R O C Z N I K O R I E N T A L I S T Y C Z N Y, T. LXVI, Z. 1, 2013, (s. 74–85)

KAROL R. SORBY

1963: The Spring of Hope for the Baʿṯ*

Abstract

In 1963 events elsewhere in the Arab world began to move swiftly under pressures from the underlying Arab nationalist forces. On 8 February the Iraqi dictator ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim was overthrown and shot in a coup led by the Baʿṯists and Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir's admirer ʿAbd as-Salām ʿĀrif was installed as president. The new tide soon overwhelmed the weak Syrian regime, which collapsed under the joint pressure from Baghdad and Cairo. Here also the Baʿṯists took over in alliance with Nāṣirists and other Arab unionist groups. Both the new Iraqi and Syrian regimes pledged themselves to support the new movement of Arab unity. Iraqi and Syrian ministers arrived in Cairo in scenes of great popular enthusiasm for reconciliation meetings with Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir. This seemed to be another moment of great triumph for Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir, since there were now five of "liberated Arab states" sharing similar aims and ideals. Syria and Iraq had agreed to start immediate negotiations for the formation of a federal union.

Keywords: the army in politics, military coups, the *Baʿṯ* Party, pan-Arab Nāṣirist Officers, Arab unity, sectarianism, minority problems

The 14th Ramaḍān 1382 (8th February 1963) coup in Iraq that finally put an end to the autocratic regime of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim came from the Arab nationalist quarter; no other element in the political spectrum was prepared to undertake the task. The Communists and the left still tacitly supported the regime but they had too little support in the army officer corps. The Kurds had weakened the fighting capacity of the army, but they were in no position to overthrow the regime by themselves. However, there was no real unity of purpose between Arab nationalists beyond their common desire to be

* This study is published within the VEGA 2/0141/12 grant project.

rid of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim and to reorient foreign policy toward some kind of union with other Arab countries.

A new party command had consolidated and the old cadres had resumed activity. In June 1961 the Nāṣirists seceded – or were excluded – from the *National Front* (*Al-Ǧabha al-Qawmiyya*)[1], as the *Baʿṯ* Party would no longer tolerate a partner whom it regarded as a fifth column of Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir and this development strengthened rather than weakened the nationalist underground. Finally, the amnesties granted that year – possibly not a very wise step of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim – restored the leadership which executed the coup in 1963. His acts of clemency had restored to liberty, and often to office and command, some of his most formidable enemies.

During the armed revolt against the regime of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim on 8 February 1963 (the 14 Ramaḍān revolt) a National Council of the Revolutionary Command (NCRC) was set up by the *Baʿṯ* Party to replace the ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim Government. The NCRC was composed of Baʿṯists and Arab nationalist officers.[2] The membership of this council was never disclosed to the public and some of the members were not known even to high authorities. The NCRC was proclaimed to the public as a self-appointed body, presumably deriving its validity from the de facto control of authority by the military, which replaced the extinguished regime by force of arms. No mention was made of the *Baʿṯ* Party in the proclamation to the Iraqi people.[3]

At this stage the NCRC disclosed no new revolutionary principles, for its main purpose was to turn public opinion against ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim, who had allegedly betrayed the goals of the July Revolution. The NCRC appointed ʿAbd as-Salām ʿĀrif, whose name was identified with pan-Arabism, as temporary President of the Republic, pending the establishment of a permanent constitutional regime. But the choice turned out to be unfortunate for the party.[4] The initial response to the new revolutionary regime was favourable; but all opposed to pan-Arabs, especially the Communists, naturally saw grave danger to their very existence in the downfall of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim. The Communists had often been subjected to restrictive measures and were by no means fully satisfied with ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim's methods, but they seem to have realized that if ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim were ever exposed to danger caused by a pan-Arab uprising, they should come to his rescue by rallying the elements opposed to pan-Arabs to his support. Thus, as soon as tanks and armoured cars were seen in the Ar-Rašīd Street

---

[1] The National Front (*Al-Ǧabha al-Qawmiyya*) emerged in 1961 after the collapse of the Front of National Union (*Ǧabhat al-Ittiḥād al-Waṭanī*) and comprised of the *Baʿṯ Party* (*Ḥizb al-Baʿṯ al-ʿArabī al-Ištirākī*), the Independence Party (*Ḥizb al-Istiqlāl*) and the Movement of Arab Nationalists (*Ḥarakat al-Qawmiyyīn al-ʿArab*), in: Layṯ ʿAbd al-Ḥasan az-Zubaydī, *Ṯawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-ʿIrāq*, Dār ar-Rašīd li-an-Našr and Dār al-Ḥurriyya li-aṭ-Ṭibāʿa, Baġdād 1983, p. 516.

[2] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1978, pp. 1004–1007.

[3] For text of the proclamation of 8 February 1963 see "Al-Ǧamāhīr", 12 Feb. 1963; Ibrāhīm Ḫalīl Aḥmad and Ǧaʿfar ʿAbbās Ḥumaydī, *Tārīḫ al-ʿIrāq al-muʿāṣir*, Dār al-Kutub li-aṭ-Ṭibāʿa wa-an-Našr, Al-Mawṣil 1989, p. 222.

[4] Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Baʿth Socialist Party*, Syracuse University Press, New York 1966, p. 68.

heading towards ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim's headquarters, the Communists swiftly entered the battle against the pan-Arabs.[5]

From the beginning of the Ramaḍān revolt, the *Baʿṯ* Party preferred to remain in the Background and to guide the new Government from behind the scenes rather than to come to the forefront and take direct responsibility for public actions. It no doubt tried to avoid possible opposition from religious and moderate nationalist groups until it had overcome a possible Communist counter-uprising.[6] Therefore the young and unknown *Baʿṯists* wished to have an older, well-established figure at the head of the regime, preferably one satisfactory to Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir. It was for this reason that Colonel ʿAbd as-Salām ʿĀrif's co-operation was deemed essential to win the support of conservative elements.[7] The NCRC, composed of the Baʿṯists as well as others, was designed to serve as the link between the Government and the *Baʿṯ* Party. The party hoped that the non-Baʿṯist members of the NCRC, including ʿAbd as-Salām ʿĀrif himself, might eventually become members of the *Baʿṯ* Party. The leadership of the party, entrusted to the Regional Command, was ultimately controlled by a Regional Congress, which could discuss all matters of regional concern to be carried out by the party's representatives in the Government.

From the beginning of the Ramaḍān revolt, the NCRC embarked on sweeping change in the bureaucracy in the civil and military ranks. Staff Colonel ʿAbd as-Salām ʿĀrif was made president and promoted to field marshal, although in the minds of the party members he was to be mainly a figurehead.[8] Staff Brigadier Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr, was appointed prime minister. ʿAlī Sāliḥ as-Saʿdī, was named deputy prime minister and minister of interior and in his capacity as leader of the *Baʿth* Party in Iraq, he became the most influential and powerful member of the three at the time, although his authority did not go uncontested. ʿAbd as-Salām ʿĀrif, as head of state, and his vice-president Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr, instantly issued orders allowing officers whom ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim had dismissed to return to service, and placing on the retired list officers who had been closely identified with his regime.[9] Military appointments were given to men who had participated in the coup. The NCRC held the powers to appoint and remove cabinets and to assume the powers of the commander in chief of the armed forces. Once the Baʿṯists and pan-Arabs had achieved power, disagreements rapidly developed concerning the direction of the state. Unity of purpose gave way to rifts not only between Baʿṯists and non-Baʿṯists, but also among the Baʿṯists themselves as their differing views about Iraq's future and of their place in it became apparent.[10]

---

[5] Majid Khadduri. *Republican Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics since the Revolution of 1958*, Oxford University Press London, New York, Toronto 1969, p. 194.

[6] ʿAlī Ḫayūn, *Ṯawrat 8 šubāṭ 1963 fī al-ʿIrāq*, Dār aš-Šu'ūn aṯ-Ṯāqafiyya al-ʿĀmma, Baġdād 1990, p. 170.

[7] *Niḍāl al-Baʿṯ. Al-Mu'tamar al-Qawmī aṯ-Ṯāmin, nīsān 1965*, Documentary Record. Vol. 9., Dār aṭ-Ṭalīʿa li-aṭ-Ṭibāʿa wa-an-Našr, Bayrūt 1972, p. 60.

[8] ʿAlī Ḫayūn, *Ṯawrat 8 šubāṭ 1963 fī al-ʿIrāq*, op. cit., pp. 169–170.

[9] Majid Khadduri, *Republican Iraq*, op. cit., p. 199.

[10] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 171.

Appointed by the NCRC, most of the Cabinet members were nominated at the instance of Baʿṯist leaders.[11] This trend was also noticeable in the composition of the NCRC and in the distribution of high ranking posts. The Cabinet, like the NCRC, was composed on the whole of young men in civil or military ranks. There were possibly more Šīʿī and Kurdish ministers than before.[12]

The Ramaḍān revolt was quickly identified as a Baʿṯist Revolution, although its leaders tried to give the impression that it was a vindication of the July Revolution. Some of the Baʿṯist radicals openly made it known that they wished to carry out the *Baʿṯ* aims of Arab union, popular democracy, and socialism at the earliest possible moment.[13] However, some members saw grave danger in embodying all the goals of the *Baʿṯ* in the Government programme and advised patience until the regime could be consolidated. They were particularly concerned about the wisdom of carrying out socialist measures which might arouse the hostility of conservatives with vested interests. Therefore a transitional programme (*al-minhāǧ al-marḥalī*) was adopted and announced to the public on 15 March 1963.[14]

The contradiction between official acts and public statements had the apparent effect of creating confusion and gave the impression that the *Baʿṯ* Government had not yet made up its mind as to what it wanted, but in reality the causes went deeper than that. No less significant was the lack of co-ordination among *Baʿṯ* members who held responsible positions.[15] More specifically, the *Baʿṯ* officers, who had been instrumental in carrying out the Ramaḍān revolt, remained out of touch with the party leaders. Moreover, the military officers who had been included in the NCRC were neither elected by the *Baʿṯ* officers nor by the Regional Command, but by an invitation of one or two of the civilian leaders. Many non-Baʿṯist officers were appointed to important military commands.[16] The Baʿṯist officers naturally resented the manner in which they were ignored and their dissatisfaction discouraged them from continued support of the *Baʿṯ* Government.

Although one of the principles of the *Baʿṯ* constitution was socialism, its first actions in government appeared relatively conservative.[17] No socialist measures were passed. On the contrary, Prime Minister Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr assured business interests that the government did not intend to nationalize any industries. *Baʿṯ* foreign policy was equally moderate. Relations with the West, specifically the USA, were strengthened, and ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim's policy toward the UAR (which no longer included Syria) and Kuwait was reversed. Many suspected the USA and Kuwait of having encouraged

---

[11] ʿAlī Ḫayūn, *Ṯawrat 8 šubāṭ 1963 fī al-ʿIrāq*, op. cit., p. 149; Hanna Batatu. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, op. cit., pp. 1004–1007.

[12] There were five Šīʿī ministers, in: Majid Khadduri, *Republican Iraq*, op. cit., p. 198.

[13] Ibid., p. 201.

[14] Ibrāhīm Ḫalīl Aḥmad and Ǧaʿfar ʿAbbās Ḥumaydī, *Tārīḫ al-ʿIrāq al-muʿāṣir*, op. cit., p. 223.

[15] ʿAlī Ḫayūn, *Ṯawrat 8 šubāṭ 1963 fī al-ʿIrāq*, op. cit., p. 155.

[16] John F. Devlin, *The Baʿth Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, Stanford University, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, California 1976, p. 260.

[17] Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado 1985, p. 186.

the coup – the former because of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim's Communist proclivities; the latter because of his Kuwaiti stand.[18] At any rate, the *Baʿṯ* described his attitude toward Kuwait as erroneous, and in October, Iraq recognized Kuwait's independence. A few days after the revolution, Ṭālib Ḥusayn Šabīb, Iraq's foreign minister, travelled to Cairo for talks with the Egyptians and Syrians on federation.

Arab union was one of the foremost articles in the *Baʿṯ* programme, but the first proclamation of the new Government made no specific commitment to Arab union save the denunciation of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim's isolationist policy which separated Iraq from the "procession of Arabism". Ṭālib Šabīb, Minister of Foreign Affairs, made the more explicit statement in a press conference that Iraq was ready to co-operate in achieving union with other Arab states that had similar goals. The reference to states having similar goals was construed to mean the UAR, although Ṭālib Šabīb made it clear that Iraq had not yet entered into negotiations with any Arab country.[19] It was not until ʿAlī Sāliḥ as-Saʿdī, Deputy Premier and Minister of Interior, went to Egypt to participate in the anniversary of the establishment of the UAR that a public statement about Iraq's willingness to join with Egypt to achieve Arab union was made. Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir welcomed Iraq's willingness to join the UAR, but he seemed to have been in no hurry to bring Iraq into the framework of a union with Egypt, nor was the Iraqi *Baʿth* Government ready to enter into formal agreement before it had consolidated its position within the country.

* * *

When on 8 February a Baʿṯist-Nāṣirist coup in Iraq brought down the ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim government, removed Syria's strongest support. The coup found Syria virtually without a government as the Prime Minister Ḫālid al-ʿAẓm was seriously ill.[20] Many Syrian politicians tried to woo the new Iraqi government, but the new leaders in Baghdad spurned these appeals. On 22 February, the Iraqi leaders journeyed to Cairo to celebrate the anniversary of the Syrian-Egyptian union and with President Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir to herald in veiled terms the overthrow of the reactionary regime in Damascus.[21]

Three main officer groups were then preparing coups. They were the Arab nationalist and other Nāṣirist officers, the Baʿṯists, and a group led by Major Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī, the brother-in-law of Akram al-Ḥawrānī. Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī assured the anti-Nāṣirists that his coup would not mean the re-establishment of the union with Egypt. He was also in touch with the Nāṣirist and Baʿṯist officers, however, Nāṣirist hesitations permitted him to take the lead and stage his coup with the help of the Baʿṯists on 8 March 1963. The

---

[18] „Al-Ahrām", 27 September 1963.

[19] ʿAlī Ḫayūn. *Ṯawrat 8 šubāṭ 1963 fī al-ʿIrāq*, op. cit., p. 159.

[20] Ḫālid al-ʿAẓm, *Muḏakkirāt Ḫālid al-ʿAẓm*, Vol. III., Ad-Dār al-Muttaḥida li-an-Našr, Bayrūt 1973, p. 437.

[21] Speech of the President on the Fifth Anniversary of the Union of Egypt and Syria on 21 February 1963, in: *Ḫadīṯ al-baṭal az-zaʿīm Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir ilā al-umma*, Vol. IV (1961–1963), pp. 526–527.

easy success of the coup was not due to the absence of opposition but to the confusion engendered by its dual character, at once pro- and anti-Nāṣirist, and to betrayal in high places. The Syrian coup came exactly one month after the Iraqi coup and took place without great effort and without bloodshed. This proved that the secessionist regime was already too weak to resist. The great majority of the people saw the coup as just one more act in an infernal cycle of army interventions and showed their disdain by completely ignoring the new regime.

On 8 March 1963 a military coup by a coalition of Baʿṯist, Nāṣirist and independent unionist officers brought down the "secessionist regime" in Damascus. When the army took over, it set up a National Revolutionary Council under the chairmanship of Lt-General Lu'ayy al-Atāsī which invited one of the leaders of the Socialist Party of Arab Resurrection (the *Baʿṯ* Party) Salāḥ ad-Dīn al-Bīṭār, to form a government of military and civilian ministers. One of the first actions of the new government was to issue a statement in which they declared that their aim was to lead Syria back to reunion with Egypt, this time in company with Iraq. At the same time General Al-Atāsī declared that the army had been purged of secessionists, including former ministers. Shortly after, minority members in the Syrian officers' corps again increased strongly in numbers at the expense of the Sunnites. A principal reason for this was that the Baʿṯist military leaders who were involved in the coup had called up numerous officers and non-commissioned officers with whom they were related through family, tribal or regional ties, to quickly consolidate their newly achieved power positions.[22]

The military coup known as the "Baʿṯ Revolution of 8 March 1963" was also not wholly Baʿṯist even though its participants were largely members of the party's Military Committee which was at the time organically not a part of the party. The committee was only one of three military factions compelled by common weakness to act together to overthrow the Ḫālid al-ʿAẓm government. Yet the Baʿṯist officers soon won dominance. The coup did open the road to radical social change, a road that passed through many conflicts however, the social revolution expressed in *Baʿṯist* thought did not occur.[23] Colonel Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī, the leader of the coup initially set up an organization called "al-Mağlis al-Waṭanī li-Qiyādat aṯ-Ṯawra" (the *National Council of the Revolutionary Command* – NCRC), which became the supreme administrative authority. The NCRC was composed of ten officers, four independents, three Nāṣirists and three Baʿṯists. Lt.-General Lu'ayy al-Atāsī, an independent with pro-Baᶜṯ sympathies, was elected president of the council. Plans to add ten civilians to the NCRC were hampered by the party's insistence that half of these be Baʿṯists.[24]

The initial circumstances following the coup and its attendant difficulties urged the calling-up of a large number of reserve military (officers and non-commissioned officers),

---

[22] Munīf ar-Razzāz, *At-Tağriba al-murra*, Dār Ġandūr, Bayrūt 1967, pp. 158–159.

[23] Thabita Petran, *Syria*, Praeger Publishers, . New York 1972, p. 167.

[24] Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War. Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970*, Oxford University Press, London, New York 1977, p. 45.

party members and supporters, to fill the gaps resulting from purges of the opponents and to consolidate and defend the *Baʿṯ* Party*'s* position. This urgency made it impossible at the time to apply objective standards in the calling-up operation. Rather, friendship, family relationship and sometimes mere personal acquaintance were the basis of this procedure. Most of the military called up in this way were of minority Background, especially ʿAlawīs, Druzes and Ismāʿīlīs, which is not surprising since most members of the Baʿṯist Military Committee which supervised the activities of the military organisation were themselves minority members.[25]

Contradictions were inherent in the very structure of the coup since each faction had its own goals. Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī, lacking any politically precise strategy, was condemned to lose the competition for power. He was neither a real Nāṣirist to push Syria Back into union nor a Baʿṯist to propose a new party alternative. The Baʿṯ Military Committee had the advantage of being well organized and skilled in a secretive method of operation and it succeeded in eliminating first the Nāṣirists and then Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī himself. Becoming masters of Syria, the Baʿṯist officers were ready to challenge the party's traditional leadership despite the fact that they needed them because they had no organization of their own outside the army and also wanted a link to the *Baʿṯ* Party in Iraq. The *Baʿṯ* was never a united party, either ideologically or organizationally, and whenever it was in power, its internal personal and political conflicts were intensified.[26] The *Baʿṯist* leaders now accepted the officers as fully-fledged party members and integrated the Military Committee into the party structure as the exclusive party military organization. As the Military Committee was allowed to retain its autonomous status, the created dual power-structure weakened the civilian leadership in face of the military contingent.

Baʿṯist leaders participated in the NCRC, which under the new Provisional Constitution exercised real power. Beside them in the NCRC and the Cabinet were represented the officers of Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī, and three small pro-*Nāṣirist* groupings.[27] The NCRC presidency and the post of Commander-in-Chief of the Army went to the insignificant Lu'ayy al-Atāsī, brother-in-law of the Nāṣirist Ǧāsim ʿAlwān. Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī, newly promoted to Major-General became chief-of-staff, Colonel Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, who had been exiled to Argentina as a military attaché by ʿAbd al-Karīm an-Naḥlāwī, was brought Back by the Baʿṯist officers to assume the key posts of Acting Military Governor and Minister of the Interior.[28] It should be noted that at the time of the coup five of the 14 members of the Baʿṯist Military Committee were ʿAlawīs, so that it is hardly surprising that ʿAlawī officers subsequently played an important role in the army. Moreover, the

---

[25] According to one report, many ᶜAlawīs were among those officers who, directly after the coup of 8 March 1963, were to fill the gaps in the army resulting from purges of political opponents. About half the approximately 700 officers who were dismissed were reportedly replaced by ʿAlawīs. Cit in: Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1978*, Croom Helm Ltd. Publishers, London, 1979, p. 43.

[26] Eliezer Be'eri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, Pall Mall, London 1970, p. 406.

[27] Akram al-Ḥawrānī, *Muḏakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī*, Vol. IV, Maktabat Madbūlī, Al-Qāhira 2000, pp. 3158–3164.

[28] Nāǧī ʿAbd an-Nabī Bizzī, *Sūriyya. Ṣirāʿ al-istiqṭāb, 1917–1973*, Dār Ibn al-ʿArabī, Dimašq 1996, p. 333.

highest leadership of the Military Committee lay in the hands of three *ʿAlawīs*, namely Muḥammad ʿUmrān, Salāḥ Ǧadīd and āfiẓ al-Asad.[29]

* * *

However, all this changed with the Baʿṯist coup d'état in Syria. On 8 March the Syrian *Baʿth* was elevated to power by a group of army officers who had been opposed to Syria's secession from the UAR through a military coup. It issued a proclamation denouncing secession and called for "putting Arab Syria back on her true way – the way of union, freedom and socialism".[30] Two days later an Iraqi delegation, led by ᶜAlī Ïāliḥ as-Saᶜdī, arrived in Damascus for an exchange of views on possible co-operation between the two branches of the *Baʿṯ* Party and the UAR Since the *Baʿṯ* Party was now in power in two Arab countries, it was not expected that its leaders, who had voiced grievances against Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir's authoritarian rule, would join Egypt in a union without an assurance of obtaining greater participation in the central government. Their views on union stressed federalism, freedom, and socialism.[31]

The Iraqi government entered into a tripartite commitment to unification with Egypt and Syria in April 1963, despite the fact that this complicated relations with the Kurds.[32] More seriously for the fate of the Iraqi government, entanglement with the new regime in Damascus embroiled the Iraqis in the barely suppressed power struggle in Syria between the National Command of the *Baʿṯ* Party (personified by the party's founder-leaders Michel ʿAflaq and Salāḥ ad-Dīn al-Bīṭār) and the Syrian Regional Command of the party.

The Baʿṯist members of the Syrian government turned their eyes towards Cairo and to the man without whom little progress could be made towards unity. However, though Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir regarded the Syrian March Revolution of 1963 as a victory of the advocates of union over those who supported secession, he made no statement welcoming Syria Back into the UAR, because some of the *Baʿṯ* leaders, especially Salāḥ ad-Dīn al-Bīṭār, Syria's new Premier, had supported the advocates of secession in 1961. Pro-Nāṣirist demonstrations occurred in many areas of Syria after the coup. They forced Damascus and the *Baʿṯ* Party, which had the predominant position in the new regime, to hold negotiations with the Egyptians and the Iraqis about the possibility of establishing a tripartite union.[33]

---

[29] Munīf ar-Razzāz, *At-Taǧriba al-murra*, op. cit., p. 158.

[30] *Niḍāl Ḥizb al-Baʿṯ al-ʿArabī al-Ištirākī, 1943–1975. Dirāsa tārīḫiyya taḥlīliyya māǧaza*, Maṭbaʿat al-Qiyāda al-Qawmiyya, Dimašq 1978, p. 97.

[31] Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War. Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970*, p. 49; ʿAlī Ḫayūn, *Ṯawrat 8 šubāṭ 1963 fī al-ʿIrāq*, op. cit., p. 158–159.

[32] David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, I. B. Tauris, London, New York 1996, p. 313.

[33] Aḥmad Ḥamrūš. *Qiṣṣat ṯawrat 23 yūliyū*, Vol. III. *ʿAbd an-Nāṣir wa al-ʿArab*, Al-Mu'assasa al-ʿArabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Bayrūt 1976, pp. 119–124; Said K. Aburish, *Nasser. The Last Arab*, Duckworth, London 2004, p. 215.

Ğamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir agreed to hold discussions in March and April 1963. Thereupon, Syrian and Iraqi delegations went to Cairo in mid-March to persuade him to negotiate a new scheme of Arab union which would incorporate Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. However, this time he was much more cautious and did not have much confidence in the Baʿṯist leaders. In talks he subjected them to severe criticism and questioned their past behaviour, which he called deceitful and opportunistic. No agreement was reached and sensing that the Baʿṯists were in retreat from the whole unity concept, he taunted them with going back on the ideals of democracy which they had preached while accusing him of personal dictatorship.[34] In these negotiations Syria and the *Baʿṯ* Party in particular were at a disadvantage. On the one hand there were the intertwined rivalries among and within what can be considered the five major power centres in Syria at that time: the NCRC; the Ministry of Defence and higher military positions; the governmental structure of the premier and the cabinet; the *Baʿṯ*'s Syrian Regional Command; and the *Baʿṯ*'s National Command.

Within the *Baʿṯ* Party itself there were four major conflicts. The first of these was between the Michel ʿAflaq – Salāḥ ad-Dīn al-Bīṭār wing (the old guard) which did not really want a full union, and the younger *Baʿṯ* members who wanted to organize "the masses against reactionary secessionism". Other conflicts were between the National Command and the Military Committee; between the National Command and both the Syrian and Iraqi Regional Commands; and between the Syrian Regional Command and the Military Committee.[35] Nevertheless, Syria went ahead with the Cairo Unity Talks, as the negotiations were called, even though few of the participants actually aspired to unity. These talks were held in three separate stages: trilateral negotiations in five meetings from 14 to 16 March; five Syrian-Egyptian meetings on 19 and 20 March; and ten meetings between 6 and 14 April, of which the first two were again Syrian-Egyptian and the last eight trilateral.[36]

Nothing concrete really emerged from the talks until 19 March when Michel ʿAflaq and Salāḥ ad-Dīn al-Bīṭār both went to Cairo. It was then that Ğamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir began putting on a show, taking advantage of the slow, deliberate conversational style of his rivals and the fact that they had come to him to get a new agreement and to stabilize their regime.

The unity talks between the delegations of Syria, Iraq and the UAR were held in three stages from 14 March to 14 April. The three delegations first met to exchange ideas on the subject before formulating a final scheme of union.[37] The conversations reflect the divergent views of three leading Arab countries on Arab union. The main points of difference were the issues of the presidency and the existence of political parties. The

---

[34] Robert Stephens, *Nasser. A Political Biography*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London 1971, p. 405.

[35] Itamar Rabinovich. *Syria under the Baʿth*, Israel Universites Press, Jerusalem 1972, p. 55–56.

[36] *Maḥāḍir ğalasāt mubāḥaṯāt al-waḥda, mārs-abrīl 1963*, Kutub Qawmiyya, Al-Qāhira 1963, the first stage, pp. 5–88; the second stage, pp. 91–241; the third stage, pp. 245–602.

[37] For text of the proceedings, see *Maḥādir ğalasāt mubāḥaṯāt al-waḥda*, op. cit. For a critical study of the Cairo conversations, see Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.

Iraqi delegation acted as mediator between the Syrian and Egyptian delegations. The Syrian delegation, composed mainly of Baʿṯists, was insistent on a "collegiate presidency", maintenance of local autonomy, and freedom to organize political parties. President Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir, however, demanded that the people decide by a plebiscite whether the presidency should be collegiate or individual. Certain of his popularity among the masses in Syria and Iraq, Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir insisted upon this point and a deadlock seemed inevitable. The deadlock was circumvented by the presentation of a new draft by the Iraqi delegation and the three governments finally agreed on the formation of a federal union with one president and a federal council.[38] However, the agreement was of short duration and ended in a deep rift between the *Baʿṯ* and the UAR. Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir seems to have reluctantly agreed on a scheme of union acceptable to the Syrian and Iraqi leaders, because authority in the new structure of Arab union was to be exercised by "collective leadership" rather than by one responsible leader, although he was to be the head of the "collective leadership".

* * *

Despite this exhibition and after torrents of recrimination, double-talk and contradictions, the three countries signed an agreement on 17 April 1963, under which the president (who would be Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir, of course) held virtually all power. However, it also provided for a transitional period of five months with 20 additional months before the implementation of full union.[39] The Baʿṯists were not fully reconciled to the idea of a union which would not allow them the free hand they sought in Syria. The internal situation remained troubled with dissension between those who supported Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir come what may and the Baʿṯists.

A transcript of the talks was published and broadcast on Cairo radio. It provides a fascinating picture of the cut and thrust of argument and how Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir taunted the Syrians. He made it very clear that any union would be on his terms according to his new socialist precepts. His strong personality dominated the discussions and the Syrians and Iraqis tried lamely to defend themselves and to ward off his attacks. He obviously enjoyed his superiority and dominant position and his strength derived from the fact that he was still the only conceivable leader.[40]

The leaders of the Military Committee in Syria were swiftly able to consolidate their newly achieved positions of power, thanks to their efficient organization and planning and to all the military supporters who had been called upon. Within a few months they succeeded in purging their most prominent Nāṣirist and independent unionist military

---

[38] Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Baath Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*, p. 70.

[39] Robert Stephens, *Nasser. A Political Biography*, op. cit., p. 405.

[40] Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, *Sanawāt ġalayān*, „Al-Ahrām", Al-Qāhira 1988, pp. 689–699.

opponents. These, once again, whether coincidently or not, happened to be mainly Sunnīs.[41] The climax of the Baʿṯists' power monopolization came on 18 July 1963, when a group of predominantly Sunnī Nāṣirist officers, led by Ǧāsim ʿAlwān,[42] staged an abortive coup, but the Baʿṯists led by Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ bloodily put down. Most of the officers who suppressed this coup, not without bloodshed, were of minority Backgrounds, and among them ʿAlawīs played a prominent role.[43] This was exploited as sectarianism by Sunnī political opponents of the *Baʿṯ*, who resented the many minority members among the new rulers and tried to give the impression that the repeated purges of Sunnī officers were based primarily on sectarian motives. Some 800 people, largely innocent victims, were killed or wounded, 20 supporters of the coup were executed and hundreds more arrested. The patience of Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir was exhausted by these moves and he declared, "We do not consider that the UAR is bound to the present fascist regime in Syria by any common aim".[44]

The suppression of the coup left the *Baʿth* Party in power and General Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ – a Sunnī from Aleppo, from the lower middle class – as leader. He attempted to bring together the disparate elements in Syrian political life and, while not reconciling all, he at least gave some stability to the leadership of the *Baʿṯ*. The *Baʿṯ Military Committee* established tight control of the army; among its leading members were Salāḥ Ǧadīd, an able *ʿAlawī* from Latakia and Colonel Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, another *ʿAlawī* who commanded the air force. The Committee gradually infiltrated the armed forces to ensure that the most important units were under its control and to strengthen its ability to forestall any counter coups. In this process several members of minority groups began to assume authority, particularly the ʿAlawīs, Druzes, Ismāʿīlīs, as Sunnī influence tended to diminish. This was a highly significant trend. The Baʿṯist officers of the ʿAlawī minority might subsequently have seized the opportunity to purge the remaining (mainly Sunnī) Nāṣirist officers from the army. The distrust which such interpretations created among many of the Sunnī majority population against those Baʿṯists who originated from religious minorities, was difficult to neutralize after this stage.

The unity talks had not been a solid diplomatic success for Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir, however, for he had won no vital commitments except moral ones. What he had accomplished was to play the part that his reputation as the champion of pan-Arabism demanded, while protecting his interests against the risk of serious damage. The all-important commitment he had secured for the preliminary period, which would have

---

[41] The purged independent unionist officers Lu'ayy al-Atāsī and Ziyād al-Ḥarīrī, and the Nāṣirist officers Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣūfī, Rāšid al-Quṭaynī and Fawwāz Muḥārib, who had all been members of the NCRC set up as the supreme authority of the state after the 8 March 1963 coup, as well as Ǧāsim ʿAlwān, Muḥammad Ǧarrāḥ, two leading Nāṣirist officers, were indeed all Sunnīs, in: Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, op. cit., p. 50.

[42] Akram al-Ḥawrānī, *Muḏakkirāt Akram al-Ḥawrānī*, op. cit., Vol. IV., pp. 3200–3202.

[43] Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Baʿth Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*, pp. 72–73.

[44] *Ḫiṭāb ar-raʾīs fī al-ʿīd al-ḥādiya ʿašara li-aṯ-ṯawra, 22 yūliyū 1963*, in: *Kitāb at-taḥrīr: Ḥadīṯ al-baṭal az-zaʿīm Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir ilā al-umma. Al-ǧuzʾ ar-rābiʿ 1961–1963, al-ʿadad 47–48*, pp. 550–556.

to be tested immediately, was for the formation of acceptable coalitions in Syria and Iraq. The precise terms of the coalition between the *Baʿṯ* and its rivals were not spelled out in the text of the Cairo agreement, and there was ample room for disagreement. That a Syrian-Iraqi union failed to materialize was not due to any success of Egyptian policy, but because of the ineptitude of the *Baʿṯ*.

Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir's assault on the Syrian *Baʿṯ* triggered off a vicious campaign by the Egyptian media which continued throughout the summer and autumn of 1963. This particularly effective policy instrument contributed to an incipient power struggle between the "left" and "right" factions of the Iraqi Baʿṯist leadership. The Baʿṯist era lasted a mere nine months that were pervaded by political turbulence, ideological discord, and personal rivalries.[45] As this fragmentation increased, reaching almost anarchic dimensions, the army under President ʿAbd as-Salām ʿĀrif (who had fully demonstrated his wholehearted devotion to Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir in 1958) took control of the situation in November 1963 and expelled the warring Baʿṯist leaders. Cairo immediately and enthusiastically recognized the new regime and cautioned the Syrians against any military operation directed at Iraq.

[45] Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq. A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 2011, p. 185.