COLD WAR AND COVERT ACTION: THE UNITED STATES AND SYRIA, 1945–1958

Douglas Little

At dusk on August 12, 1957, the Syrian army surrounded the US embassy in Damascus. Claiming to have aborted a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) plot to overthrow neutralist President Shukri Quwatly and install a pro-Western regime, Syrian chief of counterintelligence Abdul Hamid Sarraj expelled three US diplomats, jailed dozens of officers implicated in the alleged conspiracy, and moved closer to Moscow. Two days later President Dwight Eisenhower denounced Syria’s “slanderous campaign” and declared its ambassador persona non grata.¹ By month’s end, the United States, along with Turkey and Iraq, was considering what British prime minister Harold Macmillan termed a “Suez in reverse,” an action that could have easily escalated into a full-scale Soviet-American confrontation.² Although contemporary observers dismissed the episode as a bizarre example of Syrian paranoia, it now appears that Sarraj’s allegations were accurate. Indeed, the abortive CIA plot to topple Quwatly in August 1957 capped nearly a decade of covert American meddling in Syria. Most recent accounts of CIA secret operations during the early years of the Cold War, however, ignore Syria entirely and focus instead on better known episodes in Iran, Guatemala, and Indonesia.³ Yet as early as 1949, this newly independent


Douglas Little is associate professor, Department of History, Clark University, Worcester, MA. The author would like to thank Richard Immerman, George Lane, and Joshua Landis for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

MIDDLE EAST JOURNAL ■ VOLUME 44, NO. 1, WINTER 1990
Arab republic had become an important staging ground for the CIA's earliest experiments in covert action.

Syria's strategic location and its chronic political instability held ominous implications for broader US interests in the Middle East during the late 1940s. Because Turkey lay to the north and Israel to the south, an unfriendly Syria could easily undermine President Harry Truman's doctrine of containment or complicate his special relationship with Tel Aviv. Because it stood athwart the pipelines carrying Persian Gulf oil to the Mediterranean, an unpredictable Syria could suddenly halt the flow of petroleum upon which Western European economic recovery depended. In addition, because it hosted a surprising array of left-wing political organizations, including the Arab world's most active communist party, an unstable Syria seemed especially vulnerable to Soviet influence. Convinced that Syria was fast becoming a serious threat to regional peace and stability, the CIA secretly encouraged a right-wing military coup in March 1949. In the short run, this seemed the perfect way to create a stable pro-Western regime without resorting to armed intervention that might draw the United States directly into the Arab-Israeli conflict or, even worse, into a superpower showdown with the Soviets. Repeated CIA covert action during the following decade, however, merely stimulated Arab anti-Americanism, drove the Syrian left closer to the Kremlin, and, ironically, made overt military involvement more, not less, likely.

**US-SYRIAN RELATIONS: POST-WORLD WAR II**

Clandestine US intervention in Syria after World War II helped reverse a century of friendship that began with the American missionaries who flocked to the Levant after 1820. Soon after their arrival, they began to encourage the Arabs to throw off the Ottoman yoke. So did President Woodrow Wilson, who included Arab self-determination among his celebrated Fourteen Points. To be sure, Wilson rejected the American mandate proposed in 1919 by his own emissaries, Henry King and Charles Crane, and acquiesced in a French protectorate over Syria. Yet two decades later the King-Crane plan still evoked pro-American sentiment among Syrians who hoped that President Franklin Roosevelt might transform Wilsonian rhetoric into reality. Truman, of course, did just that in 1945, by helping Britain thwart a brutal French attempt to reclaim the prewar protectorate that the Vichy regime had allowed to lapse and by insisting that France accept Syrian independence instead.4

---

The departure of the last French troops on April 15, 1946, sparked a wild celebration outside the US embassy, but Syrian praise for Washington’s support was soon overshadowed by criticism of American policy toward Palestine. Roosevelt had assured Quwatly a year earlier that he would consult Syria before taking action on a Jewish homeland.\(^5\) Truman’s subsequent support for the United Nations (UN) partition plan, however, prompted Syrian Foreign Minister Faris Khouri to complain bitterly in September 1947 that “the United States was out to railroad”\(^6\) the Arabs. Only hours after the UN General Assembly approved the partition plan on 29 November, a jeering crowd of 2,000 rock-throwing Syrians stormed the US embassy, set several fires, and tore down the American flag. During the following six months, Syria helped more than 8,000 Arab guerrillas infiltrate into Palestine.\(^7\) Once full-scale war with Israel erupted in May 1948, US officials regarded an “anti-American explosion”\(^8\) in Damascus as only a matter of time.

Israel, however, was not America’s only ally in the region to be targeted by Syrian nationalists during the late 1940s. Turkey, so crucial to Truman’s containment policies in the Middle East, was embroiled in a bitter dispute over the Sanjak of Alexandretta, Syria’s northernmost province ceded by the French to the Turks on the eve of World War II. Despite American fears that “Syrian claims might establish a dangerous precedent and thus serve to reinforce Soviet claims against northeastern Turkey,”\(^9\) Syria brought its demand for the return of Alexandretta before the UN in early 1947. Washington managed to table the matter temporarily in March, but Syrian prime minister Jamil Mardam vowed that “Syria is not abating its claims and will present them at [the] proper moment.”\(^10\)

Syro-American friction over Turkey and Israel created problems not only at the White House but also on Wall Street. In late 1945, the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), the US consortium that controlled Saudi Arabian petroleum, announced plans to construct a Trans-Arabian Pipe Line (TAPLINE) from the Dhahran oil fields to the Mediterranean. With State Department help,

---

ARAMCO was able to secure the necessary rights-of-way from Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Negotiations with Syria, however, deadlocked in December 1946 after ARAMCO refused to locate the pipeline’s terminus on the Syrian coast. The firm’s blunt threats to bypass Syria entirely persuaded Mardam to initial a draft concession in September 1947, but firebrands in parliament quickly linked TAPLINE to the issue of Palestine, killing any chance for early ratification by the Syrian legislature.11 American recognition of Israel in May 1948 virtually guaranteed “continued refusal [of the] Syrian Govt. [to] grant concession”12 and prompted Secretary of State George Marshall to table indefinitely ARAMCO’s request to export heavy steel pipe for TAPLINE construction.

Washington Sees Red

The growing animosity between Syria and the United States invited speculation at the State Department in the latter part of the 1940s that the Syrians might gravitate toward the Kremlin. To be sure, Joseph Stalin’s preoccupation with European affairs, his speedy recognition of Israel, and the reflexive anticommunism of most Arabs combined to limit Soviet influence in the Middle East during this period. Yet as early as November 1945, American diplomats in Damascus had warned that “Soviet or Communist activities in this country seem to have caused the Syrian Government no particular concern.”13 With the “Communists” increasingly “on the move, staging large rallies,”14 and with Quwatly and Mardam either unwilling or unable to crack down on the left, US officials gave “a discreet nudge here and there”15 in an unsuccessful bid to tilt the July 1947 parliamentary elections to the right. The real danger, however, was not a Bolshevik-style takeover by Communist Party leader Khalid Bakdash and his 2,000 followers, but rather a Syro-Soviet marriage of convenience based on Quwatly’s need for arms and Stalin’s desire to fish in troubled waters.16 As the Arab-Israeli war dragged on into the summer of 1948, Syria quietly began to purchase weapons from

Czechoslovakia. By late August, Marshall was deeply concerned about unconfirmed reports "indicating serious efforts being directed toward Syrian-USSR rapprochement." 17

American relations with Syria deteriorated still further during the fall. Washington's frustration mounted when Quwatly refused to accept UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte's truce proposal. 18 CIA speculation that "nationalistic elements in Syria" 19 were readying a fresh campaign to wrest Alexandretta from Turkey deepened State Department gloom as did a less than positive report on the status of TAPLINE. ARAMCO's quest for a right-of-way across Syria remained stalled in parliament, and James Keeley, the US ambassador, doubted whether even "baksheesh in the right place could carry the day." 20 To make matters worse, radical students and workers launched violent anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations in November, eventually forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Mardam, who was succeeded on December 17, 1948, by Khalid al-Azm, an enigmatic independent. It was in the midst of this crisis that Stephen Meade, a CIA operative, first established contact with right-wing Syrian army officers. 21

REVOLVING-DOOR GOVERNMENTS

When Miles Copeland, a former CIA Middle East specialist, first disclosed 20 years ago that he and Meade had engineered the March 1949 coup in which Chief of Staff Husni Zaim overthrew Quwatly and Azm, most observers dismissed his claims as tall tales. 22 Recently declassified records, however, confirm that beginning on November 30, 1948, Meade met secretly with Colonel Zaim at least six times to discuss the "possibility [of an] army supported dictatorship." 23 US officials apparently realized from the start that Zaim was a "'Banana Republic' dictator type" 24 who "did not have the competence of a French corporal," 25 but they were also well aware of his "strong anti-Soviet attitude," 26 his willingness to

19. CIA Report SR-1/1, December 22, 1948, Box 189, Subject Series, President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers, Truman Library.
21. Stephen Meade to G-2 (Intelligence), tel. December 3, 1948, 350 Syria, Box 49, Damascus Post Files, Record Group 84, Records of the Diplomatic Posts, National Archives, Suitland, MD (hereafter cited as NARG84). Meade's official title was assistant military attache, which helped keep his role as a CIA political action specialist secret for 20 years.
24. Ibid.
TABLE 1
Political Changes in Syria, 1949–1955

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 30, 1949</td>
<td>Army Chief of Staff Husni Zaim overthrows President Shukri Quwatly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 14, 1949</td>
<td>Zaim is overthrown and executed by officers group headed by Colonel Sami Hinnawi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 19, 1949</td>
<td>Colonel Adib Shishakli ousts Hinnawi and heads seven civilian cabinets in the next 23 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 29, 1951</td>
<td>Shishakli dissolves parliament and establishes a military dictatorship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 25, 1954</td>
<td>Colonel Adnan Malki overthrows Shishakli.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 22, 1955</td>
<td>Pro-Shishakli members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party assassinate Malki.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 18, 1955</td>
<td>Quwatly is elected president.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

talk peace with Israel, and his desire for American military assistance.27

Meade and Zaim completed planning for the coup in early 1949. On 14 March, Zaim "requested U.S. agents [to] provoke and abet internal disturbances which [are] 'essential for coup d'etat' or that U.S. funds be given him this purpose"28 as soon as possible. Nine days later Zaim began to show "signs of lack of confidence in events occurring as he hoped," but he still "promised a 'surprise' within several days"29 if Meade could secure American help. As rumors of a military coup grew stronger, Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee arrived in Damascus, ostensibly to discuss resettling Palestinian refugees with "an unstable Syrian government,"30 but possibly to authorize US support for Zaim as well. In any case, shortly thereafter, students protesting governmental corruption and mishandling of the war with Israel took to the

27. For Meade’s other early meetings with Husni Zaim, see Meade, “Syrian Army Commander’s Plans to Seize Power,” March 10, 1949, 350 Syria, Box 49, Damascus Post Files, NARG84, and Meade to G-2, tels. February 11 and March 11, 1949, Syria Weeka (Part 5), Box 77, Record Group 319, Records of the Army Staff, G-2, National Archives, Suitland, MD (hereafter cited as NARG319).
streets, and on 30 March Zaim staged his coup, arresting Quwatly and Azm and suspending the constitution.31

As Zaim consolidated his regime, American policymakers began to have second thoughts. Some feared that if Washington took the lead in recognizing the new regime, friends in Britain, France, or Saudi Arabia would take offense.32 Others, like Secretary of State Dean Acheson, expressed concern about "recent unfortunate military dictatorships in Latin America" and did "not wish by too speedy recognition of Zaim [to] inspire or encourage similar movements in other Arab armies."33 Yet most US officials soon believed that Zaim’s assets outweighed his liabilities. Meade, for example, reported on 15 April that "over 400 Commies [in] all parts of Syria have been arrested"34 and that Zaim was prepared to ratify TAPLINE just as soon as Washington recognized his regime. Once Syria announced plans to improve relations with Turkey and Israel as well, the State Department concluded that "early recognition in concert with Great Britain and France would be desirable."35 President Truman agreed and, on 26 April, Keeley, like his British and French colleagues, presented his credentials to Zaim.36

Zaim’s performance over the next three months far exceeded Washington’s expectations. As early as 28 April, he told Keeley that Syria was resuming peace talks with Israel and would consider resettling as many as 250,000 Palestinian refugees in the Jazirah Valley along the Iraqi frontier. On 16 May, Zaim approved the long-delayed TAPLINE concession, removing the final obstacle to ARAMCO’s plan to pipe Saudi oil to the Mediterranean. Two weeks later he broadened his anti-Soviet campaign by banning the Communist Party and jailing dozens of left-wing dissidents. Zaim capped his virtuoso performance in July by withdrawing all Syrian claims against Turkey over Alexandretta and then by signing the long-awaited Syro-Israeli armistice.37 Having done so much so quickly to improve relations between Syria and the United States, Zaim not unreasonably anticipated equally swift American approval for the $100 million military and economic aid package he requested in late July. Before the proposal could get beyond the exploratory stage, however, Zaim was overthrown and executed on 14 August by

31. For Meade’s report on the coup, see Meade to G-2, tel. April 1, 1949, 350 Syria, Box 49, Damascus Post Files, NARG84.
33. Acheson, circular telegram April 15, 1949, ibid.
34. Meade to G-2, tel. April 15, 1949, Syria Weeka (Part 5), Box 77, NARG319.
35. Satterthwaite to Acheson, April 23, 1949, 890D.01/4-2349, NARG59.
Colonel Sami Hinnawi and other officers unhappy with his increasingly personalistic rule and his friendly policies toward Israel. 38

Caught off guard by the coup and fearful that Hinnawi might repudiate Zaim’s pro-American policies, Truman agreed to recognize the new regime only after receiving assurances that “free elections” would be held later that fall. Almost at once, however, the frictions that had bedeviled Syro-American relations prior to Zaim’s takeover reappeared. As early as 5 October, Hinnawi warned that continued Israeli violations of the armistice would necessitate Syrian retaliation unless the United States could persuade Israel to live up to its obligations. 39 A week later ARAMCO officials asked for US help in overcoming a “succession of minor delays which threatened a new crisis in Tapline-Syrian relations.” 40 As the elections slated for 15 November drew near, US military intelligence reported that “Commies [were] attempting [to] assure increased influence in [the] new parliament by offering to support numerous non-Commie candidates throughout country.” 41 The balloting produced not a swing to the left, but rather a victory for Hinnawi’s Populist Party, which announced plans in December for a Syrian union with Iraq’s Hashemite dynasty. Appalled by the prospect of domination from Baghdad, on December 19, 1949, Colonel Adib Shishakli ousted Hinnawi in Syria’s third coup in nine months and scuttled plans for the Syro-Iraqi federation. Shishakli’s power play, however, did little to curb the political chaos, largely because he aimed merely to preserve Syrian independence, not to establish a strong central government, military or otherwise. As a result, his coup ushered in the first of what would become seven revolving-door civilian cabinets in 23 months. 42

The Left Regroups

By offering Syria technical and economic assistance under the auspices of the Point Four Program, the Truman administration hoped to encourage stability in the area during 1950. Continued US support for Israel amidst fresh signs of Soviet friendliness toward the Arabs, however, generated an “anti-American and pro-Communist tide,” 43 which led the State Department, in its year-end review of

40. On TAPLINE's woes, see memorandum by Embassy Economic Officer Richard Funkhouser, October 13, 1949, 890D.6363/10–1349, NARG59.
41. MAD to G-2, tel. October 28, 1949, Syria Weeka (Part 5), Box 77, NARG319.
42. See Torrey, Syrian Politics & the Military, pp. 150–77; Seale, Struggle for Syria, pp. 84–99.
the Middle East, to call Syria "a particularly sensitive danger spot." Syrian instability also disrupted US efforts to resolve the Palestinian refugee problem. "The key to the situation," Acheson noted on January 9, 1951, "is Syria," where Prime Minister Nazim Qudsii was reluctant to commit "political suicide" by endorsing an American resettlement plan. Mere rumors that Qudsii had agreed to accept 100,000 refugees prompted left-wing students, reportedly "led by Commies," to take to the streets "shouting neutralist, anti-West, and pro-Soviet slogans." Troubled by Syria's slide to the left and frustrated by the Palestinian deadlock, Acheson sent McGhee back to Damascus in mid-March. McGhee quickly concluded that the Qudsii regime was "a bunch of mush," a view doubtless confirmed when a bomb ripped through McGhee's suite at the US embassy just hours after he departed for Tel Aviv. Not surprisingly, with the approach of summer, US officials predicted that "Communist activity in Syria would undoubtedly be stepped up considerably."  

With Syria drifting rapidly leftward in mid-1951, the United States once again encouraged a military quick-fix, this time with the far shrewder Shishakli cast in Zaim's strongman role. Shishakli had approached US officials as early as March 1950 seeking "military aid for army modernization the better 'to maintain order in Syria,' " but American commitment to the Tripartite Declaration limiting Middle East arms sales as well as American interest in such regional defense plans as Britain's proposed Middle East Command (MEC) sidetracked his request. Nevertheless, US officials realized that Shishakli and like-minded officers had "by default emerged as . . . one of the strongest anti-Communist forces in the country." As a result, Washington hinted in early 1951 that Syria might soon receive US weapons under the recently created Mutual Security Program.

45. Memorandum by Acheson, January 9, 1951, Box 66, Dean G. Acheson Papers, Truman Library.
46. Ambassador Cavendish Cannon to Acheson, tel. January 26, 1951, 783.00(W)/1–2651, NARG59.
47. McGhee, Envoy to the Middle World, pp. 346–51. On the bombing, see Cannon to Acheson, tel. March 30, 1951, 783.00(W)/3–3051, NARG59.
48. Embassy Political Officer David Gamon to Acheson, April 9, 1951, 511.83/4–951, NARG59.
50. "Regional Security in the Eastern Mediterranean," May 11, 1950, Foreign Relations, 1950, vol. V, pp. 152–58. The Tripartite Declaration, issued jointly by Britain, France, and the United States on May 25, 1950, called for the three powers to work closely to preserve a rough arms balance between the Arabs and Israelis. The Middle East Command was little more than a British charade designed to protect Britain's interests in the Arab world, and especially in the Suez isthmus, by linking those interests to broader Western concerns about regional security.
51. First Secretary Owen Jones (Tel Aviv) to Chargé d'affaires Harlan Clark, October 2, 1950, 783.00/10–250, NARG59.
52. See memorandum by John Ralph Barrow, international relations officer, State Department, May 21, 1951, 683.84A/5–2151, NARG59; Clark to Acheson, tels. May 24 and 30, 1951, 783.5/5–2451 and 611.83/5–3051, NARG59.
Such hints had the desired effect. American officials confirmed in early July that "Shishakli ha[d] been making friendly overtures," and that one of his chief lieutenants had actually asked the US military attaché, "What do you want us to do?" The answer was clear when Washington pressed Damascus to endorse the MEC plan Britain unveiled later that fall. Predictably, once the Syrian debate over cooperation in the regional defense scheme threatened to "burst into full-fledged crisis," Shishakli spoke out in favor of the MEC and then had a "cordial 2 hour discussion" with Copeland and other officials at the US embassy on November 23, 1951. When Ma'aruf Dawalibi, an outspoken foe of the MEC long regarded by American observers as pro-Soviet, announced a week later that he would head Syria's eighth cabinet in less than two years, Shishakli dissolved parliament and set up a military dictatorship.

THE EISENHOWER YEARS

Although the American role in triggering these events remains unclear, US officials were aware of Shishakli's plans in advance and welcomed his coup. Chargé d'affaires Harlan Clark cabled Washington on 30 November that "if US is to profit from new sit[uation], it will be more than ever necessary for us to be able to show Shishakli how and when we can help him." The State Department agreed and won Pentagon approval "on political grounds" within days for "early delivery to Syria on a cash reimbursable basis of a limited amount of selected military material," provided the Syrians accepted the provisions of the Tripartite Declaration. A week later Washington quietly extended recognition and encouraged "Shishakli to come to the West" with proposals for additional aid.

There were "numerous indications that Shishakli might be embarking on a policy of cooperation with the West" early in the new year. In short order, Syria initiated mutual defense talks with Turkey and renewed the TAPLINE concession on terms favorable to ARAMCO. Shishakli was even willing to consider a peace treaty with Israel and the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Syria provided

54. Clark to Acheson, tel. October 25, 1951, 783.00/10–2551, NARG59.
55. MAD to G-2, tel. November 23, 1951, 783.00(W)/11–2351, NARG59.
57. MAD to G-2, tel. November 30, 1951, 783.00(W)/11–3051, NARG59; information received by author from former US official in Syria who wishes to remain anonymous.
59. Assistant Secretary of Defense William C. Foster to Acheson, December 8, 1951, 783.5 MSP/12–851, NARG59.
substantial US financial and military aid was forthcoming. Some progress was made during 1952 on the economic front, where the Truman administration pressed the World Bank to expedite Syria’s request for a $200 million loan.\textsuperscript{62} Syro-American arms talks, however, so promising in late 1951, had “reached a dead end”\textsuperscript{63} a year later, partly because Shishakli refused to guarantee that US weapons would not be used against Israel and partly because he, like many Arab leaders, hoped that, once Dwight Eisenhower took office on January 20, 1953, the “USG [US government] will change its Near East policies”\textsuperscript{64} and offer Syria more favorable terms.

As expected, Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles did unveil a more “even-handed” approach toward the Arab-Israeli conflict designed to promote regional defense, preserve Western access to Persian Gulf oil, and prevent Soviet expansion. A two-week tour of the region in May 1953 convinced Secretary Dulles that Shishakli’s Syria must figure prominently in these new policies. His trip had gotten off to an inauspicious start in Cairo where discussions with President Gamal Abd al-Nasir confirmed that Egypt would not even consider participating in the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO), the latest Anglo-American variation on the MEC, until Britain evacuated its Suez base.\textsuperscript{65} Shishakli, by contrast, impressed Dulles during talks in Damascus as “a realist” who “does not want arms to push Israel into the sea” and who was “less engrossed with [the] Suez problem and more aware of [the] Soviet threat” than the Egyptians.\textsuperscript{66} “Syria was a state that offered real possibilities,”\textsuperscript{67} he told the National Security Council (NSC) after his return to Washington. “The country, however, needed more concrete evidence of the good intentions of the United States.”\textsuperscript{68}

It proved exceedingly difficult to square Syria’s persistent requests for military hardware with broader plans for regional development and mutual security. To be sure, most US officials shared Assistant Secretary of State Henry Byroade’s view that “General Shishakli represents the best available Syrian


\textsuperscript{63} Paul Geren, embassy counselor (Damascus), to Acheson, December 31, 1952, 883.10/12–3152, NARG59.

\textsuperscript{64} Moose to J.F. Dulles, April 8, 1953, 783.00/4–853, NARG59.


\textsuperscript{66} Memorandum of conversation, May 16, 1953, enclosed in Moose to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs John D. Jernegan, May 21, 1953, 611.83/5–2153, NARG59.

\textsuperscript{67} Minutes of the 147th NSC meeting, June 1, 1953, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
regime from our standpoint." Moreover, Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles wooed Shishakli with personal diplomacy and promises of economic aid. Despite this, when presidential emissary Eric Johnston arrived in Damascus seeking support for his ambitious Jordan Valley irrigation and refugee resettlement plan, Shishakli refused to cooperate unless he received US military assistance. Washington and Damascus did edge closer together toward the end of 1953, but before they could reach final agreement on an arms package, Shishakli was overthrown in an army-orchestrated, bloodless coup on February 25, 1954.70

Shishakli's popularity had been waning since mid-December 1953, when antigovernment and anti-American riots had rocked Aleppo and Damascus. US officials continued to hope he would weather the storm, but mounting discontent both inside the army and among political rivals sealed his fate. Colonel Adnan Malki and other left-wing officers were outraged by Shishakli's heavy-handed efforts to curb their influence. Akram Hawrani and Michel Aflaq, who led the increasingly anti-Western Ba'ath party, expected Shishakli's fall to hasten the achievement of their own pan-Arab goals of unity, freedom, and socialism. The Communist Party, whose membership had been halved and whose leaders had been driven underground by Shishakli, saw the coup as the first step toward a national front with the Ba'athists and others opposed to Western influence.71 Washington reluctantly recognized the new regime on 8 March after receiving assurances that it would hold elections as soon as possible. With the approach of summer, however, American diplomats were deeply troubled by mounting evidence of "considerable Communist infiltration in the ASRP [Ba'ath party]"72 and other telltale signs that "Soviet influence is growing."73

Indeed, soon after Stalin's death in March 1953, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had moved to improve Moscow's position in the Arab world by wooing anti-Western nationalists in Cairo and Damascus. Determined to prevent any further Soviet inroads in Syria before the September 1954 elections, the Eisenhower administration quietly encouraged "responsible political elements" to "remain united and pursue constructive policies."74 The most innovative

---

69. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs Henry Byroade to J.F. Dulles, July 7, 1953, 783.037/7-753, NARG59.
71. See Moose to J.F. Dulles, December 15 and 22, 1953, and April 30, 1954, 783.00/12-1553, 12-2253, and 4-3054, NARG59; Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith to Moose, tel. March 6, 1954, 783.00/3-654, NARG59; Scale, Struggle for Syria, pp. 141-45, 157-63; Torrey, Syrian Politics & the Military, pp. 244, 248-49; Laqueur, Soviet Union & the Middle East, p. 133.
72. Moose to J.F. Dulles, April 5, 1954, 783.00/4-554, NARG59.
74. Clark to J.F. Dulles, May 18, 1954, 783.00/5-1854, NARG59. On Khrushchev's Middle East policies, see Laqueur, Soviet Union & the Middle East, pp. 197-99.
attempt to "counter the growing Communist strength in Syria" occurred at the Damascus International Trade Fair in August, where the CIA, ARAMCO, and the US Information Agency (USIA) financed an American pavilion whose chief exhibit was to be an outdoor film event called Cinerama. As expected, thousands more Damascenes flocked to watch This is America on the wide screen than visited the dreary pavilions of the Soviet bloc. When the Syrians went to the polls on 24 September, however, they favored the Ba'ath and other left-wing parties and sent Khalid Bakdash to parliament as the first freely elected Communist Party deputy in the Arab world. By early October, US diplomats were reporting "an unprecedentedly bitter campaign against the United States" among "opportunistic and Communist-controlled segments of the Syrian press." Although American officials did what they could to get "Syrian conservatives [to] organize to combat left-wingers," by the end of the year Secretary Dulles would complain that "from the way Syria acts at the UN she is a Soviet satellite." CIA director Allen Dulles, John Foster's brother, agreed that "the situation in that country is the worst of all the countries in that area."

The Dulles brothers did not have long to wait for fresh evidence of Syria's increasingly anti-Western stance. With Washington's blessing, Britain and Iraq announced plans in January 1955 for the Baghdad Pact, a regional defense organization modeled on NATO, and pressed other Arab states, including Syria, to join. Some moderates were favorably inclined, but a "progressive front," led by Ba'athist Salah al-Din Bitar and backed by Colonel Adnan Malik, opposed Syrian participation. As a result, when Iraq and Turkey concluded a bilateral accord on 25 February, touted in the West as the cornerstone of the Baghdad Pact, Syria joined Egypt in calling for Arab nonalignment and Malik worked with Nasir to undermine Iraq's pro-Western premier, Nuri Sa'id. On 7 April, Eisenhower's Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), an interagency group that monitored covert activities, complained that "the increasing influence of leftists and a few communists" inside the Syrian army was impeding American plans for Middle East Defense. Should Malik or other left-wing officers actually seize power and conclude a formal alliance with Nasir's Egypt, Secretary Dulles remarked gravely a week later, Syria's "anti-Western policies" could easily

78. Strong to J.F. Dulles, December 13, 1954, 783.00/12-1354, NARG59.
79. J.F. Dulles to CIA Director Allen Dulles, phone call, December 27, 1954, Memoranda of Telephone Conversations, John Foster Dulles Papers, Eisenhower Library.
80. Ibid.
trigger "Iraqi military intervention" or, even worse, "Israeli military action against one or several Arab states."  

On April 22, 1955, Malki was assassinated by a gunman from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a right-wing group that had supported Shishakli and that had long been rumored to have close ties with the CIA. Ambassador James Moose reported on 7 May that the assassination had sparked a fresh outburst of anti-Americanism, creating a "real danger that Syria will fall completely under left-wing control" unless the United States mobilized pro-Western civilian and military leaders. The Dulles brothers agreed, and before the month was out Wilbur Eweland, the OCB's chief Middle East expert, arrived in Damascus to encourage Syrian conservatives "to save their own country." By late June, Eveland and Moose agreed that only by offering Syria military aid could Washington "induce relatively pro-West" army officers to "oppose leftist takeover." After reviewing the situation in early July, however, the OCB concluded that the army had already been infiltrated by the Syrian Communist Party, whose membership had swelled in recent months to nearly 10,000. With Syria apparently on the verge of "coming under a communist-dominated regime," the OCB "recommended that the United States not attempt to strengthen Syrian internal security forces." Instead, Washington should focus on other unspecified "courses of action . . . designed to affect the situation in Syria." 

Arms, Aid, and Operation Straggle

Syria's vocal opposition to the Baghdad Pact, its open hostility toward Israel, and its growing sympathy for Nasir's brand of neutralism continued to work against an arms deal that summer. So too did the victory of Shukri Quwatly in the 18 August presidential elections. As late as 10 September, Moose urged Washington to reconsider its earlier decision and sell Syria defensive military equip-

84. Labib Zuwiyya Yamak, The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 70-72, 146. For an early example of charges that the SSNP was receiving US funds, see Geren to J.F. Dulles, October 9, 1953, 783.00/10-953, NARG59. An SSNP officer did contact the American embassy in October 1954 to say that "he and some of his colleagues intend to work quietly to develop within the next two years the capability of overthrowing the Syrian government, should it take too leftist a turn; and that something should be done about Colonel Adnan Malki, who was using his position to put his friends in key spots." (Strong to J.F. Dulles, October 9, 1954, 783.00/10-954, NARG59.) Several Americans then in positions to know, however, have recently denied any US involvement in the assassination. (Wilbur Eweland interview with author, December 19, 1986, and William Brewer to author, November 19, 1987.)
87. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
ment—trucks, jeeps, and trailers. "Refusal can be expected [to] strengthen leftists," he warned, "and cause Syrians [to] turn to USSR," which had just sent its first military attaché to Damascus. Once US policymakers learned later that month that Nasir had obtained weapons from the Soviet bloc, however, his Syrian friends learned that US arms policy in the Middle East had been reevaluated and that no weapon sales would be made to Syria at the time. Washington's rebuff only prompted Damascus to conclude an alliance with Cairo in mid-October, which in turn led the OCB to predict that "Syria would appeal to the USSR for political and material support" in the near future. As the year drew to a close, the State Department agreed that the Kremlin was likely to "find a particularly fertile field in Syria," where "chronic governmental weakness" encouraged "a Soviet-supported drift into a firmly anti-Western position."

The Eisenhower administration tried to counter Soviet inroads among the Arabs with an economic offensive of its own. The offer to help finance Egypt's Aswan Dam was the centerpiece of this campaign, but Washington was also willing to subsidize construction of a Syrian oil refinery at Homs. Both projects, however, hinged on the success of a mission headed by Robert Anderson, a Texas oil man and former deputy secretary of defense whom Eisenhower secretly sent to the Middle East in January 1956 to secure an Arab-Israeli peace settlement. Unfortunately, six weeks of shuttle diplomacy between Tel Aviv and Cairo produced "no progress whatsoever," largely because, as Anderson put it, "Nasser proved to be a complete stumbling block." Within days, Eisenhower concluded that "we will have to serve some notice on certain Middle Eastern countries." On 28 March, he approved a State Department plan, code-named Project Omega, which called for scuttling the Aswan Dam, shoring up Nasir's conservative Arab rivals, and overthrowing the increasingly pro-Nasir regime in Syria.

Operation Straggler, as this latest effort to topple anti-Western leaders in Damascus came to be known, differed from the earlier Zaim and Shishakli episodes because, for the first time, the United States agreed to cooperate with Great Britain. "Orthodox diplomatic procedures to improve [the] US position in

Syria” having largely failed, Ambassador Moose had suggested as early as 8 January that “thought be given to other methods,” including an “anti-Communist coup” engineered by the SSNP.98 Various plans to effect a change in Syria also came up during Anglo-American discussions at the White House three weeks later. Noting that “Syria seemed to be behaving much like a Soviet satellite,” Secretary Dulles told Prime Minister Anthony Eden and Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd on 30 January that “if it should be decided to move against Nasser, it might be wise to consider Syria as well.”99 By mid-March, Eden and Lloyd had developed a covert strategy for the Middle East that sought, among other things, “to establish in Syria a Government more friendly to the West.”100 British Ambassador Roger Makins advised Secretary Dulles on 23 March that Whitehall was still “interested in the Syria situation.”101 A week later, Allen Dulles and CIA Middle East chief Kermit Roosevelt flew to London, where they worked out the details for the Syrian coup with their counterparts in Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (SIS).102

Because so many key documents remain classified, only a rough sketch of the evolution of Operation Straggle is possible. The original CIA-SIS plan appears to have called for Turkey to stage border incidents, British operatives to stir up the desert tribes, and American agents to mobilize SSNP guerrillas, all of which would trigger a pro-Western coup by “indigenous anticommunist elements within Syria” supported, if necessary, by Iraqi troops.103 What Washington perceived as a deteriorating situation in Damascus made Straggle more and more attractive. There was a “witch’s brew now simmering in Syria” whose chief ingredient was “communist subversive activities,”104 Ambassador Moose warned on 7 June. Later that month, Washington confirmed that Soviet arms and tanks were pouring into the country, strengthening the hand of the “well organized and influential”105 communist cadres inside the Syrian army. According to Archibald Roosevelt, Kermit’s cousin and the State Department’s “point man on Syria,” by early July, top US officials regarded the “leftist coalition of forces supported by the Soviets” in Damascus as “a target legally authorized by statute for CIA political action.”106

---

106. Archie Roosevelt, For Lust of Knowing: Memoirs of an Intelligence Officer (Boston: Little Brown, 1988), pp. 444–45. Roosevelt was a CIA Middle East expert on assignment in
Nasir’s seizure of the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956, however, disrupted joint Anglo-American planning for Straggle. Still “much concerned about what’s going on in Syria—especially the way the Communists and nationalists appear to be ganging up for some kind of action,” in August Foster Dulles sent Archibald Roosevelt to Damascus, where he kept the Secretary of State abreast of the CIA’s covert countermeasures. “The United States has increased its efforts to counteract leftist influence in Syria,” Foster Dulles remarked elliptically on 21 September, “and will continue to do so” through contacts with “conservative elements in Syria, dissatisfied with the present situation, [who] are considering steps which might be taken to bring about an improvement.”

Meanwhile, London had subordinated Straggle to its own top-secret plans for intervention in Egypt. The British, Foster Dulles complained on 18 October, were “deliberately keeping us in the dark,” a sentiment shared by his brother Allen, who by month’s end was “suspicious of our cousins.”

Nevertheless, Washington moved forward with plans for the coup, tentatively scheduled for 25 October, and provided $150,000 to the Syrian conspirators. At the last minute, however, SIS persuaded the CIA to postpone Straggle for four days, so that, unbeknownst to the Americans, it would coincide with the British-backed Israeli invasion of the Sinai. When Secretary Dulles and Eisenhower discussed the deepening Middle Eastern crisis on 27 October, the Anglo-American covert operation in Syria helped distract them from the explosive situation at Suez. As a result, they were doubly surprised, first by news of Israel’s lightning assault on Egypt and then by word that Syrian counterintelligence had uncovered Straggle. Foster and Allen Dulles discussed “Straggle” on 30 October and agreed that although it would have been “good to have an anti-communist government” in Syria, now “it would be a mistake to try to pull it off.”

From the American standpoint, the Middle East situation was just about as bad as it could be. Israeli forces occupied the Sinai, British and French troops were poised to intervene, and Syrian president Quwatly was in Moscow pleading for Soviet help. On 3 November, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) warned that “the

Washington where he served as liaison between State Department officials and the agency’s covert operators in Damascus.

110. J.F. Dulles to Allen Dulles, phone call, October 30, 1956, ibid.
Soviets may introduce volunteers and additional Soviet equipment into Syria.\(^{114}\) Two days later Ambassador Charles Bohlen cabled word from Moscow that although he did "not see the Soviet Union deliberately starting World War III" over Suez, "there was [a] strong smell of some military deal in Syrian talks here."\(^{115}\) By the morning of 6 November, Eisenhower and his top aides believed that the Kremlin was likely to station Soviet MiG fighter planes in Syria. After discussing just such a possibility with the NSC, the president ordered the CIA "to conduct high [U-2] reconnaissance in this area" and commented that if there were "Soviet Air Forces on Syrian bases he would think that there would be reason for the British and French to destroy them." He added grimly, "If the Soviets attack the French and British directly, we would be in war, and we would be justified in taking military action even if Congress were not in session."\(^{116}\) During a noontime transatlantic telephone conversation, however, he persuaded Eden to accept a cease-fire at Suez calling for phased British withdrawal, and the nightmarish scenario envisioned just a few hours earlier never materialized.\(^{117}\)

Yet even as Washington thwarted overt military intervention in Egypt, it contemplated renewed covert action in Syria. The Kremlin, Allen Dulles warned the NSC on 8 November, still seemed intent "on keeping the pot boiling," particularly "in Syria, where, he said, it would be easy for a coup to occur under Soviet auspices."\(^{118}\) Before the week was out, the CIA director was speculating that "the USSR plans to use the rather large and growing communist element in Syria to try to establish a leftist government there which might offer to make bases and other facilities available to Moscow."\(^{119}\) Signs in Damascus of deepening Soviet influence prompted Acting Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr., to raise "the Syrian thing" with his ailing boss.\(^{120}\) Although still hospitalized following surgery for stomach cancer, Foster Dulles had been in touch with his brother at the CIA and told Hoover on 9 November that "Allen thinks Operation Strangle might be carried forward but when the British and French troops are out."\(^{121}\) A week later Hoover told Eisenhower that British and American officials had already begun secretly to discuss "certain operational intentions regarding

\(^{114}\) JCS 1887/298, "Analysis of Possible Soviet Courses of Action in the Middle East," November 3, 1956, JCS Geographical Files 1954-56, Record Group 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Archives, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as NARG218).

\(^{115}\) Ambassador Charles Bohlen (Moscow) to Eisenhower, tel. November 5, 1956, Dulles-Herter Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.

\(^{116}\) Goodpaster memocon, November 6, 1956, DDE Diary Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.

\(^{117}\) Eisenhower to Eden, phone call, November 6, 1956, ibid.

\(^{118}\) Minutes of the 303rd NSC Meeting, November 8, 1956, NSC Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.


\(^{120}\) Eisenhower to Herbert Hoover, Jr., phone call, November 9, 1956, DDE Diary Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.

\(^{121}\) J. F. Dulles to Hoover, phone call, November 9, 1956, Memoranda of Telephone Conversations, J.F. Dulles Papers, Eisenhower Library.
Syria,” and the CIA confirmed that “the UK, France, Turkey, Israel, and Iraq all . . . would welcome US participation and support in strong measures to check or counter the leftward trends in Syria.”

The Eisenhower Doctrine and Operation Wappen

Before Straggle could be resurrected, however, Washington was developing a much broader plan to combat Soviet influence in Syria and elsewhere in the region. As early as 30 November, Eisenhower had begun to consider asking Congress to grant him broad powers “to deal with the Soviets in the Middle East.” On 22 December the OCB passed along a lengthy analysis of Soviet objectives stressing that “Syria, in particular, remains a likely focal point for Communist influence.” Ten days later, during an unprecedented New Year’s Day (1957) meeting with key legislative leaders, Eisenhower requested congressional authorization to use US troops to counter Soviet subversion in the Middle East. He “cited Syrian developments as evidence of Russian intent.” The House approved, 355 to 61 on January 30, 1957, and the Eisenhower Doctrine went into effect after the Senate followed suit on 5 March by a 72 to 19 margin.

Although public discussions of the Eisenhower Doctrine focused on Egypt’s ties with the Kremlin, US officials privately believed Syria was the Arab state most nearly under the control of international communism. On 17 January, the joint chiefs confirmed that Syria had already received 24 MiG-15 jet fighters, 130 T-34 medium tanks, and approximately 100 Soviet technicians. In mid-February, Allen Dulles reported that “the current leftist regime in Syria” had begun to terrorize SSNP exiles in Beirut, which “illustrated how far the Syrians were willing to go when pushed by the Russians.” Syria’s denunciation of the Eisenhower Doctrine and its refusal even to confer with White House Middle East troubleshooter James B. Richards in late March only deepened American suspicions. “Syria,” Eisenhower himself recalled years later, “was far more vulnerable to Communist penetration than Egypt,” largely because there was no “strong man” in Damascus comparable to Nasir, and as a result, the Soviets had

“bypassed the government” and infiltrated the army, leaving Syria “ripe to be plucked at any time.”

What galvanized Washington into action, however, was the possibility that the Soviet harvest might also include Jordan. When left-wing officers backed by Syria and Egypt attempted a coup in late April 1957, Eisenhower helped King Hussein save his throne by sending the Sixth Fleet into the eastern Mediterranean. If by some miracle stability could also be achieved in Syria,” Eisenhower believed that “America would have come a long way in an effort to establish peace in that troubled area.” The CIA, of course, had considerable experience in attempting to work such miracles and was already secretly encouraging rival right-wing factions inside the Syrian army to “join forces effectively against the leftists,” who were expected to sweep the upcoming by-elections. On 7 May, the Dulles brothers agreed to undertake “new planning.” That same day, C. L. Sulzberger of the New York Times learned from British intelligence that the CIA was indeed once again scheming to depose “the pro-Communist neutralists” and “achieve a political change in Syria.” But “this had not quite come off,” Foster Dulles admitted four months later.

With the approach of summer, top US officials worried that Syria was about to slide into the Soviet camp. The communists and the Ba'athists made big gains at the polls in May, Czech engineers began work on an oil refinery at Homs in June, and Russian military advisers wooed such anti-Western officers as Colonel Aff al-Bizri. Then in late July, Defense Minister Khalid al-Azm traveled to Moscow, where he signed a $500 million grain-for-weapons deal with Khrushchev. Foster Dulles called Eisenhower's attention to this latest example of “Soviet ‘aid’ to neutral countries” on 6 August. The next day the OCB issued a bleak report confirming Moscow’s inroads in Damascus. “Syrian leaders seem more inclined to accept Soviet influence blindly than in any other country in

the area... There was evidence that the Soviets are making Syria the focal point for arms distribution and other activities, in place of Egypt."\(^{139}\)

Sometime during the next 36 hours, Washington apparently gave final authorization for Operation Wappen, the code name for the new American covert operation against Syria. Howard Stone, a CIA political action specialist with experience in Tehran and Khartoum, had been planning a coup with dissidents inside the Syrian army for three months. Meanwhile, former president Adib Shishakli secretly arrived in Beirut where he assured Kermit Roosevelt that he was ready to reassert power in Syria.\(^{140}\) According to Charles Yost, who served as US ambassador to Syria briefly in late 1957, Wappen was "a particularly clumsy CIA plot" and was "penetrated by Syrian intelligence."\(^{141}\) Patrick Seale, who used a variety of Arabic sources to reconstruct this episode in *Struggle for Syria*, agrees: "Half a dozen Syrian officers approached by American officials immediately reported back to the authorities so that the plot was doomed from the start."\(^{142}\)

Counterintelligence chief Adbul Hamid Sarraj reacted swiftly on August 12, 1957, expelling Stone and two other CIA agents, arresting their Syrian accomplices, and placing the US embassy under round-the-clock surveillance. Even worse, from the American perspective, the left-wing Colonel Bizri used the CIA fiasco as an excuse to wrest control of the army from his moderate rivals. The "serious situation" worsened two days later when Eisenhower expelled Faris Zeineddine, the Syrian ambassador to the United States, and Syria retaliated by declaring Ambassador Moose persona non grata.\(^{143}\) Convinced that Syria was about to "fall under the control of International Communism and become a Soviet satellite,"\(^{144}\) Secretary Dulles favored invoking the Eisenhower Doctrine. On 21 August, he asked General Nathan Twining, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to attend an emergency meeting on Syria at the White House later that afternoon.

\(^{139}\) OCB Progress Report, August 7, 1957, "NSC-5428—Near East (2)," NSC Series, ONSA, Eisenhower Library.


\(^{142}\) Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, p. 294. Journalist Drew Pearson, who visited Damascus in the midst of the crisis, remarked in his diary on September 24, 1957: "In Washington I had heard that it was definitely true that some of the American officials with the Embassy had tried to overthrow the military regime in Syria by plotting with other army officers. General [sic] Bizri spoke about this at great length and said that the Syrians who conspired with the Americans would soon be up for trial. Naturally I did not tell Bizri that I had heard his charges were true. But when I lunched at the Embassy I did try to find this out on a confidential basis. [Robert] Strong protested that there is absolutely nothing to it. However, knowing how Central Intelligence operates, I am still skeptical." Drew Pearson, *Diaries 1949–1959*, ed. by Tyler Abell (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1974), pp. 393–94.


\(^{144}\) J.F. Dulles to Eisenhower, August 20, 1957, Dulles-Herter Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.
"We are thinking of the possibility of fairly drastic action," the telephone log reads, "so come with anybody he needs in that respect." 145

Although the minutes of this meeting remain classified, Eisenhower's memoirs provide a disturbing outline of what transpired. "Syria's neighbors, including her fellow Arab nations, had come to the conclusion that the present regime in Syria had to go; otherwise the takeover by the Communists would soon be complete." Consequently, the United States would encourage Turkey and Iraq to mass troops along their borders with Syria; and "if Syrian aggression should provoke a military reaction," Washington would "expedite shipments of arms already committed to the Middle Eastern countries and, further, would replace losses as quickly as possible." Eisenhower "realized that Middle East tensions and the preparatory moves we were making could snowball into a real risk of war" in which "the Soviets might very well . . . move against Turkey," a key NATO ally. "The alternative, however—to do nothing and lose the whole Middle East to Communism—would be worse." Therefore, "the Sixth Fleet was ordered again to the eastern end of the Mediterranean," US jets were sent from Western Europe to the NATO base at Adana, Turkey, and "our 'ready' forces, particularly the Strategic Air Command, were alerted." For the second time in a year, an abortive CIA operation in Syria had nearly triggered a superpower confrontation in the Middle East. 146

Eisenhower met with top aides at least four times during the following fortnight and gradually edged away from the provocative scheme he had approved in late August. His caution stemmed in part from a growing awareness that only Turkey was truly serious about a showdown with Syria. Loy Henderson, an envoy who visited several Arab capitals at Eisenhower's request, confirmed that Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia were "wissy washy." 147 In addition, Britain was not eager for Western intervention in Syria so soon after the Suez debacle. "Paradoxically enough," Prime Minister Harold Macmillan recalled in his memoirs, "our function proved not to stimulate but often to restrain the impetuousness of . . . the Americans," who were "talking about the most drastic measures, Suez in reverse." 148 Even had Britain and the Arab conservatives lined up squarely behind Eisenhower, he still would have had a hard time justifying intervention in Syria to skeptics on Capitol Hill. "The Mid East Resolution said nothing about internal subversion and only mentioned . . . direct aggression against a country and that country asked for help," 149 the president had pointed out as early as 21 August. "All we can do," he assured jittery congressional

149. Pre-Press Conference Notes, August 21, 1957, DDE Diary Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.
leaders a week later, "is to make sure that the Soviets cannot come in, and give... military aid to our allies."\(^{150}\)

Keeping the Kremlin out became considerably more problematic once the White House learned of the first successful Soviet testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile in late August. The CIA saw "an angle of blackmail and possible relation to Syria."\(^{151}\) In early September, Khrushchev fired off a still-classified note bluntly warning Eisenhower not to intervene in Syria. Claiming that the Syrian crisis had ushered in "a period of the greatest peril for us since the Korean War," Foster Dulles insisted during a three-hour NSC meeting on 7 September that Khrushchev was "more like Hitler than any Russian leader we have previously seen."\(^{152}\) Although Eisenhower was determined to avoid a Middle Eastern Munich, he was unwilling as yet to resort to military intervention. Speaking to the press corps on the president's behalf immediately afterward, Secretary Dulles expressed "deep concern at the apparently growing Soviet Communist domination of Syria."\(^{153}\) The American response, however, would be limited to "the accelerated delivery to the countries of the area of economic and other defensive items."\(^{154}\)

If the United States drew back from military intervention because of British opposition, congressional second-guessing, and Soviet bluster, the Turks, despite words of caution from American diplomats and NATO officials, refused to demobilize the 50,000 troops they had massed along the Syrian frontier. Foster Dulles tried to assure Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko on 5 October that Eisenhower was working to defuse the Syro-Turkish crisis, but five days later Khrushchev warned that "if Turkey starts hostilities against Syria, this can lead to very grave consequences, and for Turkey, too."\(^{155}\) This blunt talk left little doubt in Washington that, if the Turks decided "to go it alone in Syria," Khrushchev would "for prestige reasons [be] forced to attack Turkey, thereby precipitating an open, full scale conflict between ourselves and Russia."\(^{156}\) As a result, US policymakers used increased economic aid and explicit assurances of military support to persuade the Turks to demobilize in late October.\(^{157}\)

---

151. C.P. Cabell (CIA) to J.F. Dulles, phone call, August 27, 1957, Memoranda of Telephone Conversations, J.F. Dulles Papers, Eisenhower Library.
154. Ibid.
Turkey’s anxieties may have been assuaged, but Syria’s were not. Faced with two unpalatable alternatives—Turkish invasion or Soviet domination—Colonel Sarraj and Ba’athist leaders pursued a third option, union with Egypt, which was consummated, against Nasir’s better judgment, in early 1958.\textsuperscript{158} Washington’s satisfaction that Syria had finally seen through the Kremlin’s blandishments, however, was tempered by the realization that Nasir was certain to use the newly created United Arab Republic (UAR) “to threaten Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq and perhaps engulf them one by one.”\textsuperscript{159} Indeed, after anti-government demonstrators nearly toppled Lebanon’s pro-Western President Camille Chamoun in May 1958, the Eisenhower administration attributed the crisis to “violent propaganda from Radio Cairo and Radio Damascus... supplemented by arms and armed men infiltrated from the Syrian sector of the United Arab Republic.”\textsuperscript{160} When a bloody anti-Western coup in Iraq later that summer prompted Chamoun to appeal for US help against Syrian operatives, the White House responded swiftly. As 10,000 marines waded ashore at Beirut on July 15, 1958, Eisenhower pondered American problems in the Arab world. “The trouble is that we have a campaign of hatred against us, not by the governments but by the people,” and, he added ruefully, “the people are on Nasser’s side.”\textsuperscript{161}

CONCLUSION

Nothing confirms Eisenhower’s observation more clearly than the steady deterioration of relations between Washington and Damascus from 1945 through 1958. Encouraged by the lofty rhetoric of Wilson’s Fourteen Points and Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms to expect postwar support and friendship, Shukri Quwatly and other Syrian nationalists soon found themselves at odds with the United States. To be sure, Truman did press France to grant Syria independence, but the onset of the Cold War and the founding of the State of Israel gradually poisoned Syro-American relations. US officials consistently accorded higher priority to containing the Soviet Union, promoting Israeli security, and maintaining Western control over Middle East oil than to accommodating Arab nationalism. When Syria’s flirtation with Moscow, its hostility toward Israel, and its dispute with TAPLINE threatened these priorities, Washington resorted to covert action, haltingly under Truman and then with boundless enthusiasm under Eisenhower.


\textsuperscript{159} State Department Staff Study, January 16, 1958, “NSC 5801/1—Near East (2),” NSC Policy Papers, OSANSA, Eisenhower Library. See also Pre-Press Conference Briefing, February 5, 1958, DDE Diary Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.

\textsuperscript{160} Statement by Robert Murphy, May 19, 1958, U.S. Senate, 86th Congress, 1st Session, Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, vol. 10, p. 228.

\textsuperscript{161} Staff Notes, July 15, 1958, “Middle East 1958,” International Series, Whitman Files, Eisenhower Library.
Although in the short run such activities produced pro-American strongmen like Husni Zaim and Adib Shishakli, in the end US clandestine meddling in Syria actually intensified anti-Western and anti-American sentiments among Ba’athists and left-wing officers. Zaim’s swift rise and even swifter fall showed how easily American officials could mistake reckless military adventurism for a Western-style commitment to law and order, while Shishakli’s longer tenure demonstrated that Syrian brains and muscle, even with American assistance, could not indefinitely hold back the rising tide of Arab nationalism. As a result, by the mid-1950s Syrian leaders as diverse as the moderate Quwatly and the communist Bakdash were using rumors of CIA conspiracies, most of them all too true, to whip up the hatred for the United States that Eisenhower so lamented. By resorting repeatedly to clandestine quick fixes in Syria, Washington succeeded only temporarily in bottling up what would become by the end of the decade a torrent of Arab anti-Americanism.

Nevertheless, the Eisenhower administration remained fascinated by CIA covert action in the Middle East for the same reason it adopted the strategic “New Look” toward the Soviet Union—both policies promised “more bang for the buck.” Because operations like Ajax in Iran and Success in Guatemala had produced major benefits at modest cost in 1953 and 1954, American policymakers embraced schemes in Syria like operations Struggle and Wappen, which seemed to combine most of the advantages of armed intervention with few of the drawbacks. Ironically, however, the CIA’s Syrian shenanigans came perilously close to triggering precisely the sort of military involvement they were designed to avoid and on a scale much wider than anyone had expected. Not only did Struggle fail to isolate Nasir and reduce Soviet influence in Syria, it actually prompted Quwatly to seek Russian intervention against Britain and France at the height of the Suez crisis and forced Eisenhower briefly to think the unthinkable. Likewise, the Wappen fiasco nine months later ensured the triumph of the pro-communist officers the CIA hoped to defeat and nearly touched off a Syro-Turkish conflict that could easily have led to a superpower clash.

For 30 years, the bitter legacies of the failed policies of Truman and Eisenhower in Syria have bedeviled their successors. Syria’s September 1961 secession from the UAR produced a brief opening toward the United States, but the Ba’ath revolution of March 1963 reversed even this modest rapprochement. When Washington’s support for Tel Aviv during the 1967 Six-Day War prompted Damascus to sever diplomatic relations, the estrangement was complete. Hafiz al-Asad, the Ba’athist officer cut from the mold of Adnan Malki who seized power in November 1970, has occasionally expressed a willingness over the years to cooperate with US initiatives in the Middle East. Asad has also, however, cemented Syria’s ties with the Soviet Union, adopted a stance of unremitting hostility toward Israel, and, according to the CIA, aided and abetted terrorists. Should the mystique of covert action ever again lure US officials into the labyrinth of Middle East politics, they would do well to ponder the unintended consequences of American clandestine meddling in Syria during the decade and a half after 1945.