspaper articles to analyze how Za'im attempted to justify the coup and legitimize his authority as a military head of state. Varying reactions to the coup will reveal how military officials and political leaders differed in their ideas about authority, government, and legitimacy. The third section continues to show how Za'im's immediate attempts to justify his rule also set the stage for the army's continuing involvement in politics. The fourth and final section will apply concepts of military coups and rule, particularly Samuel Finer's ideas about the consciousness of the army as an institution, to develop a better understanding of what enabled army leaders to perpetuate their authority and presence within the political realm.

Sources and Methods

The thesis relies on articles from Arabic newspapers published in Syria in the 1940s, which I gathered during the summer of 2010 at the al-Assad National Library (*Maktabat al-Assad al-Wataniya*) in Damascus, Syria. These newspapers include *Alef Ba'* (“*alef*” and “*ba'*” are the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet), *al-Ayyam* (The Days), and *al-Inqilab* (The Coup). Other primary sources are memoirs of Syrian politicians and army officers and government literature from Za‘im’s regime, such as official proclamations or decrees, collected and translated into English by Muhammad Khalil.⁸

With all of these sources, context influenced content; the two cannot be considered separate. Each newspaper, for instance, had its own sympathies due to sources of funding, political affiliations, or other types of backing.⁹ These external factors may not be gleaned directly from the page, yet they significantly affected what was written or published. As a result, I will be careful to take these factors into account, as well as the fact that different kinds of sources serve different functions. For example, newspapers possess the dual capacity to spread news and to shape readers’ understandings of and reactions to current events, thereby indirectly influencing future events, whereas memoirs present information and ideas that are often rooted in the past. Nor are they disseminated on the same level as newspapers. Political decrees and forms of propaganda take a top-down approach by trying to impose ideas. Using these sources as evidence requires accepting their limitations and different functions.

Finally, all translations from Arabic newspapers and memoirs are my own. Where noted, I used Muhammad Khalil’s translations of political literature.

⁸ *The Arab States and the Arab League; A Documentary Record*, ed. Muhammad Khalil, vol. 1, *Constitutional Developments*, ed. Muhammad Khalil (Beirut: Khayats, 1961).

⁹ For more information on the development of the Arabic press, see Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Oxford, 1995).

I. Syria Before 1949

“Syria was ripe for a benevolent despot who would cleanse the corrupted nation and restore the nation’s self confidence.”¹⁰

--Gordon Torrey, *Syrian Politics and the Military*

In the months preceding Za‘im’s coup, an unstable government, a weak economy, and growing popular dissatisfaction characterized the *status quo* in Syria. These circumstances developed as a result of policies enacted during the years of the French Mandate, poor leadership by nationalist leaders after independence, ethnic and sectarian divides within Syria, and the Arab Liberation Army’s major loss in the 1948 war with Israel. The army’s increasing awareness of its separation from civilian government leaders, disputes between these leaders and army officers, and popular unrest leading to the imposition of martial law made Syria especially prone to a drastic shift in power such as a military coup. This chapter will elaborate on the circumstances described above, and give background on the Syrian army and Husni al-Za‘im.

Post-Ottoman Entities: Syria Under the French Mandate

After World War I, imperial France and Britain divided up the former Ottoman Empire and established mandate systems under the Covenant of the League of Nations,¹¹ with the French taking Syria and modern day Lebanon and the British taking Palestine, including Transjordan, and Iraq. Although in theory mandatory powers were supposed to help the new countries develop and guide them “until such time as they are able to stand alone,”¹² the system functioned as a thin veil for French and British colonialist endeavors, clashing with Arab initiatives towards

¹⁰ Gordon H. Torrey, *Syrian Politics and the Military: 1945-1958* (Ohio State University Press, 1964), 115.

¹¹ A.L. Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1969), 338.

¹² Paragraph 4, Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, quoted in Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, 338.

independent governance. In March of 1920, Prince Faisal, son of the Sharif Husain of Mecca,¹³ established an Arab government in Damascus from which to rule greater Syria and Palestine.¹⁴ But French forces overthrew Faisal's government in July 1920, despite the fact that the Syrian mandate itself was not approved until 1922 and did not go into effect until over a year later.¹⁵

Throughout the Mandate, the French maintained a policy of “divide and rule” in order to prevent unification of any solid opposition to the French. Headed by the French High Commissioner, who governed by decree, the French split Syria into four geographic districts of governance that tended to fall along sectarian and ethnic lines—Greater Lebanon, the ‘Alawi region, the Druze region, and Aleppo-Damascus—under the claim that separate administrative units allowed for better local self-governance.¹⁶ The French also tried to weaken opposition from the Sunni Arabs, who formed the core of Syrian political elite, by empowering the ethnic and religious minorities that tended to live separately and in rural geographic regions.¹⁷ One of their strategies implementing tax and administrative reform in rural areas,¹⁸ as the Sunni Arab population was concentrated in cities. The French also attempted to directly quell opposition to their rule by exiling or sentencing to death many notables, primarily in Damascus but also in minority regions, and heavily censoring the press.¹⁹ Perhaps their most influential decision, however, was to build up separate military detachments from each rural community as part of the *troupes spéciales*, their internal security forces during the Mandate,²⁰ and not recruit from Sunni

¹³ For more information on the Arab revolt and efforts to establish an independent Arab government after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, see Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, 283-337.

¹⁴ Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 53.

¹⁵ Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, 339.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁷ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 7.

¹⁸ Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). 45.

¹⁹ Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, 340.

²⁰ Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961-1980* (London: Croon Helm, 1981), 18.

Arabs.²¹ By the time the *troupes spéciales* were converted into the Syrian and Lebanese armies, minorities, for whom joining the army presented opportunities for social and economic ascendance, filled their ranks.²² These demographics would have lasting implications on relations between army officers and civilian politicians.

Despite its goal of preventing opposition, favoring minorities helped foster opposition among the Sunni Arabs, many of whom coalesced in the 1930s under the National Bloc (*al-Kutla al-Wataniyya*). A majority of those leaders came from elite wealthy families. Their goal was to gain Syrian independence, and in the 1940s, after many attempts, they succeeded. Until then, their efforts led only to nominal increases in Syrian governance, since the French retained full control of the country and the authority to suspend the Syrian constitution or install martial law whenever they deemed necessary.²³ In 1936, for example, resistance efforts resulted in a Franco-Syrian treaty that would have led to increased Syrian sovereignty. But the French never ratified the treaty, a failure that hurt the popularity of the National Bloc leaders who had secured it and established an all-Bloc government in Damascus.²⁴ Thus even before independence, politics dominated by the Sunni Arab elite were evidence of a rift between the French-bolstered minority population and the wealthy, nationalist, anti-French political elite. Although Syria gained formal recognition as an independent state in 1941, Syrians did not have full legislative and administrative control and jurisdiction over the armed forces until the last French forces withdrew in 1946.²⁵

²¹ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 39.

²² Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power*, 40.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 24-25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

Independent Syria

The constant political battles between the Syrians and the French created a lack of stability that set the stage for future politics. Once Syria gained independence, leaders from the National Bloc had no model for governance and stability. Nor did they know how to rebuild their country, as they had spent the past two decades fighting for independence. Furthermore, they were faced with widespread domestic issues including constant popular protests and a weak economy.²⁶ Unprepared to deal with these problems on top of Syria's newfound independence, these National Bloc leaders gained a reputation for incompetence and quickly became unpopular with Syrians because of nepotism and corruption.²⁷ One scholar described the government after independence as both "an edifice of nepotism and mismanagement eroded at the base" and a "creaking network of family patronage and administrative venality."²⁸

These circumstances worsened considerably during and after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which highlighted the failings of the government and led in part to widespread public unrest, especially because before the war, politicians had confidently proclaimed the superiority of the Arab troops and predicted victory.²⁹ But in the war itself, Arab countries suffered a devastating loss to Israel in spite of efforts to combine forces into the Arab Liberation Army, which the Arab League decided to base in Syria.³⁰ Perhaps the most important outcome of the war in terms of its impact on Syrian politics was the intensification of animosity between politicians and army officers, who in turn learned to capitalize on popular discontent to justify military takeover.

²⁶ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 56.

²⁷ Gordon Torrey, "The Role of the Military in Syria," in *The Military in the Middle East: Problems in Society and Government*, ed. Sydney N. Fisher (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 1963), 56.

²⁸ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33; Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 105.

³⁰ Haim Levenberg, *Military Preparations of the Arab Community in Palestine, 1945-1948* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1993), 189-190.

Disputes due to the war were critical in the deterioration of relations between the army and civilian leaders. Army leaders accused politicians of a host of failures that contributed to defeat—unpreparedness, corruption, poor communication, and refusal to hand responsibilities to the army officers actually fighting the war. Fawzi al-Qawuqji, commander of the Arab Liberation Army, indicated in his memoirs that civilian leaders failed at carrying out basic but crucial tasks during the war, especially with their lack of communication and coordination with other Arab governments. In fact, he implied that politicians were responsible for the defeat, saying, “The 1948 fighting was directed by senior Arab politicians from behind their office desks, and in accordance with their own personal interests, ambitions, and whims.”³¹ Most importantly, Qawuqji acknowledged the impact that the war had on Syria’s future; victory “might well have resulted in a radical change in the whole military situation, which would have been followed by a change in the political situation.”³²

All of these sentiments, which reflected the perspective of army officers in general,³³ contributed to the resentment that helped prompt Za‘im’s coup. Other incidents further implicated civilian politicians in war-profiteering, so when the government cut army spending and picked an army officer as the first to be investigated for corruption by a special tribunal, the army believed that the government was attempting to blame the army for the loss.³⁴ Meanwhile, a weak economy and endemic corruption, in conjunction with the government’s refusal to try to ameliorate circumstances, increased popular resentment that Za‘im used to his advantage.

In December 1948, unrest in the form of strikes and demonstrations grew violent and serious enough that martial law was declared. Sources are ambiguous as to whether the

³¹ Fauzi al-Qawuqji, “Memoirs, 1948: Part II,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1972), 24.

³² Qawuqji, “Memoirs, Part II,” 24.

³³ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 33.

³⁴ Torrey, “Role of the Military,” 57.

government asked Za‘im to intervene or whether Za‘im implemented martial law himself.³⁵ Either way, Za‘im had his first taste of controlling the country as he used the army to impose a curfew from 6 am to 6 pm and other limits on the people.³⁶ After two weeks, Khalid al-‘Azm managed to form a civilian government, but it did not last long, especially after the experience of enforcing martial law taught Za‘im and other officers that they possessed more power than the civilian government and unleashed the possibility for them to take on a new role as a powerful actor in Syrian politics.

Husni al-Za‘im and the Army: A Brief Background

Described by his personal secretary, Nadhir Fansah, as a “short and fat man” who knew of little but the military,³⁷ Brigadier General Husni al-Za‘im was born in Aleppo at the end of the 19th century. Of Kurdish descent, he fought in the Ottoman army and was an officer in the *troupes spéciales*, the French mandate internal security forces. Although one of the army’s main grievances against civilian politicians was corruption, Za‘im had no sparkling track record himself. In 1941, Vichy authorities entrusted him with 300,000 Syrian pounds to carry out guerilla attacks against Free French forces. Instead of carrying out orders, he stole the money, was arrested and brought to trial, and was sentenced to ten years of hard labor.³⁸ At the end of the war he was released and reinstated in the Syrian army, but only after what Fansah claimed as “numerous interferences” on his own part. Even after Za‘im’s reinstatement he was dissatisfied with his placement and rank, insisting on a transfer to Damascus.³⁹ Early in the 1948 War,

³⁵ Cf. Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 111; Haddad, *Revolutions*, 198; Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 34; Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria*, 382.

³⁶ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 34.

³⁷ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im: 137 Yawman Hazzat Suriya* [The Days of Husni al-Za‘im: 137 Days That Shook Syria] (Damascus: Mu‘assast al-Nuri, 1993), 10.

³⁸ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 43.

³⁹ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 10.

President Shukri al-Quwatli, whom Za‘im overthrew, appointed him chief of staff of the army, a decision that would haunt him.⁴⁰ Fansah described Za‘im as “often foolhardy.”⁴¹ Other characteristics that emerge from Fansah’s anecdotes of Za‘im include arrogance, rashness, and a constant desire for greater power and status.

In 1946, the Syrian army had 5,000 men, many of whom were minority Armenian, Kurdish, or Circassian, since the army had evolved out of the *troupes spéciales*.⁴² After independence, minorities regarded the army as a path to social and economic liberation, as it provided an education and a secure future. Although some older officers in the army hailed from wealthy and influential families, they were still from minority communities, and after 1946 the background of cadets at the Homs military academy had expanded to include more young men from lower middle class families.⁴³ Wealthy elite Sunnis, on the other hand, did not need to join the army in order to improve their quality of life. They could also pay their way out of military service once Parliament passed a conscription law in December 1947 after the Arab League’s decision to raise an Arab army.⁴⁴

The dichotomy between army officers and political leaders became even clearer as time passed and army officers grew critical of Syrian civilian leaders because of the way they “fumbled and fought among themselves for their own selfish ends.”⁴⁵ Meanwhile, gaps between officers’ and politicians’ levels of economic and political empowerment facilitated openness among army officers to ideologies that called for an influential role for the army in politics. The demographic composition of the army as well, particularly in contrast to political elites, fostered

⁴⁰ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 672.

⁴¹ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 13.

⁴² Torrey, “The Role of the Military,” 54.

⁴³ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 37.

⁴⁴ Levenberg, *Military Preparations*, 189-190.

⁴⁵ Torrey, “The Role of the Military,” 55.

the growth of ideas in the army that specifically regarded political elites as separate from themselves, incompetent, and above all, in need of army intervention.

Nadhir Fansah recorded his memories of Za‘im’s coup and regime in *Days of Husni al-Za‘im: 137 Days That Shook Syria*. Early in the morning on Wednesday 30 March 1949, the morning of the coup, “The streets of Damascus were quiet and damp with the rain of the previous night.”⁴⁶ An unusual scene emerged of “tanks and armored cars that were stationed around the public buildings, or some of which roamed the streets... From each of the vehicles a soldier loomed, an iron helmet on his head, and his hand on a large machine gun.”⁴⁷ Syria’s first military coup had begun.

⁴⁶ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

II. Legitimizing Authority and Justifying Military Takeover

“And not one Damascus resident could sense what had occurred beneath the windows of their houses that historic night...”⁴⁸

--Nadhir Fansah

In the following days, details of the coup gradually came into focus. Brigadier General Husni al-Za‘im, leader of the Syrian army, had overthrown the civilian government in a bloodless coup shortly after midnight on 30 March 1949. He ordered Prime Minister Khalid al-‘Azm and President Shukri al-Quwatli arrested and they were held temporarily in the military hospital in Mezza, a neighborhood of Damascus.⁴⁹ Tanks occupied the streets of the capital,⁵⁰ while police and military police, in addition to ordinary soldiers, followed Za‘im and the army’s orders.⁵¹ Later, both wired and wireless connections that linked Damascus to the rest of Syria and the world were cut, ensuring that Damascus was isolated.⁵² Za‘im’s mechanisms of control effectively made resistance to the coup futile.

Moreover, “Za‘im’s officers carried out his orders precisely; everything went according to plan,” explained Fansah, who was an eyewitness to the coup and much of its planning.⁵³ A clean coup would be crucial for Za‘im to establish and then develop credibility as a competent and legitimate leader. From the moment his coup began, one of Za‘im’s main concerns was the (il)legitimacy of his regime.⁵⁴ Using memoirs, newspapers, and political statements, this chapter will show how Za‘im set out to accomplish the immediate goals of proving the legitimacy of his rule and solidifying his authority through propaganda, threats of force, and reliance upon the

⁴⁸ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 30.

⁴⁹ *al-Ayyam*, March 31, 1949, 1.

⁵⁰ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 29.

⁵¹ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 121.

⁵² Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁴ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 58.

remaining political infrastructure. In 1949, different leaders held a wide array of ideas about what constituted a ruler's legitimacy or right to rule. How Za'im defined the grounds for his legitimacy reflected his own ideas and the army's. Yet they were utterly different from the ideas of civilian politicians, as their memoirs show. Za'im's efforts to legitimize his rule (and simultaneously delegitimize the previous rule) highlight these divergent conceptions of legitimacy and also suggest that the army was becoming politically conscious.

Describing the beginning of the coup, Fansah wrote, "I began to hear from afar the roar of tanks in the streets of Damascus, and the sound drew closer and closer... I saw columns of tanks entering most of the critical streets of Damascus."⁵⁵ With tanks and soldiers filling the streets, the army's authority seemed absolute. The police and military police in Damascus had already surrendered to the army,⁵⁶ so resistance was futile; no one could call in reinforcements from other parts of the country. Nor were political parties unified enough to rebel against Za'im or claim the right to govern. In any case, the lack of opposition and apparent ease with which Za'im overthrew the civilian government were a testament to its lack of political control. In contrast, many of the steps Za'im took during early hours of the coup, such as cutting off communications and occupying streets with soldiers and tanks, represented efforts to establish physical control and maintain order. He did so with great success, as Fansah pointed out, clearing the initial hurdles to legitimizing his rule and establishing authority.

Other efforts to give his rule the aura of legitimacy included making public statements and releasing decrees. Although these types of literature were essentially propaganda, whether or not people believed their content is a separate matter. As sources, they provide excellent evidence of not only the methods Za'im used to justify the army's takeover and his reign but also

⁵⁵ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za'im*, 29.

⁵⁶ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 121.

the reasons that he believed legitimized the takeover. Decree Number One, broadcast on the radio and printed in newspapers, immediately denounced the old government while extolling the army, declaring:

Motivated by our patriotic sentiments and embittered by the present plight of the country, which has resulted from deceiving lies and despotism of those who claim to be our sincere rulers, we have felt obliged to take over, temporarily, the reins of government in this country whose independence we are very anxious to protect.⁵⁷

By citing the army's love of homeland and desire to protect it and then insisting that the army felt obliged, as if it had no choice, to take over, Za'im drew on positive elements to assure Syrians that the army was not acting out of self-interest. Za'im continued to disseminate similar decrees and announcements over the following days.

Interestingly, his rhetoric frequently referenced democratic government, an indication that democracy was associated, at least nominally, with legitimacy. In a statement the day after the coup, Za'im proclaimed that one of the grievances of the Syrian people was suppression of "the democratic spirit... deeply entrenched in the hearts of the Syrians."⁵⁸ Furthermore, "The Syrian people have on several occasions... expressed their pressing desire to establish true democratic rule that will liberate the people."⁵⁹ By fulfilling the expressed desire of the people through the establishment of "a true democratic parliamentary system,"⁶⁰ Za'im rhetorically underscored the legitimacy of the army's rule. Later, Za'im held elections in which he was the only candidate for president. Despite the fact that they made somewhat of a mockery of democracy, they represented an attempt to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality.

⁵⁷ General Command of the Army, "Proclamation No. 1, Explaining the Army's Mission of Liberation, March 30, 1949," in *Constitutional Developments*, ed. Muhammad Khalil, vol. 1 of *The Arab States and Arab League*, ed. Muhammad Khalil (Beirut: Khayats, 1962), 522.

⁵⁸ Husni Az-Za'im, "Statement by Brig. H. Az-Za'im Concerning Syria's International Obligations, March 31, 1949," in Khalil, *Constitutional Developments*, 522.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Khalid al-‘Azm, who held the positions of Prime Minister, Defense Minister, and Foreign Minister and was arrested during Za‘im’s coup, laced his memoir with scathing comments about Za‘im and the army officers who took control of the government. Though clearly biased, this perspective nonetheless reflected ‘Azm’s views about the army, which were influenced by the fact that Za‘im arrested and imprisoned him. According to ‘Azm, Syria’s brief “period of independence collapsed with the hand of Husni al-Za‘im” when he “felt a prevailing indignity against Shukri al-Quwatli and the men of the National Party.”⁶¹ After 1949, “Rule by the people did not return, but rather a team of officers took possession of it.”⁶² The coup itself, ‘Azm said, was carried out “by virtue of the French and the Americans’ encouragement.”⁶³ ‘Azm attributed the coup to a variety of factors, ranging from Za‘im’s personal flaws and emotions to foreign influence through officers who had “sold themselves to foreign countries.”⁶⁴ He certainly did not blame the nationalist government, in which he had been a part. Nor did he cite as causes of the coup the public’s high levels of dissatisfaction with this government because of its corruption and incompetence. ‘Azm’s definition of political legitimacy was rooted in nationalism and disavowed of any kind of foreign intervention or influence.

‘Azm was a staunch supporter of Shukri al-Quwatli, the president arrested during the coup, and believed in Quwatli’s “ingenuity” for his dealings with the French without resorting to British support or caving in to British pressure.⁶⁵ Such reasoning reflects ‘Azm’s own values and his role in gaining independence from the French. His emphasis on the importance of strong negotiation skills to obtain an independent state shows that ‘Azm’s political attention was not

⁶¹ Khalid al-‘Azm, *Mudhakkirat Khalid al-‘Azm* [Memoirs of Khalid al-‘Azm] (Beirut: Al-Dar al-Muttahidah lil-Nashr, 1973), 114.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

focused upon state building but towards gaining the state itself. He had spent most of his political career until the 1940s trying to expel the French from Syria. His views suggest that for Za‘im’s coup to overthrow the very leaders who had worked to obtain independence demonstrated neither the appreciation that those leaders deserved nor the acknowledgement that their political authority was legitimized or justified by their successful efforts to liberate Syria.

Two points are significant here. The first is that some of ‘Azm’s accusations, such as foreign involvement in the coup, were not unfounded, as other sources corroborated them, including Amir ‘Adil Arslan.⁶⁶ The second is ‘Azm’s preoccupation with blaming Za‘im’s coup on factors over which ‘Azm himself had no control—particularly foreign intervention. British, American, and especially French support was anathema to such a fervent nationalist. Nationalist leaders had derived their authority and qualifications to rule from having secured independence from the French.⁶⁷ As we will see later, this idea conflicted with Za‘im’s ideas about authority. With his coup, the factors that legitimized authority shifted from securing state sovereignty to maintaining stability and meeting Syrians’ needs and wishes.

Amir ‘Adil Arslan was another Syrian politician who had participated in rebellions and anti-French political parties.⁶⁸ He was also a minister in the government formed immediately after Za‘im’s coup, until Arslan grew frustrated with Za‘im and resigned his post.⁶⁹ He made claims similar to ‘Azm’s that Za‘im relied on support from the British, Americans, and French: while “Za‘im ... carried the preference of the French,” he wrote, the French “still considered

⁶⁶ Al-Amir ‘Adil Arslan, *Dhakriyat al-Amir ‘Adil Arslan ‘An Husni al-Za‘im* [Recollections of Amir Adil Arslan On Husni al-Za‘im] (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid), 29-30.

⁶⁷ While nationalist leaders certainly worked to achieve independence, other concurrent events that distracted or considerably weakened France, such as WWII, had an impact as well.

⁶⁸ Arslan, *Dhakriyat*, 9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Syria and Lebanon to be their field of influence, from political to economic.”⁷⁰ Another indication of a connection between Za‘im and the French was the issue of arms. “The Syrian army was equipped originally with French weapons. Thus it was necessary to search for ammunition and renewed supplies from the French.”⁷¹ Arslan suggested that Za‘im and the French had a mutually beneficial relationship, and implied that the preferential treatment Za‘im received from the French was the equivalent of betraying Syria and her hard-won independence.

Arslan’s testimony relied on scenes he had witnessed. Anyone who reviewed a list of Za‘im’s visitors, he stated, would find that one or two foreign ministers visited him daily. If ever a minister had to be absent, “he sent his deputy or his secretary, so that the stream of this ‘advice’ was not cut off. The sole objective [of this advice] was to make possible the influence of [a certain] state, as opposed to supporting Za‘im.”⁷² Although Za‘im refused to disclose to whom exactly the mysterious “they” referred, he spoke constantly in terms of “ ‘They advise to us that we do this and that... They suggest to us... They expect of us.’ ” Arslan recalled that deducing that “they” were French was easy. The steady presence of French ministers during Za‘im’s rule suggested that seeking advice from foreign elements did not, in Za‘im’s eyes, delegitimize his rule, although this mistake later contributed to his downfall. Furthermore, the fact that Za‘im sought advice at all, especially from Syria’s former mandatory power, meant that he was uncertain and tentative about making decisions as head of state. For Za‘im, perhaps the legitimacy that security and successful governance could bring overrode concerns about the illegitimacy that some associated with foreign influence.

Although Arslan was a nationalist, his work indicated something different from ‘Azm’s memoirs. The paradox evident throughout Arslan’s work was that he condemned and criticized

⁷⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 29.

Za‘im, albeit after the fact, yet served as part of the government under him, even though “relations between Za‘im and [Arslan] were very tense.”⁷³ Arslan’s decision to serve indicated his awareness that even if Arslan disagreed with Za‘im’s policies, he would have to work with him, a foreshadowing of other politicians’ eventual acceptance that cooperating with army officers was an unavoidable part of politics.

The fact that memoirs are personal and written in hindsight always affects their content. Although politicians such as ‘Azm were guaranteed to react negatively to Za‘im’s coup, others’ stances, such as those of Fansah and Arslan, were not so starkly defined. Therefore what they say must be tempered with the awareness that although they initially supported Za‘im, their recollections have been filtered by the knowledge of what later happened as Za‘im’s rule deteriorated and its implications for Syria became clearer. Fansah, a friend and colleague of Za‘im, recounted Za‘im’s reign cautiously, tentatively, interspersing his memories with commentary on what Za‘im would eventually become.

Newspapers, however, did not have the luxury of hindsight. As mentioned previously, they also possessed the dual capacity to express Za‘im’s ideas of legitimacy and to spread them amongst people, similar to propaganda. Nor were they objective sources of information in Syria at that time (as well as today). As publications, their goal was to sell papers, and, as publications in Syria, a country notorious for its harsh censorship, to stay in print. Za‘im himself shut down several newspapers during his reign.⁷⁴ The newspapers that were allowed to publish probably stayed in print because they expressed pro-Za‘im content or portrayed him favorably. Furthermore, most newspapers at that time had political affiliations—they received tacit or outright financial support from political groups—and would be careful to publish only news or

⁷³ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁴ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 130.

views that corresponded with those of their backers.⁷⁵ There was no such thing as a non-partisan paper. *Al-Ayyam*, for instance, was founded in 1931 by leaders of the National Bloc and was sold a year later to Nassuh Babil, a journalist loyal to the Bloc.⁷⁶ *Al-Inqilab* (The Coup) was founded during Za‘im’s coup—its first issue came out 23 May 1949⁷⁷—and ended with his overthrow in August 1949. The title and publication dates are clear indicators of affiliation with Za‘im’s reign. *Alef Ba’* did not originally have a political affiliation,⁷⁸ but at the time of Za‘im’s coup in 1949, Nadhir Fansah was its editor-in-chief.⁷⁹ Za‘im asked Fansah to print copies of “Decree Number One” at the newspaper’s office in the early morning of the coup.⁸⁰ Certainly *Alef Ba’* did not lack connections with Za‘im. As long as we take into account these inherent biases, newspapers provide a wealth of information.

The Syrian newspaper *al-Ayyam* phrased events quite differently from how Khalid al-‘Azm described them. “Leadership of the Syrian army accepts the government, consulting with the president of the assembly to form a constitutional government,” read one headline from the day after the coup.⁸¹ Of particular interest in this sentence is the word “accepts,” especially when contrasted with ‘Azm’s phrase—“takes possession.” The word “accepts” gave an air of legitimacy, as if government leadership had been kindly offered to the army, which received it graciously and dutifully. The idea that something is taken by force generally implies that it did not rightfully belong to whoever took it. But if the Syrian government was “accepted” by the army, as if the task of governing were imposed upon the army instead of the other way around, then the army deserved a place in the government.

⁷⁵ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 41-42. “Policies and coverage depended upon... politics and business.”

⁷⁶ Ayalon, *Press In The Middle East*, 85.

⁷⁷ *Al-Inqilab*, 23 May 1949.

⁷⁸ Ayalon, *Press In The Middle East*, 86.

⁷⁹ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 10.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸¹ *al-Ayyam*, 31 March 1949, 1.

Furthermore, *al-Ayyam* noted that Za'im had consulted with the president of the assembly, Faris al-Khoury. Taken in conjunction with the fact that Za'im allowed 'Azm and Quwatli to live, the decision to consult with a civilian leader suggests that Za'im did not want to alienate any potential allies or create more enemies than necessary. Several of Za'im's proclamations following his coup corroborate this point, as they publicly declared Za'im's intent to continue to work with the secretaries-general of certain ministries, allowing them to manage affairs specific to the ministries, rather than taking control of them himself.⁸² Akram al-Hawrani, a prominent Syrian army general who actually assisted with the planning of the coup,⁸³ also confirmed in his memoirs that when Za'im met with Faris al-Khoury, they discussed how Khoury would meet with Quwatli and 'Azm "to convince them to present their resignations so that the assembly can elect a new president."⁸⁴ Obviously Za'im considered certain members of the civilian government valuable and was not willing to abandon them simply because they had been part of the ousted government. Instead, he made use of them.

Still, in its depictions of the coup, *al-Ayyam* did not gloss over details. The front-page from 31 March 1949 described "a general occupation by the Syrian army, which has taken over... all official establishments and chambers... military patrols were wandering in the streets and avenues forbidding people from passing through."⁸⁵ Furthermore, it noted that few people knew what exactly was going on, and "many rumors spread about what people had seen."⁸⁶ Ironically, even if Za'im could consolidate physical control using soldiers and police troops, no civilians fully knew what had happened, so Syrians could not recognize Za'im as the new leader of Syria.

⁸² Husni Az-Za'im, "Military Order No. 1" and "Military Order No. 2" in Khalil, *Constitutional Developments*, 523.

⁸³ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Arab Independence*, 672

⁸⁴ Akram al-Hawrani, *Mudhakkirat Akram al-Hawrani* [Memoirs of Akram al-Hawrani] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2000), 929.

⁸⁵ *al-Ayyam*, 31 March 1949, 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

The following day, *Alef Ba'* published an official letter from Za'im thanking the country for its support. "Colonel Husni al-Za'im, commanding General of the Army and Armed Forces, shows his thanks to the honorable Syrian people... for supporting the Syrian army's liberation movement."⁸⁷ While this statement can be reasonably construed as propaganda, it nevertheless represented Za'im's attempts to legitimize his coup and regime. In thanking people for their support, he made the coup belong to everyone who supported him. By couching the overthrow as a "liberation" movement, despite the fact that it had already been named a coup, Za'im again sought to include the Syrian people as its fortunate beneficiaries. He was not liberating just the army, but the people too. The second page of *Alef Ba'* two days after the coup listed all the people or organizations who "support" Za'im, including the Second Brigade, the Air Force, officers and soldiers of various battalions, and certain students and youth.⁸⁸ Perhaps Za'im was trying to prove that since all of those organizations and people supported him, everyone else ought to as well.

In addition to providing details and lists that seemed like propaganda, *Alef Ba'* also printed Za'im's justifications for the coup, citing concrete reasons and grievances such as the parliament's "exhibition of indecent behavior" and politicians who were "against the army."⁸⁹ The newspaper declared "Peace and Quiet In Every Place", as if peace and quiet were proof that circumstances in Syria were stable. Za'im's efforts to legitimize his rule and highlight the positive changes that his coup had spurred continued well into his reign. On 2 June 1949, a headline from *al-Inqilab* proclaimed, "Za'im Creates Renaissance and Reform For the Country."⁹⁰ The same newspaper also constantly repeated the phrase "Dawlat al-Za'im,"

⁸⁷ *Alef Ba'*, 1 April 1949, 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 4.

⁸⁹ *Alef Ba'*, 1 April 1949, 4.

⁹⁰ *Al-Inqilab*, 2 June 1949, 2.

meaning “Za‘im’s state.” On 20 June 1949, the first page of *al-Inqilab* used the phrase no less than four times, just in headlines.

As we’ve seen, Za‘im was concerned from the outset that he would not be seen as a legitimate leader, and so he used a variety of methods to justify the takeover by the army and legitimize his reign—imposing abstract political ideas from above while securing the country physically using police and troops, for example—that complemented each other, even as they also appeared contradictory. In the next chapter, we will see how the tactics he used to accomplish the immediate goal of legitimizing his rule, however, also had longer-lasting implications. They relied inherently on recognition of the army as an entity that was distinct, morally, politically, and otherwise, from civilian politicians and leaders. This recognition in turn shows that the army was developing both self-awareness as an institution and an identity in opposition to civilian politicians, both of which helped the army remain a key player in Syrian politics in the decades that followed.

III. 137 Days in Power: Integrating the Army with Politics

“There is no life without dignity, and there is no dignity without vigor and a strong army...”⁹¹

--*Al-Inqilab*, 12 June 1949

As Za‘im ruled, his focus shifted from legitimizing the takeover to implementing political authority. The tactics on which he relied were complex and at times seemed contradictory, but ultimately they complemented each other by further integrating the army with the political system. The methods Za‘im initially employed to justify the coup, such as disseminating propaganda and publicly declaring political authority, and the decisions he began to make in domestic and international affairs strengthened the army’s political power. Two months into his regime, Za‘im held and unsurprisingly won presidential elections. Towards the end of his reign, he relied increasingly on what ‘Adil Arlsan considered terror tactics—brute force, arbitrary arrests, and spying—that led, along with other mistakes, to his overthrow.

After Za‘im was gone, his legacy remained. In subsequent governments, the army continued to play a significant and influential role. Governments could not be formed without the army’s approval. Sometimes army officers held key positions in the cabinet, and during others, they covertly directed political affairs. Za‘im’s regime was brief, but it launched Syria on this trajectory and set the precedent for the army to shape politics for decades to come.

Solidifying Political Control and a Veil of Democracy

Even as Za‘im attempted to distinguish between newly implemented army rule and the previous civilian government, his propaganda efforts to justify military rule relied, paradoxically,

⁹¹ *Al-Inqilab*, 12 June 1949. Also reprinted in the same newspaper on 13 June 1949, 1.

on merging military power with political power. They also attempted to win the support of the Syrian populace, particularly the proportion that was historically disenfranchised, and to give military matters a new level of priority in public and political spheres. Official decrees and evidence from newspapers highlight how Za'im tried to manufacture a bond between the Syrian people and the army. Even though many of these materials can be reasonably considered propaganda, they still represent Za'im's legitimate efforts to impose ideas on the Syrian people.

Throughout his reign, Za'im made a series of official proclamations, statements, and decrees, which were published in newspapers or read aloud on the radio.⁹² On the first day, Za'im revealed himself only as "General Command of the Army and of the Armed Forces."⁹³ Za'im did not long remain anonymous, however, and quickly began making his name and face ubiquitous. According to Fansah, "From the second morning of the coup, the broadcaster on Syrian radio mentioned at the end of every command or military decree the name of the owner of the coup."⁹⁴ In newspapers, Za'im's picture and the same title "General Command of the Army and the Armed Forces" frequently made the front page. Regular reiterations of his name, face, and title exalted him along with the army and the coup they had mounted together.

Za'im's first public statement, which he gave the day of the coup, praised the army extravagantly, calling it "gallant" and commenting on "the noble character of its members" and the "honourable" stance they had taken against the previous regime.⁹⁵ The text of the statement was printed in full the next day, 31 March 1949, in *al-Ayyam*.⁹⁶ Such praise indicated an obvious attempt to foster a positive image of the army as noble, brave and morally superior to the leaders that had been overthrown. Having witnessed the "betrayals and robberies, suppression of

⁹² Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za'im*, 37.

⁹³ General Command, "First Public Statement," 521.

⁹⁴ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za'im*, 37.

⁹⁵ General Command, "First Public Statement," 521.

⁹⁶ *Al-Ayyam*, 31 March 1949, 2.

democratic freedom and the violation of the constitution and laws” committed by the previous regime, the army “could not stand by with its arms folded” and so had “launched this glorious movement... the triumph of freedom over servility, of honour over humiliation.”⁹⁷ Za‘im’s statement set up a simple and clear dichotomy, where the army was good and the civilian leaders of the previous were bad. The same day, in a separate proclamation regarding “the Army’s Mission of Liberation,”⁹⁸ Za‘im heavily criticized the previous government, without specifying individuals, and continued in the same vein from before, describing leaders from the previous regime as “those who claim to be our sincere rulers” yet were filled with “deceiving lies and despotism.”⁹⁹ In repeatedly broadcasting the sins of the previous civilian government, Za‘im implied the need for a moral compass. Then, by constantly extolling the army’s virtues, he suggested that the army filled that void.

In addition to establishing a clear divide between the prior regime and the now-ruling army, Za‘im also linked the Syrian people to the Syrian army. “The noble Syrian people have met this coup with all due admiration, appreciation and exaltation,” proclaimed his public statement from 30 March 1949. They “have most truly expressed their loyalty to their brave Army, which has saved them from disaster and restored to them their lost rights.”¹⁰⁰ By calling the Syrian people “noble”, Za‘im attributed to them the same high level of morality that he had attributed to the army, implying a connection between the people and the army. At the same time, however, Za‘im depicted the army as the people’s savior and declared that the people were grateful to the army. Thus even if the people and the army stood on equal moral footing, Za‘im complicated the relationship so that while the wrongs committed by the nationalist government

⁹⁷ General Command, “First Public Statement,” 521.

⁹⁸ General Command, “Proclamation No. I, Explaining the Army’s Mission of Liberation, March 30, 1949,” in Khalil, *Constitutional Developments*, 522.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ General Command, “First Public Statement,” 521.

unified the people and the army, the army's intervention to "put things right and restore this nation its honour, its dignity and its freedom"¹⁰¹ separated them. The dynamic Za'im's rhetoric attempted to build was distant enough to ensure that the people respected the army as a source of authority but close enough that the people did not feel alienated.

Nor can we dismiss Za'im's rhetoric and propaganda as ineffective or incongruous with the actual sentiments and reactions of the Syrian populace, which appeared to actually welcome the coup. One reason they may have supported the coup is that people identified with the army as a material basis for support, an economic livelihood that also provided political power and status for otherwise marginalized groups. They also hoped that a change in power would result in a change in the *status quo*. In the days following the coup, "The demonstrations began in the streets, in support of the hero of the coup, as did the pounding of drums and sounding of horns. Students, soldiers, and the youth of the neighborhoods began to dance happily in the streets and public squares,"¹⁰² according to Fansah. The demonstrations continued at least three days, and "thousands of telegraphs of support... to the leader of the coup" continued flooding in.¹⁰³ Religious leaders also showed their support. In his sermon at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the *khatib* (deliverer of a sermon) called Za'im, "a savior" who was "foreordained by Allah."¹⁰⁴ Other preachers followed suit. Akram al-Hawrani's memoirs supported Fansah's recollections, mentioning, "Demonstrations of popular support were continuing in front of the Ministry of Defense" in the days after the coup.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za'im*, 39.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁵ Hawrani, *Mudhakkirat*, 935.

Overall, according to eminent historian Patrick Seale, the country hailed Za‘im as a savior and the leader who had brought an end to domestic turmoil and instability¹⁰⁶—a fully ironic assessment, in retrospect and in light of the political instability that followed his reign. His coup was greeted among the general populace as “the harbinger of a new era in which all of their frustrations would be overcome and their longings for progress, reform, and stability fulfilled.”¹⁰⁷ The fact that Syrians welcomed the coup meant that they looked forward to the improvements it had the potential to bring. It also meant that they could have been more open to accepting any type of government or leadership, so long as it brought positive change.

Za‘im wasted no time articulating the integration of the army with the political system. Although he initially declared that the army’s intervention in politics was merely “temporary” and that it had no “desire to take over... the reins of government,”¹⁰⁸ only a day later, in several other statements, Za‘im claimed the army had “proceeded to establish a true democratic parliamentary system which will save the country from numerous evils and remove from it the threat of anarchy and disturbance.”¹⁰⁹ By claiming that the army had established a democratic parliamentary system, Za‘im forged an ideological connection between the army, ideally a representation of physical order and stability, and the government, ideally a representation of political order and stability.

The day after his coup, Military Order Number 1 expressed this connection more specifically, announcing, “The Commander-in-Chief of the Army and of the Armed Forces... shall enjoy all the powers (usually) vested in a head of state.”¹¹⁰ Yet even though Za‘im had taken control as head of the government, he did not eliminate civilians from all other positions,

¹⁰⁶ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 45.

¹⁰⁷ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 126.

¹⁰⁸ General Command, “Proclamation No. 1,” 522.

¹⁰⁹ Az-Za‘im, “Statement,” 522.

¹¹⁰ Az-Za‘im, “Military Order No. 1,” 523.

as discussed previously. In his second Military Order, also from 31 March 1949 and published the following day on page two of the newspaper *Alef Ba'*,¹¹¹ he left decision-making of various ministries to the secretaries-general of individual ministries, with the exception of the Ministry of National Defense, of which he took control.¹¹² Za'im, backed by the army, did not assume absolute control; rather, he initially attempted to merge the army with the pre-existing political system to ensure that officers and politicians would work together in government.

By making himself head of state and head of national defense, Za'im assumed control of two crucial positions of power. In particular, his overseeing national defense and the armed forces brought together components of the military and the government under a single formidable figure. Later on in his regime, when backing a civilian government failed, Za'im himself took power, first as prime minister in April 1949, then as president in June.¹¹³ He no longer attempted to make civilians and army officers cooperate; he simply took over, and army leadership became political leadership. As a result, under the army's political leadership, the threats of force Za'im had made early in his regime gained a political tone as a mechanism of enforcement. In the early days of the coup, he declared in Proclamation Number 1, "Any attempt by an opportunist, destructive element to disturb the peace will be crushed instantly and mercilessly."¹¹⁴ The last part of the sentence—"crushed instantly and mercilessly"—left no doubt as to the severity and speed with which Za'im would destroy dissent and demonstrated his intolerance for disagreement with his decisions. Once Za'im became head of state, the threat of the use of force gained political reinforcement.

¹¹¹ *Alef Ba'*, 1 April 1949, 2.

¹¹² Az-Za'im, "Military Order No. 2," 523.

¹¹³ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 128.

¹¹⁴ General Command, "Proclamation No. 1," 522.

Although some of Za'im's methods and decisions appear contradictory, they are more complementary than opposing, as if Za'im sought to cover all possible bases from which to derive authority. For example, though Za'im made explicit his willingness to use force, he also demonstrated the army's could exert its authority in a political manner. In a statement on Syria's international obligations, he defined how the army would interact with other countries and international bodies, announcing:

The General Command wishes to assert that the new Syrian State will observe Syria's international obligations and undertakings, that it will adhere to true democratic principles, and that it will respect the United Nations Charter. It will do its best to... promote the closest and firmest relations with sister Arab countries, and consolidate the League of Arab States as well as improve and strengthen its relations with all democratic states.¹¹⁵

Za'im's choice to show that the army was involved in the administration of foreign affairs gave it additional authority via political power. Instead of being purely a military institution, it also played a political and administrative role in Syria's foreign relations. Even though the changes he made did not mean that the army was instantly or fully integrated into the political system, Za'im established the foundations on which later coups would build. Civilian leaders had little opportunity to protest his rule, as he was backed by the army and in charge of the government. Later, subsequent officers drew on the example that Za'im set, and civilian leaders, especially in the Ba'ath Party, often relied on the support of the army to reinforce their rule.

Perhaps the most striking example of Za'im's efforts to prove that the army had political legitimacy—even if in a highly superficial manner—was when he decided to hold elections. On 20 June 1949, Za'im “released an announcement stating his candidacy for the presidency of the republic,” wrote Akram al-Hawrani.¹¹⁶ “It was announced on the 26th of June that the percentage of those who had voted for Husni al-Za'im for president of the republic reached 99.53%... That same day... the previous government resigned and Husni al-Za'im charged Dr. Muhsin al-Barazi

¹¹⁵ Az-Za'im, “Statement,” 522-523.

¹¹⁶ Hawrani, *Mudhakkirat*, 990.

with forming a new government.”¹¹⁷ Although such a high percentage of the vote was unrealistic, if not ludicrous, the semblance of elections represented yet another effort to legitimize a combined army and political leadership, especially in contrast to Za‘im’s appointing himself prime minister in April. What the elections also represented was the fact that legitimacy through democratic elections was an effort undertaken superficially, as if it were a cover crafted by whoever was in power, and not rooted in a truly democratic system that represented the desire of the people. This idea would replay itself in other regimes after Za‘im.

In addition to merging the leadership of the army with that of the extant political system, Za‘im continued to reinforce the concept that the Syrian people and the army were one and develop a military culture in Syria by constantly pledging the army to the people and vice versa. As one example, *Al-Inqilab* printed a prolific amount of articles and announcements regarding *Yawm al-Jaish*, or Day of the Army. On 9 June 1949, a headline on the front page declared, “Day of the Army... Day of Every Citizen.” Proclaiming that a day to celebrate the army was also a day to celebrate the citizen had obvious implications of equating and joining the two. Beneath this headline fell a brief description of what this particular day meant. “It is the day... for which all of Syria waits in order to indicate her love for her valiant army through generous contribution... to the buildup and development of the army.”¹¹⁸ Then, the article defined what contribution meant:

Indeed, the qirsh [a denomination in Syrian currency] which each citizen pays will become strength and immunity and dignity, and by the strength of the sentiment people can demonstrate through contribution, Syria builds the robust tower of her strength... There is no strength without the people’s sacrifice.¹¹⁹

The original Arabic word translated as “sacrifice,” *badhal*, has a monetary connotation.

Requiring the people to sacrifice the army added a layer to the relationship Za‘im initially

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 991.

¹¹⁸ *Al-Inqilab*, 9 June 1949, 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

created between the people and the army, where the people were indebted to the army for freeing them from a despotic regime. The army now relied on the people for support. Even if the support was monetary and obligatory, contributions represented the people's ideological support, approval, and appreciation of the army. Over the course of nearly two months, in official and public discourse, a symbiotic relationship had developed.

Patriotic sentiment was another component in this special day. *Al-Inqilab* called it a day “towards which the people feel deep and reverential feelings”¹²⁰ and “a test for Syrians’ patriotic sentiment” alongside their support for the army, “the bulwark of the nation.”¹²¹ Therefore supporting the army meant that one also supported Syria as a whole. It served as a demonstration of patriotism. As a result, the army represented Syria in at least two facets, by acting as both physical protection—a “bulwark”—and a manifestation of nationalism and patriotism.

Other Arab countries were quick to recognize the consequences of Za‘im’s pro-military rhetoric and actions. In a small section that shared media from other Arab countries, under the headline “Al-Za‘im Calls Forth From Syria a Military State,” *al-Inqilab* quoted Egyptian writer and professor Muhammad Tawfiq Diyab. “The news has arrived that Col. Husni al-Za‘im is spending great efforts on the reinforcement of the Syrian army, and not surprisingly, since he is a military man” in every aspect of his person, he had written.¹²² Fansah also hinted at the inevitability that Za‘im would militarize Syria, attributing it to the fact that Za‘im was “educated only militarily and outside of the military, he didn’t know anything.”¹²³ As a result, Za‘im relied on what he knew best—the armed forces, and the accompanying ability to threaten and use physical force. These reactions to Za‘im’s decision were, in hindsight, on target.

¹²⁰ *Al-Inqilab*, 15 June 1949, 2.

¹²¹ *Al-Inqilab*, 2 June 1949, 2.

¹²² *al-Inqilab*, 28 May 1949, 1.

¹²³ Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 28.

Efforts to Modernize Syria: Domestic Reforms

Although Za‘im’s regime lasted just over four months, he implemented certain liberal social and economic changes, which Patrick Seale has described as “shock[ing] Damascus out of its stuffy puritanism.”¹²⁴ He abolished *awqaf* (singular: *waqf*), an Ottoman-era system of religious land endowments and declared that he would create better working conditions for peasants and that educated women would enjoy the right to vote. He established a Bureau of Complaints to address citizens’ complaints and criticisms of officials, and he also significantly increased the strength of the army, from 5,000 men to 27,000 by July 1949.¹²⁵ He also moved the police and *genderarmerie* from the control of the Ministry of Defense to the control of the army, thus giving it an additional and specific political role, and he appointed new provincial governors with both civil and military authority.¹²⁶

When enacting these changes and reorganizing the army, however, Za‘im also dismissed or imprisoned large numbers of his supporters and friends. Meanwhile, his land and fiscal reforms threatened many within the commercial and feudal classes.¹²⁷ Another mistake he made was to hand over Antun Sa‘ada, leader of the Syrian nationalist party, who had tried to mount a coup in Lebanon, to Lebanese authorities. Sa‘ada had been allowed to live in Syria but under pressure from the Lebanese government, Za‘im had him arrested and deported to Lebanon, where he was executed. The general populace “felt that traditional Arab hospitality had been grossly violated.”¹²⁸ Finally, as a result of French military training, Za‘im used French methods and terminology in the military, leading people to believe that he was a puppet of the French.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 58.

¹²⁵ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 125-129.

¹²⁶ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 58.

¹²⁷ Torrey, *Syrian Politics*, 129.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

Discerning what Za‘im hoped his decisions and actions would achieve in the long term would be difficult. Evidence has indicated that his short-term objectives were to justify the coup and prove that he possessed the legitimate authority to rule. Nevertheless, the means by which he attempted to accomplish these immediate goals had significant effects beyond what he may or may not have intended. How he decided to run the country—by integrating the military with politics and by calling on all citizens to show their support for the army and thus for Syria by giving money—led the army to become a crucial agent in politics. Za‘im set a precedent where the army supported the head of state, who as a result always had at his disposal the option of using force. At the same time, he created the expectation that the people must always show their support for the army.

Decline and Fall of Za‘im

Syrians who interacted regularly with Za‘im reported a serious deterioration in his behavior and believed that he was growing delusional, paranoid, and irrational towards the end of his regime. ‘Adil Arslan described how Za‘im returned from a trip abroad “thinking that the entire world was within his reach.”¹³⁰ Later, Za‘im began threatening to use force against his own ministers. “He ordered the men of the military police to be stationed in front of the gate whenever the cabinet called a meeting,” Arslan recalled. “Whenever the discussion raged or voices were loud, the men of the military police rushed to the concourse in front of the gate, their weapons clanging, to remind us of their presence.”¹³¹ Fansah provided further evidence of Za‘im’s change in demeanor. After receiving warnings that Za‘im’s own officers felt hostility towards Za‘im, Fansah said, “I believed these warnings... But if I were to tell Za‘im he would

¹³⁰ Arslan, *Dhakriyat*, 36.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

not change... because he was lost, entranced with himself.”¹³² Za‘im’s self-delusional and arrogant manner was one of many causes leading to his downfall.

In August 1949, Za‘im was overthrown and executed by one of his own officers, Colonel Muhammed Sami al-Hinnawi, in a coup not unlike Za‘im’s own. At 3 o’clock in the morning on 14 August 1949, separate groups of officers assassinated Za‘im and Prime Minister Muhsin al-Barazi and arrested Major Ibrahim al-Husaini, commander of the military police. Although Hinnawi nominally returned control of the government to civilian leaders, the populace remained suspicious of the army’s influence. Indeed, Gordon Torrey considered the army the most influential force on the Syrian political scene around that time, explaining that even though “it was as divided and confused as the politicians... the coups had shown ambitious younger officers how relatively easy it was to overturn the civilian government.”¹³³

In December 1949, Colonel Adib Shishakli overthrew Hinnawi after the civilian government established by Hinnawi under army protection began to move towards union between Syria and Iraq, which Shishakli and his faction of the army opposed.¹³⁴ The existence of opposing factions, which continued long after Shishakli’s regime, shows that not only did the army seek to carry out its own goals or impose its own ideas on politics, but the army was also becoming politicized. When army officers disagreed over a point, such as union with Iraq or Egypt, the army was no less immune to factionalism than civilian politicians were in their political parties. Further evidence lies in the fact that in just over two decades, from 1949 to 1970, Syria experienced a whopping fourteen military coups,¹³⁵ many of which were carried out

¹³² Fansah, *Ayyam Husni al-Za‘im*, 58.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹³⁴ Samuel Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962), 126.

¹³⁵ Richard P.Y. Li and William R. Thompson, “The ‘Coup Contagion’ Hypothesis,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Mar., 1975): 86.

when one faction of the army disagreed with the policies of another, often the one in power either directly or via puppet politicians.

Syria evidently experienced little political stability before the last coup in 1970. Nevertheless, the years between 1949 and 1970 gave the army the opportunity to shape itself into a political tool and learn how to wield considerable influence in Syrian politics. The next chapter will examine what factors, despite constant regime changes, allowed the military to continue to influence if not completely control politics even as the military itself dealt with internal turmoil and dissent, and give a brief history of the coups and regime changes that occurred after Za'im. These factors are less dependent upon external political or economic circumstances and rely more upon the internal developments within the army. Although the army grew increasingly divided as it became more involved in politics, as a whole, the idea that the army possessed the right to be involved in politics overrode intra-army disputes, which in turn relied on the army's consciousness as an institution with the distinct right to address grievances and take action.

What began with Za'im's coup but did not end with it was a pattern where the army acted on a political agenda and had the ability to back up their actions with force. Za'im's regime also fostered the development of the army into an institution that refused to relinquish its role in politics. Za'im was significant in this process because he was the first to capitalize on this political agenda and the belief that the military could rule better than civilian politicians.

IV. The Awakening of the Syrian Army

“The regime of military provenance or direct military rule is, in short, a distinctive kind of regime; and the military as an independent political force is a distinctive political phenomenon.”¹³⁶

—Samuel Finer, *The Man On Horseback*

Coup d'état. Putsch. Military intervention. Overthrow. The list is of terms for rapid changes in power are extensive, as are the models and variations for when these changes are put into practice. No single paradigm or comprehensive model can explain why or how a particular military coup is carried out, especially when this phenomenon occurs in countries all over the globe and in countless different contexts. Dozens of theories and models on coups, military coups, military intervention, and civil-military relations, especially in developing nations, have been written, seeking to explain the causes, methods, and patterns of military coups.¹³⁷

Despite such a proliferation of works and ideas, this thesis focuses on a particular and more narrow idea, the concept of the consciousness of the army, in order to shed light on Za'im's time in power, and draws specifically on the ideas of Samuel Finer's *The Man on Horseback* and Dankart Rostow's "The Military in Middle Eastern Society and Politics."¹³⁸ These authors discuss the relevance of the context surrounding a military coup, such as the strength of a country's political system, examine the internal dynamics of the military, and explore the relationship between political and military institutions based on analysis of the first two points.

¹³⁶ Finer, *Man on Horseback*, 4.

¹³⁷ See Edward Luttwak, *Coup D'Etat: A Practical Handbook* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969); Amos Perlmutter, *The Military and Politics in Modern Times: On Professionals, Praetorians, and Revolutionary Soldiers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Steffen Schmidt and Gerald Dorfman, eds., *Soldiers In Politics* (Los Altos, CA: Geron-X, 1974); John B. Londregan and Keith T. Poole, "Poverty, The Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power," *World Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Jan., 1990): 151-183; Richard P.Y. Li and William R. Thompson, "The 'Coup Contagion' Hypothesis," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Mar., 1975): 63-88. These selections are by no means a comprehensive list.

¹³⁸ Dankart Rostow, "The Military in Middle Eastern Society and Politics," in *The Military in the Middle East: Problems in Society and Government*, ed. Sydney N. Fisher, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1963), 3-19.

Finer's work presents the broad concept of the army's consciousness and self-awareness, which in the case of Syria, were tied to the army's belief that they possessed the duty, the right, and the superior ability to rule, all three of which Za'im's regime demonstrated. The preconditions and patterns that Rostow lists support Finer's theory, even if they do not explicitly reference it or the idea of army consciousness. These ideas emphasize the agency of the army in Syrian politics, beginning with the Za'im era.

The Man on Horseback¹³⁹

Finer suggests that "where public attachment to civilian institutions is weak or non-existent, military intervention in politics will find wide scope,"¹⁴⁰ and therefore, "circumstances that tend to discredit the civilian regimes" are a common starting point for the idea of a military coup, especially when these regimes' "inefficiency, corruption, and political intrigue appear to be the very reverse of that austerity, brisk authoritarianism, political neutrality and patriotism."¹⁴¹ As a result, he claims, the fact "that the military find in civilian mismanagement the opportunity, the motive and subsequently the pretext for their intervention" is simply "unsurprising."¹⁴² The logic in this argument is absolutely applicable to Za'im's coup. As we have seen, Za'im attempted to discredit the previous civilian regime, accusing it of betraying the freedoms and rights of the Syrian people and violating the constitution, and finding it "to abound in vices and in disgrace, including betrayals and robberies."¹⁴³ When juxtaposed with Za'im's proclamation that the army and its members were "motivated by [their] patriotic sentiments and embittered by

¹³⁹ Refers to a person, usually military, who is a potential dictator.

¹⁴⁰ Finer, *Man on Horseback*, 21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ General Command, "First Public Statement," 521.

the present plight of the country,”¹⁴⁴ these claims provided the appropriate pretext, as Finer suggests, for taking control. The difficult question, however, is not what justifications the army provided for taking control, but how these justifications morphed into the reality where the military came to possess political authority and govern Syria or influence its politics. Part of the answer lies in Finer’s ideas about military consciousness.

The consciousness of the military is a defining component of the institution itself, according to Finer. Consciousness is critical not only for initiating a coup but also for the decisions the military makes as the post-coup governing authority. Although the idea of the consciousness of an institution established for its ability to use force is abstract and may even seem insubstantial, it adds a new dimension to understanding military coups. Seeing the army as an entity with self-awareness provides an entirely new lens through which to understand why the Syrian army interacted with civilian authorities the way it did and why, after Za‘im’s coup, no matter who appeared as the face of the Syrian government, the army played a dominant role in Syrian political affairs.

Finer defines the military’s consciousness as its “having an identity that is separate from, different from, and yet juxtaposed with the civilians and the politicians,” explaining further, “It is this self-awareness that permits the military to conceive that they have a unique duty, a duty of supererogation, to watch over the national interest.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, the army has consciousness because not only is it self-aware, but this self-awareness also is rooted in an identity distinct from other groups or institutions. But how can such a large institution comprised of so many individual bodies and layers within its hierarchy build common consciousness? After Za‘im’s coup, dissent and disagreement within the army itself, particularly over foreign policy

¹⁴⁴ General Command, “Proclamation No. 1,” 522.

¹⁴⁵ Finer, *Man on Horseback*, 71.

issues, led to constant changes in government, whether by switches in the civilian leaders who were puppets of the army, or when different factions of the army attempted to overthrow the ruling faction in a coup. An all-encompassing consciousness does not mean that the army or the military wholly agreed on every single political issue. Rather, it means that the army possessed a sense of itself where it believed it had a role to play in politics or that it possessed and deserved a measure of authority in Syria. What it meant “to watch over the national interest” was a point of disagreement within the army, as Colonel Hinnawi’s coup in August 1949 and Colonel Shishakli’s coup a few months later in December 1949 demonstrated, but the fact that the army possessed the right and the duty “to watch over the national interest” was undisputed.

The roots of Syrian army’s self-awareness and identity separate from civilian politicians lie in inherent sectarian, religious, and economic differences as well as diverging beliefs of what constituted political legitimacy. These more apparent distinctions led to the creation of a subtler psychological and abstract rift that were no longer based on concrete differences. Although the military and army are inherently separate institutions with different functions, Finer takes this point to a new level, where not only did the army clearly see itself as separate from civilian government, but it believed that it was more qualified to rule, as did Za‘im and subsequent military leaders. Za‘im’s “First Public Statement” highlighted “the gravity of the disaster” to which “the ruling clique” had brought “the Syrian people.”¹⁴⁶ The use of such a loaded term as “disaster” suggests that anyone who could bring a country to disaster was utterly unfit to rule. In the same statement, the army was placed not just in opposition to the government but also in a position of superiority, both moral and political. In addition to propaganda evidence, Akram al-Hawrani recalled that on the night of the coup, Za‘im said to him, “We have done our duty and

¹⁴⁶ General Command, “First Public Statement,” 521.

delivered the country from a corrupt bunch.”¹⁴⁷ No other statement thus far has been so explicitly clear about Za‘im’s personal belief in the army’s duty and role as savior.

Finer explains that as soon as “the military draw this distinction between nation and the government in power, they begin to invent their own private notion of the national interest, and from this it is only a skip to the constrained substitution of this view for that of the civilian government.”¹⁴⁸ We have seen from Za‘im’s proclamations and decrees that the army did develop its own notion of the national interest and acted on that notion. Indeed, Finer states that in Syria after 1946, “The armed forces were highly politicized—especially over issues of foreign policy—very self-conscious, and also highly self-interested.”¹⁴⁹ By developing a self-awareness and consciousness rooted in its right to rule, the army ensured that it would continually find ways to remain involved in politics, whether from behind the scenes or by means of direct rule, even when disagreements over issues such as foreign policy occurred within the army itself.

By capitalizing on the dual role of the army as a recognized restorer of order, as demonstrated in December 1948, and supposedly separate entity from the corrupt and incompetent nationalist politicians, Za‘im ensured that the army would play a crucial role in Syrian politics. He took advantage of the fact that the civilian government had lost legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian population, but instead of trying to restore authority and legitimacy to civilian leaders, he handed both to the army and set the stage for it to redefine politics in Syria. According to Finer, it is Syria that “provides an enlightening sequence, in so far as it illustrates how the armed forces, having taken the first overt step to interfere with civilian processes may be compelled to go further and further until... they must themselves become the government.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Hawrani, *Mudhakkirat*, 927.

¹⁴⁸ Finer, *Man on Horseback*, 26.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

Syria may not be unusual for having military coups, but its record of having so many coups that kept the country on the same trajectory is fascinating and arguably remarkable.

However, just because an individual or institution believed that it possessed the qualifications and the right to rule did not mean it could simply take over. The self-evident advantage that enabled the military to influence and at times control Syrian political activity and foreign policy was its ability to use force, which Dankwart Rostow suggests is the “one thing all military regimes have in common.”¹⁵¹ Za‘im’s position as the head of the army and his publicly articulated willingness to use force—anyone disturbing the peace would be “crushed instantly and mercilessly”¹⁵²—demanded a certain level of obedience on the part of the people and politicians and led as a result to automatic reinforcement of whatever political decisions Za‘im decided to implement.

The overarching theme of Rostow’s paradigm for coups in the Middle East is that “the most decisive factor is the relationship of the military to the civilian segment of the political process.”¹⁵³ His claim underscores the importance of how the military sees itself in comparison to civilian politicians, particularly under the following conditions Rostow puts forth: first, that armies usually seize domestic power after defeat, not victory, on the battlefield; second, that military coups follow a period of domestic instability during which civilian authorities begin to rely on the military to enforce their jurisdiction; and finally, that armed coups occur when, despite popular dissatisfaction, no peaceful means can be found to change the government. Rostow’s second condition and its counterpart in Syria’s history—the fact that Za‘im imposed martial law in December 1948 to help restore order—especially support Finer’s explanation of the military’s self-awareness being based on its separation from civilian politicians. By

¹⁵¹ Rostow, “The Role of the Military,” 15.

¹⁵² General Command, “Proclamation No. 1,” 522.

¹⁵³ Rostow, “The Role of the Military,” 17.

examining the two ideas together, we learn that the weakness of the civilian government in Syria played an important role in facilitating Husni al-Za'im's coup, but at the same time, the military developed a sense of itself as separate from and superior to the politicians. The motivations for the army to find ways to stay in power were two sides of the same coin, stemming from not only a lack of faith in the civilian government's ability to govern Syria but also a firm belief that the army was capable of what the government was not. Za'im's experience imposing martial law in Syria in 1948 reinforced his conviction that the civilian government had failed at maintaining stability and strengthened the army's self-awareness as a more effective political institution.

After Za'im: Coups and Rulers

Although Za'im's coup was a turning point in Syrian politics, the regime of Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, who overthrew Colonel Hinnawi in December 1949, solidified the changes initiated during Za'im's regime. Patrick Seale called Shishakli's rule "the dominant, if sometimes veiled, influence on Syrian affairs from the first coup in December 1949 to his fall in February 1954,"¹⁵⁴ and the almost immediate overturning of any civilian government that did not agree with Shishakli and the army's interests supports this claim. Shishakli's domination ranged from covert rule to direct rule—initially he installed a government led by Khalid al-'Azm, but over the next four years, whenever a civilian government began to make political decisions, especially ones regarding foreign policy, that did not align with what Shishakli or the army wanted, he would interfere and install a different civilian government. In 1952, Shishakli himself became president. He ruled until his overthrow in 1954.¹⁵⁵ Even after the fall of Shishakli, the support of the military was essential to gaining and maintaining power, and no political decision could be made

¹⁵⁴ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 118.

¹⁵⁵ Finer, *Man on Horseback*, 126.

without the agreement of the military. After his overthrow, the army played a central role in securing the Syrian-Egyptian union of 1958, also known as the United Arab Republic, and gradually began to combine its strengths with those of the ascendant Ba‘ath party, and vice versa. Amos Perlmutter described this symbiotic relationship as the following: “Since 1964, Syria has depended on the resilience of the Ba‘th and the cohesion of her army. The Ba‘th has depended on army support and the army on the organization, ideology, and leadership of the Ba‘th.”¹⁵⁶ Factions from within the Ba‘ath and the army recognized that an alliance could be mutually beneficial.

In September 1961, yet another coup by the military ended the brief life of the United Arab Republic, and Syria fell again under military rule and experienced two years of instability. Finally, in 1963 the Ba‘ath party took control of Syria. It was divided into several factions, one of which was led by General Hafiz al-Assad, the Defense Minister who took over in a military coup in 1970 and whose son, Bashar al-Assad, is the current president. After Hafiz al-Assad took control, Syria became more stable, but the power of the army did not wane. Instead, it became more firmly entrenched in politics, absorbing problems characteristic of politics and becoming divided to the extent that it “came to reflect civilian factionalism in its own structure.”¹⁵⁷ Lack of unity and constant disputes within the military led, for example, to several military coups and much political turnover between the breakup of the United Arab Republic in 1961 and the takeover of the Ba‘ath in 1963.

Since 1970, explains Raymond Hinnebusch, “the military has, to a degree, been subordinated to the presidency but it remains the most powerful actor which, particularly in

¹⁵⁶ Amos Perlmutter, “From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Ba‘th Party,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Dec., 1969): 834.

¹⁵⁷ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 147.

times of crisis, has the potential to shape outcomes.”¹⁵⁸ When instruments of power such as the party apparatus or state bureaucracy fail to control society, “a large, well-equipped military and security force”¹⁵⁹ can be relied upon as a backup. One of the reasons Syria maintains a notorious reputation for repression even today, is because its “security forces and intelligence services... are multiple, pervasive in surveillance of society, and feared for the arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and torture of dissidents which they have practised.”¹⁶⁰ Such practices directly relate to the idea of the threat of the use of force, which Za‘im demonstrated in 1949. In some ways, this concept has morphed and in some ways, it has not changed at all, as will be discussed in the conclusion.

As examinations of Finer and Rostow’s ideas showed, the Syrian army’s ability to use force has been an influence on the its longevity in Syrian politics, but its consciousness and self-awareness played an equally important role. Without this consciousness and the belief that they could—or even ought to—do the job of civilian politicians, army officers would not have relied upon the threat of force in the first place. The two together made a formidable combination, where once the army had both the conviction necessary to seize power and the brute force to enforce that conviction, few could disagree with army leaders’ decisions. Whether deliberately or not, Za‘im’s speech and actions during his regime fit into this particular paradigm—he established that the army was an entity superior to and separate from the previous civilian government, and he was willing to use force against anyone who dissented—which, in the context of Syria, worked steadily to perpetuate the power and influence of the Syrian military.

¹⁵⁸ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, 73.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

Conclusion

A topic that has been simultaneously fundamental and peripheral to this thesis is that of brute force. Discussed only superficially so far, the threat and use of brute force did not play a central role either in Za'im's bloodless coup or during his regime. Yet a well-recognized aspect of the power of the military is its ability to use violence, including deadly force. We have seen that although Za'im deemed the use of force appropriate for the sake of maintaining stability, he never actually resorted to public or large-scale violence. Until the government's crackdown on recent protests, the open use of force in Syria has existed for several decades in a similar way¹⁶¹—more as a threat than as a practice. This policy is due in part to the fact that the use of force is not limited to the army. Police and other security forces, including the *mukhabarat*, or secret police with an intelligence-gathering function, retain that capacity. Other practices are also associated with the *mukhabarat*, including arrests without a warrant and detainment, imprisonment, and torture.

Lisa Wedeen, in *Ambiguities of Domination*, her wonderfully fascinating study of the cult surrounding the late Hafiz al-Assad and the innovative techniques used to secure his domination, argues in part that Assad was able to maintain stability under his regime because people were more afraid of being punished than of repression and a lack of freedom,¹⁶² and because the regime was able to disseminate what Wedeen calls “credible *threats* of punishment”

¹⁶¹ The last and most prominent crackdown in Syrian history was the government's response to an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama in 1982. Tens of thousands of people were reported killed as the Syrian army massacred Muslim Brothers and unarmed civilians alike.

¹⁶² For more about the trade-off between stability and freedom, see Mustafa Nour, “The Myth of Syrian Stability,” *New York Times*, 1 April 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/>. He writes, “many do believe that it's a fair bargain: limits on personal and political freedoms in exchange for the stability that is so dear to them.”

as part of “coercive compliance,” where “people obey because they *fear* being punished.”¹⁶³ Under Za‘im, the army was an institution that backed the decisions of its leader, who threatened to crush any and all dissent. Under Assad, the army and other branches of security such as the secret police still existed to support the leader’s decisions, but they were also used in a more subversive manner. Tactics of solidifying dominion arguably underwent a transformation between the reigns of Husni al-Za‘im and Hafiz al-Assad. By the time Assad, a general in the army, took over in 1970, army officers were well integrated into the Arab Socialist Ba‘ath Party, of which Assad was a member—starting in 1963, top army officers in Syria became more and more Ba‘thist.¹⁶⁴ As army officers joined the ruling Ba‘ath Party, they solidified the army’s position in politics. Indeed, at one point in 1963, seven out of twelve ministers in the government were army officers.¹⁶⁵ Today, the army itself does not rule directly but instead has been fully integrated into the political system, or as one scholar explicates, “Officer-politicians continue to use... institutions to perform a variety of functions, becoming at once military commanders and civilian technocrats, ideologues, and commercial producers, and the like.”¹⁶⁶ Where the army begins and the Ba‘ath-dominated government ends is difficult to discern.

Explaining the transition from the threat of the use of force to the methods of subversion and coercion that could be considered even more frightening than brute force is beyond the scope of this thesis. Clearly, however, the two are connected. The eleven-plus agencies—civilian, military, and military with security duties—that make up the Syrian security forces are evidence enough of a correlation between the ideas of brute force and coercion. One is

¹⁶³ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 146.

¹⁶⁴ Amos Perlmutter, “From Obscurity to Rule,” 839.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 837.

¹⁶⁶ Mehran Kamrava, “Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (Spring, 2000): 80.

certainly less subtle than the other, but the institutions that operate using either brute force or coercion all fall under the category of Syrian security forces, and according to a list from 1995, some civilian agencies were even headed by army officers.¹⁶⁷ Even the differences, however, between Za‘im’s reign and the current regime represent transformations in ideas that began with Za‘im’s coup. For now, the utter lack of separation between civilian and military are indicative of the gradual distortion of an idea—force—that is a fundamental of the military into a system of domination that uses psychologically manipulative tactics backed by the threat of force, and has the audacity to label the bureaus that carry out those tactics “civilian.”

As Lisa Wedeen shows, coercive compliance was a technique that developed under Hafiz al-Assad. His son and successor, Bashar al-Assad, has retained many of the same measures. Nevertheless, the army remains an integral part of the current regime, along with the other institutions that have the ability to reinforce “coercive compliance.” When asked in February 2011 whether unrest and revolution would occur in Syria, Fawaz Gerges, professor of Middle Eastern politics at the London School of Economics, responded in the negative, explaining, “The army in Syria is the power structure... the army would fight to protect not only the institution of the army but the regime itself, because the army and the regime is one and the same.”¹⁶⁸ Current events would appear to disprove Gerges’s denial that the “Arab spring” would spread to Syria. Yet perhaps the better question to ask Gerges would have been whether or not political reform that included separating the army from the government could ever occur.

The aim of this thesis has been to show how intricately connected the army has been to Syrian politics, beginning with the coup of Husni al- Za‘im in 1949. The coup indicated that the

¹⁶⁷ See Appendix VI from Daniel Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), 27.

¹⁶⁸ Staff Writer, “Syria: ‘A kingdom of silence,’ ” *Al-Jazeera*, 9 February 2011, accessed 17 February 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/>.

army as an institution had begun to develop its own consciousness, related partially to ethnic, sectarian, and socioeconomic identities, and its own agenda based on differing ideas of political legitimacy. Za'im's attempts to solidify his own legitimacy as a leader relied on these very ideas. Because the army had self-awareness as an institution as well as a political agenda, both of which Za'im launched onto the national stage, the army was able to carve out and maintain its status as a central body in Syrian politics. Whether its officers ruled covertly or directly in subsequent regimes, the army still has yet to exit from Syrian politics.

Today, protests continue spreading across Syria and demonstrators demand an end to rampant corruption, lifting of the emergency law that has been in place since 1963, release of political prisoners, and other reforms. Despite the many developments that have taken place between Za'im's coup in 1949 and today, Za'im's coup marked a turning point in pre-1949 Syria where internal developments in the army itself and external political, economic, and social factors allowed the army to create and maintain a firm grip on a deeply entrenched position within Syria's politics and government. Furthermore, the idea upon which military authority is predicated—the threat and ability to use force—has transformed and become embedded in the very nature of Syrian governance. Today, not only the army but also other branches of state security play a dominant role in Syrian politics and everyday life.

At the beginning of this thesis, I suggested that Husni al-Za'im's coup served as a turning point, launching Syria on the trajectory that brought it to where it is today. As I write, circumstances in Syria and other regions of the Middle East remain largely uncertain and open-ended. No one knows or can predict what happen. Nevertheless, for the first time in decades, the possibility exists for Syria to redirect the trajectory of its historical narrative.

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