Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics

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TO THE PEOPLE OF SYRIA

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PREFACE

IN THE FIRST two parts of this book attention is centered on Syria's peasantry. An attempt is made to throw into relief the elements of significance in its social differentiation and in the evolution of its mode of life, economic circumstances, and forms of consciousness and behavior. This, it is hoped, will contribute to a better understanding not only of Baʿthism—which, as will be clear from Part III of this work, was really a mantle for a variety of forces with different instincts and frames of mind—but also of the holders of the crucial levers of power since 1963, who had their roots in rural society and had to a large extent been shaped by its historical experience. In the remaining parts of the book the focus of interest shifts to these power holders and, more particularly, to Asad and to the characteristics of his regime and the main lines of his conduct.

This work does not seek to prove or disprove any particular thesis or draw from the accumulated evidence any general theory but to interpret, as accurately as possible, the relevant data on Syria in the country's own historical and contemporary contexts. In many chapters the chosen model involved a progress from low- or middle-level generalizations to the pertinent corroborative evidence.

In the course of my research and during visits in 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1992 to villages in different regions of Syria—in the Ḥawrān, the Druze and ʿAlawī mountains, the Ghūṭah of Damascus, the Ḥimṣ and Ḥamāh plains, and in the neighborhoods of Aleppo and Dayr-iz-Zūr—I received help from many peasants who opened their hearts to me and shed light on various aspects of their life and the vicissitudes in their fortunes over the years. I am also indebted to many other Syrians—writers, journalists, scholars, specialists, businessmen, state and Baʿth party officials, and leaders of opposition movements—who shared with me their views or provided me with their publications, and who are cited at appropriate points in the text or footnotes, or must be left unnamed.

I benefited much from conversations I had at different stages of my work with the late Akram al-Ḥūrānī, the inspirer of the first agrarian movement in Syria's history; the late Michel ʿAflaq and Ṣalāḥ-id-Dīn al-Bīṭār, founders of the Baʿth party; the late Zakī al-Arsūzī, the most prominent leader of the Arab refugees from Alexandretta; Hānī al-Hindī, a leader and founder of the Arab Nationalist Movement; the early Baʿthist or Arab Socialist activists Jalāl as-Sayyid, Dr. Wahīb al-Ghānem, Dr. Sāmī aj-Jundī, Dr. Anṭūn Maqdisī and ʿAbd-ur-Raḥmān al-Mārdīnī; Dr. Ibrahīm Mākhūs, one of the more influential civilian allies of General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd; Colonel ʿAbd-ul-Ḥamīd as-Sarrāj, chief of Syria's Second Bureau (Military Intelligence) from 1955 to 1958 and minister of the interior in the days of the United Arab Republic; and Colonel Aḥmad al-Mīr, member of the inner core of the Military Committee, which formed the center of gravity of the Baʿth regime of the 1960s.

I owe acknowledgments to the headquarters of the Baʿth Command, which obligingly furnished me with the results of censuses relating to the numerical strength and social composition of the Baʿth party in 1992 and earlier years; to the late Abū Iyād, a leader of the Palestinian resistance, who was generous with his time and allowed me access to the files of the Palestine Liberation Organization on its relations with Syria's regime; to ʿAdnān Saʿd-ud-Dīn, one-time superintendent general of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, who patiently answered the numerous questions I put to him; and to Tammām al-Barāzī, a journalist from Ḥamāh, who kindly provided me with the texts of his interviews with the various leaders of the opposition.

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I would also like to express my thanks to the French Institute in Damascus for its hospitality; to the Social Science Research Council in New York for awarding me a postdoctoral research and travel fellowship in 1985; to the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University for granting me a sabbatical leave in 1992; and to my former colleagues at Georgetown, Professors Ḥalīm Barakāt, Michael Hudson, Ibrahīm Ibrahīm, Ibrahīm ʿOweiss, John D. Ruedy, Hishām Sharabī, and Barbara Stowasser, for their support and encouragement.

I am specially beholden to Thābet al-Mahāynī, one of the founders and leading figures of the Arab Nationalist Movement and of the Nasserite Alliance of the Laboring Forces of the People and deputy director general or chief executive officer of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce between 1960 and 1983, and executive director of the U.S. Arab Chamber of Commerce in New York from 1985 to 1987, whom I often inconvenienced with questions, particularly on matters relating to Syria's mercantile class, and who was always helpful.

Of course, none of the above-mentioned persons is responsible for the opinions I express in this book, or the generalizations I make, or the errors into which I may have fallen.

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CHAPTER 17

Focusing for a While on the More Subtle Forms of Power

CONFINING ATTENTION exclusively to the leadership at the very top of society or to the heads of the key institutions of the state would keep indirect but effective forms of power in Syria out of view.

As a rule, it is not easy to gain access to evidence for the ability of groups or individuals outside the formal power loop to influence, by roundabout or clandestine means, or through personal connections or informal relationships, public policies or the course of events in manners answering to their purposes. But one illuminating example comes readily to mind. During Asad's "time of troubles," that is, in the period 1976–1982, a belief was current in Damascus that the merchants of Sūq al-Ḥamīdiyyah—one of the city's principal markets—were playing a double game. At least some of them were thought to be liberally subsidizing the Muslim Brethren while avoiding any public identification with the movement. Others, by gestures of support to the government through the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, secured concessions for the class as a whole. Thus in 1976, when the Muslim Brotherhood launched out against Asad's rule, and again in 1980, when its activities were approaching their peak, Asad eased matters for the merchants by sharply increasing their import quotas for consumer goods. The value of their registered imports rose from 1.72 billion Syrian pounds in 1975 to 3.63 billion pounds in 1976 and 4.17 billion pounds in 1980.[1] Asad also took pains in 1980 publicly to "thank and salute the Chamber of Commerce and merchants of Damascus for their patriotic feelings . . . and their devotion to the national interest."[2]

All this suggests, if anything, that when it comes to shrewdness, the mercantile class measures up to Asad. It is necessary to add that its capacity for making the most of his ingratiating policy was enhanced by the flow of money into front-line Syria in the 1970s from the Arab oil-producing Gulf states, and by the remittances of Syrians working abroad and the generally upward trend of agricultural production.[3]

It is interesting that the president's younger brother Rif'at strongly suspected in the heyday of his power that "the merchants and owners of businesses" had been a driving force behind the dissensions within the Ba'th leadership since 1963. "They harbor feelings of ill-will toward the party," he confided to a friend who served under him in the Defense Companies. "We are not unaware," he went on, "of the rumors circulating at the popular level about the large role they have played, overtly and secretly, at home and abroad, in sowing discord among the members of the Ba'th command since the onset of the revolution,

and there is probably truth in what is said about their readiness to recoil from no intrigue calculated to divide our forces and break us up."[4]

Rif'at also blamed the merchants for the widespread talk about his financial wheelings and dealings. He had asked the same friend: "What do you hear? What do the people say about me?" "They refer to you," his friend unreservedly replied, "as ḍarrāb, *nahhāb*, *qammār*, *wa khammār*—a womanizer, plunderer, gambler, and booze guzzler." "This," Rif'at charged, "is the work of the merchants, an invention by them, and a product of their envy and jealousy. They have been accustomed to lay their hands on everything in the country and, if this is beyond their reach, they will be satisfied with nothing less than an apportionment that would leave the ruling power holding the reins of government and the merchants monopolizing money and the means of [economic] management."[5] While suggesting that the merchants and businessmen sought to undermine his position, Rif'at conceded that he had cultivated "relations" with them, but contended that in this he was driven by the hope of "reducing the intensity of their hatred of the regime."[6]

Quite apart from an underlying motive to justify himself, there are, it is obvious, flaws in Rif'at's assertions, in particular a proneness to exaggerate and to lump together the business class without regard to differences in values or aims between, at least, such elements as the traditional merchants and the nouveaux riches, or the relatively independent entrepreneurs and those whose wealth, as one Syrian businessman put it, "is political or has political cover or those who merely front for the security services and made their money swiftly and with little effort."[7]

For all that, there is little doubt that the well-connected business elite, in its various subdivisions, is very skillful in advancing and protecting its interests and in clearing away impediment after impediment from its path. It is true that it does not, in any direct sense, have its hands on the levers of high policy, and that the business class as a whole, having steered clear of formal affiliation with any political party, has had no footing in any of the Ba'th commands since 1963,[8] and occupied only 3 out of the 186 seats in the 1973–1977 sessions and 18 out of the 250 seats in the 1990–1994 sessions of the largely ceremonial People's Assembly.[9] Even so, things have been going the way of the business leaders to some extent, if interruptedly, since 1970, and increasingly and more meaningfully since the middle 1980s, in matters affecting not only commerce but also other parts of the economy's private sector.

Suggestive of the growing progress of businessmen is the 50 percent increase in the "special" membership of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce and the tripling of its "first class" membership between 1971 and 1990 (Table 17–1). The recent sharp decline in their tax burden by a scaling down of the business tax law also points to an unequivocal tendency on the part of the government to accommodate their interests: as is clear from Table 17–2, the maximum tax liability on net profits from business fell from 70.74 percent in 1974 to 45 percent in 1992. Even more favorable, from their standpoint, is Law No. 10 of May 5, 1991, for the Encouragement of Investment. Under this law, develop-

TABLE 17–1
Membership in the Damascus Chamber of Commerce by Class in Selected Years

Class	Number of Members 1971	Number of Members 1990	Minimum Capital in 1990 in Syrian pounds (SL)
Special	44	66	For public sector companies and private joint-stock companies, SL3 million; for individual establishments, SL 2 million
First	104	331	SL 1 million
Second	230	868	SL 800,000
Third	627	1,381	SL 600,000
Fourth	1,210	6,040	SL 300,000
Fifth	1,535	—[a]	—
Total	3,750	8,686	

Sources: Damascus Chamber of Commerce, *An-Nashratu-l-Iqtiṣādiyyah* (Economic Bulletin), No. 2 of 1981, p. 7; and No. 1 of 1991, p. 61. The figures for the minimum capital for the various classes are taken from Article 20 Paragraph B of the Internal Rules of the Chamber.

[a] The fifth class was annulled in 1982.

TABLE 17–2
Tax Liabilities on Net Profits from Business in 1974 and 1992

1974		1992	
Net Profit (selected amounts in Syrian pounds)	*Tax Liability[a] (% of net profit)*	*Net Profit in Syrian Pounds*	*Tax Rate[a] %*
10,000	14.74	Up to 20,000	10
20,000	18.09	Over 20,000 to 50,000	14
50,000	28.14	Over 50,000–100,000	18
100,000	42.54	Over 100,000–200,000	22
200,000	55.44	Over 200,000–400,000	26
300,000	61.97	Over 400,000–600,000	30
400,000	65.24	Over 600,000–800,000	35
500,000	68.54	Over 800,000–1,000,000	40
600,000	70.74	Over 1,000,000	45

Sources: For the 1974 figures, see Damascus Chamber of Commerce, *an-Nashratu-l-Iqtiṣādiyya* (Economic Bulletin), No. 2, August 1989, p. 25. For the 1992 figures, see Article 1 of Law No. 20 of 6 July 1991 relating to changes in the scale of income tax rates. These changes took effect in January 1992.

[a] Including surcharges for local administration, schools, and the national defence and war effort.

ment projects with tangible assets of more than 10 million Syrian pounds (converted at "the rate prevalent in neighboring countries"—$1 = 42/43 Syrian pounds in 1991) and duly approved by a Supreme Investment Council headed by the prime minister, enjoy among other advantages exemption from all taxes for a period of five years, if undertaken by individuals or private companies, and for a period of seven years, if undertaken by mixed companies with a public-sector participation of at least 25 percent. If more than 50 percent of the project's output is exported and the proceeds are transferred in hard currency through Syrian banks, its tax holiday may be extended by two years.[10]

The rise of businessmen to a greater role in the country's economy can be inferred from Table 17–3, which points to a marked expansion since 1986 in their share of the total value of Syria's registered foreign trade. Assuming for the moment the accuracy of the figures in the table, this share, insofar as imports are concerned, bounced up and down in the 1970s, declined in the first half of the succeeding decade, sinking to a record low of 8.3 percent in 1984, but rebounded subsequently, peaking at 65.3 percent in 1995, and as regards exports was, except for the year 1976, on a generally downward trend after 1973, bottoming at 7.6 percent in 1985, but went through a sizable growth afterward, climbing to as high as 48 percent in 1989. The figures relating to the value of the transactions upon which these percentages are based, however, do not lend themselves to a precise interpretation due to a number of factors: among others, the difficulty of determining the effect of inflation,[11] the tendency on the part of at least some merchants to exaggerate the value of their exports in the hope of increasing their access to import licenses, and the uncertainty as to whether, in the sets of official figures for the various years, due account was taken of the use since 1981 of different exchange rates for government and private-sector transactions.[12]

It is, nevertheless, beyond question that private businessmen have been forging ahead in Syria's foreign commerce from 1986 onward. In internal trading—on the retail front—they had the lion's share all along or, as *Tishrīn*, a government daily, put it in 1985, "the law of supply and demand prevails on the widest scale." Questioning the effectiveness of the official machinery of price control, the paper went on to affirm that "in the markets for fruits and vegetables middlemen have the last word." In the entire retail trade, *Tishrīn* added, "the government's share does not exceed 7 percent."[13] As is evident from Table 17–4, however, the public sector is still dominant in manufacturing, private capitalists being important mainly in light industry. Moreover, banking and the wholesale trade in wheat and cotton remain state monopolies.

Up to this point, in trying to ascertain the extent of the progress of private businessmen in recent years reliance has been placed on official statistics, which do not provide completely accurate indices of the real gains in the domain of private commerce, if only because they do not reflect the unusual growth in the volume of the "unofficial" or clandestine economy, or what is sometimes labeled by Damascenes as "the fourth branch of trade," that is, the trade in smuggled goods.[14] How rife this trade has been may be gathered from

TABLE 17–3
Value of Registered Imports and Exports by the Private Sector and Its Percentage Share of the Total Value of Syria's Registered Imports and Exports, 1972–1995

Year	*Value of Imports by Private Sector*[a] *(in billions of Syrian pounds)*	*Private Sector's % Share of Total Value of Imports*	*Value of Exports by Private Sector*[a]	*Private Sector's % Share of Total Value of Exports*
1972[b]	0.72	34.6	0.33	28.7
1973[b]	0.73	31.2	0.39	29.3
1974	1.11	24.2	0.37	12.6
1975	1.72	27.7	0.35	10.2
1976[b]	3.63	39.5	0.54	13.1
1977	2.93	27.9	0.50	11.9
1978	2.78	28.8	0.46	11.0
1979	3.62	27.7	0.52	8.1
1980	4.17	25.8	0.60	7.3
1981	4.23	21.4	0.72	8.8
1982	2.89	18.4	0.85	10.6
1983	2.11	11.8	0.82	10.8
1984	1.33	8.3	0.72	9.9
1985	2.45	15.8	0.49	7.6
1986	2.71	25.3	1.57	30.3
1987	5.99	21.5	3.37	22.2
1988[b]	6.68	26.7	5.53	36.7
1989	10.02	42.6	16.19	48.0
1990	12.40	46.0	21.11	44.6
1991	16.57	53.4	13.65	35.4
1992	24.54	62.6	7.37	21.2
1993	28.75	61.9	8.84	25.0
1994	38.30	62.4	13.68	34.3
1995	34.54	65.3	12.69	28.5

Sources: Syria, *Statistical Abstracts*, for various years.
Note: The figures do not, of course, include the value of smuggled goods.
[a] In rounded figures.
[b] In 1972 the official exchange rate per US $1 stood at 3.80/3.82 Syrian pounds, rose to SL 3.60/3.65 in 1973, but depreciated to SL 3.90/3.95 in 1976, and SL 11.225 in 1988; but several different rates were used for private-sector transactions from 1981 onward.

observations made in 1985 by a Syrian official at a seminar organized by the newspaper *Tishrīn*. "It is my belief," he said, "that the Customs Department is in possession of data which indicate that there are about 50,000 smugglers in this country." "It is probable," he added, "that through the contraband traffic no fewer than 10,000 have become millionaires."[15] Consonant with these remarks is an opinion—based also on probability—set forth in an unpublished report prepared in 1987 by a number of economic experts. "There are," the report read, "no estimates of the size of the unofficial economy but it is believed to

TABLE 17–4
Value of Gross Output of Private Industrial Sector at Current Prices and Its Percentage Share of the Value of Syria's Total Industrial Gross Output

Year	*Value of Output*[a] *(in billions of Syrian pounds)*	*% Share of Total Industrial Gross Output*
1970	0.85	32.6
1971–1973	—[b]	—
1974	2.51	37.6
1975–1978	—[b]	—
1979	4.99	28.4
1980	6.78	28.6
1981	7.13	21.4
1982	9.46	29.4
1983	10.56	27.3
1984	8.72	21.9
1985	8.81	22.1
1986	11.11	26.3
1987	13.47	24.4
1988	31.28	35.4
1989	33.84	30.4
1990	40.37	27.5
1991	44.83	28.2
1992	58.88	31.9
1993	70.36	34.8
1994	80.88	34.4

Sources: Syria, Office of the Prime Minister, Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract, 1972*, p. 148; *1984*, pp. 188–89; *1986*, pp. 210–11; *1990*, pp. 170–71; *1991*, pp. 170–71; *1992*, pp. 170–71; *1994*, pp. 171–73; and *1996*, pp. 182–84; and *idem, Aj-Jumhūriyyat-ul-'Arabiyyatu-s-Sūriyyah tī Arqām, 1974–1975* (The Syrian Arab Republic in Figures) (Damascus, 1976), p. 14.
[a] In 1970 the official exchange rate per US $1 stood at 3.80/3.82 Syrian pounds, from 1979 to 1987 at SL 3.90/3.95 and from 1988 to the present at SL 11.25.
[b] Not available.

exceed—and possibly by much—30 percent of the Gross Domestic Product."[16] Unsurprisingly, the French News Agency reported on June 23, 1988—if an opposition journal is leveling with its readers—that Syrian currency estimated by Lebanese economic circles at between 50 and 90 million pounds (roughly between 1.4 and 2.6 million dollars) slipped daily across Syria's border with Lebanon, much of it ending in the eastern sector of Beirut, where the Syrian army had no presence. With part of the smuggled money, consumer goods, including luxuries, were purchased in Lebanese markets for ultimate conveyance into Syria by stealth. Another part was converted into hard currency and kept in foreign bank accounts, being earmarked for the financing of illicit im-

ports into Syria from Europe and the Far East. For the purposes of the surreptitious trade with Turkey, the remaining currency was said to have been exchanged for gold ingots.[17]

It is difficult to identify the big operators in the secret, tortuous, and seemingly recession-proof world of smugglers, but well-informed Syrians affirm that some businessmen from among the elements recently risen to wealth are involved, not directly but through professional agents who have armed bands at their beck and call and, being amply remunerated, their own fleets of trucks and chains of warehouses and hideouts. The businessmen in question are also said to be skilled at circumventing difficulties and to have silent associates high up in the Customs Administration and in the Security and Intelligence services.[18] Back in 1981 a member of the People's Assembly who, to all appearance, was familiar with the ins and outs of the clandestine traffic, enlightened his colleagues on its elaborate division of labor, with specific functions—such as the securing of roads, the purchase or transport or distribution of illicit commodities, and the bribing of customs officials—assigned, he pointed out, to specialized but mutually dependent groups.[19] A respected Syrian economist implicated unnamed American tobacco companies: he maintained that they compensated smugglers for losses in the cigarette trade incurred through confiscations by customs officials.[20]

As to the methods of the smugglers and their allies, it would be enough to mention—as the member of the People's Assembly just cited brought to light—that the chief of a customs detachment lived under the threat of violent death and did not "dare to move outside his home" because, without counting the risk to himself, he had seized two trucks loaded with prohibited goods, one on the Tripoli-Ḥimṣ road and the other near Maṣyāf, and had refused an offer of 100,000 Syrian pounds to release one of the impounded trucks.[21]

But officials higher up do not appear to be as diligent or as earnest in combating the smugglers as this unfortunate middling customs employee. In a 1993 interview Asad acknowledged that "smuggling is a problem," but indirectly suggested that Syria has long borders and urged that his regime had "thwarted many undertakings" by illicit dealers, and that its courts had passed "severe sentences" on those whom it was able to apprehend. "However," Asad added, "the smugglers are usually armed and violent and there were frequent clashes between them and the security forces which caused loss of lives on both sides."[22] Nevertheless, a complaint recurrently heard in Damascus is that the government, while cracking down from time to time on the smaller smugglers, tends except in few instances to turn a blind eye to the activities of the well-connected bigger culprits, leaving them unpunished. In this regard, when a delegate to the 1985 Ba'th Regional Congress raised the issue of outlawing the Lebanese black market, a Ba'thist lady reportedly stood up and boldly wondered how could it be proscribed when "all present" thrived on it, "drawing a hearty laugh from Asad."[23]

It remains to account for the ability of at least the bonafide businessmen to influence the government toward policies sensitive to their needs and interests,

as is borne out by the already highlighted favorable legislation on many of the issues uppermost on their minds.

Although the increasing integration of the world market and the recent changes in the international balance of power have been important contributory factors, of direct bearing as a source of their influence is their money, much of which is socked away in foreign bank accounts far beyond the reach of a government keen on attracting it back, particularly in years when foreign aid to Syria markedly diminishes, as after the collapse of the Soviet Union or during much of the 1980s, when help from the Arab Gulf states almost dried up in the wake of Asad's alliance with the Iran of Rūhullah Khumaynī. Congruently, since the introduction of Investment Law No. 10 of 1991[24] more capital has been coming into Syria than leaving it. According to official sources, from May 1991 to August 1992 new investments within the country, mostly by Syrians but partly by foreigners, amounted to $1.6 billion and, on the average, came to about $3.76 billion in 1996. Some of these investments were made by Syrian expatriates who are said to control between 50 and 60 billion dollars.[25]

No less significant as an explanation for the influence of businessmen is their success in *culturally* overcoming senior officials in key state institutions, that is, in imbuing them with the spirit of gain by which they themselves are animated, and exploiting, to no little degree, their new hunger for money. This process gained ground in measure as the regime entered into a fog ideologically, and many of its elements lost their sense of purpose. As early as 1977 corruption grew so rampant that Asad deemed it necessary to set up a Commission of Inquiry into Illicit Gains, empowering it to deal with every form of bribery or abuse of office, and with a view to distancing himself from these practices, used the occasion to donate to the state "the few patches of land which I inherited . . . and the house that I own in Damascus and bought in 1964 . . . with a loan from the military establishment."[26] But a year later a member of the People's Assembly still bemoaned "the ability of the merchants . . . and their agents to win over, by their own special means, many of the officials responsible for the public sector,"[27] and in 1980 the Seventh Ba'th Regional Congress felt bound to recommend "the screening of comrades whose movable and immovable assets exceed half a million Syrian pounds and the application to them of the principle: 'where did you get this from?' "[28] But all apparently to little avail. In 1985 the Eighth Ba'th Regional Congress decried the lingering corruption "in a number of state institutions,"[29] and in 1987 a congress of the General Federation of Labor Unions threw into relief "the many instances in which the parasitic bourgeoisie, working hand-in-glove with officials in responsible positions . . . played fast and loose with the existing laws and rules."[30] To this day payoffs and kickbacks remain, it would seem, beyond remedy.

The businessmen engaging in such practices enjoy, it goes without saying, unique privileges. The higher the standing of their silent partners in the government, the greater are their own economic chances. As a traditional Damascene merchant put it in 1992, "the advantages they get are denied to others; that which is permissible to them is forbidden to me."[31]

Some members of the business class are undoubtedly scripted and directed by the men close to the center of power, but sometimes it is difficult to say who is pulling the strings and who is dancing on them, if only because the more powerful, while adept in the arts of constraint or restraint, are less knowledgeable when it comes to the intricacies of the economy or the management of money. In any case, both elements are enriching themselves at the expense of the public.

The buying of persons in authority or with power by businessmen is not something peculiar to Syria, of course. It is enough in this regard to call to mind an observation made not so long ago by a Washington insider and a more recent advice by a British lobbyist. In the U.S. Congress, remarked the Washington insider, "on too many occasions, the laws were not passed—they were purchased."[32] The advice by the lobbyist was given to a foreigner who was having difficulty gaining approval for his purchase of Harrods, the renowned London department store. "You need," he told him, "to rent an MP just like you rent a London taxi!"[33]

CHAPTER 18

The Organization of Power at the Second Tier of Asad's Polity and Its Partaking, among Other Features, of a Basic Trait of Peasant Life

The Elemental Instinct for Family and Clan and Its Impact

For very long in most of Syria's villages the family and, to a lesser degree, its extensions—the clan and the tribe—formed the fundamental units of life. From the standpoint of the peasants in these villages, the ties of blood and marriage transcended in significance all other social ties. In their eyes, the kin group enjoyed more moral authority than the state, which they in essence distrusted. This feeling was particularly intense in areas like the ʿAlawī and Druze mountains, especially in the Ottoman period. In times of danger it was in the first place on the kinship unit that the peasants relied for protection, and without the mutual help which it provided they would have had difficulty warding off hunger in years of severe drought.

With many ʿAlawīs the feeling for family and clan extended to the whole ʿAlawī community, not only by virtue of the ties that their shared religious tenets generated or the disabilities and persecution that the community endured over the centuries but also by dint of their belief that the ʿAlawīs were originally one Arab tribe. As Dr. Aḥmad, a son of Sulaymān al-Aḥmad—the late eminent ʿAlawī Imām and holder of the title of "Servant of the Prophet's Household" (*Khādim ahl-il-Bayt*)—put it, the ʿAlawīs "are first and foremost united by kinship, being almost all cousins stemming from one and the same lineage." "In the manner of other Arab tribes," he added, "they inescapably branched out into clans and sub-clans."[1] That this observation may not accord with the historical facts is beside the point. What matters is that it reflects what many—but not all—ʿAlawīs believe. It is necessary to add that, for several generations now, many of the ʿAlawī husbandmen of the Latakia coast and the Banyās plain have been clanless, and that with the younger and educated ʿAlawīs, even those who have their roots in the mountains, clan ties are in various degrees of decomposition. Indeed some have lost all traces of clanship.

The elemental instincts of many—particularly older—ʿAlawīs for family, clan, and community have left, to a lesser or greater degree, their imprint on Asad's power structure. As is clear from Tables 18–1 and 18–2, out of the thirty-one officers whom Asad hand picked between 1970 and 1997 as chief figures in the armed forces, the elite military formations, and the apparatuses of security and intelligence, no fewer than nineteen or 61.3 percent have been ʿAlawīs. Of the latter, eight stemmed from his own tribe, al-Kalbiyyah, and four

TABLE 18–1

Chief Figures in the Armed Forces, the Elite Military Formations, and the Apparatuses of Security and Intelligence, 1970–1997

Name (and Highest Rank Attained)	*Post*	*Place of Birth*	*Date of Birth*	*Sect*	*Tribal Affiliation, if ʿAlawī*	*Family Relationship to President, If Any*	*Class Origin*
Muṣṭafa Ṭlās (*ʿimād* or Army Corps general)	Chief of staff, 1968–1972; minister of defense and deputy commander-in-chief of armed forces since 22 March 1972 but, in terms of real power, carries little weight	Rastan (north of Ḥimṣ)	1932	Sunnī (paternal grandmother of Circassian and mother of Turkish origin)			Lesser rural notability; son of a mukhtār of Rastan and former contractor who furnished provisions to the Turkish army; member of the agricultural clan of Firzāt
Yūsuf Shakkūr (major general)	Chief of staff, 1972–1974; deputy minister of defense in the mid-1970s; subsequently served as ambassador to France and then as deputy foreign minister	Aleppo	1928	Greek Orthodox Christian			Of modest and poor background. When still a child, his father migrated to Brazil
Ḥikmat al-Shihābī (*ʿimād* or Army Corps general)	Chief of military intelligence 1970–1974; chief of staff, 1974–1998; had access to Asad but was a purely professional officer	al-Bāb (northeast of Aleppo)	1931	Sunnī (of Kurdish origin)			Lesser landed rural notability; son of a middle landowner from a locally influential family
Nājī Jamīl (major general)	Deputy commander of air force, 1970; commander of air force, 1971–1978; head of National Security Bureau, Regional Baʿth Command, 1970–1978; deputy defense minister for air force affairs, 1975–1978; lost favor subsequently.	Dayr az-Zūr	1930	Sunnī			Petty official class; son of a policeman from the Dayr-az-Zūr clan of ash-Shawālghah (allies of the Khurshān clan, originally the main social base of the Baʿth party in Dayr az-Zūr)
ʿAdnān Dabbāgh (brigadier general)	Chief of general intelligence, 1970–1976; minister of interior 1976–1980; died in first half of 1980s	Aleppo	?	Sunnī			?
Muḥammad al-Khūlī (major general)	From 1964 to 1970 deputy chief, and from 1970 to 1987 chief of air intelligence; from about 1971 or so until 1987 served simultaneously as chairman of the Presidential Intelligence Committee; from 1987 to mid-1994 deputy commander and since mid-1994 de facto commander of air force and reportedly exercised all along and still exercises much influence as an intelligence advisor to the president	Bayt Yāshūṭ, a village in the district of Jableh	1937	ʿAlawī	al-Ḥaddādīn		Petty landed family; a descendant of a peasant overseer and son of a religious shaykh (according to an ʿAlawite source)
ʿAlī Ḥaydar (major general)	Commander of the special forces from 1968 to 1988, when affected by aneurysm; he ceased wielding direct control over his units but was back at the helm in the early 1990s, only to be apprehended in the summer of 1994 reportedly for "insubordination"; released subsequently	Ḥillat ʿĀrā, a village in the Jableh district	Around 1932	ʿAlawī	al-Ḥaddādīn		Religious middling landed rural notability; son of a man of religion and nephew of Shaykh Aḥmad Muḥammad Ḥaydar, an influential religious reformer who died in 1981 and whose *qubbah* (memorial shrine) is held in reverence locally
Rifʿat al-Asad (brigadier general)	Head of commandos and paratroopers in the Damascus area and at the major air bases of Mezzeh and Ḍmeir, 1966–1970; commander of *Sarāyā-d-Difāʿ* (defense companies), 1971–1984; nominally vice president for security affairs from 1984 to February 1998 but actually excluded from any active role	Al-Qirdāḥah, a village in the district of Jableh (now the chief town of the district of al-Qirdāḥah)	1937	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah	Brother	Petty landed peasant notability; son of a peasant and leader of alʿĀylah quarter of Qirdāḥah
ʿAlī al-Madanī (major general)	Commandant, military police, 1966–1976; chief of general intelligence, 1976–1979	Ḥamāh	?	Sunnī			Petty trading class; son of a seller of a sweet called *jarjaʿah* in Ḥamāh

TABLE 18–1 (Continued)

Name (and Highest Rank Attained)	*Post*	*Place of Birth*	*Date of Birth*	*Sect*	*Tribal Affiliation, if ʿAlawī*	*Family Relationship to President, If Any*	*Class Origin*
ʿAdnān al-Asad (major general)	Commander of the struggle companies since 1973	Al-Qirdāḥah	1942	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah	Cousin	Petty landed peasant notability; son of a peasant
Aḥmad Saʿīd Ṣāliḥ (major general)	Chief of political security, 1970–1987; deputy minister of interior since 1987	Al-Mukharram, a village in Ḥimṣ province	1935	ʿAlawī	al-Khayyāṭīn		Petty landed peasantry; son of a peasant
ʿAlī Dūbā (major general)	Chief of military intelligence since 1974; recently "promoted" to advisor to the president on military intelligence or to deputy chief of staff for security affairs, but apparently still controls the military intelligence corps	Qurfayṣ, a village in the district of Jableh	1933	ʿAlawī	al-Matāwirah		Religious petty landed lesser rural notability, son of a religious shaykh
ʿAbd-ul-Karīm Razzūq (brigadier general)	Commander of the missile corps and air defence forces, 197?–June 1977 (when he was killed by Muslim militants)	Al-Mukharram, a village in Ḥimṣ province	Around 1935	ʿAlawī	al-Khayyāṭīn		Landless peasantry; son of a sharecropper
ʿAlī Aṣlān (*ʿimād* or Army Corps general)	Commander of the Fifth Mechanized Infantry Division, 1970–1975; commander of Syrian component of Arab Deterrent Force in Lebanon, 1976–1978; first deputy chief of staff, responsibe for operations, 1979–1998; chief of staff since 1998	Al-Qabū, a village in the district of Jableh	1933	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah		Petty landed peasantry; son of a peasant
ʿAlī Ṣāliḥ (major general)	Commander of the missile corps and air defence forces since 1977	Ṣafīṭā	1935	ʿAlawī	al-Marāwirah		Petty landed peasantry; son of a peasant
Muḥammad Naṣīf (major general)	Chief of the internal security branch of general intelligence since mid-1970s	al-Laqbeh, a village near Maṣyāf	Around 1939?	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah		Petty landed peasant notability; son of a village notable who is said to have "lived on *atāwas* (exactions)"
ʿAdnān Makhlūf (major general)	Deputy commander of the defense companies, 1971–1979; commander from 1979 to June 1995 of the Republican Guard, a force which was initially of lesser significance than the defense companies but has become from 1984 onward a main prop of the regime security system in the Damascus area	Bustān al-Bāshā, a village in the district of Jableh	Around 1939	ʿAlawī	al-Ḥaddādīn	Cousin of Asad's wife	Landed and well-to-do village notability; son of a landowner and overseer of peasants
Shafīq Fayyāḍ (*ʿimād* or army corps general)	Commander of the Seventh Mechanized Infantry Division, 1973–1978; commander of the elite politically relevant Third Armored Division since 1978, but reportedly incapacitated in 1991–1992 because of a heart attack	ʿAyn al-ʿArūs, a village in the district of Jableh	?	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah	Cousin (son of Asad's aunt); a son of Fayyāḍ is also the husband of a daughter of the president's brother Rifʿat	Petty landed peasant notability; son of a peasant
Ibrahīm aṣ-Ṣāfī (major general)	Commander of the politically relevant First Armored Division since 1978	Ash-Sharāshīr, a village in the district of Jableh	?	ʿAlawī	al-Khayyāṭīn		Landless peasantry; son of a sharecropper
Nazīh Zurayr (brigadier general)	Chief of general intelligence, 1974–1984	Al-Qaryatayn, Ḥimṣ province	1941	Sunnī			From a family of nomadic background
Ṣubhī Ḥaddād (major general)	Commander of air force, 1978–1987	Ḥamāh	?	Sunnī			From a family of artisans

TABLE 18–1 (Continued)

Name (and Highest Rank Attained)	*Post*	*Place of Birth*	*Date of Birth*	*Sect*	*Tribal Affiliation, if ʿAlawī*	*Family Relationship to President, If Any*	*Class Origin*
Fūʾād al-ʿAbsī (high-ranking police officer)	Chief of general intelligence, 1984–1987; governor of Ḥimṣ formerly	Jobar, a village in the Ghūṭah of Damascus	?	Sunnī			Petty landed peasantry; son of a peasant
ʿAdnān Badr Ḥasan (major general)	Chief of political security since 1987; commander of Ninth Mechanized Infantry Division formerly	Ḥimṣ (originally from al-Mukharram al-Fūqānī)	?	ʿAlawī	al-Khayyāṭīn		Petty landed peasantry; a son of a peasant
Ibrahīm Ḥwayjah (major general)	Chief of air force intelligence since 1987	Bayt Yashūt, a village in the district of Jableh	?	ʿAlawī	al-Ḥaddādīn		Landless peasantry; son of a sharecropper
Mājid Saʿīd	Chief of general intelligence, 1987–1994	Damascus	?	Sunnī			From an urban middle-class family
Ghāzī Kanʿān (major general)	A key figure in the military intelligence service; chief of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon; viewed as a possible successor to ʿAlī Dūbā	Baḥamrah, a village in the district of Jableh	Around 1933	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah	His son Yaʿrib is married to a daughter of Asad's brother Jamīl; Kanʿān is also a cousin of Shafīq Fayyād (a son of Asad's aunt)	Well-to-do peasantry; son of a landed peasant
ʿAlī Malāḥafjī (major general)	Commander of air force from 1987 to mid-1994	Aleppo	?	Sunnī			From an artisanal family (makers of bedspreads)
Bāsil al-Asad (major)	A trainee, successively, in civil engineering and as an air force pilot; an increasingly influential figure in the Republican Guard from about 1987 till his death in a car accident on January 21, 1994; had been formally chief of presidential security	Damascus	1962	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah	Asad's eldest son	Petty landed peasant notability
ʿAlī Ḥabīb (major general)	Commander of the special forces since August 1994; formerly Commander of the Seventh Mechanized Division	Ṣafīṭā	?	ʿAlawī	al-Matāwirah		Religious petty landed notability; son of a religious shaykh
Bashshār al-Asad (major)	Although trained as an eye doctor, he has apparently succeeded his brother Bāsil in 1994 as a key figure in the Republican Guard	Damascus	1965	ʿAlawī	al-Kalbiyyah	Asad's son	Petty landed peasant notability
Bashīr an-Najjār	Chief of general intelligence since 1994; formerly director general of the Customs Department	Damascus	Around 1945	Sunnī			From an urban lower middle-class family

Sources: I am indebted to many Syrians (mostly ʿAlawīs) for the details in this table. Though I checked and rechecked these details with different persons, the possibility of factual errors cannot be altogether excluded.

TABLE 18–2
Summary of Table 18–1

Sectarian Affiliation	No.	%	Sect's Roughly Estimated % in Total 1995 Population
Sunnīs	11	35.5	about 73
ʿAlawīs	19	61.3	about 12
Christian	1	3.2	about 10
Total	31	100.0	

Tribal Affiliation of ʿAlawīs	No.	%
Al-Kalbiyyah (Asad's tribe)	8	42.1
Al-Ḥaddādīn (tribe of Asad's wife)	4	21.05
Al-Khayyāṭīn	4	21.05
Al-Matāwirah	3	15.8
Total	19	100.0

ʿAlawīs' Degree of Kinship to Asad		
Close kinsmen by blood or marriage	7	36.8
Others	12	63.2
Total	19	100.0

Class Origin	No.	%
Peasantry		
Landless or sharecropping peasants	3	
Petty landed peasants	5	
Well-to-do peasant	1	
Total	9[a]	29.1
Lesser rural or village notability		
Petty landed peasant notables	7	
Petty landed religious rural notables	2	
Contracting mukhtār or rural town headman	1	
Middling landed rural notables	2	
Middling landed religious rural notable	1	
Total	13[b]	41.9
Others		
Petty official	1	
Petty trader	1	
Petty artisan	1	
Family of bedouin origin	1	
Total	4[c]	12.9
No precise information	5	16.1
Grand total	31	100.0

[a]All ʿAlawīs except for 1 Sunnī petty landed peasant.
[b]11 ʿAlawīs and 2 Sunnīs.
[c]All Sunnīs.

others from his wife's tribe, al-Ḥaddādīn. Of these twelve, seven were drawn from kinsmen closely related to him by blood or marriage, three of whom—his brother Rifʿat, his wife's cousin ʿAdnān Makhlūf, and his own cousin Shafīq Fayyāḍ—commanded or command the more crucial of the elite striking units, namely, the Defense Companies, which formed the chief pillar of his regime from 1971 to 1984; the Republican Guard, which has become one of its main props from 1984 onward; and the Third Armored Division, which since 1978 has been used as a back-up force in subduing or chastising the regime's internal enemies. Moreover, Asad's eldest son Bāsil played a key role in the Republican Guard from about 1987 till his death in a car accident in 1994, and was involved in an important program for the training of aḍ- Ḍubbāṭ al-Qādah or the "officers-leaders," in which carefully selected young men receive advanced education in various fields at the expense of the military establishment, and are apparently being primed to succeed the present generation of leaders in the armed forces in the future. Another of Asad's sons—Bashshār—has, it would seem, taken over his brother's role in the Republican Guard and is also connected with the "officers-leaders" program.

THE LESSER RURAL NOTABILITY AND THE INNER CORE OF THE REGIME'S LEADERSHIP

Out of the nineteen ʿAlawīs who filled or fill positions at this level of the power structure, no fewer than eleven or 57.9 percent descend from the lesser rural or village notability, which owned land but on a small or middling scale and, while not wealthy, enjoyed influence and prestige among the local peasants. Only three or 15.8 percent are descendants of sharecroppers. In other words, the majority does not come from families at the lower end of the rural income or status ladder. Moreover, four are sons of religious shaykhs, including ʿAlī Dūbā, the chief of military intelligence since 1974, and ʿAlī Ḥaydar, the commander of the Special Forces from 1968 to 1994, who is also a nephew of Shaykh Aḥmad Muḥammad Ḥaydar, a religious leader renowned in the ʿAlawī Mountains, particularly among the members of the Ḥaddādīn tribe, for his reformist ideals. Shaykh Ḥaydar, whose qubbah or memorial shrine is held in reverence in his native village of Ḥillat ʿĀrā, sought to free the ʿAlawī faith from superstitions and bring it more into line with modern strains of thought. One other relevant point bears emphasis: the descendants of religious shaykhs, even if they are not themselves shaykhs, retain influence among the villagers or in the larger tribal or religious community, and are respected through their families. This is true at least, in the instance of ʿAlī Ḥaydar.

It will be recalled that officers with roots in the lesser rural or village notability were also preponderant in the Military Committee that formed the backbone of the Baʿth regime of the 1960s. (For the supporting evidence and the historical factors accounting for the economic and social rise of this class, turn to Chapter 12.)

Is Asad's Regime Sectarian?

A close scrutiny of Table 18–1 will show that from 1971 to 1994 the post of air force commander was invariably held by Sunnīs, that is, successively by Nājī Jamīl, Ṣubḥī Ḥaddād, and ʿAlī Malāḥafjī. Again from 1970 to the present only Sunnīs—namely, ʿAdnān Dabbāgh, ʿAlī al-Madanī, Nazīh Zurayr, Fūʾād al-ʿAbsī, Mājid Saʿīd, and Bashīr an-Najjār—have been appointed to the office of chief of the civilian General Intelligence. Similarly, from 1974 to 1998 a Sunnī—Ḥikmat al-Shihābī—was chief of staff, and since 1972 Muṣṭafa Ṭlās, also a Sunnī, has been defense minister. However, none of these officers has or had at any point the power of crucial decision or independent initiative. They clearly drew their authority from Asad and had no military underpinning of their own.

It is true that in the first phase of Asad's rule, that is, roughly between 1970 and 1975, some of them—Ṭlās, Shihābī, and Nājī Jamīl among others—had within their specified range of activities relatively more freedom than in subsequent years. This is explicable partly by the personal ties Asad had forged with them since his days at the military academy or the air force college, and their contribution to Asad's victory over General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, his ʿAlawite rival and Syria's strongman in the second half of the 1960s. But more significant as a causal factor was the relaxed internal political climate of the day, which had its roots in the wide public support Asad's contemporary policies enjoyed. Besides, Asad was then still in the process of consolidating his primary power base. Even at that time, however, trusted aides from his own kin group or community kept a sharp eye on Sunnīs in high military or security posts and had the necessary resources to anticipate, contain, or counter any move unauthorized by him. For example, although Nājī Jamīl stood at the head of the air force, no combat aircraft could take off from any military airfield without the knowledge of agents of the ʿAlawite Muḥammad al-Khūlī, chief of Air Force Intelligence and chairman of the Presidential Intelligence Committee. Moreover, commandos and paratroopers enrolled in the Defense Companies under Asad's brother Rifʿat guarded Syria's major air base of al-Mezzeh on the outskirts of Damascus and the Ḍmeir airfield for operational fighters sixty kilometers to the northeast of the capital. At the same time, the ʿAlawite ʿAbd-ul-Karīm Razzūq controlled the Missile Corps and Air Defense Forces.

Nevertheless, it was during the regime's "time of troubles," that is, in the years 1976–1982—a period marked by controversial Syrian policies in Lebanon, deep erosions in Asad's appeal, recurring waves of deadly assaults by Islamic militants, and cruel reprisals, particularly at Ḥamāh, by the Defense Companies and other elite units—that Asad's dependence on his kinsmen and the ʿAlawī brass and soldiery intensified and became the indispensable safeguard of his paramount power.

After that, high-ranking Sunnī officers counted, with few exceptions, less and less. Ṭlās is still defense minister, but his functions have since the second half of the 1970s been increasingly ceremonial in nature. An ʿAlawite friend of Rifʿat al-Asad who served under him in the Defense Companies was, for all his bias, not far from the truth when he wrote in 1992: "Ṭlās is in the army but at the same time seems as if he is not of the army; he neither binds nor loosens and has no role other than that of the tail in the beast."[2]

As for Ḥikmat al-Shihābī, he had been all along a purely professional officer. His duties were in essence technical, but he remained close to Asad and was often entrusted by him with sensitive missions abroad. Thus at certain points in the Lebanese civil conflict he acted as mediator on Asad's behalf. In the 1980s he reportedly represented him on several occasions in secret meetings with American officials in Washington from which Syria's ambassador to the United States was excluded.[3] As chief of staff, he conducted negotiations in 1994 in Washington with his Israeli counterpart, Ehud Barak, who portrayed him as "focused and highly intelligent."[4] According to well-informed Syrians, however, when it came to moving any Syrian military unit of any important size, the key figure was not Shihābī but ʿAlī Aṣlān, the ʿAlawite first deputy chief of staff for operations from 1979 to 1998 and chief of staff since 1998.

As regards Najī Jamīl, the only other prominent military member of Asad's little knot of Sunnī personal friends, he first incurred the president's displeasure when he ventured in the mid-seventies to express, in officers' circles, misgivings about the growing role of Rifʿat al-Asad, who was then still in his brother's good graces. But Jamīl lost his posts as air force chief and head of the National Security Bureau of the Baʿth Regional Command only in 1978, and mainly because, as was commonly said, Asad felt that he did not do enough to uncover the secret cells of Muslim militants responsible for the then mounting wave of violence. In 1984 he reappeared on the scene at the height of the "succession crisis" (soon to be discussed) and, to the surprise of many Syrians, on the side of Rifʿat. It later transpired, however, that he did this at the direct request of the president, who feared that Rifʿat, if left without allies and the restraint they could bring to bear, would behave recklessly and make a mess of things. But this did not save Jamīl from being subsequently excluded, like Rifʿat, from any active role.

The increasing reliance of Asad, from his regime's "time of troubles" onward, on members of his own community is palpably reflected in Table 18–3. Apart from the special regime-shielding military formations, over which they had all along exclusive control, ʿAlawī generals commanded in 1973 only two out of the five regular army divisions but in 1985 no fewer than six—and in 1992 as many as seven—out of the nine divisions now constituting Syria's regular army.

Is it justifiable to infer from the preceding observations that Asad's regime is at bottom sectarian? Although it is beyond question that Asad's power base is at its core solidly ʿAlawī and that this feature of his rule was in part instrumental in producing in the second half of the seventies and the first half of the eighties a political climate charged with confessionalism and a grievous rift in Syrian opinion along sectarian lines, there is at the same time little evidence that in his

TABLE 18–3

Names and Denominational Affiliations of Commanders of Army Divisions (Excluding the Defense Companies, the Republican Guard, and the Special Forces) in 1973, 1985, and 1992

Division	*1973*		*1985*		*1992*	
	Name of Commander	*Sect*	*Name of Commander*	*Sect*	*Name of Commander*	*Sect*
Divisions formed prior to 1973 war						
1st Armored	Tawfīq aj-Jahanī	ʿAlawī[a]	Ibrahīm aṣ-Ṣāfī	ʿAlawī[b]	Ibrahīm aṣ-Ṣāfī	ʿAlawī[b]
3rd Armored	Muṣṭafa Sharba	Ismāʿīlī	Shafīq Fayyāḍ	ʿAlawī[b]	Shafīq Fayyāḍ	ʿAlawī[a]
5th Mechanized Infantry	ʿAlī Aṣlān	ʿAlawī[a]	Aḥmad ʿAbd-ar-Razzāq an-Nabī	Sunnī	ʿAbd-ul-Ḥamīd Jamāl	?
7th Mechanized Infantry	ʿUmar Abrash	Sunnī	ʿAlī Ḥabīb	ʿAlawī[c]	ʿAlī Ḥabīb	ʿAlawī[c]
9th Mechanized Infantry	Ḥasan Turkmānī	Sunnī	ʿAdnān Badr Ḥasan	ʿAlawī[b]	Nadīm ʿAbbās	ʿAlawī[a]
Divisions formed after 1973						
10th Armored			Ibrahīm Dāūd	Shīʿī?	?	?
11th Armored			Muḥsin Salīm ʿAmmār	Druze	Tawfīq Jallūd	ʿAlawī
14th Armored			Sulaymān ʿIsa	ʿAlawī	ʿIzzat Zaydān	ʿAlawī
569th Armored (the official appellation since 1984 of the reorganized Defense Companies)			Ḥikmat Ibrahīm	ʿAlawī[a]	Ḥikmat Ibrahīm	ʿAlawī[a]

[a]From the Kalbiyyah tribe.
[b]From the Khayyāṭīn tribe.
[c]From the Matāwirah tribe.

economic policies Asad gave a marked preference to the interests of the ʿAlawī community, or that the majority of the ʿAlawīs enjoy more of the amenities of life than the majority of the Syrian people.

If anything, there have been complaints by ʿAlawīs from the highlands that the bulk of the peasants in their areas are destitute of comforts and still dependent for tillage on erratic weather conditions. Despite the electrification of their villages and the gains they made in the field of education, their real earnings from agriculture appear to have been in general on a slow downgrade, at least in the last ten years or so, and only in some cases on a very gradual upscale. To make both ends meet they have often to seek additional sources of revenue. The net annual income of poor families with small landholdings—that is, of the majority of the peasants—in the ʿAlawī Mountains did not exceed, according to a field study sponsored by the Peasants' General Union, 500 Syrian pounds or $139.86 in the 1950s[5] and, on the basis of rough estimates by montane ʿAlawīs,[6] rarely amounted to 30,000 Syrian pounds or about $600 in 1991. Assuming the accuracy of these figures, it is doubtful that they represent a real increase in income, if due account is taken of the sharp decline in the purchasing power not only of the Syrian pound but also of the American dollar in the intervening period.

It is noteworthy that opponents of the regime from all denominations admit that the generality of the ʿAlawīs do not enjoy privileged treatment and are as politically marginalized as the rest of the people. For example, Ḥamūd ash-Shūfī, a Druze and the secretary general of the Baʿth party from 1963 to 1964, affirmed in 1988 that "the ʿAlawīs who enjoy special advantages are in respect to number inconsiderable." Earlier, in the last article written before his assassination and published posthumously, Ṣalāḥ-ud-Dīn al-Bīṭār, a Sunnī cofounder of the Baʿth party, dwelt on "the necessity" of distinguishing between the regime and "the great body of ʿAlawīs who had no role in establishing it and are part of the silent majority of the people who resist its crimes at least with their hearts." Even ʿAdnān Saʿd-ud-Dīn of the Muslim Brotherhood conceded that "many of the ʿAlawīs are oppressed."[7]

As regards the ʿAlawīs in the officer corps who are, on the whole, better off than the ʿAlawī peasants, the prominent ʿAlawī dissident Dr. Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad insisted in 1988 that "the great majority of our officers [ʿAlawīs and non-ʿAlawīs] live at the poverty level." "It cannot be otherwise," he added, "if only because an honest officer has, like other honest employees, merely his pay for income and often supports a large family and has, in most instances, to provide for the education of a brother or a sister."[8]

It is difficult to say to what extent this assertion accords with the facts. In some respects it runs counter to a widely held view that the officer corps is a pampered element of the community in salary, pensions, state loans on very easy terms, cheap goods from army cooperatives, and other privileges, such as subsidized housing: in 1977 Defense Minister Muṣṭafa Ṭlās himself revealed in the People's Assembly that "the Military Housing Establishment charges military officers [over a specified period] only between 46,000 and 64,000 Syrian

pounds for houses in Damascus whose real value is as high as 170,000 or even 200,000 Syrian pounds."[9] In disclosing this fact, which was adduced by way of example and reflected in substance a practice that was in effect not only in Damascus but also in other parts of the country, Ṭlās sought to justify the enactment of Decree No. 4 of 1977, which prohibited beneficiaries from selling houses thus acquired before five years had elapsed from the date they took possession of them and earlier than "the payment of their [nominal] value in full."[10] It would not be altogether surprising that the acquisition of such houses was easier for high-powered than for middle or low-ranking officers.

The Abuse of Authority in High Places and Its Prime Symbol

There is little doubt that many—but not all—senior officers, who are close to the center of power and on whom attention must now be refocused, have grown rich in office. The veteran Syrian politician Akram Ḥūrānī, who had his own knowledgeable sources, maintained in 1985 that Shafīq Fayyāḍ, a cousin of Asad and the commander of the Third Division since 1978, had built a mansion at a cost of 56 million Syrian pounds or about $1.86 million in ʿAyn al-ʿArūs, his native village, and that ʿAlī Dūbā, the chief of military intelligence since 1974, had sunk 80 million Syrian pounds or about $2.6 million into an even more palatial residence in Qurfayṣ.[11] These affirmations—and the excessively large amounts involved—could not be independently verified. But the essential point that Ḥūrānī meant to convey was that the two generals and others at their level of power had in one way or another manipulated their influence to channel riches into their hands. It is, of course, necessary to be wary when handling the evidence of opponents of the regime. At the same time, there is a general feeling in Syria that underhand practices and illicit gains in high places have gone out of control. It is significant that when, on a trip to a village in the ʿAlawī country in 1992, this writer, catching sight of a stately residence perched on a hill, wondered about the identity of its owner, the ʿAlawī taxi driver volunteered: "it belongs to a man in authority, that is, to a thief!" He said at once too much and too little but, having been warned by Syrian friends that some cabmen work as informers for the security services, I did not press for an elaboration.

Until 1985, when he was effectively driven from public life, the prime symbol of the corruption afflicting the regime was the president's brother Rifʿat. That he took shortcuts to wealth cannot be refuted. Even if it is assumed that the legitimate emoluments of his post as commander of the Defense Companies amounted to double or triple the official salary of Syria's vice president or its prime minister, which came to 2,500 Syrian pounds a month in 1973[12] and may have risen to 5,000 Syrian pounds by 1984, there is no way that he could have permissibly accumulated the vast sums needed for the investments he made in real estate in Syria, Europe, and the United States. It is a matter of public knowledge that in August 1982 he paid for a Georgian-style villa on Halter

Court in Potomac, Maryland, $1.1 million with a cashier's check drawn on the Potomac Valley Bank. The funds were reportedly sent over the wires from overseas. Even the bank's president did not "have much experience with this sort of thing" and simply did not "see those kinds of funds go through the bank like that."[13] Earlier, in 1977, Rifʿat bought 2,000 dūnums or 500 acres in the Syrian village of Kfār Zbīn for 1.5 million Syrian pounds (about $150,000).[14] He also purchased at some point a residence in the Paris suburb of Saint Nom-la-Dreteche[15] and, according to an organ of the opposition, owned among other properties in London in 1988 a grand twenty-story building near Buckingham Palace.[16] Some of his Syrian critics put his net worth in the middle 1980s at more than $100 million, others at far higher amounts.[17]

If this is true, one question unavoidably arises: by what means did Rifʿat come to wallow in such wealth? In this connection many particulars passed in Damascus from mouth to mouth. Some, while illuminative, gained currency more by repetition than by evidence, or seemed unduly magnified. Others had the ring of truth. In a conversation with this writer, one merchant affirmed that with a view to helping his transactions forward, a Lebanese businessman of his acquaintance gave Rifʿat in the late 1970s a cadillac and $200,000. Others laid to Rifʿat's charge the taking of kickbacks on government contracts. He was also said to be a "silent partner" of several men of business, including Ṣāʾib an-Nahḥās, a Shīʿī of humble origin from the Jorah district of Damascus who rose to exceptional wealth, was involved in the 1980s in the sale of arms to Iran, and is, among other things, the general manager of the Damascus affiliate of Digital Computers, the chairman of the Arab Syrian Company for the Development of Agricultural Products—a mixed private-state venture—and the agent of Peugeot, Volvo, Volkswagen, Interflug, and Scandinavian Air Lines. Even peasants from the Ḥawrān reproached Rifʿat with appropriating gold that retreating Ottomans, fearing capture, had buried east of Darʿā during the last phase of World War I and which was—as they contended—unearthed during excavations personally directed by him. For his part, the long-time opposition leader Akram al-Ḥūrānī linked Rifʿat to "the surreptitious sales" through Lebanon to dealers abroad of Syrian antiquities, including relics "looted from the Ḥamāh Museum" by his Defense Companies during their suppression of the Ḥamāh uprising of 1982 when, under Administrative Law No. 184, Rifʿat had it all his own way as the city's martial law governor.

Ḥūrānī could not help comparing the ease with which members of Asad's family and some of his closest aides accumulated wealth and the lavish lives they live with conditions in 1954–1957, when he was the head of the Budget Committee in the Chamber of Deputies. He still remembered how the then President Shukrī al-Quwatlī showed up one day at a session of the committee and personally pleaded with its members to allocate 18,000 Syrian pounds (about $5,028) for the purchase of a new presidential car. His old vehicle, he urged, was in bad shape and recurrently broke down. But led by Ḥūrānī, who thought that the amount could better be spent on providing an indigent village with an artesian well, the committee rejected Quwatlī's plea.[18]

Rifʿat himself was miffed by the stories circulating about him in commercial circles and by the opprobrium thrown on his name. "Why," he asked in a pre-1984 tête-à-tête with one of his friends, "are excuses advanced on behalf of the merchant when he enters upon an enterprise or undertakes a project . . . while when others engage in such endeavors, they are reviled and defamed?"[19] At another point in his account, his friend—who, by the way, had served in the Defense Companies—suggested that Rifʿat's detractors charged him with "smuggling narcotics, selling arms, killing the innocents, abducting women, and maintaining suspicious relations with [Syria's] enemies." From their standpoint, he added, the conduct of the Defense Companies constituted their "great proof." While seemingly questioning many of their accusations, he conceded that "in [some] segments of these companies one cannot but wonder: ʿwhere am I? In a military unit or a market?' "[20]

Rifʿat had been an embarrassment to his brother even before Asad's assumption of the reins of government. This is clear from remarks Asad made in November 1970—a few days before his coup d'état—at an extraordinary session of the Tenth Baʿth National Congress in which partisans of his rival Ṣalāḥ Jadīd had the upper hand. After emphasizing that he was "an old and disciplined member of the party" and "bound by its rules," Asad added: "Did you call for an investigation of my brother's conduct and did I object? Did you impose a punishment on him and did I refuse to carry it out?"[21] There was no hint in the summarized version of the proceedings as to the nature of the improprieties in which Rifʿat had been involved, but it would appear that Asad's observations related in part to unauthorized archaeological excavations undertaken at Rifʿat's initiative on the property of the Ḥasībīs, the in-laws of the then President Nūr-ud-Dīn al-Atāsī.[22]

The "Succession Crisis"

Rifʿat was also at the root of the trouble that distracted the regime during the 1983–1984 "succession crisis" set off by Asad's grave illness. On November 13, 1983 he had hurried to his brother's bedside as soon as word reached him of the latter's decline in health, and lost no opportunity to meet with the chief figures of the regime "individually or in groups" as they came to the hospital to express their solicitude for the president's condition. According to an account attributed to ʿAlī Ḥaydar, the commander of the Special Forces, Rifʿat came straight to the matter nearest his heart. "We no longer," he is quoted to have said with pain in his voice,

> have hope that my brother will pull through. . . . Even if he escapes death this time, he will not be able to conduct the affairs of state. . . . The disease from which he suffers is vicious and incurable. He was stricken by it a long time ago. That it racked him severely was kept secret except from myself and some members of the family. While we may with deep sorrow remain on the watch for what will become of him, it is impermissible that we should be heedless of our fate and the fate of the people and the country. Enemies lie in wait for us at home and abroad. . . . Why don't we use our meetings here to deliberate on who will succeed him? . . . I do not believe that you will prefer another man to me. My candidacy to step into his shoes is of long standing. . . . Of this you are aware. You used to confide it to me under your breath and took no precautions to spread it among friends and intimates. The hour has now come. Be, therefore, with me and I will be with you on a well-marked path toward well-defined aims. It may please you . . . that I met with the American ambassador more than once. . . . We agreed to plan together the course that we would steer. . . . He conveyed to me a commitment by the United States to stand by us. . . . I in turn promised him that we would act . . . at the earliest time you deem convenient. Perhaps today or tomorrow would be most opportune . . . for taking the first step toward . . . a new order of things that would, in my view, hold out brighter prospects . . . and bring the country greater good.[23]

It is difficult to determine whether Rifʿat was faithfully quoted or liberties were taken with his actual words or the real facts. That Rifʿat took the feeling of the American ambassador appears to be borne out by a 1984 press report that in "private conversations" with western diplomats Rifʿat "hinted that he was unhappy with Syria's ties to the Soviet Union and would be interested in reorienting Syrian policy toward the West if he were to succeed his brother as president."[24] It was not possible to verify that the U.S. government committed itself to back him up; however, it is significant that in its issue of February 6, 1984, *Business Week* maintained that "the United States is working overtime to forge stronger ties with Syria's 'first brother.' "

At any rate, in November 1983, Rifʿat is said to have pressed the personalities in Asad's inner circle time and again for an early response to his overture and to have been—to use the words ascribed to the commander of the Special Forces—"abominably lavish" in his promises of riches to those who would lend him support.

It is not clear what happened next, but it is doubtful that any of the generals who mattered showed willingness to give Rifʿat a free hand or lay at his feet the keys of the state. In their eyes he did not have the needed qualities or stature to inherit his brother's authority. He was too controversial a figure and, as already noted, vulnerable to charges of corruption. There was also a strong feeling of ill-will in the society at large against his 50,000-strong Defense Companies. They were viewed as lacking discipline, indifferent to human life, and beyond the restraints of the law. The regular army itself was resentful of the special status they enjoyed: until 1983 they were the only major military force permitted in Damascus or near the access routes to the capital, had their own investigative and intelligence units, ran their own prisons, had prior claims or easier access to advanced technology and sophisticated weapons and were, to crown it all, free from the control and financial supervision of the military establishment and unduly favored in emoluments and perquisites. When, at a meeting of the Union of Journalists and Men of Letters held on October 9, 1979, which Asad had countenanced with a view to taking the pulse of the

people, the ʿAlawī poet Mamdūḥ ʿUdwān wondered "why is the pay of the soldier in the Defense Companies higher than that of the officer in the regular forces?" he was giving vent to a widely shared feeling among the soldiery.[25] To many a high-ranking officer Rifʿat's accession to paramount power could only have meant a free charter to misrule. Nor did they approve of the turn in foreign policy he sought to make.

As the days sped and there was no sign of a favorable response from any of the regime's principal military figures, Rifʿat decided to advance in his own way the aim that he had in view. In the latter part of November 1983, at a word from him, men from the Defense Companies began setting up placards bearing his portrait on walls in various parts of the capital. Republican Guardsmen and agents of the internal security services soon intervened, pulling the placards down or covering them up with portraits of the president. But Rifʿat's men reappeared and did the same thing over again. This "war of posters"—to use the label that Damascenes fastened on it—went on for more than a week and ceased only when Asad began to recover his strength, but not before giving umbrage to close members of his family who could not forbear to express their indignation at such an unworthy public display by Rifʿat while his brother lay helpless and in pain.[26]

The tensions within the power structure now subsided, but not for long. They were stirred up anew by an army assignment list that transferred or removed Rifʿat loyalists from positions of real responsibility. Such a list could not have been issued without Asad's approval, and was interpreted as a first step in a conscious attempt to cut his brother down to size. It almost led to a clash in Damascus on February 27, 1984, between the Defense Companies and elements of the Republican Guard, but the conflict was temporarily eased by the appointment of Rifʿat on March 11 as one of three vice presidents. It soon became clear, however, that this was no more than a subtle endeavor by Asad to whittle away further his brother's power. For one thing, his new responsibilities were not defined. For another, an Asad loyalist was appointed to the command of the Defense Companies.

What Rifʿat did next seems, in retrospect, to have been reckless. Back in 1973 his mother had pleaded with him to keep away from the limelight and "appear on the scene only under the standard of your brother." He had sworn to her that he would "remain a ring in his finger" and would "in the manner of Solomon's ring, act only as he directs."[27] But he now broke his oath and played for his own hand. He compelled Asad's appointee to relinquish the command of the Defense Companies, turning it over to his own son-in-law, and on the night of March 30 ordered the armored units he could muster to seal off all access roads to Damascus and advance on the capital in full force.

According to Rifʿat's chronicler, what followed was thus recounted by a key player in Asad's entourage, whom he does not identify but who believed that it was Rifʿat's "folly, rashness, and vanity" that brought him in arms against his brother, and that "Rifʿat in himself amounts to nothing . . . and we all are, like him, of no account and have no weight and are what we are by the favor of the Lieutenant General"[28]

> At 2:00 A.M. my telephone rang. . . . General Ḥāfiz was on the other end. . . . "You might or might not see me after to-night," he said in a shaking voice. . . . "If the die is cast," he went on, "and things shape the course [Rifʿat] seeks, I beseech you and your comrades in God's name to keep faith with me. Tell them that it is my desire that you should all fight to the bitter end rather than allow the country to go to ruin before your eyes. . . . The matter is very serious. . . . It is a conspiracy that he has been hatching for quite a while . . . and with the most ignoble and wicked of men. . . . His emissary has just left me. . . . He urged me and pleaded with me to do Rifʿat's bidding, turn over to him the keys of the country, . . . and leave to Switzerland or any place of my choice with my family and the attendants and the guards I may wish to accompany me. If I refuse to submit to Rifʿat's will this very night, he warned that he will resort to the other language, that of the lightning strike and destructive force. . . . I do not now feel safe from the hazard of an attack or betrayal by him in the coming few moments.[29]

Assuming that the chronicler did not break away from solid fact, the unnamed key player, who in all probability was either Shafīq Fayyāḍ, the commander of the Third Armored Division and a cousin of Asad, or ʿAlī Aṣlān, the first deputy chief of staff, immediately called his orderlies and rapped out instructions for the summoning of the commanders of brigades within reach. After placing the units in a state of alert, he hurriedly joined Asad. Loyal troops within Damascus were then said to have been reinforced "in a cunning way." Simultaneously, other units moved to "encircle" the elements of the Defense Companies that had taken up positions outside the capital.[30]

Earlier that morning ʿAlī Ḥaydar, the commander of the Special Forces, had been—as he himself is said to have disclosed—urgently summoned to army headquarters and confronted with a claim by Rifʿat that he, ʿAlī Ḥaydar, was his ally and "in cahoots" with him. "This allegation," he protested, "is devoid of truth." He was then asked to telephone Rifʿat "and give him the lie in our presence." On being reached by Ḥaydar, Rifʿat said: "I hope you are still intent on honoring your pledged word to stand by me in this hour to which we all have been looking forward." "Where and when," ʿAlī Ḥaydar cut in, "did I make this pledge? How dare you utter such a slander?" Fuming, Rifʿat called him names. "By now playing me false and turning against me," he added, "you bare your true nature." ʿAlī Ḥaydar gave him back affront for affront. "I recognize," he went on, "no leader in this country other than Ḥāfiz al-Asad. He is my benefactor. . . . What I have of power and prestige I owe to him. I am a soldier in his service and a slave at his beck and call. While I am alive I bear obedience to him and will not fall away from him." On this note the high-wrought colloquy ended.[31]

Rifʿat's chronicler suggested that ʿAli Ḥaydar had been playing a double game. "It is not improbable," he wrote, "that he had woven threads with Rifʿat . . . without exposing his subservience to Ḥāfiz al-Asad to any doubt . . . either because he thought it likely that Rifʿat would score a victory over his brother . . . or aspired at securing new prestige in a new post if Rifʿat triumphed."[32] Anyhow, at that pivotal moment in the succession crisis ʿAlī Ḥaydar cast in his lot with the president and thus assisted in bringing Rifʿat to bay.

In the end Asad decided to deal with his brother personally. Repairing to his place of abode, he is said to have castigated him in these words:

> I am out of all patience with you. I can bear no more from you than I already endured. . . . Did you forget that it was I who nurtured you, trained you, led you by the hand to the comforts of life . . . , removed obstacles from your path, saved you from accusations and punishments, and made you my associate in power? . . . You repaid me with ingratitude and by conspiring against me and moving in the darkness of night to pull me down. . . . You no longer have any choice. Your fate is now in my hands. . . . If you do not abide by what I tell you and comply with my orders, I will send you to your death and will have dirges sung over you.[33]

Rifʿat yielded resignedly to his brother. He could not, in any case, have kept to his course. He had been as one walking along a sword-edge. By now the dice were also heavily loaded against him.

It is not possible to vouch for the strict accuracy of the version of the succession crisis given in these pages, if only because of the secretive nature of the politics within Syria's top leadership and the difficulties of securing trustworthy data on the alignments and internal discourse of the regime's central figures.[34]

It would be pointless to dwell at length upon the sequel. It is well known that Rifʿat was stripped of authority and sent abroad to live for a time in exile, being allowed only a few short visits to Syria. Eventually, however, he was given leave to resettle in Damascus, but was excluded from any active role. At the same time, his Defense Companies were thinned down from 50,000 to the size of a regular division—roughly between 15,000 and 20,000 men—and shorn of their privileges, their emoluments being reduced to the normal level. They were also deprived of their special intelligence branch and some of their airborne and missile units, and incorporated into the armed forces. Their command passed to Brigadier General Ḥikmat Ibrahīm, allegedly the husband of Asad's maternal aunt.[35] In these moves against Rifʿat, Asad was apparently abetted by the sages of the ʿAlawī community who, as rumors current then in Damascus had it, perceived Rifʿat as a threat to the survival of the regime as a whole.

The Republican Guard, which since its organization in 1979 had mainly concerned itself with Asad's personal safety, was now markedly strengthened and charged with many of the tasks for which the Defense Companies had been responsible. It became in effect the linch pin of the regime's security system in the Damascus area. ʿAdnān Makhlūf, one of Asad's confidants and a cousin of his wife, remained its commander and was before long promoted to major general. The president's eldest son Bāsil, though merely a major, came from about 1987 to wield palpable authority within the built-up unit in his new capacity as chief of Presidential Security and, after his death in a car crash in 1994, the ground was prepared for Bashshār, a younger son of Asad, to take over his brother's role. In the last few years of Bāsil's life there was a widely held view that he was being groomed to succeed his father, and that the Republican Guard was to serve as his primary power base. More recently the same thing was said with regard to Bashshār.

Indicative of the growing significance of the Republican Guard within Asad's power structure is an assertion by knowledgeable Syrians that this unit absorbs much of the revenue from the oil fields of the Dayr-az-Zūr region—which, incidentally, is in large part not recorded in the country's budget.

It should be added that in June 1995 Major General ʿAli Maḥmūd Ḥasan succeeded ʿAdnān Makhlūf as Commander of the Republic Guard. ʿAlī Maḥmūd Ḥasan, who is in his mid-fifties and of rural ʿAlawī background, is considered to be a highly professional officer. The reason for the change in the command of the Republican Guard could not be ascertained. But ʿAdnān Makhlūf remains an influential figure in Syria's regime.

New Tensions

Tensions within the power structure recurred. They evolved, to a degree, out of Asad's policy of maintaining a state of equilibrium among the regime's central figures. This had been from the outset a first principle of his statecraft. On the whole he had put it into effect with consummate skill. But between 1978 and 1983 he had let his brother Rifʿat slip his leash, thus unwittingly smoothing the way for the body politic to be temporarily thrown out of balance in 1984. He now sought to breathe new vigor into his old policy by pursuing it more consistently and dividing authority among his principal aides in such a manner as to preclude the possibility of another threat to his personal power. The increase in the strength of the reshaped Republican Guard and the salient role within its cadre and in the program of the future "officers-leaders," given at first to Asad's eldest son Bāsil and then to his younger son Bashshār, form essential elements of this policy. At the same time, it is not difficult to understand why, in consequence of the sustained play at counterpoising potential rivals, some of the regime's chief figures could not resist the feeling that they had been virtually reduced to mere pawns on Asad's power chessboard.

In similar manner appear to have been affected at least ʿAlī Ḥaydar, the commander of the Special Forces, a division of 8,000 to 15,000 commandos centered at al-Quṭayfeh, twenty-five or so miles northeast of Damascus, but with units posted since the middle 1980s around Bḥamdūn and Tripoli in Lebanon as well as in the neighborhood of the Syrian port of Ṭarṭūs and in Jabal Qasyūn, a mountain overlooking the capital. At a 1994 meeting of senior army officers attended by Chief of Staff Ḥikmat al-Shihābī, in a comment on Syria's involvement in the peace process and Asad's open commitment to achieve "normal" relations with Israel conditionally upon the full withdrawal of its forces from the Golan Heights,[36] ʿAlī Ḥaydar is said on good authority to have blurted out: "We have become nonentities. We were not even consulted." This imprudence and the attendant wrangle between him and Shihābī must have given offense to Asad when word of what happened reached him, and may have provided one of the causes for ʿAlī Ḥaydar's arrest in the summer of that year

and his replacement in the command of the Special Forces by the ʿAlawite Major General ʿAlī Ḥabīb.[37]

But in his fall from favor other factors may also have been at play. He reportedly raised doubts about the propriety in Syria of a transfer of power by lineal descent. But he did this cautiously and in muffled tones when Asad moved his son Bāsil into the limelight, and thus avoided giving Asad a handle against him. However, he was more forward in his criticism when, in the wake of Bāsil's death, attention shifted to Bashshār. As the story goes, he in effect said that the mantle of Asad does not fit Bashshār and that Syria is not a hereditary kingship. It is very likely that such views reflected a strong inclination among the military; at least it is doubtful that the bulk of the politically conscious Syrians can easily be reconciled to the notion of dynastic power. At any rate, by relieving ʿAlī Ḥaydar of his post, Asad signaled to his principal aides that they would play his way or would not play at all.

After ʿAlī Ḥaydar's arrest, a leaflet is said to have been circulated in Damascus by agents of one of the security bureaus alleging that he had $51 million stashed away in foreign bank accounts. If the reference to such a leaflet owes nothing to invention, the motive behind passing it around, quite apart from the truth or untruth of its content, was obviously to bring ʿAlī Ḥaydar into disrepute.[38]

One other development bears attention. On February 8, 1998, Asad issued an edict dismissing his brother Rifʿat as vice president. As already noted, Rifʿat held this post only nominally and the two brothers had been in disaccord since 1984. The new edict appears to have been prompted by the recent activities of Ṣawmar, one of Rifʿat's sons who, presumably under his father's direction, launched an opposition group in Paris, the Arab People's party. Through *ash-Shaʿb* (the People), a newspaper that he published also in the French capital, and a television station, the ANN (the Arab News Network), which he established in London, Ṣawmar was highly critical of Syria's regime. This naturally displeased Asad, who reportedly asked Rifʿat to put an end to his son's activities. But Rifʿat remained intransigent and allowed his son to keep to his course.

A Word on the Security and Intelligence Networks and Their Key Figures

Scarcely a month after their coup of February 1966, the Baʿthists loyal to General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd condemned at an extraordinary session of their regional congress "the conduct of some of the security organs" during "the past period" and sharply criticized "their numerousness," their "squandering of the money of the people," their "assault on freedoms," and the rise of their personnel "by illicit means" to "a class with special privileges."[39]

This criticism was voiced more than four years before Asad's ascent to the pinnacle of power, and suggests that in some respects his security networks are akin to their forerunners. However, under Asad they became—more palpably

than at any point since Syria's independence—sheer instruments of the ruler, with their forces harnessed to his needs and their chiefs ultimately accountable to him alone. Crises added to their numerical weight and expanded the range, forms, and intensity of their activities, freeing them from restraint and enhancing their power to curb, harass, or suppress political opponents, as during the 1976–1982 clandestine campaign against the regime by Muslim militants. In posthumously published observations made prior to his assassination in 1977, the Druze leader of the Lebanese National Movement Kamāl Junblāṭ described Syria in that year as "a big prison in which pullulate the agents of the secret police (they have attained, according to some reports, the extravagant number of 49,000)."[40] This figure is, in all probability, inflated. But even if the secret police is assumed to have been in 1977 only one-half or one-third as strong, the number would still be, for a small country like Syria, flagrantly excessive. For purposes of comparison, in the United States, which had at the time a population twenty-eight times as large as that of Syria (220 millions in one, 7.8 millions in the other), the total "work force" of the Federal Bureau of Investigations came to only 17,345 in 1970.[41]

It is necessary to emphasize that in the earlier period of Asad's rule, that of 1970–1975, when the course he steered was in high favor, the ranks of the secret police were much thinner, the hand of its investigative agents much lighter, and the watch they kept over citizens more benign. Similarly, in the period after the regime surmounted its internal crises, that is, from 1986 onward, its security networks became increasingly less overbearing or obtrusive in their behavior and more subtle and circumspect in their methods. "No person," affirmed Asad in 1995, "can now be arrested except by the [civil] police that turns him over to a court of justice."[42] But few Syrians accept this statement without some reserve.

Since the early 1980s or so, the security services have also become more efficient. One contributory factor is that the information they collect is now processed, stored, and retrieved electronically. This is also true in the case of the data gathered by the organs of Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence. By contrast, the institutions of the Baʿth party remain uncomputerized. As late as 1985 its Eighth Regional Congress listed among the obstacles hindering its progress "the absence of advanced technical means—such as computers—in the sphere of party activities."[43] It still suffers from a sense of technological inadequacy. From this, it may be justifiably inferred that in the eyes of Asad it does not enjoy the priority that he attaches to the apparatuses of security and intelligence.

Apart from the intelligence units incorporated in the politically relevant military formations, there are today altogether, as far as could be ascertained, four major security and intelligence networks, namely, Political Security, General Intelligence, Military Intelligence, and Air Force Intelligence. All answer ultimately to the Presidential Intelligence Committee. The primary task of Political Security is to detect any sign of organized dissidence or of tendencies, if only in speech, prejudicial to the interests of the regime. General Intelligence is made

up of three branches, that of Palestine, that of Internal Security (the equivalent of the F.B.I.), and that of External Security (the equivalent of the C.I.A.). There is much overlap in the functions of Internal Security with those of Political Security. In bringing into play these two parallel secret forces and thus ensuring that he has always in the security field two strings to his bow, Asad was acting in a manner not unlike that of Napoleon, who pressed into his service a secret police under Fouché and simultaneously organized a counterpolice to check on Fouché.[44] Naturally enough, the agents of Asad's Internal Security and those of his Political Security are unknown to one another, to the point that in the early 1980s some of their elements are said to have exchanged fire, each apparently thinking that the other consisted of Muslim militants. As to Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence, tales that had made their way through the opposition's rumor mill contend that the sharp edge of these two networks is turned against potential dissidence within the armed forces rather than against enemies abroad. But it must be kept in mind that all the security and intelligence establishments operate in intense secrecy, and reports about them are seldom based on definite knowledge.

The key intelligence and security figures under Asad have been ʿAli Dūbā, Muḥammad al-Khūlī, and Muḥammad Naṣīf. They all now hold the rank of major general and all are ʿAlawites (Table 18–1).

ʿAlī Dūbā has had a 24-year run as chief of military intelligence: he has held the post since 1974. Significantly, in the same period Asad changed his prime minister five times.[45] Though recently "promoted," according to one report, to advisor to the president on military intelligence or, as another account has it, to deputy chief of staff for security affairs, ʿAlī Dūbā appears to be still in control of the military intelligence corps.

Born in 1933 to a religious shaykh and a small landowner from the Numaylatiyyah clan of al-Matāwirah tribe, he descends from a family that numbers in the thousands, all bearing the surname of Dūbā.[46] Some of them are, like him, natives of Qurfayṣ, a village in the district of Jableh, but others are indigenous to Alexandretta and still others to Jisr-ush-Shughūr, fifty-three miles northeast of Latakia.[47] The family gained in prestige among montane ʿAlawīs by dint of the "martyrdom" in 1921 of one of its members, Muḥammad Asʿad Dūbā, in a fierce battle against the French led by Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-ʿAlī, a popular man of religion and a chief of the Bashārghah clan of al-Matāwirah tribe.

More relevant as a factor in ʿAlī Dūbā's initial ascent in the military intelligence corps is his membership in the Baʿth party since the 1950s, that is, since his days at the Latakia Holy Land Secondary School. But his durability in power is in essence explicable by the decision he took in 1970 to link his fate to that of Asad, and by the fact that at no subsequent point did he break faith with him.

Some reports insist that over the years Dūbā built a following or a bloc of his own. For example, it is said that General ʿAdnān Badr Ḥasan, the chief of political security since 1987, and Mājid Saʿīd, the chief of general intelligence from 1987 to 1994 (Table 18–1), are Dūbā's allies, that Colonel Muḥsin Salmān, the commander of the Thirty-fifth Commando Regiment of the Special Forces, is his nephew, and that General ʿAlī Ḥabīb, the commander of the Special Forces since 1994, is a fellow tribesman. If true, this can be interpreted as no more than a reflection of Asad's policy of allowing his principal aides to gather strength, but only up to the point that would enable him to continue to hold the scales between them and avoid setting his paramount power at hazard.

Conducive to the efficacy of this policy in the particular instance of ʿAlī Dūbā are several factors. One is his unpopularity among the military officers in general, which has its roots in the tendency of his apparatus to reach into many aspects of their lives. At the same time, there is in their higher ranks not only fear but also jealousy of his authority, seeing that, as an Arab saying goes and as an ʿAlawite opponent of the regime put it, "the dog of the emīr is an emīr."[48] Moreover, tales that are abroad contend that ʿAlī Dūbā has succumbed to corruption, that he has "a lot of fingers in a lot of Lebanese pies," and that he is "a silent partner" of Mundhir al-Kassār, a Sunnī from an-Nabak, a husband of a sister of ʿAlī Dūbā's wife, a former contractor and in the 1980s and 1990s allegedly "one of the kings of drug trafficking." Such contentions, if true, cannot but weaken Dūbā's standing and strengthen Asad's hold on him. But it is necessary to reiterate that it is very difficult to tear away the veil of secrecy that covers the intelligence and security organs and their chiefs, and that a scholar must pick his way with caution amid the pitfalls of hearsay evidence.

Unlike ʿAlī Dūbā, Muḥammad al-Khūlī, for long Asad's leading intelligence advisor, has never been the mark for accusations, even by the enemies of the regime, in any matter involving abuse of authority with a view to personal enrichment. One hears no ill of him except that he may have had a part in influencing Asad toward an undue reliance on members of his own sect. Otherwise he is depicted as upright, competent, deep in Asad's confidence, and unwavering in his loyalty to him. He is also known to be a man of few words and to keep to the background, shunning publicity. Elements of the opposition hold a similar view of him. "Muḥammad al-Khūlī," remarked in 1988 a vocal opponent of the regime and a former secretary general of the Baʿth party, "is among the most discerning of the men around Asad. He is clever and cultured. It is possible that it was he who pushed Asad toward the slippery path of sectarianism. But he is a man with a horizon. I know him personally and know also that his is a nature that is complex."[49]

Muḥammad al-Khūlī descends from the tribe of al-Ḥaddādīn and from a family that historically belonged to a class of intermediaries between the peasants and the absentee landowners. The members of this class were called in some parts of the ʿAlawī country "al-khūlīs" and in the coastal region "shūbāṣīs." As a rule, they functioned as agents of the landowners. Their main task was to watch over the peasants, particularly during the season for reaping and gathering in of the produce. A field study sponsored by the Peasants' General Union depicted the khūlī or shūbāṣī in the preagrarian reform period as "the epitome of force, injustice, intimidation, and high-handedness in the eyes of the peasants."[50] This generalization may not necessarily be true of the forefathers of

Muḥammad al-Khūlī, of course. In any case, according to an ʿAlawite source, his nearest male ancestor, that is his father, was not by occupation a khūlī but a religious shaykh.

Little is known about the early life of Muḥammad al-Khūlī, except that he was born in 1937 at Bayt Yāshūt, a village in the district of Jableh. In his youth he showed no interest in the ideas of the Baʿthists, and in fact had no connection whatever with the party prior to his sudden appearance in the arena of power in 1970 on Asad's seizure of the reins of government. It is not clear when the first link between him and Asad was forged. But it is beyond question that he owes his prominence primarily to his close ties with Asad. On the latter's assumption of the command of the air force in 1964, al-Khūlī was appointed deputy chief and, in 1970, chief of air intelligence; and, not long afterwards, he was made chairman of the Presidential Intelligence Committee, which represented something in the nature of a supreme intelligence staff and played a key role in selecting many of the leaders of the intelligence networks and keeping a close surveillance on their undercover activities.

Al-Khūlī retained his intelligence posts until October 31, 1987, when, for larger reasons of policy and as a consequence of the controversial Hindāwī incident of April 1986 at London's Heathrow airport and the ensuing severance by Britain of its diplomatic relations with Syria, it became necessary to convey the impression that he had fallen out of favor. The Ḥindāwī incident is still open to different interpretations. One view regards it as a clumsy attempt by Syria's Air Intelligence to bomb an Israeli El Al jet in retaliation for the mistreatment of a Syrian delegation on board a Libyan jet flying from Tripoli to Damascus that Israeli fighters had forced down earlier in February. Another interpretation is inclined to suspect that Nidhār Hindāwī was a double agent and a tool in the crafty hands of Mossad, and that Syria's Air Intelligence had fallen into a trap that the Israelis had sprung, their ulterior object being, as the French Premier Jacques Chirac put it, "to embarrass Syria and destabilize the Asad regime."[51] It is still not possible to shed light on the precise role, if any, of Asad or al-Khūlī in the whole affair. But it is not unlikely that al-Khūlī decided to take ultimate responsibility for imprudence or missteps by Air Intelligence and to consent to the semblance of presidential disfavor in the higher interest of the regime.

Despite his formal demotion in 1987 to deputy commander of the air force—a post he would hold till 1994—al-Khūlī continued to stand high with Asad and reportedly exercised all along and still exercises much influence as his intelligence advisor. Since 1994 he has been also de facto commander of the air force. Moreover, Ibrahīm Ḥwayjah, the chief of air intelligence since 1987, is, as Syrians put it, "al-Khūlī's creature" and descends, like al-Khūlī, from the tribe of al-Ḥaddādīn.[52]

As could be imagined, of Asad's principal aides the least open to public scrutiny is Muḥammad Naṣīf, the chief of internal security, which comes to the same thing as the secret police. Little of political import escapes his eyes. He is depicted by opponents of the regime who came in contact with him as a man who is "smooth and slick" and "shows outwardly other than which he harbors inwardly" or "ingratiates himself with you only to stab you in the back." They also affirm that when it comes to methods of investigation or forms of punishment for political offenders, no scruple would weigh with him. In other words, he appears to have all the qualities for the part for which Asad had tapped him.

It is not known when the lines of their lives first crossed. He descends, like Asad, from the Kalbiyyah tribe. This may or may not have formed a bond between them, being as he is from a different subclan and from a different part of the ʿAlawī country. He is also about nine years younger than Asad. Born around 1939 in al-Laqbeh, a village near Maṣyāf, to a lesser rural notable who, according to a Syrian journalist with wide contacts, "lived on aṭāwas," that is, on exactions, Muḥammad Naṣīf joined the army on finishing school and was only a noncommissioned officer in 1963 on the advent of the Baʿthists to power. Not long afterward, close upon his twenty-fifth year, he was entrusted with the section of Internal Security that had the charge of tapping telephones. At the time the secret Military Committee, which included Asad in its inner core, called the shots.[53] Naṣīf proved so equal to his task that in the mid-seventies Asad, now unrivaled in authority, picked him to run the Internal Security Branch of General Intelligence. Since then, despite a recent operation on his heart, he has been Asad's chief instrument in tracking the regime's domestic enemies. Formally he comes under the chief of General Intelligence, but none of the five Sunnīs who held this post during his tenure of office had as much weight or stood as high in Asad's confidence as Muḥammad Naṣīf.[54] He overshadowed them all and, unlike them, enjoyed and still enjoys unhindered access to Asad.

Naṣīf did not, it would appear, escape the temptation of using his influence to build a personal fortune. He is often identified as one of the silent partners of the nouveau riche Ṣāʾib an-Naḥḥās, with whom he reportedly trades favors and who is said to have opened a bank account for him in West Berlin as far back as the 1970s.[55] A prominent Damascene merchant put it somewhat differently: "Ṣāʾib an-Naḥḥās," he said, "belongs to a class of merchants who are of the breed of Internal Security and its chief Muḥammad Naṣīf."[56] These are things that are here merely recounted, but for which it is not possible to vouch.

One puzzling question remains: why has Asad, whose own rectitude in money matters is beyond dispute, tolerated abuses among so many of his key aides, and not demanded a stricter accounting from them? One explanation given by Syrians is that by resorting to improper practices the aides in question weaken themselves, which renders them more pliant to Asad's will. Others say they constitute his power base, which he cannot be expected to shoot in the foot. But the blind eye that he turns to corruption in his entourage has eroded some of his stature and has added to the cynicism that many Syrians feel about his regime.