CHAPTER I

Historical Overview of Syria till 1970
"A land of the past, it has a future ... they are the most gifted race that I have as yet, ever seen. And when the curse shall have left the country - not the bane of superstition but the bane and plague spot of bad rule - it will rise again to a position not unworthy of the days when it gave the world a poetry and a system of religion still unforgotten by our highest civilization".

This is how Richard Francis Burton, the British Consul in Damascus (1867-71) had described Syria in the preface to his book, *Unexplored Syria*.

While writing about Syria, one must make it clear at the outset that "Syria" never signified one political or administrative entity at all points of time. The historical Syria was, through the ages, a geographical entity with marked natural boundaries - the Taurus mountains to the north, the Sinai Peninsula and Arabia to the south, the Mediterranean to the west, and the desert to the east. This area today would include Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and parts of Jordan and Turkey. But the contemporary Syria is a truncated State. It bore the brunt of the colonial sword which cut away pieces from it and left the mainland stranded.

An effort is made here to trace how this area was christened "Syria". The original inhabitants, the Assyrians and later the Amorites, called it *Bilad Amaro*. The Aramites named it *Bilad Aram* while the later Assyrians called it *Aramo* or *Araeme*. Then the Persians came to this area around 500 B.C. It is interesting to note that

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Egyptians, Babylonians, Hittites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Turks and Arabs fought across it and in turn made it a part of their empires. While doing so, they also accorded a new nomenclature to the area. Dara I, the Persian Emperor in 523 B.C. had divided his huge empire into 20 satrapies or Vilayats. The area which extended from Houran mountain in the north to Sinai was called the Vilayat of Athoura Arabiya (Asoura Arabaya). The word "Syria" is actually a version of "Suria" which was derived from Asoura. Herodotus, the Greek historian, records that this area was called Asoura Arabaya. In the Bible, the area which covers today's Lebanon and Syria was called "Shryn". The ugarit clay tablets show the same name. Alexander the Great defeated Dara III in the Battle of Essos in 333 B.C. The Persian Empire was destroyed and the Greeks left Syria under the Seleucids. The Greeks, the Romans and the Byzantines, all called it Syria. When Pompei was the Emperor of the Roman empire, the borders of the classical Syria were retained and the area was declared the Vilayat of Suria. The later Romans divided this area into two: Syria Prima with its capital at Antakia (now in Turkey) and Syria Secunda was the name of the other part.

When the Arabs came, they called it Bilad Ash-Sham which means "The country on the left or north of Mecca". The Ottomans called it by the same name. At present it is "al-Jamhouriya al Arabia al-Suriya", which sounds close to the 6th century B.C. "Suria Arabaya".

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2 Ibid, p.23.
One of Syria's major claims to a special place in history is due to the fact that both Judaism and Christianity were born in the southern part of the country. Aramaic, the language of Christ, is still spoken in three villages in Syria, in Ma'alula and surrounding areas. Islam was the third major religion to enter the area in the seventh century. But Syria was not just the cradle of great religions only. It was a witness to a profusion of heresies, schisms and zealous sects. All these sects could retain their separate identity basically because they lived in mountainous and isolated areas.

Syria has been called "one of the most interesting countries in the world". In contrast to the drab aridity of most Asian and Arab territories, Syria, with Lebanon, possesses not only a long Mediterranean coastline of striking beauty but also a hinterland varying from mountain ranges of scenic majesty, and big rich intermontane plains and valleys and by famous rivers and broad fertile uplands and arid steppes.

Since antiquity, it has formed an important link in the trade routes between the Far East and the Near East and between the latter and the whole Mediterranean world and Europe. It has the whole eastern Mediterranean coast; it joins Asia with Africa and it has easy access by sea to Europe. It was for the above reasons and for being located at the intersection of many land and sea routes that the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians waged many a battle to possess it.

But an important point to be noted is that other than various Empires ruling over the area, no single indigenous power has ever been able to assert political control

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over the whole region. Its original political set up was that of independent city
kingdoms. These cities are the world's earliest continuously inhabited cities. Syria
occupied a pivotal position in between the three continents and thus had acquired the
character of a marchland between neighbouring empires and had for the same reason
attracted the external powers. It was at the crossroads between the Mediterranean Sea
and the Indian Ocean, between the Caspian Sea, the Red Sea and the Nile.

Since historical times Syria has been flooded by emigrant people of different
origins and tongues. But the strongest immigration and the most persistent infiltration
has been Semetic. Syria's earliest inhabitants spoke a non-Semetic language though
Semetic people inhabited this area since 3,000 B.C. The third millennium B.C.
witnessed the migration of the Amorites followed by the Canaanites who came to the
Syrian coastlands. The Araemeans and the Hebrews arrived during the second
millennium B.C. The Nabateans (Nabtiyin), who were Arabs, came to this land in one
millennium B.C. The next hundred years saw the coming of many foreign invaders
who conquered and ruled Syria. They were the Hittites, Hurrians, Hyksos, Egyptians,
Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Philistines, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, European
Crusaders, Mongols and Turks. Most of them ruled Syria or parts of Syria for
centuries but it was only the Arabs who left an indelible mark on the land's history.

Syria's most important gift to civilization has been the invention of the
alphabet, somewhere in the second millennium B.C. After a long period of evolution,
alphabet appeared when the written symbol was dissociated from the syllable and
related to sound. The earliest known set of alphabet dates back to the fourteenth
century B.C. in *Ugarit (Ras Shamra)*. A clay tablet gives us 30 letters in Cuneiform writing. Ugaritic is a Semitic language which resembles Arabic a lot. The Phoenicians borrowed this, developed it and then passed it on to the Araemeans and other Semetic people. Then the Greeks innovated it with vowel signs.

Syria can also boast of being one of the oldest civilizations of the world. Damascus is the oldest continuously inhabited city of the world, and Aleppo, though there is no concrete evidence, could be even older.

The two empires, the Hittites in the north and the Egyptians in the south, of the second millennium B.C. were edged out by the people of Syria who asserted their independence and created civilizations. The Araemeans and the Hebrews settled here in the latter part of the thirteenth century. The Bible points towards the fact that the Hebrews were bequeathed an already advanced civilization. David established his Hebrew Kingdom around 1000 B.C. in the hills of Samaria and Judaea, which later he (and others) expanded. Then the Araemeans founded the Aram or Syria of the Bible which extended from the Yarmuk to the Euphrates. Damascus was made the principal city of Aram. Aramaic, as a language, spread to span even the Persian Empire. It also displaced Hebrew and it was the language spoken by Christ.

The Assyrians defeated the independent Syrian states in the eighth century B.C. Then the area fell to the Babylonians in the seventh, and to the Persians in the sixth. The Persian empire succumbed to Alexander the Great's invasion in 333 B.C. Then Syria was made a part of the Seleucid Empire around 301-64 B.C. The Romans
then made it a part of their Empire from 64 B.C. to 395 A.D. The Byzantines ruled from A.D. 395 to 636.

All through this period of Greek, Roman and Byzantine rules, the Arabs kept pouring into Syria and developed Arab principalities, for instance the Nabatean Empire, Zenobia's Syrian Kingdom whose capital was Palmyra and the Ghassanite Kingdom. The Arab conquest in A.D. 636 completed the Arabization of Syria. The Arabs defeated the Byzantine forces at Ajnadin in July 634, seized Damascus in September 635 and by their decisive victory on river Yarmuk in August 636, they virtually secured possession of all Syria.

Syria has shown an amazing capacity to assimilate or reject alien invaders without losing its essentially Semetic character. Much of the population had infiltrated the land and had settled there, almost unnoticed by those who compose the annals of history. These tribes had come to Syria as independent entities and "fitted the little shelves and corners of Syria so that Syria was tribal both by her form and by the character of her population". All these tribes in their specific regions developed their own customs, folklore, manners, costumes, and even pronunciation. The primacy of kinship ties were based on the family, clan and tribe, which gave a sense of belonging and identification. This loyalty and allegiance to one's own tribe had an adverse effect too. It led to bitter rivalries amongst the tribes. The most long-lasting of such a tussle was the Qays-Yaman conflict which more often than not led to bloody wars.
Some invaders were almost welcomed. When the Arabs came to spread the Islamic creed, the population of Syria was quick to identify with this new element which shared with them the Semetic language and also a similar culture. But they were ill-disposed towards the Greek-speaking orthodox Byzantines and so did little to oppose the muslims.

"None of the vicissitudes of Syria's long history had more lasting influence than the Arab conquest. It gave the country its predominantly Arab-Muslim character which neither two centuries of occupation by European Crusaders nor four centuries of Turkish domination could alter. During the early Arab period the foundations of Syrian glory were laid".\(^5\) Thus we see that apart from the Arabs, few other ethnic and cultural elements could manage to leave a permanent mark. The fusion of the Arabs with the already settled population, also in the main Semetic stream, made for a substantially homogeneous people with a specific Syrian character.

Though most Muslims of Syria have been Sunnis there are many Shi'i sects who have survived till date. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Ismailis became very distinctive. The Nusayriyyahs were concentrated mostly in the area east of Latakia and in Tyre. They are better known today as Alawis. In the Nusayriyyah mountains, Shiite customs and doctrines had combined with earlier practices like nature worship, and worship of springs and trees, and all these were practised by the Nusayriyyahs. The Alawi sect basically divides its followers into two classes of an initiated elite and an uninitiated majority. Alawi society was basically tribal. When

\(^5\) Ibid, p.40.
Syria was truncated in the post-World War I period, all her Alawis were left concentrated in the province of Latakia. Today the Alawis are Syria's largest minority, about 11 per cent of the population. Moreover, this sect has the additional pride since it has given the nation a President, Hafiz al Asad.

The Druze sect was born in the eleventh century. The Fatimid Caliph of Egypt, Al-Hakim, had made a tall claim that he was the incarnation of a deity. Ismail Al-Darazi, a Persian, worked to convert mountaineers of southern Lebanon into this new belief. The Druzes played an important role in Syrian history. Most of the Druzes settled in Jebel Hawran, (this mountain came to be called the Jebel Druze). The Druze religious precepts are revealed only to a few. Their religious hierarchy is based on the extent of initiation into the secrets of the doctrine. The majority would never know what the religion professes. Today the Druzes constitute only about 3 per cent of Syria's population.

There are about 12 Christian sects in Syria, some dating from the Byzantine period. But most of these Christians, in fact more than 70 per cent, are Arabic-speaking. The Greek orthodox community is the largest and they are Arabic-speaking. This community is closer to the Muslim Arabs as compared to the other Christian sects. At present the Christians constitute about 12 per cent of the population in Syria.

The largest ethno-linguistic minority are the Kurds. They have lived in Syria for centuries. A fresh wave of Kurdish refugees came to Syria in the inter-war period
when Turkish repression on Kurds took place. In Syria today, the Kurds live in Al-
Jazira (al Hassake), the Kurd mountains north-west of Aleppo, in Jarablus, and in
Salhiya. That Kurds have been an integral part of Syrian life is clear from the fact that
one of their most venerated heroes - Salahuddin, (Saladin) was a Kurd, who fought
heroically against the Crusaders.

The other minorities in Syria are the Circassians, originally from Caucasus, the
Armenians, who fled Turkey, Assyrian refugees from Iraq, Turcomans and Jews.
There were around 30,000 Jews in Syria before the creation of Israel. Since then
there has been large scale migration to Israel.

This homogeneity of the Syrian population and its racial mixture has existed
for centuries. But it would be misleading to picturize Syria as a "mosaic of
minorities". All the different religious, ethnic, racial communities share a large
common ground. The Pan-Syrian thought expresses an essential unity of the territory,
the aegis of familiar coexistence, the shared racial origins and the great common
legacy of Arabism, without trespassing on legitimate community pride and liberties.

The Seljuq Turks overran Damascus in 1075 and occupied Syria. Then
arrived the First Crusade. The Crusaders took Antioch in 1098 and Jerusalem in
1099. But Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Damascus could not be taken. Here mention
must be made again of Salahuddin, the Kurd, who defeated the Crusaders at Hattin in
July 1187 and destroyed the kingdom of Jerusalem. He made himself the effective
ruler of Egypt, terminated the Fatimid Caliphate, absorbed Nur Al-Din's Syrian Kingdom and created a Syrian-Egyptian State.

Salahuddin's successors ruled Syria and Egypt until the mid-thirteenth century when Turkish-speaking Mamluk warriors of the Ayyubids seized power in Egypt and in 1260 defeated the Mongol armies in Palestine, who had swept across Syria. Then the Mamluks did away with the remaining crusader states and took over Syria and integrated it into their kingdom. The rule of the Mamluks marked a steady decline of the Syrian civilization. "Syrian civilization lost the ability to respond to new challenges". It underwent calamities like plague, locusts, famine, earthquake and flood in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Mongol invasions in 1299-1303 and 1400-01 almost destroyed Damascus and Aleppo.

The Ottomans conquered Syria in August 1516, after the Battle of Dabgh. The Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, established Ottoman rule over the whole region. Thus, Syria became a part of a powerful and wealthy world empire. Initially, the Ottomans made no attempts to Turkify the Arabs, and they respected Arabic as the language of Islam. Moreover, they portrayed themselves as defenders of Islam. Local lords and chieftains were allowed autonomy under the decentralised Ottoman administration. Thus, for 400 years, the Ottoman rule was not contested by the Arabs.

Under the Ottoman rule, Syria steadily degenerated. Economic development was stunted. But the most harmful chapter was when the Ottomans signed the Treaty

of Capitulations with virtually all European States. The European powers dictated terms of these treaties, and infiltrated Syria in a number of ways. For instance, France extended its "right" to protect European Catholics, and Russia took on to protect Greek Orthodox Christians all over the Ottoman empire. Thus, the empire was exposed to European economic penetration and European political interference. The Syrian economy was devastated since European goods entered with low custom duties while Syrian goods exported to Europe were charged high duties or were barred. Traditional Syrian markets were flooded by European products. Artisan industries died out, food was drained out, agricultural economy was on the decline. As a result, by the eighteenth century, Syria was completely decadent and the 4 million population of fourteen century fell to 1½ million.

The 19th century heralded more changes. The Ottoman Sultan, Mahmoud II (1808-39), was defeated by the Egyptian Pasha Ibrahim, son of Muhammad Ali and Syria was incorporated into the Egyptian Kingdom. Muhammad Ali and Ibrahim must be given the credit of Arabizing Syria which was a profound factor in the development of Arab nationalism. They introduced numerous reforms. Most notable were the reforms in the field of education - be it the opening of schools and colleges, educating all the boys or sending students to study in Europe at government expense. They also encouraged the missionary activities. All this helped in the growth of national consciousness. But, in the year 1840, with the help of the Great Powers, Syria was given back to the Ottomans. This led to unlimited European economic intervention.
REAWAKENING OF SYRIA

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, under oppressive European encroachment and western political ideas, Syria showed signs of regaining its lost vitality. As already mentioned, the first stimulus came from the Egyptian occupation. Its administrative councils gave Syrians their first opportunity in modern times to participate in the administration of their own affairs. The Syrians were shaken out of their intellectual lethargy. They realised that the Turks, far from defending Islamic civilization, were assisting in its subversion. Secret societies were formed in Beirut, Damascus and Aleppo in late 1870s and 1880s. They demanded Arab autonomy. Secular Arabic publishing of literature started. Arabic journalism was developed. Educational institutions were established like the Syrian Protestant College (the present American University of Beirut). Leading Muslim thinkers sought to defend Islamic civilization by reforming Islam and by forging Muslim solidarity into an effective weapon against western domination. Pan-Islamists promoted the study of classical Arabic and talked about the glories of Arab civilization. They demanded equal rights with the Turks within the empire. People started thinking in terms of Arab nationality.

A rising urban elite of professionals, journalists, intellectuals, government officials and army officers led Syria's fight for political rights and then for independence. The first step taken by them was their participation in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) organized by the Young Turks who demanded the restoration of the 1876 Constitution. But, restoration of the Constitution, after the
1908 revolution, did not bring Arab equality. Soon, the Arabs formed societies like the Al-Ahd (The Covenant) and the Jamiat Al-Fatat al-Arabia (Young Arab Society).

Common interests binding Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs were realised. To start with, the Arabic language was a common bond and an object of love and pride. More important was the growth of the idea of homeland (Watan) as distinct from the larger and universal Ottoman Empire. Loyalty of the Arabs shifted from an Islamic empire to a regional Arab fatherland.

The members of various societies tried to spread the need for a reassertion of Syria's independence. They distributed leaflets and placards. An excerpt from the actual text of a surviving placard is given below:

"... but for our moribund conditions we would not be the slaves of the degraded Turks .... Where is your Arab pride? Where is your Syrian zeal? O people! Return [to your past glory] while it is opportune ...."

The stress in this movement was generally on the Syrian Arab Watan, whose inhabitants, proud of their descent from conquerors and men of learning, had two demands now - autonomy and recognition of Arabic as rasmiyya i.e. official language.

The Arab national effort in this period was helped by a number of semi-autonomous Arab Emirs in the Arabian peninsula. They hoped to capitalise on the Turkish involvement and loss of face in the Balkans and their pre-occupation with the
1911-12 Italian war, to manoeuvre for greater independence. Among these, most prominent was the ruler of Hijaz, Husain Ibn Ali, Sharif of Mecca. It was his dream to become the Caliph. He was already making very subtle overtures towards the British before 1914, hoping to get the latter's recognition of his independence from the Ottoman Empire.

THE WORLD WAR I AND TURKISH DOUBLE STANDARDS:

The beginning of 1914 saw the European countries getting ready for a major war. The political status quo was changing. The Ottomans were declared the "sick man of Europe". Their Empire suffered tremendous loss of face after the two Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913. The only option before the Ottomans was to align themselves with one of the blocs of Europe. They were reluctant to ally themselves with Russia. So they approached France for a treaty. The Ottoman Sadr al-Azam, Jamal Pasha, went to France for negotiations but had to return empty handed because France put a few conditions which were unacceptable to the Ottoman: that Syria should be awarded total independence that no Ottoman military ruler should be appointed in Syria prior to the formalizing of the treaty; and that France should be given certain concessions in Syria. These terms were not acceptable to the Ottomans. Therefore, the Ottomans went to Germany and a treaty was signed on August 2, 1914. Germany promised to safeguard Ottoman interests and the Ottomans agreed to join the war on the German side if Russia joined the war. The Allies went into a flurry of activities to win the Ottomans back to a neutral position.
"The Ottoman Empire has committed suicide" was the loaded comment by Asquith, the British Prime Minister, when the Ottoman Empire aligned with Germany. But it was not a quick death. The "sick man of Europe" survived long enough to turn Syria into a major theatre of war. In fact, circumstances deteriorated so much that it drove the Arabs to seek complete independence. Turkey's entry into the war against Britain made the Arabs in Syria and adjacent countries an important element in British strategy and policy. British statesmen and soldiers perceived at once the great advantage to their cause of detaching the Arabs from the Turks and encouraging the Arab movement for independence. British moves on these lines were already underway. On the instructions of Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, government departments connected with Arab affairs were informed that if "... Turkey joins Germany - His Majesty's government should at once give every support and encouragement to the Arabs to possess themselves of Arabia and the holy places".7

The outbreak of the war found the British already in contact with the Sharif of Mecca. In late October, Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, sent a message to the Sharif's second son, proposing that the "Arab Nation" assist England in the war, promising in return, aid against aggression and hinting at the possibility of an Arab Caliphate. Abdullah sent back a guarded reply, that he and his father desired close relations with Great Britain but they required written guarantees against Turkish

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7 Note from Sir Eyre Crowe to Indian Office in Foreign Office 371/2139, Quoted in Tibawi, Ibid.
reprisals. "Stretch out to us a helping hand", the Sharif is reported to have told a messenger, "or we will never defeat these (Turkish) oppressors".\(^8\)

On 31 October, Kitchener sent another message. It is necessary to quote it here to judge the extent to which the British failed to keep their promises. Kitchener's message carried a definite promise that "... if the Arab Nation assist England in this war, England will guarantee that no internal intervention takes place in Arabia and will give the Arabs every assistance against external foreign aggression. It may be that an Arab of the race will assume the Caliphate at Mecca and Medina".\(^9\)

Sharif Husain of Mecca was not projected as a leader of the Arabs. It was the urban elite, mainly Syrian, which had originally led the movement for independence. But these people realised the necessity to bank on a religious tribal chief as their spokesman. It was becoming increasingly apparent that the nascent movement lacked a key component - a popular leader who would be recognised by all factions. Sharif Husain answered this need; he was an Arab of the Hashemite family to which Prophet Muhammad belonged; his leadership was a function of Islamic identity and he possessed Islamic credentials which commanded the respect of the populace. Thus, he was accepted as a leader leading the people against the institutionalised religious-political authority of the Ottomans. In spring 1918, *al-Ahd* and *al-Fatat* started negotiations in Damascus with the Sharif's son, Faisal. The outcome saw

\(^8\) Telegram from Kitchner to Cheethamon, 24th September and from Cheethamon on 31 October, F.O. 371/2139, Quoted in Ibid.

\(^9\) Tibawi, Ibid. p.212.
Faisal joining both the societies and the latter agreed to make the Sharif the spokesman for their programme and issued the Damascus Protocol. An oath was taken by six leaders in which they recognised the Sharif as their leader and agreed to comply with his agreement with the British provided the conditions of the Damascus Protocol were kept. This oath of allegiance was a sort of *Bai'a*, the early Islamic practice of swearing allegiance to a leader chosen by the majority of tribal representatives.

The Husain-McMahon Correspondence (July 1915-January 1916) defined the terms under which the Arabs would undertake a revolt against the Ottomans. In keeping with the Damascus Protocol, the Sharif demanded the independence of Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula (with the exception of Aden) and for the whole of the geographic Syria. McMahon acquiesced but he put down some crucial reservations which were clothed in extremely vague terms. An analysis would point towards the fact that these imprecise British reservations were deliberate double-talk designed to cheat and deceive the Arabs. What the Arabs did not know was that France and Britain were simultaneously dividing the Arab provinces among themselves. The Sykes-Picot agreement was in the offing. “The ensuing correspondence was bedevilled all along by shortcomings on the Arab as well as on the British side ... the Arab side lacked diplomatic experience, showed inordinate optimism and gullibility inexcusable in politics and, possibly on account of difficult means of communication, had too many individual "spokesmen" of the cause. The British shortcomings .... lay in the individual officials convictions, prejudices and even ignorance ....”\(^10\)

\(^{10}\) Ibid, n.8. Quoted in Tibawi, n.6.
During this correspondence, no agreement was arrived at regarding the extent of Arab territory whose independence was proposed. The Sharif gave up nothing of his claim and McMahon refused to give in. So, both sides conceded that this argument be postponed till after the war.

Sharif Hussain launched the Arab Revolt on 5 June 1916, after Amir Faisal returned to Mecca from Syria. Mecca was captured from the Turks by Arab forces and a new era dawned on Arab politics. But plans of simultaneous revolts in Syria and Hijaz had to be abandoned due to Turkish actions and British opposition to this plan. Jamal Pasha, the Commander-in-chief of the Ottoman Fourth Army in Syria, transferred the mutinous Arab divisions to the Galli Poli front to frustrate this plan.

The Arab Revolt carried out by the Arab tribes and a number of Syrian and Iraqi officers contributed greatly to the Allied victory in this theatre of war. The Arab army under Faisal's command engaged Turkish forces in Hijaz and harassed Turkish communications, and protected General Allenby's right flank as he advanced through Palestine.

After a decisive victory over Turkish troops at Megiddo in September 1918, all Syria fell to the Anglo-Arab armies. As the Turks retreated, Arab flags were unfurled in the cities of Syria before the arrival of Anglo-Arab troops, and in Beirut, an Arab administration was established. In early October, Faisal proclaimed "an absolutely independent government embracing all Syria".
This Arab Revolt was a turning point in the affairs of the region. For the British, it removed the danger of a German submarine base developing in the Red Sea; it diverted considerable Turkish reinforcements and supplies from the Palestine front to Hijaz; the Arab forces protected the right flank of the British army on its way to Palestine. The Arab Revolt renewed hopes of the Syrians who were under Jamal Pasha's oppressive rule. To the Arab movement in general the revolt provided a rallying point; many Arab officers deserted the Turkish army and joined the Arab army.

THE BRITISH POLICY

Gradually, it dawned on the Arabs that the British had no intention of keeping their promises. The Arab authority in Beirut was replaced by a French Military Governor. All Arab control over coastlands ended and was replaced. Syria was divided into three military administrations -- Palestine, Lebanon and Syria plus Transjordan. This was the first step towards the dismemberment of Syria as per the Sykes-Picot agreement.

The Sykes-Picot agreement was negotiated in secret between England, France and Russia in 1916. The Bolsheviks blew the whistle on the secrecy when they found this agreement in the files of the Tzar whom they had overthrown. They handed it to the ottomans who in turn gave it to Sharif Hussain, hoping to drive a wedge between the latter and the British. According to the agreement, Syria was to become a part of
the French sphere of influence. At the end of the war, in keeping with its terms, a provisional French administration was established in the coastal districts of Syria while in the interior an Arab government was set up under Amir Faisal. 1917 saw the Balfour Declaration which proved the British intentions to establish in Palestine a National Home for the Jews. The importance of the Balfour Declaration to Syrian history is profound. It led, in stages, to British dominance in Palestine from 1918 to 1947, to a partition of Syria and ultimately to the loss of Palestine's millinary Arab character and population.

In September 1919, the Britain agreed with the French claim to internal Syria and told Amir Faisal that he must come to terms with France. Over a three-month period British troops in the coastal areas were replaced by French troops. The Arabs still held on to the interior. Faisal reached a kind of understanding with Clemenceau and yielded on many points to the French rather than heed the popular demand in Syria to fight for independence. But this understanding could not be acted upon.

In March 1920, the Syrian nationalists proclaimed an independent Kingdom of Greater Syria. This national Arab government exercised authority in internal Syria. This first Arab Government was Syrian and secular. It was a united effort by Muslim, Christian and Jewish Arabs. The Syrian National Congress was called to session which, on 8 March 1920, proclaimed the independence of all Syria, a constitutional monarchy with Faisal as King, and formation of a national government.
In April 1920, the San Remo Conference gave France a mandate for the whole of Syria and French troops moved in. A French ultimatum, the Gouraud warning, was issued to Faisal which demanded his unconditional acceptance of French authority throughout internal Syria. Faisal agreed but the National Assembly did not, so he dissolved it. As French forces advanced towards Damascus, poorly armed Arab forces decided to fight under the leadership of Yusuf Al-Azmah, the War Minister. These forces knew that they were heading for certain death, their clarion call was "Tab al-Mout Ya Arab" (This is the time to welcome death). This brave band of Arabs under Al-Azmah clashed with the French army at Maysalun near Damascus only to be hopelessly outnumbered by the French troops. The Arab forces were ill-equipped with arms and they were defeated at Maysalun.

Here, we see an instance of history being created due to two individuals' different perceptions about the same event. The two leaders, King Faisal and Yusuf al-Azmah, the War Minister, reacted differently to the Gouraud warning.

King Faisal decided to relent to the French. He felt he was doing the right thing. He knew the military strength of Syria and realised that if he opts for war, the outcome would be death and disaster for the Arabs.

But Yusuf al-Azmah and his band of followers belonged to those brave people for whom honour was more important than life. They went to Maysalun knowing death was inevitable. History has recorded what Al-Azmah had uttered; "I will never allow history to record that the French entered Syria without bloodshed".
One may argue that King Faisal had taken a logical stand and Al-Azmah was impulsive and adventurous. But the latter created history and left something for future generations to aspire to. Stronger nations take over weaker nations because the latter abandon their sovereignty on the pretext of weakness. But, by doing so, they destroy all revolutionary feelings that might exist among its people. And when a nation loses sight of its revolutionary spirit or pride, then history can ignore this nation.

What Al-Azmah did in Maysolua has been entered in the annals of Arab history and his memory is eternally present in the Arab mind. The story of his brave deed is a golden page in their history.

SYRIA UNDER THE FRENCH MANDATE:

A group of tenacious French official policy makers capitalized on the "defensive patriotism" wrought by the First World War to commit France to military occupation of Syria, "But seizing Syria by force was one thing, governing it was quite another. The French spent an unhappy, unrewarding and turmoil-filled quarter century in Syria because, unlike elsewhere in the French Empire, they were unable to devise an adequate formula for governing the country".11

Syria was fragmented geographically into four parts. The British extended the borders of Palestine to include both banks of the Upper Jordan river. Transjordan was made a separate Emirate under Abdullah, the Sharif's second son. France ceded Cilicia and Edessa to Turkey. Lebanon was enlarged and made a separate state, the Greater Lebanon. Not satisfied with this, France partitioned what was left of Syria along religious lines. The Nusayyriah mountains and coastal area centered around Latakia was rechristened Alawi territory and made 'independent' of the rest of Syria. The Jebel Druze was also made 'independent'. France encouraged Christians, Assyrians and Kurds to settle in the Euphrates area and tried to help develop a separatist sentiment. The rest of Syria was divided into two autonomous governments of Damascus and Aleppo. The district of Alexandretta was placed under a special administration and later it was ceded to Turkey in 1939.

A mandatory was regarded as an "agent of civilization" appointed by the League of Nations for the specific purpose of "helping the development of the inhabitants of territories not yet able to stand alone by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world". France was selected as a mandatory for Syria by the allied powers. It was contrary to the wishes of its inhabitants and the League of Nations, actually, had nothing to do with it. "The contract with the League was a fait accompli before it was entered into and it was through the contrivance of France that the mandate was conferred upon her." The French High Commissioner in Syria started governing by decree and treated Syria like conquered territory.

12 Petran, n.4, p.339.
The period 1925-27 saw a series of convulsions taking place all over Syria. It was a culmination of a string of numerous local uprisings, strikes and demonstrations. Following a French decision in 1925 to authorise political parties, some nationalist groupings gathered under the leadership of Dr. Abdul Rahman Shahbandar and Faris Al Khuri, and formed the People's Party (*Hizb Al-Sha'b*). The national movement demanded the reunification of geographical Syria. Head-on collisions took place between the French and the nationalists.

The revolutionary bugle was sounded by the Druzes in the Jebel mountains, on 18 July 1925. This revolution was led by Sultan Pasha Atrash. The revolutionaries defeated the French at Al-Kafr and took over Al-Suwayda, the capital of the Druze mountains. The urban elite of the People's Party joined with the Druzes and then the Druze revolt led by Atrash was transformed into a national revolution. In Jebel Druze, Dr. Shahbandar established a Provisional Syrian Government under the flag of the Arab government with Sultan Atrash as President. People from all walks of life joined in and guerrilla warfare spread all over the country. Damascus, Hama, Homs, Al-Qatamun, Taratus, Rayaya, Latakia, Dirzor etc. felt the revolutionary tremors. When the revolutionaries infiltrated Ghuta, near Damascus, and headed towards the Al-Asm palace in Damascus, the French High Commissioner fled to Beirut. In retaliation, France pillaged Damascus for three days and burnt it down. They needed two years to crush the rebellion. Damascus was bombarded twice by the French.

This rebellion of a truly national character was finally defeated but it achieved a lot. A majority of people acquired a national consciousness and a sense of national
dignity. The revolution forced the French to realize that they could not hold Syria by force alone and must at long last comply with the Mandate's requirement for a constitutional statute.

By the first months of 1927, the Mandatory set about making arrangements for the framing of an organic law. In April 1928, a Constituent Assembly was elected. In August a draft Constitution was completed. The High Commissioner, Henri Ponsot, rejected the draft Constitution unanimously approved by the 1928 Assembly because it did not acknowledge the existence of the Mandate and insisted on the political unity of geographic Syria. He then dissolved the Assembly and imposed a Constitution in which these clauses were nullified and clauses considered indispensable to the maintenance of French control were added.

After new elections in January 1932, negotiations began for a Franco-Syrian treaty to be modelled on the one that was concluded between the United Kingdom and Iraq in 1930. No compromise could be found between the French demands and those of the nationalists, who, although in a minority, wielded a dominant influence in the Chamber and whose aim was to limit both in time and place, the French military occupation, and to include in Syria the separate areas of Jebel Druze and Latakia. In 1934 the High Commissioner suspended the Chamber indefinitely. Massive demonstrations and strikes paralysed life in Syria. The French were forced to allow a Syrian delegation to go to Paris for talks. This delegation was led by Hashem Beg Al-Atasi and other important members were Faris al-Khuri, Jamil Mardam Beg, Sadallah Jabri, Mustafa Al-Shahabi and Edmond Hemrs. The new Popular Front Government
showed itself more sympathetic towards Syrian aspirations than the former French Governments. In September 1936 a Franco-Syrian Treaty was signed which recognized the principle of Syrian independence and stipulated that, after ratification, there should be a period of three years during which the apparatus of a fully independent state should be created. The districts of Jebel Druze and Latakia would be annexed to Syria, but would retain special administrations. Other subsidiary agreements reserved for France important military and economic rights in Syria. It seemed that Syria might now enter a period of rapid political development; but unrest caused by the situation in Palestine, the crisis with Turkey, and the failure of France to ratify the 1936 treaty were responsible for the non-fulfilment of the above cited clauses.

The National Government had hardly been installed when the French began to retract from the 1936 treaty. They exacted new compromises from the government, which undermined people's confidence in the government. The French special service encouraged separatist movements and the last straw was when France ceded Alexandretta - an integral part of Syria - to Turkey. The Turkish population of Alexandretta was only 39 per cent and so the Syrians were rightly indignant at this step. In 1939, the French parliament refused to ratify the 1936 treaty and after the Alexandretta episode, public opinion was poised against the French. The government faced a crisis when violent riots took place and street demonstrations, mass arrests etc. became the order of the day. The French High Commissioner, Gabriel Duaux, suspended the Constitution, dissolved the parliament, restored Jebel Druze and Latakia provinces to autonomy and took over administration of Jazira and appointed a 'non-political' Council of Directors to rule by decree.
SYRIA DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR - TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE

"The war changed the country in two important respects. It paved the way for independence from France and it stimulated economic and societal changes which accelerated the realignment of political forces in the country". The war severely undermined French and British colonial positions and made imperative a more liberal allied policy towards colonial and semi-colonial peoples. "The fall of France and contradictions between French, British and American interests proved decisive in Syria's accession to independence".

Initially, when the war broke out, many nationalists in Syria had pinned their hopes on independence in case of an Axis victory. But this was not to be. On the other hand, the Anglo-French army invaded Syria on the pretext that its Vichy authorities had allowed overflight by German planes taking supplies to Iraqi Revolutionaries and in the space of 1 month, Anglo-Free French forces occupied all Syria. But, before the invasion, General Catroux, then de Gaulle's representative in Cairo, in his name, had promised Syria and Lebanon unconditional independence and the right to unite if they desired. This promise had British guarantee. But then de Gaulle made signing of treaties with France in military, economic and other spheres mandatory before independence. He also stated that the Mandate would still remain in force. But the British put pressure on France to grant Syria and Lebanon

13 Khoury, n.11, p.583.
14 Petran, n.4, p.77.
independence. The Free French restored the suspended Syrian Constitution in 1943. General elections were held in July and the National Bloc came to power. A nationalist government was formed under Shukri al-Quwatly as President. Both Lebanese and Syrian governments announced their intentions to terminate the mandate.

De Gaulle announced:

"Inhabitants of Syria and Lebanon:

At the moment when the forces of Free France .... are entering your territory I declare that I assume the power, duties and responsibilities of France in to the mandatory regime and to proclaim you free and independent".15

By 1944, Syria had received recognition from almost all neighbouring states and major states like the USSR and USA. When Syria declared war on Germany in February 1945, it was assured that thus it had earned a place for itself at the Conference where the United Nations was to be born.

By May the French were reinforcing their garrisons, mainly with the dreaded and hated Senegalese troops. Heckles rose in Damascus when France laid down specifics of their proposed treaties which did not include the transfer of the Troupes Speciales until Syria and Lebanon signed on the dotted line. This was a tactic to continue their dominance over both the units. But both Lebanon and Syria announced

their refusal to negotiate under the conditions of French military escalation in the Levant. The result was a total collapse of law and order. While people took to the streets, the French shelled and bombed the riot-hit areas, especially Damascus. The heavy casualty rate prompted the British to intervene. More so, because these developments could have upset their Arab policy. They ordered the French troops back to their barracks. Then, they took over military control till the governance could be taken back by the Syrian government.

By July, France agreed to transfer control of the much contested *Troupes Specials* to the Syrians and the Lebanese. Then followed a complete withdrawal of French troops and thus the Syrian dream of independence turned into reality.

**SYRIA AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

"The story of the first years of Syrian independence is not one of great statesmen or powerful political ideas but of lesser men, who, called upon to deal with a situation in flux, spent themselves in the task of retaining power. With few well-tried institutions or recognized political traditions to guide them, they were more often engrossed in the trivia of personal rivalry than in statesman-like acts in their newly won independence."  

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The period after attainment of independence was fraught with instability. The internal political situation was in chaos. "Seething popular discontent, quarrels between generals and politicians over responsibility for the Palestine disaster, charges and counter-charges of corruption created a state of near anarchy". On 30 March 1949, Colonel Husni Zaim staged a smooth and bloodless coup de'tat. This coup is often called the trendsetter of those numerous coups which then took place all over the Arab world. Zaim's coup was heralded by many as a "blessed revolt" against the old order. Even the Ba'ath regarded it as heralding a 'new age'. Zaim had the support of his nationalist officers-like Colonel Adib Shishakli in the staging of his coup. This coup is often said to have been engineered by the CIA and the American Embassy in Damascus. Miles Lepelaand, a member of the 1949 embassy team in Damascus wrote, "A 'political action team' under Major Stephen Meade systematically developed a friendship with Zaim", suggested to him the idea of a coup de'tat, advised him how to go about it, and guided him through the intricate preparations in laying the grandwork for it.

In his short tenure Zaim did achieve a number of notable reforms, for instance, extension of suffrage to literate women, a modern civil code, abolition of family Waqfs etc. But these reforms were balanced by his acts of political suppression, outlawing of the Communist Party, dissolving of other political parties, suppressing the media etc. His shifty politics and tendency to concentrate most powers in his hands alienated him from the people and the result was the occurrence of the second coup.

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17 Petran, n. 4, p. 96.
18 Ibid. p. 105.
coup of the year. On 14 August, Colonel Sami Hinnawi staged a successful coup and Zaim was executed. In keeping with Hinnawi’s claim that the military would not interfere in civil affairs, Hashim Bey al-Atasi was made the President. Accordingly, the army was withdrawn from politics, most political parties were legalized, a cabinet was formed which had members of the Ba’ath Party. The aspect which turned out to be Hinnawi’s Achilles heel, was the question of Arab unity.

The question of the day was whether Syria should unite with Iraq. This idea had supporters as well as opponents. Moreover, the split between the politicians and the soldiers was deepening. Internal political dissensions surfaced due to the disagreement over the unity Constitution and the provisions of the new Constitution. These two very reasons were made the excuse for the third coup of the year. On 19 December, Colonel Adib Shishakli successfully staged his coup and Hinnawi was arrested. But this change in government did not bring Syria internal stability. Shishakli installed himself at a powerful position and seemed to appoint and dismiss Presidents and Premiers almost at will. On 29 November 1951, he abandoned all pretexts and carried out a second coup which swept away all semblance of civilian rule and ended the period of indirect army rule. The Parliament was dissolved, President Atasi was dismissed, all legislative and executive power was conferred on his spokesman, Colonel Fawzi Selu, political parties were outlawed, newspapers were abolished and numerous other steps were undertaken to bring about social and economic reform by decree. Shishakli initially tried to end the fellahin's unrest by decreeing reforms but when it proved ineffective, he directed a repression of the fellahin’s unrest. He hoped to create a stable, modern state, united internally, by doing
away with foreign influence and abolishing the separate status of religious and racial minorities and the tribes. When political parties like the Ba'ath continued unabated to oppose him, he ordered the arrest of prominent leaders like Akram Hourani, Michel Aflaq, Salah ud-din Bitar etc. To give his rule a constitutional semblance, Shishakli rigged a 'popular referendum' and on 10 July 1953, was "elected" President. But on 25 February 1954, he was overthrown by an army coup which started in Aleppo and soon spread all over the country. President Atasi, and the 1950 Constitution were reinstated and restored.

Thus ended the rule of the three Colonels. None of them could bring internal stability to Syria because they were not able to handle the trouble-torn country. They were groomed in the French army and belonged to a 'pre-ideological' generation which could not fathom the post-war situation. It was Shishakli who could tackle the situation to a certain extent and thus stayed in power for almost five years. The contribution of these Colonels was to help Syria stumble out of the stupor it had fallen under during the Ottoman rule and to guide the country's first steps towards statehood of the modern kind. After the overthrow of Shishakli in 1954, the army solemnly withdrew to the barracks and seemed to have retired from politics. All the political parties emerged into the open and Syria again became a democracy. Seven months after Shishakli's fall, an election in the Arab world took place. Hashem al-Atasi became the head of the state but was soon replaced by Shukri al-Quwatli.

This free political atmosphere saw the interplay of numerous political parties in the political arena. The Ba'ath, the Arab Socialist Party, the Syrian Social
Nationalist Party of Antun Sa'adeh, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communists etc. were all in the fray. The situation was such till the whole Arab world was swayed by the rising force of Nasserism.

MAJOR POLITICAL FORCES IN SYRIA

The period after the first World War was filled with economic and political frustration. Besides their own brand of nationalism, western ideas were also seeping in. For instance, the fascist and socialist movements in Europe left their mark on the Arabs. Liberal and radical ideologies were floated, while many grouped into parties with agendas including deliberation, discussion and representation. There were others - "Nazi-style para-military organisations", who took to the streets in violent demonstration. Extremely doctrinal parties also emerged with their own nationalist ideologies.

One of the first parties to be organised in Syria was the *Hizb al_Qawmi al-Ishteraki al-Suri* (Syrian Social National Party, SSNP) founded by Antun Sa'adeh in 1932. Sa'adeh believed in the reality of a Syrian nation, in a homeland which encompassed all geographic Syria and extended to the Suez Canal in the south. He developed the idea that the Syrian nation differed from the Arab nation and consisted of a unique historical synthesis of Arabs, Phoenicians, and other groups who lived in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Palestine, and who, therefore, must be united under the flag of a Greater Syria. This nation was to contain a homogeneous society in which traditional group loyalties, feudalism and capitalism would be abolished and
religion would be separated from the state. This 'scientific national philosophy' of Sa'adeh had a lasting impact on the minds of many Arab intellectuals. The party had begun functioning as a secret organisation in 1932. The idea of Greater Syria was the backbone of Sa'adeh's brand of nationalism. National revival was made the core cause of the SSNP and involved the realization of nationhood in Syria. Sa'adeh successfully coupled a comprehensive ideology of Syrian nationalism with rigorous secularism.

But Sa'adeh's brand of totalitarian, corporative, anti-religious nationalism was soon overwhelmed by the force of Arab nationalism. For the Arab nationalists, it was unforgivable that any Arab should restrict his nation to his country, since it undermined the concept that all Arabs form one nation. But Sa'adeh's Syrian nationalism appealed to those who were interested in maintaining Syria's national existence and making it the center of a large Arab political entity. It held enormous appeal to extremist secularists who felt that no religion should be made the basis of nationalism, since other national bonds, like that of language and history were considered stronger than religion. Sa'adeh's party found many followers and sympathisers. It even had supporters in the army. In 1949, after an aborted coup in Lebanon, Sa'adeh fled to Syria. But Husni Zaim handed him over to the Lebanese authorities and in July 1949, he was tried and executed.

Sa'adeh's death did not mean the end of the SSNP. His condemnation of feudalism and his call for economic progress and social justice, formulated within the context of secular nationalism and corporates, have been preserved and remoulded under the ideology of Arab socialism. His influence on all subsequent Arab revolutionary movements was indelible. After his death, his party was legalised.
Subsequently, the ideological trend moved towards populism and revolutionism. The SSNP played a major role in Syrian politics till 1955 when it was banned and all its ranks were driven underground. The most important achievement of Sa'adeh was the popularisation of the 'Greater Syria' concept which even today is said to kindle desire in the minds of some politicians in Syria.

The party which has dominated Syrian politics over the past few decades has been the *Hizb al-Ba'ath al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki*, or the Ba'ath Party (Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party). It is commonly accepted that the Ba'ath was founded in 1940 by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar, two Damascus-born school teachers who had studied together at Sorbonne. Their students were the most politically conscious members of the community, providing fertile ground for their ideas. Their first step was the founding of a weekly called *al-Taliha* (Vanguard) which was revolutionary in its views on literary, social and political questions. The two began to gather followers and exert an influence which persisted as these followers went on to universities and into professional life. Especially important were those followers who became teachers, for the major recruiting ground of the party in Syria's provinces were the government secondary schools. Another person politically active at that period was Zaki al-Arsuzi, often regarded by some as the real founder of the Ba'ath, since he had formed a party named *al-Ba'ath al-Arabi* (The Arab Resurrection) in 1940.

Both the above streams worked in parallel ways and aimed at similar goals, but they had virtually no cooperation. Due to many reasons the al-Arsuzi group broke up and he went into virtual political retirement while Aflaq and Bitar gained political
momentum. They held meetings, wrote articles and issued bulletins and pamphlets in the name of "The Arab Revitalization (ihya) Movement". However, it is evident that they also used the name Ba'ath a number of times. This group attracted nationalists of many hues, especially those who professed Pan-Arabism. It was from 1943 onward that Aflaq and Bitar's party formally used the term Ba'ath in the place of ihya. The first mention of (the Arab Resurrection Movement) appears in a statement issued by Aflaq and Bitar in support of Shukri Quwatly in June 1943. In 1943, Aflaq and Bitar contested the election and thus started the active political and electoral involvement in Syrian politics of the nascent Ba'athists and they engaged in propaganda against the French. In 1945-46, they applied for a licence to function as a legal political party which was not granted. The main themes professed by this party were Pan-Arabism, common Arab problems, the Palestine Question, anti-colonialism, etc.

The founding congress of the party was held at the Luna Park Coffee House in Damascus from 4 to 7 April 1947. The congress elected Aflaq as amid or doyen. With this congress, the Ba'ath Party successfully completed its transition from a movement to an organized political party with an organizational apparatus.

The basic idea in Ba'ath doctrine is that the Arab nation is one and a permanent entity in history. Arabism is defined as the feeling and consciousness of being Arab. An overriding priority is given to Arab unity and a moral preponderance to socialism and liberty. It was asserted that Arab unity should go hand in hand with the Arab people's struggle for freedom and that socialism should steer it. The

Ba'athists hail their party as being the first movement to give Arab unity its true revolutionary content, and a paramount, significant place. The cardinal slogan of the Ba'ath is "Ummatun Arabia Wahida, Thal Risala Khalida" (One Arab Nation - with an eternal mission) and this "eternal mission" is taken to mean Arab unity. In short, its three main objectives are - Unity, Freedom and Socialism. The Party Constitution lays stress on the above three factors alongwith nationalism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, revolutionary Arab nationalism and Arab solidarity. The Ba'ath proposes to make the Arab nation a modern and secular state. It also promises democracy.20

This party became the largest organized party in Syria and gradually spread to Iraq, Jordan, Sudan etc. The Ba'athists played a major role in the coups and succeeding government in Syria. They were the chief proponent of the union with Egypt. The result of this ardour for union proved to be almost fatal for the party when it was banned according to Nasser's pre-condition to the union. In 1963, successive coups in Syria and Iraq installed Ba'ath governments in these two states. Since then the Ba'ath party has remained in power in Syria. It has had a turbulent career, no doubt, filled with persistent internal problems, assassinations and coups but it remains one of the most successful political parties in the Arab world.

20 For details about Ba'ath principles see the Constitution of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party, Damascus: Publication of National Leadership B.A. S.P. n.d.).
COMMUNISM

The communist movement in the Arab world was initially a pet project of a handful of middle-class intellectuals who were overawed and mesmerized by the Bolshevik revolution and its slogan of proletarian revolution, though very few among them could relate it to the realities of life in the Arab East. In Syria and Lebanon, communism began as a movement of romantic visionaries who viewed the Bolshevik Revolution not as a forerunner of the world proletarian movement but as a summation of the humanistic and egalitarian ideas of the French Revolution. The streams of the left in Syria are of interest as instruments which strove to bring change. Their political action drew its force from a body of ideas which can be said to have transformed, to a certain extent, the attitudes and ways of thinking of a generation of Arab youth. The Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon was founded in the mid-1920s but it could never surge up with strength and remained proscribed. Their activities were restricted to acts like demonstrations on May Day.

The earliest communists in Syria were Fu'ad al-Shamali, Yusuf Yazbek, A. Madayun etc. In 1926 the French mandatory authorities arrested most of the prominent members. All party activity was frozen until their release in 1928, when, under the leadership of al-Shamali, the party extended its activities. The Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon was formally constituted in 1929. Although ideologically committed to internationalism, the Syrian communists were vastly influenced by the rise of the popular Fronts in Europe and from the mid-1930s applied this concept to the Syrian situation. For them, the plurality of Syria's social formations made this
concept a realistic one, and many believe that the Communist Party was later to owe much of its success to this. It was active in the national struggle but clashed with the Arab nationalists. Its strategy differed from that of the other nationalist forces. While the motive behind nationalist upsurge was the desire to redeem national identity, communism was motivated by the urge to foment a proletarian revolution transcending national boundaries. While nationalism was an indigenous project, communism was an "exotic plant sought to be abruptly transplanted". Moreover the main difference was about the methods of struggle - the nationalists commended unity of national ranks to wrest political freedom while the communists resorted to class struggle as a contribution to the global conflict between communism and capitalism. Communism found its most ardent supporters neither in the teeming peasantry nor in the far less numerous industrial proletariat but in the politically articulate middle class of lawyers, doctors, teachers, technocrats and even army officers. Even while espousing the Arab nationalist cult the Communists endeavoured to give it a revolutionary twist. In the Syrian Communist Party, the motto of Arab unity was the motto of struggle for "liberation from imperialist tyranny".

In the 1930s a prominent communist leader, Khalid Baqdash, emerged in Syria. He led the Syrian Communist Party till the Syrian-Egyptian union when he had to flee to Eastern Europe. He was a Kurd and it is accepted that Kurds and Armenians were proportionately far more numerous than the Arabs in the Communist Party in Syria. Baqdash's books, pamphlets and speeches were instrumental in spreading Communism in the area. The Party was outlawed in 1939 but resumed activities in 1941. The period, 1942-48, marked the party's second phase of legality. The party
participated in the election of 1943 and enjoyed good relations with Quwatly and the National bloc. But after 1946, the party lost ground to other political groups. It lost face when the Soviet Union voted in the UN (1947) in favour of a Jewish state and then recognised the state of Israel. The party was dissolved in 1948 and was relegated to the underground by the first military coup of March 1949. The Syrian Partisans of Peace were the main Communist front in 1950-51. After initially opposing Shishakli, the party slowly accepted him as a better alternative than the People's Party. Then it directed most of its energies against the Ba'ath. They had many ups and downs in the 1954-58 period. Finally, the Syria-Egypt union put them out of political reckoning.

NASSERISM AND THE UNION

The political and social ideas of Gamal Abdul Nasser had an enormous impact on the entire Arab world and Syria was no exception. In retrospect, it is easy to understand that Nasserism was a necessary transitional stage. His revolutionary ideas took the Arab world by storm. He regarded the division of the Arab states as artificial and propounded the idea of one Arab nation. He championed Pan-Arabism since he felt it would eventually lead to unification and integration in the form of one Arab state. To a large extent, nationalism and socialism became the means for fulfilling this unity. The main conditions for unity were free choice by people seeking this union, consolidation of internal unity by each Arab state, willingness of the majority in a country to live in a union, and adoption of socialism. In his global foreign policy he opposed colonialism, imperialism, spheres of influence, foreign military bases and alignment with the Great Powers. The result was the foundation of the Non-aligned
movement by Nehru, Nasser and Tito. His pet theme was Arab nationalism which he described as love and solidarity among Arabs, as a movement and philosophy for political, social and economic mobilization, and as a struggle for the unity, freedom, integrity, and dignity of Arabs. The basis of Arab nationalism was the unity of language, culture and hope and strategic necessity. His socialist views also held immense appeal for the Arabs. Nasser's radical steps like the arms deal with Czechoslovakia, the Bandung conference, the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the abortive British-French-Israeli aggression on Egypt, etc. gave Nasser the status of not just an Arab leader but almost that of a world personality. In a very short time Nasser and Nasserism became the strongest force in the Arab world and he had ardent followers in all the Arab countries. Nasserism became synonymous with Arab nationalism.

For Syria, the reasons for union with Egypt were many. Syria in 1957-58, faced with the threat posed by the growing strength of its Communist Party, the strong pressure of its conservative groups and the open hostility of its Turkish and Iraqi neighbours was on the verge of political disintegration. Rival army factions were on the verge of clashing. Many external and internal dangers made it imperative for the Syrians to incline towards Egypt. Egypt supported Syria during the Turkish-American created crisis. Moreover, Egypt was Syria's ally in the Arab economic and propaganda war against Israel. Nasser's charisma had made Egypt a 'progressive' Arab power and it appeared to be a suitable partner in helping to achieve the Ba'athist dream of Arab unity. The army saw the union with Egypt as a way to halt its own dangerous factionalism and to preserve its paramount position in Syria's political life.
Many other elements, too, preferred a union with Egypt to complete disintegration. Gradually, the Ba'athists became the principal promoter of the union despite the initial hesitation of the Egyptian government and even Nasser himself. The bringing about of the union was basically due to the efforts of the Ba'ath party. That a party could carry the majority with it was due to its espousal of a popular national cause which no other political group could oppose and hope to survive. Arab unity had been the aim of the national movement since its inception in Syria itself. Now that imperialism had been forced out, this was an opportunity to join Syria and Egypt and lay the cornerstone of Arab unity by opening the way to other Arab states to join in. Moreover, there was this ideological affinity between Ba'ath philosophy and Nasser's socialism. Nasser demanded a merger of the political patterns in both parts of the new united state, the dissolution of all the political parties in Syria, and the termination of the Syrian army's role in politics. These demands were agreed to and the United Arab Republic (UAR) was born in February 1958. It was regarded as a radical unity achievement which would soon lead the other Arab states into an Arab union.

But this union was not fated for survival. The Syrians gradually felt that they were in danger of losing their identity. The Syrian Ba'ath was the first victim, since soon after the Union, the Party was dissolved. Nasser then scattered and suppressed the Ba'ath leadership. Egyptian officers and officials were sent to govern Syria and this was resented by the Syrians. The Ba'ath had hoped to provide the ideology to Nasser. They wanted Nasser to take the help of their sophisticated political philosophy. But this was not to be. Nasser sent veteran Ba'ath leaders off to Cairo and gradually removed the Ba'athists from influential positions. In the National
Union the Syrians were not proportionately represented. After the Syrian Vice-President resigned, Nasser found in Abdul Hamid al-Sarraj an agent to unleash a reign almost verging on dictatorship over Syria. Due to all these, a new Ba'athist stream emanated which was not just hostile to the UAR but also displeased and impatient with the Ba'athist leadership of the day for giving in so easily. There were other grousers accumulating against Nasser and Egypt. The agrarian reforms introduced were taken to be an assault on the privileges of the rich landlords who had hitherto formed the core of the political leaders. The nationalisation laws affected in another way the rich landlords who had employed capital in industry, commerce and banking. Above all, the rule of people like al-Sarraj turned out to be a vicious totalitarian regime of security, with arrests, imprisonment without trial and torture as its insignia. One of the most dissatisfied groups was of the army officers, who were tired of subordination to Egyptians.

The end of the Union was caused by yet another coup on 28 September 1961. This coup was carried out by two separate rightist elements, linked with the Syrian middle class and the conservative Arab regimes and a group which did not really want to break from the union, but, only wished to reform it by imposing certain conditions on the Egyptians. Thus took place the infisal (secession) and Syria regained its national identity.

Most of the countries had to recognize this fait accompli. Syria once more became a member of the United Nations. A provisional Constitution was
promulgated in November and new elections took place in December 1961. The President of the new Republic was Dr. Nazim-al-Qudsi.

The intervening period saw the development of a military junta who formed the National Council of the Revolutionary Command. They seized control of Damascus on 8 March 1963. But in a couple of months, the Ba'athists took measures to purge the armed forces and administration of all elements favourable to Egypt. A government with distinct Ba'athist overtone formed a new government. It created a National Guard whose members were Ba'athist. In the month of July, after aborting an attempted military coup, Maj.Gen. Amin al-Hafiz became the President of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command, a post which actually was at par with that of the Head of State.

Then followed a period of socialistic rule. Banks were nationalised, industrial enterprises were brought under state control and land ceiling took place. The Ba'ath government enjoyed military support. The period also witnessed the gradual coming into prominence of the Alawi sect, a Shi'i sect of Syria. Many quarters were dissatisfied with the regime. The Muslim Brotherhood opposed the regime. The peasant population had many Nasserites in them. The upper class was opposed to the Ba'athist regime. All these forces combined to break into an open revolt at Hama in April 1964, which was easily suppressed. In 1964 a provisional Constitution was promulgated which described Syria as a 'Democratic Socialist Republic'. The Presidential Council had General Hafiz at its head. A National Council was established in 1965 which was accorded the task of formulating a new Constitution.
But the ruling Ba'ath Party was not without internal dissensions. There existed a vertical split between the old guards and the younger sections who were doctrinaire and radical in their attitude and enjoyed the support of the younger military officers. This section staged a successful coup in February 1966 and arrested the Ba'ath veterans like Aflaq. Gen. Hafiz and the Premier, Salah al-Din Bitar.

Syria then was involved in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. The loss they suffered was reflected in the internal Ba'athi affairs. A new group emerged which favoured a pragmatic approach to the economy, avoided empty ideological slogans and advocated a bolder role against Israel. The leader of this faction was Hafiz al-Assad, who soon became the Defence Minister. In November 1970, the acute power struggle culminated in seizure of power by Gen. Assad's group. Ahmad Khatib was named the acting President and Gen. Assad became the Prime Minister and the party general secretary. In March 1971 Gen. Assad was elected President for a term of seven years.

Thus Hafiz al-Assad came to power in Syria. At that point of time, no one could have foretold how this man would determine Syria's future.