

Book Review Essay: Syrian Ba’thist Memoirs

General Mustafa Talas. *Mir'at Hayati* [The Mirror of My Life]. 4 Parts. Damascus: Dar Talas, 1991-2004, 3,740 pages. Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali. *Hayati wa al-I'dam* [My Life and Execution]. 3 Volumes, 1,700 pages. Damascus, 2007.

Reviewed by Nikolaos van Dam

In my view, Mustafa Talas' memoirs *Mir'at Hayati* [The Mirror of my Life] are indispensable to anyone wishing to seriously study the history of the Ba’thist era in Syria in detail and in depth. The memoirs provide detailed descriptions of behind-the-scenes situations and of the secretive Ba’th organization and its leading personalities. Mustafa Talas provides essential hitherto unpublished material. Talas was minister of defense for over 30 years (1972-2004) and personally took part in many important developments within the Syrian Armed Forces and the Ba’th Party from its earliest days. Whereas it had previously been taboo to write about sectarianism or the secret intricacies of party history and its intrigues, this has now become possible in Syria. This development was not only due to Talas' position (although it certainly made it easier), but also because speaking of such issues is no longer considered as sensitive as it once was. Nevertheless, what is now permitted for a select group of Ba’thists in power, remains prohibited to others. Other memoirs (or other kinds of publications or statements) which only hint at sensitive phenomena could land their authors in prison and could be forbidden in Syria.

Part 1 (1948-1958) deals with Talas' youth, his years at the Military Academy, the Ba’thist Qatana revolt (1957), and the unification with Egypt (1958). In addition to his studied analysis, Talas also provides compelling anecdotes, including stories about Hafiz al-Asad who was there at the same time. Al-Asad was both respected and feared. As a disciplinarian he was known to butt (*yantah*) heads with his rivals in such a way as to completely subdue them (I, pp. 307-309). Because of this story the book was reportedly not particularly welcome in Damascus on initial publication, although later on it turned out not to be a problem.

Part 2 (1958-1968) describes the secretive life of the “exiled” Syrian Ba’thist officers in Egypt during the Egyptian-Syrian union, and the formation of their secret Ba’thist military committee which eventually took power in Syria. Talas introduces some hitherto unknown Military Committee members. He also covers the separation of Syria from Egypt in 1961, the Free Officers Movement and their abortive coup attempt in Aleppo in 1962; the Ba’thist revolution of 8 March 1963; and the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood's Hama insurrection in 1964. Talas also attends to internal Ba’thist power struggles, including the expulsion of Military Committee leader and Alawi General Muhammad ‘Umran; the 23 February Movement of 1966; and the abortive coup of 8 September 1966 led by Druze Major Salim Hatum who tried to topple the regime by inviting the party leadership for a banquet (*walimah*) in al-Suwayda' with the aim of taking them hostage and, possibly, killing them. Talas compares Hatum's plan with the slaughtering of the Mameluks by Muhammad ‘Ali in 1811. Talas reports that Hatum had tried to set up a similar trap in October 1965, but had failed then as well (II, pp. 612-614). The volume closes with a critical analysis of relations with the Soviet Union and of the causes and consequences of the June War in 1967.

Part 3 (1968-1978)—by far the longest section of the book at 1,460 pages—deals with the power struggle between Alawi Generals Hafiz al-Asad and Salah Jadid and the suicide of National Security Chief ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi (all three co-founders of the Ba’thist Military Committee). It also covers Hafiz al-Asad’s Corrective Movement of 1970; foreign and inter-Arab relations; the October 1973 War; Syrian military intervention in Lebanon; the Israeli invasion in Lebanon in 1978; and Ba’th Party congresses, Camp David, and the Palestinian resistance movement.

The book had to undergo an amusingly minor type of censorship in *Part III* (p. 1086), where President Hafiz al-Asad is quoted as having asked about an officer of Rif’at al-Asad’s Saraya al-Difa’ (Defence Brigades): “Where is that donkey (*himar*) from?” With a small piece of paper glued over it, *himar* has been replaced by “officer (*dabit*)”...

Part 4 (1978-1988) deals with Syria’s relations with both Iran and Iraq, including Iraqi-Syrian unification efforts; internal Iraqi Ba’th affairs and encounters with then Vice President Saddam Husayn and President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr; the Muslim Brotherhood’s massacre of Alawi recruits at the artillery academy near Aleppo (1979); "lessons learnt" from the Iraq-Iran war; and the abortive coup of Colonel Rif’at al-Asad against his brother Hafiz al-Asad in 1984.

Most of Talas’s work focuses on developments in which he himself personally participated. These are by far the most valuable parts of his work. The analyses of Talas are generally valuable because they come from an insider.

The memoirs of the former commander of the National Guard and later of the People’s Army, Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, *Hayati wa al-I’dam* [My Life and Execution], are equally important and indispensable for those who want to obtain an in-depth understanding of Syrian Ba’thist history and the inner workings of the Ba’th Party. They were privately published in Damascus between 2005 and 2007 (in several editions, available through Maktabat al-Nuri) and make fascinating reading for those who are fond of detail and already have a solid background knowledge of the relevant issues. The three volumes are not always chronologically ordered, nor are they systematically organized. They also contain minor repetitions.

Volume I is almost exclusively devoted to the Arab nationalist Free Officers Movement (Ba’thists, Nasserists and others) and their abortive coup in Aleppo in 1962. It has the character of a very detailed documentary study, which was originally planned as part of a wider Ba’thist history project about the Arab nationalist movement in Syria. Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali was sentenced to death because of his role in this coup. As the date of his execution was scheduled on 9 March 1963, the Ba’thist Military Committee leaders decided to carry out their coup earlier than originally planned, in order to save al-‘Ali from execution (I, p. 157).

Volume II provides fascinating insight into al-‘Ali’s difficult early youth in the countryside surrounding Hama, where his Alawi parents suffered the harsh conditions of poverty under Ottoman rule and as a result of the feudal system which oppressed the peasantry. The book then proceeds through various stages of al-‘Ali’s military career and his early risky experiences as member of the Ba’th Party. Of particular interest are his accounts of the bloody Nasserist coup of

18 July 1963; of Colonels Jasim 'Alwan and Muhammad Nabhan (the latter being an ex-Ba'thist Alawi); and of the internal disputes within the Ba'th regime involving President Amin al-Hafiz and Muhammad 'Umran (1963-1966).ⁱ

Al-'Ali's relationship with the Murshidiyin sect and his crucial role in aborting Rif'at al-Asad's revolt against his brother President in 1984 (II, pp. 241-274) is especially noteworthy. The Murshidiyin were followers of Salman al-Murshid, a charismatic leader of the people of the Alawi Mountains, who was hanged in 1946 during the era of President Shukri al-Quwwatli. They had been discriminated against ever since. Coincidentally, al-'Ali and Rif'at al-Asad had separately cultivated strong ties with the Murshidiyin. Rif'at relied on members of the Murshidiyin to such an extent that they became the backbone of his Saraya al-Difa'. Rif'at's revolt in 1984 against President Hafiz al-Asad was made toothless when, at the suggestion of al-'Ali, President al-Asad asked the 3,000 Murshidiyin soldiers to withdraw from Rif'at's forces. Without these men, Rif'at's tanks and armored vehicles could not come into action. Al-'Ali's account of these events is confirmed by Talas (IV, pp. 345-349).

Volume III deals with the coups of February 23rd and September 8th, 1966. The latter coup is described in even more detail than by Talas, as al-'Ali was personally taken hostage by Major Salim Hatum. The abortive revolt in Qatana led by Druze Major Muhsin al-'Aqabani in 1966 (just before the Hatum coup) is mentioned by both al-'Ali and Walid Hamdun (Damascus, 2007, p. 93), but no clear explanation is given as to the background of the al-'Aqabani revolt.ⁱⁱ Al-'Ali considers the June 1967 War; Syrian military intervention in Jordan in 1970 on behalf of the Palestinians (an episode which is rarely described by insiders in such detail); the suicide of 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi; the removal and imprisonment for life of former Chief-of-Staff General Ahmad al-Suwaydani; important Ba'th Party congresses; and the final supremacy of Hafiz al-Asad beginning in 1970. Al-'Ali portrays Hafiz al-Asad as a strong statesman and principled personality and as one who was prepared to go to any length—short of his own deposition as he demonstrated in 1970—for the sake of loyalty to the party.

Talas and al-'Ali's accounts of the suicide of al-Jundi differ slightly from one another and from the account of former Deputy Prime Minister and Regional Command Member Muhammad Haydar.ⁱⁱⁱ They all heard the fatal shot themselves, but in the presence of different persons. Taking as a point of departure that all three authors wrote their stories in good faith, it just shows that human memory is not always perfect, however much the authors themselves may be convinced of the authenticity of their respective versions.

This incident is an example of how there can be several different accounts of the same events. Invariably, the author tends to highlight his own position. As a result, it is not always clear what actually happened. One needs to compare multiple sources in order to best approximate the truth. Al-'Ali, for instance, writes himself into a pivotal role during the coup of 23 February 1966, where he gained control over the 70th armored brigade south of Damascus (which provided the military backbone of the regime at the time). However, former Minister and Regional Command Member Marwan Habash (who was, at the time, head of the Ba'th Party Organizational Bureau) maintains that al-'Ali did not play any role at all.^{iv} Mustafa Talas (II, p. 680), on the other hand, confirms and, thus, substantiates al-'Ali's claim.

Both Talas' and al-'Ali's memoirs describe a situation in which Ba'thist military and civilian personnel, especially between 1963 and 1970, lived with deep mistrust of one another. Faced by the real danger of a military coup which could occur at any moment, the threat of murder or imprisonment was always close at hand. Former Ba'th Party comrades and friends turned out, on various occasions, to become the most deadly of enemies. Ba'thist regimes not only severely suppressed their non-Ba'thist opposition but also fellow Ba'thist rivals.

As most of the main Syrian Ba'thist players of the period 1963-1970 have died or are very elderly, this era is also coming to a close as far as the publication of personal memoirs and observations is concerned.

If one has to choose which to read first, the memoirs of Mustafa Talas or those of Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali, I recommend the work of Talas. It is better organized and more analytical. With regards to the three volumes of al-'Ali's work, I would give priority to parts two and three. I am not usually eager to read such lengthy books, but for these works I am glad to have made an exception.

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ⁱ See also the interviews with Amin al-Hafiz on *al-Jazeera* in 2001: *Al-Inqilabat fi Suriya kama yaraha Amin al-Hafiz* [The Coups in Syria as Seen by Amin al-Hafiz] (<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/3E3413BB-03BD-48B7-B9B2-951B0E0C754C.htm>). They provide interesting details about the Hama Muslim Brotherhood revolt of 1964; the case of Israeli spy Elie Cohen; and President Nasser's authorization of the bloody Nasserist coup in Syria in 1963 which appears to have been hopeless from the start.

ⁱⁱ The memoirs of former Deputy Prime Minister and Regional Command Member General Walid Hamdun (1937-2006), *Dhikrayat wa-Ara'* [Memoirs and Opinions] (Damascus, 2007), are less detailed and not of the same caliber as those of Talas and al-'Ali, but they are useful if one wants to have the view of an insider concerning the positions of the author's party comrades including al-'Ali and others. According to Talas, Hamdun's memoirs contain exaggerations and mistakes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Muhammad Haydar, *Al-Ba'th wa al-Baynunat al-Kubra* [The Ba'th and the Great Disunity], (n.p., 1998), p. 180. Haydar provides a refreshing analytical synopsis of Ba'thist history in Syria from its early beginnings to 1970, including fascinating descriptions of key Ba'thist personalities.

^{iv} Marwan Habash, "Harakat 23 Shubat 1966" [The Movement of 23 February 1966] (Part 8). *Kulluna Shuraka' fi al-Watan* (22 July 2008) <http://all4syria.info/content/view/3510/124/> (Accessed 21 April 2009).