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Extended Book Review Essay by Nikolaos van Dam*

SYRIAN BA'THIST MEMOIRS

General (al-'Imad) Mustafa Talas, "*Mir'at Hayati*" (*The Mirror of my Life*), 4 Parts, Damascus: Dar Talas, 1991-2004, 3740 pages.

Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali, "*Hayati wa al-I'dam*" (*My Life and Execution*), 3 Volumes, 1700 pages, Damascus, 2007.

Muhammad Haydar, "*al-Ba'th wa al-Baynunat al-Kubra*" (*The Ba'th and the Great Disunity*) (n.p., 1998, 238 pages).

General (al-'Amid) Walid Hamdun, "*Dhikrayat wa Ara*" (*Memories and Views*) (Damascus, 2007, 400 pages).

General (al-Liwa') Muhammad 'Umran, "*Tajribati fi al-Thawrah*" (*My Experience in the Revolution*), (n.p., 1970, 445 pages).

General (al-Fariq) Amin al-Hafiz, "*Al-Inqilabat fi Suriya kama yaraha Amin al-Hafiz*" (*The Coups in Syria as Seen by Amin al-Hafiz*) (Interviews by Ahmad Mansur, *Al-Jazeera*, 2001).

Marwan Habash, "*Harakat 23 Shubat... al-Dawa'i wa al-Asbab*" (*The 23 February Movement, its Motives and Reasons*), "*Muhawalat 'Usyan al-Ra'id Salim Hatum fi al-Suwayda' Yawm 8 Aylul 1966*" (*The Revolt Attempt of Major Salim Hatum in al-Suwayda' on 8 September 1966*), "*Harb Huzayran*" (*The June War; its Preludes and Facts*) and various other articles in *Kulluna Shuraka' fi al-Watan*, and other media, 2002-2009.

Introduction

When I was preparing my thesis on sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism in political life in Syria more than 35 years ago, I had the pleasure to intensively study "with a magnifying glass" every Ba'th Party document or other relevant publication which I came across. I often had to read in between the lines in a continuous effort to discover something relevant. From a large quantity of various sources I put many little pieces together in an effort to get a precise and reliable picture of an essential part of Syrian political and social history. The fact that my

subject was considered to be taboo in Syria at the time did not make my research easier, but only whetted my academic appetite and added to my fascination. Having interviews with key personalities was essential, just as reading memoirs could be of the utmost importance. Looking back, I think the final results of my study still firmly stand today, be it that some important memoirs have now been published which would have made my work much easier, had they been available before. Because they provide a much more detailed and precise picture, giving a much clearer and more all round view about developments, events and personalities. But they provide no reason to alter my historical and socio-political analysis of developments in Syria. My analysis has only been confirmed by these memoirs.

Over the last four decennia various memoirs have been published by prominent Syrian and other Ba'thists who were leading the Ba'th Party organization in Syria during crucial periods: during and after the Ba'thist takeover of 8 March 1963, the "23 February Movement" of 1966, the "Corrective Movement" of 1970 and onwards. Some of the most important writings in this respect include (chronologically): "*al-Tajribat al-Murrah*" by former Ba'th National Command Secretary General **Dr. Munif al-Razzaz** (Beirut: Dar Ghandur, 1967) (1), who was the first Ba'thist leader to disclose a lot about the secretive inner workings of the Syrian regime. **Sami al-Jundi's** small book "*al-Ba'th*" (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1969) was also important in the period of its publication, because so little had been published at the time yet. Although Jundi's book remains interesting as far as some details are concerned, it has in the meantime been overshadowed by several newer works and other memoirs. (2)

Muhammad 'Umran

General Muhammad 'Umran's book "*Tajribati fi al-Thawrah*" (*My Experience in the Revolution*), published during his exile in Lebanon in 1970, is not really a kind of memoirs, but nevertheless contains relevant autobiographical details, as well as important analyses of Syrian internal events in the 1950s and 1960s. Only one volume was published, however, because 'Umran was assassinated in Tripoli in 1972 before he had been able to publish the, probably, more sensitive second volume which he had announced under the title of "*Fi al-Istratijiyyat al-Thawriyah wa al-Tatbiq*" (*On Revolutionary Strategy and Practice*). 'Umran's work is also relevant because it is the only personal book published by one of the five founding leaders of the Ba'thist Military Committee which took over power in Syria in 1963. Additionally, Muhammad 'Umran's book is important in the sense that he himself corrects the picture usually provided of him by his former rivals (being repeated afterwards without any criticism by others), as a man with mainly Nasserist

inclinations, having no clear ideological vision, let alone solid Ba’thist ideas. ‘Umran was generally considered by rival party members to be an opportunist with strong sectarian inclinations, being secretively active behind the scenes, showing a behavior which reflected an (Alawi) “*batiniyah*” attitude. But reading his “*Tajribati fi al-Thawrah*” justifies – in my opinion - the picture of a much more sophisticated politician with solid Ba’thist ideological ideals. Some people in Damascus turned out to be surprised at the time by its higher level of sophistication.

Mustafa Talas

More than 20 years later, in 1991, Syrian Minister of Defense **General (al-‘Imad) Mustafa Talas** (born in 1932 in al-Rastan, near Homs) started publishing his memoirs in “*Mir'at Hayati*” (*The Mirror of my Life*). Whereas previously it had been taboo to write about issues such as sectarianism or the secret intricacies of inner party history and its intrigues, this now became possible inside Syria. This was not only because of Talas’ position (although it certainly made it much easier), but also because speaking about such issues was not considered extremely sensitive anymore. Nevertheless, what was permitted for a select group of Ba’thists in power or close to the regime, remained prohibited to others. Other memoirs (or other kinds of publications or statements) which only slightly hinted at sensitive phenomena could be strictly forbidden within Syria, and people could still be imprisoned for it for very long periods.

In an interview in 2007, Mustafa Talas called upon all officials, both military and civilian, to write down their memoirs “because this is the only means to teach the generations the lessons gained from contemporary life.” (3) It is doubtful, however, whether others in Syria who are in a different position are permitted to write similar books.

In my view Mustafa Talas’s memoirs are indispensable to anyone wishing to seriously study the history of the Ba’thist era in Syria in great detail and depth. The memoirs give detailed pictures of the situations behind the scenes and of the secretive Ba’th organization and their leading personalities. Some essential details, thus far unpublished, are provided.

Mustafa 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 since its early days.

He worked on this oeuvre for more than 10 years (between 1991 and 2004), and in an interview in 2007 expressed his intention to publish on the two remaining decennia (1988- 2008), which would then complete this work.

It has become a monumental and impressive document consisting of four parts

with a total of 3740 pages. Every part concentrates on a specific decennium.

Part 1 (1948-1958) (824 pages, including a useful index not available in the subsequent volumes) deals in detail with Talas's early youth, the Military Academy, the Ba'thist Qatana revolt (1957), the unification with Egypt (1958), and many other topics. Next to giving a well studied analysis, Talas also provides many vivid descriptions, including those of his early days in the Military Academy, where he was together with Hafiz al-Asad, who was both respected and feared, also because he could, by way of disciplinary action, thrust his forehead (*yantah*) against those of his opponents in such a tough way that they would never want to experience this again (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 to be no problem.

Part 2 (1958-1968) (932 pages) 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 later took over power in Syria. Talas introduces some Military Committee members hitherto not generally known. He further covers the separation of Syria from Egypt in 1961, the "Free Officers Movement" and their abortive coup in Aleppo in 1962, the Ba'thist 8 March Revolution 1963, the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood insurrection in Hama (1964), many intricacies of the internal Ba'thist power struggles, including the expulsion of Military Committee leader Alawi General Muhammad 'Umran, the 23 February 1966 Movement, and the abortive 8 September 1966 coup of the ruthless Druze Major Salim Hatum, who tried to topple the regime by inviting the party leadership for a meal (*walimah*) in al-Suwayda' with the aim of taking them hostage, or even killing them. Talas reports that Hatum had tried to set up a similar trap before in October 1965, but then failed as well (II, pp. 612-614). (4) Talas compares Hatum's effort with the slaughtering of the Mameluks by Muhammad 'Ali in 1811. The volume closes with a critical analysis (also as regards the Soviet Union) of the causes of the June War in 1967 and its consequences. Talas describes how Salah Jadid after 1967 tried in vain to regain control over the Ba'th Party organization in the army. He also notes "with grief" that "never in his life he shall forget the words of Prime Minister Dr. Yusuf Zu'ayyin: *Praise be to God, al-Qunaytarah has fallen but the regime has not*" (II, p. 874).

Part 3 (1968-1978) (1460 pages, two volumes) 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 the Corrective Movement of Hafiz al-Asad

(1970), foreign and inter-Arab relations, the October 1973 War, the "Wars of Attrition", Syrian military intervention in Lebanon, the Israeli invasion in Lebanon (1978), various Ba'th Party congresses, Camp David, the Palestinian resistance movement, and a variety of other topics.

The book has 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'*: "Where is that donkey (*himar*) from?" With a small piece of paper glued over it, the original word "donkey (*himar*)" has been altered into "officer (*dabit*)", making the text more respectful towards the speaker. All these details make Talas's book not only very informative, but now and then also very entertaining.

Part 4 (1978-1988) (528 pages) deals with Syria's relations with both Iran and Iraq (including Iraqi-Syrian unification efforts and internal Iraqi Ba'th affairs including some interesting encounters with then Vice President Saddam Husayn and President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr), the Muslim Brotherhood mass killing of Alawi recruits at the artillery academy near Aleppo (1979), "lessons learnt" from the Iraq-Iran war, the assassinations of presidents Anwar al-Sadat and Bashir al-Jumayyil, the Sabra and Shatila massacres, the abortive coup of Colonel Rif'at al-Asad against his brother Hafiz al-Asad (1984), and many other subjects.

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. Other sections are more like a kind of history writing concerning developments in which he was not himself a direct actor, but in which Syria nevertheless played a direct or indirect role. The analyses of Talas are generally valuable, particularly because they come from an insider, although a few sections, by referring to newspapers, tend to have a journalistic character.

Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali

The memoirs of the former commander of the National Guard and later 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 its inner workings. They were privately published in Damascus between 2005 and 2007 (in several editions), and should make fascinating reading for those who are fond of detail and already have a solid background knowledge of the developments and issues concerned. The books are not always chronologically ordered, nor are they systematically organized. They also contain minor repetitions.

The first volume (638 pages) 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. It starts in the form of a lengthy interview taken by former Regional Command member George Saddiqni. Many of the participating officers, including Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali himself, were later to play a central role in the various Ba’thist regimes, and already had developed strong personal links amongst one another in this period, some of them going through the same dangers and fate of being imprisoned together. Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali was himself sentenced to death because of his role in the 1962 coup. As the date of his execution was scheduled on 9 March 1963, the Ba’thist Military Committee leaders, including Hafiz al-Asad, decided to carry out their coup a few days earlier than originally planned, in order to save Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali from being executed (I, p. 157).

The second volume (528 pages) gives a fascinating insight into Muhammad Ibrahim 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 feudalism which suppressed the peasants. The book then proceeds through various stages of Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali’s military career and his early, not unriskey, experiences as member of the Ba’th Party. Of particular interest are his account of the bloody Nasserist coup (18 July 1963) of Colonels Jasim ‘Alwan and Muhammad Nabhan (ex-Ba’thist Alawi), and the internal disputes within the Ba’th regime, involving President Amin al-Hafiz and Muhammad ‘Umran (1963-1966).

The third volume (534 pages) deals with the coups of 23 February and 8 September 1966. The latter coup is described in even more detail than by Talas, as Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali was personally taken hostage by Major Salim Hatum. The abortive revolt in Qatana by Druze Major Muhsin al-‘Aqabani in Summer 1966 (who was linked with Hatum) is mentioned by both Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali (III, pp. 198-202) and Walid Hamdun (“*Dhikrayat wa Ara*”, 1997, pp. 93-94), but no clear explanation is given as to the background of the al-‘Aqabani revolt. Neither Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali nor Talas makes a clear distinction between the secret military organization led by Druze General Fahd al-Sha’ir, which was linked to the deposed National Command (led by Dr. Munif al-Razzaz), and the group of Major Salim Hatum. Both originally operated separately from one another and were not aware of each other’s existence until shortly before September 1966. Marwan Habash provides the most detailed account in this respect. (5) Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali further deals with the June 1967 War, the Syrian

military intervention in Jordan (1970) on behalf of the Palestinians (rarely described by direct insiders in such detail), the suicide of 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, the deposal and imprisonment of former Chief-of-Staff General Ahmad al-Suwaydani (which turned out to be for almost 25 years), various important Ba'th Party congresses and the final supremacy of Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 and afterwards. General Hafiz al-Asad is portrayed as a strong and solid statesman, with a principled personality, prepared to, short of being deposed himself (as he refused to accept in 1970), be unconditionally loyal to the party.

Both Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali and Mustafa Talas are familiar with all the key political and military players in Syria, which makes their memoirs all the more valuable and interesting. Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali 's habit of visiting his comrades almost continuously, gives his memoirs added value. Because of his position as commander of the National Guard, he considered it to be "his duty to know what was going on in the party, the state and society" (III, p. 108). He has been described by others as the man "who never sleeps" and always turns up everywhere. Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali 's habit to continue having simultaneous contacts with various rivals within the regime sometimes led to suspicions of him siding with one party or the other: for instance with Salah Jadid and later with Rif'at al-Asad against Hafiz al-Asad. (Walid Hamdun, "*Dhikrayat wa Ara'*", 2007, p. 104).

Mustafa Talas writes that Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali frequented his office to such an extent that he finally closed his doors to him. Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali was, according to Talas, underappreciated by other leading officers, with the exception of Hafiz al-Asad (IV, p. 346).

Most interesting is Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali's relationship with the sect of the *Murshidiyin* and his apparently crucial role in helping abort the revolt of Rif'at al-Asad against his brother president in 1984 (II, pp. 241-274). Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali, by coincidence, had started to cultivate a strong relationship with the *Murshidiyin* in 1963, who had been discriminated against since the hanging of their leader Salman al-Murshid in 1946 in the era of President Shukri al-Quwwatli. Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali helped bring about the lifting of discriminatory measures against the *Murshidiyin*, who could be considered as a sect separate from the Alawis in general. Rif'at al-Asad 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 therefore made toothless when the 3000 *Murshidiyin* military were requested by president al-Asad to withdraw from it, at the suggestion of Muhammad Ibrahim al-'Ali. Without these men, Rif'at's tanks and other armored vehicles could not come into action, because the *Murshidiyin*

occupied key positions in it. Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali’s account of the event is confirmed by Talas (IV, pp. 345-349).

As a result of showing his loyalty to president Hafiz al-Asad in such a crucial manner and period, Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali was later appointed as member of the Central Committee of the Ba’th Party as a token of high appreciation.

Both Talas’ and Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali’s memoirs describe a situation in which the Ba’thist military and civilians, particularly in the period 1963-1970, lived with strong mutual suspicions and deep mistrust. Faced by the real danger of a military coup which could occur at any moment, there were real threats of being personally killed or imprisoned until the end of life. Former Ba’th Party comrades and friends turned out, on various occasions, to become the most deadly enemies. The Ba’th regimes did not only severely suppress non-Ba’thist opposition but also internal Ba’thist rivals.

When having to choose which to read first: the memoirs of Mustafa Talas or those of Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, I would prefer to start with the work of Talas. It is better organized and gives a more structured and analytical account. With regards to the three volumes of Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali’s work, I would give priority to parts two and three. I am not normally eager to read such very long books, but for these works I am glad to have made an exception.

Walid Hamdun

The memoirs of another Ba’thist General, former Deputy Prime Minister and Regional Command member **Walid Hamdun** (1937-2006), were posthumously published under the title “*Dhikrayat wa Ara’*” (*Memoirs and Opinions*) (Damascus, 2007, 400 pages). His work is not of the same caliber as the memoirs of both Talas and Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali and they are less detailed. He also writes about developments in which he did not really participate himself. Hamdun’s book is nevertheless useful if one wants to have the view of an inside observer concerning the positions of his party comrades like Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali in internal Ba’thist developments, for instance between Hafiz al-Asad and Salah Jadid in the late 1960s; or for vivid descriptions of personalities like Salah Jadid and Rif’at al-Asad. Hamdun also writes interestingly about his personal experiences during the Syrian military intervention in Jordan (1970), during the October War 1973 as commander during tank battles on the Golan and with the Syrian military in Lebanon (dealing also with illegal interventions of Rif’at al-Asad there). Also of particular interest are Hamdun’s experiences with the Muslim Brotherhood opposition in Hama. Allegations made by an American magazine that he had 49 Israeli prisoners killed during the October War are strongly refuted by

him as untrue and pure propaganda against the Syrian army (p. 145). According to Talas, Hamdun's book contains exaggerations and mistakes. (6)

Muhammad Haydar

“Al-Ba'th wa al-Baynunat al-Kubra” (The Ba'th and the Great Disunity) by former Deputy Prime Minister and Regional Command member **Muhammad Haydar** (n.p, 1998, 238 pages), provides a refreshing analytical synopsis of Ba'thist history in Syria from its early beginnings till 1970. He explains the dynamic interaction between its organization inside Syria, Iraq and the pan-Arab level. Muhammad Haydar was personally involved in various key developments and he provides many interesting autobiographical details. He gives an original and clear picture of the various internal ideological currents and the personalities involved. He noticeably labels the *Qutriyin* as being “hostile towards Marxism, both in thought and composition” (p. 157), although “they [according to Haydar] had been entrusted by the Military Committee after 23 February 1966 with the task of bringing the Marxist Ba'thist slogans of the Six National Congress into practice”. But taking the study of former Minister of Education Sulayman al-Khashsh (one of the *Qutriyin*) and Antun Maqdisi, *al-Marksiyah, 'Ard wa Tahlil, (Marxism, and Exposé and Analysis)* (Damascus, 1968) as a reference, I do not really detect a hostility towards the subject of Marxism.

Haydar (himself Alawi) provides fascinating descriptions of various Ba'thist key personalities, for instance of the way Salah Jadid dealt with irregular inner party contacts when these did not suit him because they might undermine his authority (p. 154), and also gives examples of the oversensitivity of Jadid towards anything which could have given the slightest hint of sectarian behaviour (pp. 152-157). The Ba'thist period of 1963-1966 is labeled by Haydar as the “epoch of General Muhammad ‘Umran”. In 2000 Haydar was indicted by a national state security court for acts which “weaken the national feeling” (*Id'af al-Shu'ur al-Qawmi*).

Amin al-Hafiz

Other former Syrian politicians have been asked to air their views on television, such as former Syrian President **General Amin al-Hafiz**, who was interviewed in Baghdad by Ahmad Mansur for al-Jazeera in “*Shahid 'ala al-'Asr*”, in a series of 13 broadcasts in 2001 titled ***“Al-Inqilabat fi Suriya kama yaraha Amin al-Hafiz” (The Coups in Syria as Seen by Amin al-Hafiz)*** .(7) Amin al-Hafiz does not add much new in these interviews, but nevertheless provides some interesting details. He refutes the claim (made in the memoirs of Akram al-Hawrani (8), the Lebanese press and other publications) that the Druze Ba'thist Colonel Hamad ‘Ubayd had been responsible for the severe bombardments of the city of Hama during the

Muslim Brotherhood revolt in April 1964, which was at the time seen as a reprisal or blood revenge (*tha'r*) for the earlier bombardments of the Jabal al-Duruz in the era of Adib al-Shishakli. Apparently “someone else” was responsible, also for the bombardment of the famous Sultan Mosque in Hama and the assassination of a son of the al-‘Azm family. But al-Hafiz adamantly refused to mention his name. Four years later Talas disclosed in his memoirs that it was (Alawi) Major ‘Izzat Jadid who had been responsible, at least for bombarding Hama, including the Sultan Mosque (II, p. 534, 2005). When ‘Izzat Jadid afterwards reached out his hand in order to help Hama Muslim Brotherhood leader Marwan Hadid out of the rubble, he was reportedly bitten in it.

The al-Jazeera interviews confirm the picture frequently ascribed to Amin al-Hafiz by his rivals and opponents, such as Mustafa Talas and Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, notably that of a very straightforward military officer who is lacking the more sophisticated characteristics needed to be a good politician and statesman, let alone president. The higher ranking Amin al-Hafiz was at the time apparently used as a front man for the junior Ba'thist Military Committee officers. Amin al-Hafiz is occasionally described by Mustafa Talas as Abu ‘Abduh “*al-Jahsh*” (the “donkey”), showing his disdain for the former president. Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali notes that Salah Jadid once told him: “Put books around him [i.e. Amin al-Hafiz], in front of him and behind him; cause a situation in which he will bump into books wherever he goes, in order to perhaps make him read” ... “His political horizon was zero.” (Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali III, p. 119).

Also the remarks of Amin al-Hafiz about his discussions in 1963 with President Nasser are interesting. Apparently President Nasser gave the green light to Colonel Jasim 'Alwan to carry out his 18 July 1963 coup in Syria, even though he was told beforehand that the chances for success were very dim; and so it turned out to be by their failure and bloodshed. Amin al-Hafiz also mentions that President Nasser, during the Non-Aligned Summit in 1964, provokingly addressed Muhammad ‘Umran on the issue of Alawi sectarian military domination in Syria.

Finally, Amin al-Hafiz corrects various earlier publications about the Israeli spy Elie Cohen: Al-Hafiz never met him in Argentina, as is often alleged (also by Mustafa Talas, though “be it only once”: II, p. 573). Cohen’s intelligence information about Syria “turned out to be worthless during the June 1967 War”, as it was more than two years after he was executed in Damascus. The often “romanticized” picture of Elie Cohen is cut down to size by both Amin al-Hafiz and Mustafa Talas, as well as by Marwan Habash. (9)

Marwan Habash

Other Ba'thists have written about their experiences in the electronic media or have given interviews, like Nabil Shuwayri and former Prime Minister Dr. Yusuf

Zu'ayyin. (10)

Most remarkable and very rich in detail are the writings of former Minister and Regional Command Member **Marwan Habash** who published various series of articles in *Kulluna Shuraka' fi al-Watan* and other media, in particular between 2002 and 2009, among which: “*Harakat 23 Shubat... al-Dawa'i wa al-Asbab*” (*The 23 February Movement, its Motives and Reasons*) and “*Muhawalat 'Usyan al-Ra'id Salim Hatum fi al-Suwayda' Yawm 8 Aylul 1966*” (*The Revolt Attempt of Major Salim Hatum in al-Suwayda' on 8 September 1966*), and “*Harb Huzayran: al-Muqaddimat wa al-Waqa'i*” (*The June War: its Preludes and Facts*).

Marwan Habash unveils many interesting details not published before. They deal with important developments in Syria in which the Ba'th Party played a central role. Habash deals extensively with the June 1967 War, including its prelude and aftermath and the proposal of Salah Jadid to change the Syrian Armed Forces Command because of its defeat. This proposal was rejected by one vote in the majority against it. Habash also reports that then Minister of Defence Hafiz al-Asad proposed, in a joint military operation with Iraqi forces stationed in Jordan, to depose King Hussein during his confrontation with the Palestinian commando organisations in Jordan in September 1970. After Iraq rejected the idea, Syria intervened on its own. (11) Habash describes his ordeal in Syrian prisons for almost a quarter of a century (1970-1993), being among the longest serving political prisoners in Syria. When interviewed by Human Rights Watch about his feelings when being imprisoned, Habash answered: “Yesterday went by fast, today is very long, and tomorrow is very far away; and the characteristic they have in common is their killing monotony.” Habash writes about the personal torture which he himself and other imprisoned prominent Ba'thists had to undergo for long periods of time from former party comrades like, in particular, Naji Jamil, 'Adnan Dabbagh, 'Ali al-Madani and 'Ali Duba, and notes that the treatment of other prisoners was worse. Habash also describes the fate of others, like Nur al-Din al-Atasi and Salah Jadid. He provides the text of Jadid's highly personal letter to his daughter (who was born after he was imprisoned), shortly before he died in prison after 23 years in captivity. (12)

Habash gives his detailed insights on the internal history of the Ba'th Party from its early beginnings, the role of Michel 'Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, Iraq, his early youth in the Golan (born in Jubata al-Zayt in 1938) and his role in the Qunaytarah party branch, as well as on many other topics. His writings (more than 50 articles, covering some 300 pages in small print) would deserve to be better accessible.

The reliability of memoirs: the same events remembered differently

Sometimes articles by Syrian Ba’thist authors have been published in a different form: not really as memoirs, but nevertheless containing valuable detailed elements about Syrian history under Ba’th rule. Various publications describe the same events from different angles and the mentioned texts do not always tell the same story. Some authors explicitly dispute the different or “deviant” versions of their former comrades, be it in their analyses or sometimes only in minor detail, particularly when their personal role is involved. It is not surprising that the role of the author is often portrayed by himself as more prominent than when his role is described by comrade colleagues or adversaries.

As a result, sometimes contradictory reports are provided, creating some uncertainty as to the real series of events. Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, for instance, writes about the coup of 23 February 1966 that he himself played a pivotal role in gaining control over the 70th armored brigade south of Damascus (which provided the military backbone of the regime at the time). But Marwan Habash (who at the time was Head of the Ba’th Party Organizational Bureau) maintains that Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali did not play any role at all. Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali’s claim that he was the person who conveyed the watchword for the 23 February coup is also disputed by Marwan Habash, as such a watch word, according to Habash, did not exist. (13)

But Mustafa Talas (“*Mir’at Hayati*”, II, p. 680), confirms that Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali had been given the task to overpower an infantry battalion of the 70th brigade. A substantial role of Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali therefore seems credible, although a centrally agreed watchword may not have existed.

What to do if writers contradict one another, or have rather different versions? A point in case is the suicide of National Security Chief ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi. Mustafa Talas and Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali give slightly different accounts of the suicide of al-Jundi, and former Regional Command member Muhammad Haydar gives yet another (“*Al-Ba’th wa al-Baynunat al-Kubra*”, 1998, p. 180). They all heard the fatal shot themselves, but in the presence of a different combination of persons. Although the main lines are the same in all presented accounts here, there are some differences about who really was a personal witness of events and where.

Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali notes that he was personally present in Hafiz al-Asad’s office when the latter spoke with ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi who during that telephone conversation committed suicide. Al-Asad apparently heard the shot (Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali III, p. 335).

Muhammad Haydar notes on the other hand that ‘Ali Zaza, Head of the Military Intelligence Branch, was the one with whom ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi was speaking by telephone, when he (Haydar) heard al-Jundi shoot himself (p. 180).

Mustafa Talas, finally, notes that he heard the shot when he was in the office of Hafiz al-Asad, who spoke through an internal line with General ‘Ali Zaza, who in turn spoke with al-Jundi (III, p.116).

Marwan Habash notes that ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi told ‘Ali Zaza: “Report to General Hafiz that I leave the country up to him.” (14)

Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali does not mention anyone else but himself being present in the office with Hafiz al-Asad when the shot fell. He notes that afterwards both Muhammad Haydar and ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam entered the office of the Minister of Defense and reported about their visit to ‘Ali Zaza, where they had come to know that ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi had committed suicide.

Mustafa Talas writes, however, that he was the one who was in Hafiz al-Asad’s office, and that Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, Muhammad Haydar and ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam were at that moment with ‘Ali Zaza, and came to the office of Hafiz al-Asad later on.

Mustafa Talas, however, is not mentioned in the account of Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali here at all.

Taking as a point of departure that all mentioned 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.

As most of the main participants of the Syrian Ba’thist period 1963-1970 have already reached an advanced age, or have died, this era is also coming to a close as far as the publication of their personal memoirs and observations is concerned.

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(*) Nikolaos van Dam is the author of “*The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party*” (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996, to be reprinted in 2009), downloadable in Arabic from www.nikolaosvandam.com. This article is an extended version of his ‘Book Review Essay: Syrian Ba’thist Memoirs’, published in: *Syrian Studies Association Newsletter*, Vol. 14 No. 2 (2009), pp. 22-25, <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/ssa>.

(1)- Also published in “*Al-A’mal al-Fikriyah wa al-Siyasiyah*”, Mu’assasat Munif al-Razzaz lil-Dirasat al-Qawmiyah, n.p. 1986, Vol. 2, pp. 5-308.

(2)- See also: Jalal al-Sayyid, “*Hizb al-Ba’th al-‘Arabi*” (Beirut, 1973), Fa’iz Isma’il, “*Ma’a Bidayat al-Ba’th*” (Damascus, 1980), Muslih Salim, “*Man Yasna’ al-Aqdar*” (novel) (Damascus, 1975), and others (see: “*The Struggle for Power in*

Syria”).

(3)- <http://www.jablah.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=2288>.

(4)- Marwan Habash also refers to a third abortive attempt by Salim Hatum in: “*Muhawalat ‘Usyan al-Ra’id Salim Hatum fi al-Suwayda’ Yawm 8 Aylul 1966*” (2/4), *Kulluna Shuraka’ fi al-Watan*, 8 June 2008.

(5)- Marwan Habash provides many interesting details not published before in: “*Muhawalat ‘Usyan al-Ra’id Salim Hatum fi al-Suwayda’ Yawm 8 Aylul 1966*” (1/4), *Kulluna Shuraka’ fi al-Watan*, 7 June 2008,

http://www.all4syria.biz/index.html/index.php?item=view_article&id=10310. See also: Nikolaos van Dam, “*al-Sira’ ‘ala al-Sultah fi Suriya*”, Arabic electronic edition, pp. 82-88, www.nikolaosvandam.com.

(6)- Qaws Qazah, “*Mustafa Talas: Ba’d 75 ‘Aman: Radin ‘an Kulli ma Qumtu bihi*”, *Jablah*, 9 June 2007,

<http://www.jablah.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=2288>.

(7)- <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/3E3413BB-03BD-48B7-B9B2-951B0E0C754C.htm>.

(8)- <http://www.akramalhourani.com/index.files/Page327.htm> (to be downloaded with internet explorer).

(9)- Marwan Habash, “*Heikal wa Cohen ... wa al-Iftira’ ‘ala al-Haqiqah*”, *Kulluna Shuraka’ fi al-Watan*, 23 April 2009, <http://all4syria.info/content/view/7574/104>.

(10)- See the detailed interview with Nabil Shuwayri, “*Suriyah wa Hutam al-Marakib al-Muta’aththirah: Hiwar ma’ Nabil Shuwayri, Rafiq ‘Aflaq wa al-Hawrani*” (99 pages), <http://www.akramalhourani.com/index.files/Page371.htm>);

Yusuf Zu’ayyin: “*Yusuf Zu’ayyin yaftah Khazanat Asrarihi ba’d 40 ‘Aman*”, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2005/06/07/13742.html>; and the interviews about Michel ‘Aflaq by Ghassan Sharbal with ‘Aflaq’s daughter Razzan and leading Lebanese Ba’thists ‘Abd al-Majid al-Rafi’i, Elias Firzili, Jibrán Majdalani, Basharah Marhij and Ma’in Bashur, in *al-Hayat*, 5-12 July 2008: “*‘Awdah ila Qissat al-Qa’id al-Mu’assis lil-Ba’th*”,

<http://www.alhayat.com/special/dialogues/07-2008/Article-20080708-03b16078-c0a8-10ed-0007-ae6d8935e8c3/story.html>.

(11)- Marwan Habash, “*al-Qiwa al-Taqaddumiyah wa al-Tadakhkhul fi al-Urdunn*”, *Kulluna Shuraka’ fi al-Watan*, 30 March 2009,

<http://all4syria.info/content/view/6383/124/>.

(12)- Marwan Habash, “*Ma Yuqarib Rub’ Qarn fi al-Mu’taqal*”.

(13)- Marwan Habash, “*Min Tarikh al-Hizb: Harakat 23 Shubat 1966 ... al-Dawa’i wa al-Asbab*” (8/9), *Kulluna Shuraka’ fi al-Watan*, 22 July 2008,

<http://all4syria.info/content/view/3510/124/>.

(14)- Marwan Habash, “*‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi: al-Thawrah wa Khaybat al-Amal*”, *Kulluna Shuraka’ fi al-Watan*, 16 February 2009,

<http://all4syria.info/content/view/4457/124/>.