Hafez al-Assad's Seizure of Power Despite the 1967 War Defeat: On the Importance of Friends, Loyalty, and Fear in the Ba'th Regimes

Merve Kania*

Abstract

Some fifty years after the 1967-war, the former Defence Minister Hafez al-Assad's role in Syria's military tactics that lead to the loss of both the war and Syrian territory and which impacts these decisions had for Assad's subsequent acquisition of power (usually dated at 1970) are still largely unknown. Drawing from the most rigorous secondary material on the former Syrian Ba'th regimes, this article argues that a post-defeat fear of regime break-down and frustration created conditions that allowed Assad to successively gain ruling power with the aid of loyal friends and family members over the course of the following five years.

Keywords: 1967 war, Syria, regime formation, seizure group, loyalty, friendship, fear, emotions.

Introduction

The 1967 War (also known as 'Six-Day War', 'June War', or 'Third Arab-Israeli War') is considered as one of the, if not the, most impactful war in the history of the Middle East.[1] The fact that Israel

[1] The 1967 War is also discussed for its impact on the demise of 'Arab Nationalism' and the rise of political Islam in the Middle East. For accounts that view the 1967 War as the primary cause of the two, see: B. Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State*, 3rd ed (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 214; Olivier Roy, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2008), p. 52. For accounts that

not only won against the Arabic consortium of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan but also destroyed much of their armies and conquered East Jerusalem and the Westbank (from Jordan), the Sinai Peninsula (from Egypt) and the Golan Heights (from Syria) altered the regional order and paved the way for the 1972 war.[2,] More than fifty years after the 1967 War, however, the respective military decisions that lead to those outcomes are usually informed by American and Israeli intelligence sources[3] and focussed on the actions of Egypt and Israel.[4] In contrast to this, few accounts exist that focus on the specific perspective of Syria and Jordan as well as the effects for the respective regimes and societies at that time.[5]

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contest those inferences, see: R. Khalidi, "The 1967 War and the Demise of Arab Nationalism," in *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 264–84; Gerges, "The Transformation of Arab Politics".

[2] See, for example, F. A. Gerges, 'The Transformation of Arab Politics: Disentangling Myth from Reality,' in A. Shlaim and W. R. Louis, *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences*, 2012, 285–314; F. Ajami, *The Arab Predicament : Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[3] See, for example, N. Hartoch, "A History of the Syrian Air Force 1947-1967" (King's College London, 2015); J. Bowen, "1967 War: Six Days That Changed the Middle East," in *BBC News* (5 June 2017). https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39960461 (15 April 2019).

[4] See, for example, G. Laron, *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017); E. Hammel, *Six Days in June: How Israel Won the 1967 Arab-Israeli War* (Pacifica Military History, 2010).

[5] On Syria, see: I. Rabinovich, "Syria and the Six-Day War: A 50-Years Perspective," *Brookings Institute*, (2017); R. Alaaldin, "Syria Today and the Legacy of the 1967 War," in *Brooking Institute* (2017), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/07/syria-today-and-the-legacy-of-the-1967-war/ (15 April 2019); J. Mann, "Syria, Precipitator of the Six Day War," *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 49, No. 4 (2013): 547–62. On Jordan, see: S. A. Mutawi, *Jordan in the 1967 War* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

While Arabic documentation is often not translated or non-existent,[6] most subsume the latter two under the analysis of the overall 'setback' (*naksah*) the defeat inflicted for all Arab societies at large.[7]

This paper uses the role of Hafiz al-Assad, the at that time Defence Minister and later president, as a lens to reconstruct the tactical decisions that led to the loss of the Golan Heights (hereinafter referred to by its Arabic name *Qunaytrah* province) and its impacts on the Syrian *Ba'th* regime (often also transliterated as *Ba'ath*), in general, and Assad's subsequent seizure and consolidation of ruling power. The argument provided here is that not the factual events of the war itself but the war's socio-political impacts on the *Ba'th* leadership (collective fear of regime breakdown) and Hafiz al-Assad, as an individual (frustration), were pivotal for his subsequent acquisition and consolidation of ruling power. Those factors created a contingent momentum that allowed him to *successively* turn into Syria's strongman with the aid of loyal friends and family members between 1968 and 1972. Drawing from an extensive literature review, particularly the intra-*Ba'th* insight that the seminal works of Patrick Seale (2008)[8] and Hanna Batatu (1999)[9] provide, this paper will analyse the personnel relationships that underpin the respective allocation, maintenance, and seizure of posts in the regimes.

This paper will contribute three important nuances to the literature on the 1967 war itself, and the specialised literature on the Ba'thist regimes, in particular. It will first highlight the role Assad played during the June War, or rather the conflicting accounts thereon, and the consequences the *Ba'th* drew. That is, that Assad was able to retain his position as Defence Minister and member of the *Ba'th*

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[6] I. Abu-Lughod, 'Preface,' in [Editor] *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of June 1967: An Arab Perspective* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. ix; H. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants Of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 200.

[7] Y. al-Haj Saleh, "Defeat and the State: June 1967 and Hafez Al-Assad's Syria," in *Al-Jumhuriya* (2018); S. Al-Azm, *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, ed. G. Stergios, F. Ajami, and F. Darraj (London, England: Saqi Books, 2011).

[8] P. Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle For The Middle East*, ed. M. McConville (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley, Calif., 2008).

[9] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*.

Regional Command only by one vote, while another comrade, Ahmad al-Mir, was ousted. Second, turning to the relationships and conditions that underpinned this vote, it will show that a combination of the *Ba'th's* internal divisions, Assad's rapport, contingent opportunities, as well as the *Ba'thist*'s collective fear of being overthrown enabled him and his 'seizure group' to successively remove and replace loyalists of the preceding strongman Salah Jadid. This analysis diverges from most literature on the Assad regime in the sense that it does not set the seizing date of his 'power' at 1970 but 1968 due to networks of influential personnel loyal to Assad. Simultaneously, this illuminates the fragility and contingency of his decision-making power in the regime and the fact that his 'power' was not consolidated until after his election in 1972.

Assad's Role during the 1967 War and its Aftermath

This section is concerned with Hafez al-Assad's role during the 1967 war and the handling of the defeat by the Syrian leadership at that time. Drawing on Patrick Seale[10] and Hanna Batatu,[11] it will argue that diverging accounts concerning the course of some key battles force us to question to which extent Assad in position as Defence Minister and member of the *Ba'th* regime made decisions that were important to the war's outcomes. The pivotal question is whether Assad had (a) all information and (b) full control over the tactics and strategies employed. Seale's work relies on both official *Ba'th* documents and interviews with some of Assad's closest advisers and confidantes as well as Assad himself,[12] while Batatu interviewed dozens of Ba'thists through the 1980s and 1990s but not Assad himself,[13] the accounts they provide do not necessarily question but add to one another. The primary reason for this is that *a posteriori* first-person accounts of actors involved in a controversial event can be

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[10] Seale, *Asad of Syria.*
[11] *Batatu, Syria's Peasantry.*
[12] Seale, *Asad of Syria*.
[13] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry.*

expected to contain portrayals of the own role and that of others in adjusted, exaggerated, or more benevolent/detrimental light.[14]

It is necessary to briefly establish the undisputed causes and courses of the war. First, on the Syrian side, the responsibility for the outbreak of the June War is attributed to 'the political leadership', i.e. the *Ba'th* party Secretary General Salah Jadid and the Syrian Prime Minister Yusuf Zu'ayyin. A leadership to which Assad did not belong but doubtlessly contributed, e.g. by continuing the existing policy of mutually provocative firing, land and air clashes at the border with Israel from his time of appointment as Defence Minister from February 1966 onwards.[15] Meanwhile, Assad, like other military officers, had warned the political leadership that the army was in an inappropriate condition to wage war, due to several successful and abortive coup attempts between 1964 and 1966 that lead to shifts in the command and purges of officers associated with opposing factions across all ranks of the army.[16] It is further unchallenged that during the first four days of the war (5 June to 8 June) Assad remained largely passive and only sporadically ordered the sending of patrols and shelling across the Israeli border.[17] Israel responded to those manoeuvres with heavy bombardments and the destruction of the Syrian air force on 9 June.[18] The only disputed incident is the battle over *Qunaytrah* province from 9 to 10 June which was conquered by Israel and ended the war. In this regard, three diverging accounts exist on the role of Assad and other members of the *Ba'th* party.

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[14] On the usefulness of memoirs, see: N. Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 157.
[15] R. Khalidi, "The Asad Regime and the Palestinian Resistance," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol 6, no. 4 (1984): p. 259; J. Krasno, "Interview with Ambassador George Tomeh, March 16, 1998, Amman, Jordan," *Yale-UN Oral History*, 1998, p. 42; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 118–20; H. Sharabi, "Prelude to War: The Crisis of May-June 1967," in I. Abu-Lughod, *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of June 1967: An Arab Perspective* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 49–85.
[16] Seale, *Asad of Syria:* pp. 137, 144. Also see Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* pp. 157, 199; R. Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 58; Mann, "Syria, Precipitator of the Six Day War," p. 555.
[17] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 138.
[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 140.

First, Seale claims that Assad would neither have been the exclusive nor the primary decision-maker on the tactical level.[19] In the night of 9-10 June Chief of Staff Ahmad al-Suwaydani, supposedly gave the order to 'fall back north of Qunaytrah, the principal town of the Golan, and join the defence of the capital'.[20] Thereby, Suwaydani was supposedly advised by the commander of the Golan front Ahmad al-Mir.[21] At 8:45 GMT+2, a Defence Ministry announcement falsely broadcasted on Damascus Radio that *Qunaytrah* town had fallen which lead to a rout of fighting and a redeployment of troops.[22] Only because of this rout the road to *Qunaytrah* town and its surrounding villages then actually lay open. Subsequently, the Israeli army seized the opportunity and occupied the area. In this account of Assad himself, it is not mentioned which person in the Defence Ministry issued the announcement. Assad would have simply learned about it 'over two hours' later and would then have immediately issued a correction, i.e. at around 10:45 to 11:00 GMT+2.[23]

According to a 1986 interview with Syria's 1967 Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ibrahim Makhus, however observed that Assad was the one who ordered the Defence Ministry announcement, Communiqué No. 66, following a verbal report Assad received from the front.[24] Thus, it would have been Assad's mistake to not investigate the accuracy of the account before the broadcast by not consulting Syria's 'political leadership', i.e. the National Command of the *Ba'th* party.[25] The non-involvement of the political branch, including Makhus' Foreign Ministry, seems hard to believe however when taking the 1969 memoirs of Syria's 1967 ambassador to Paris Sami al-Jundi into consideration. Jundi wrote that he was surprised to see 'Syria's representative at the [United Nations] U.N. announcing … and Israel's representative denying the fall of Qunaytrah'.[26]

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[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 137–41.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 140-41.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[24] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* p. 199.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Afterward, Makhus supposedly told Jundi that 'it was a skilful plan to "alarm" the world so that Damascus would be saved'[27] by virtue of international pressure from the Soviet Union and the United States of America (USA). A 1998 interview with former Syrian representative to the UN, George Tomeh, and investigations into the Security Council procedures, underscore that Syria's political leadership indeed pursued this strategy.[28] Tomeh admits that he made provocative declarations after 11:30 GMT+2 and, thus, after Assad's alleged corrective broadcast.[29]

Similar to the respective regimes in post-war Egypt and Jordan,[30] 'the party, the high command and the government were racked by mutual recriminations'.[31] Some party members requested Assad's resignation from his post as Defence Minister and his membership in the *Ba'th*'s Regional Command was put up to vote at an emergency meeting. The voting failed, only due to 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, a cousin of the previously introduced Syrian ambassador to Paris.[32] Meanwhile, Ahmad al-Mir who had commanded the front of the Golan was 'retired' from this position, offered a seat on the *Ba'th*'s National Command and, in October 1968, posted as ambassador to Madrid.[33] In contrast to this, it is not known whether any debate on the fate of al-Suwaydani, Dr. Makhus or Jadid even took place, although the former bore their share of responsibility to the *Qunaytrah* redeployment and the latter two to the outbreak of the war.[34]

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[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Krasno, "Interview with Ambassador George Tomeh, March 16, 1998, Amman, Jordan," p. 42; M. Bar-Zohar, *Embassies in Crisis: Diplomats and Demagogues behind the Six-Day War* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 262.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] In Egypt, President Gamal Abdel Nasser came near a nervous and physical breakdown and army chief and Defence Minister Marshal 'Amer committed suicide, while in Jordan publicly well-known recriminations took place between King Husain and his officers. Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 142; H. Saleh, "Defeat and the State: June 1967 and Hafez Al-Assad's Syria."

[31] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 142.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] *Ibid.* Also see N. Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 67.

[34] This would not be unusual, considering that empirically only around 12.5% of incumbents lose office within two years after a military defeat. See: J. Weeks, "Accountable Autocrats? Post-War Punishment in Authoritarian Regimes," *Annual*

Although we cannot establish with certainty the course of the *Ba'th*'s decision-making processes during and after the 1967 war, we can arguably approximate the truth when questioning the (non)actions taken in its aftermath. During the 1960s, a trajectory like al-Mir's was so common that it would have been easy to transfer Assad, Suwaydani, and Jadid away, if they were intolerable to the regime, or to send them to Mezze prison in Damascus, if they were high-calibre political threats.[35] The question, thus, is why al-Mir was repositioned, whereas the other three remained in their posts, regardless of the extent to which they were (un)intentionally responsible for different elements that formed the *naksah*. To make sense of this, it is paramount to deconstruct the intra-*Ba'th* dynamics that underpinned position allocation, maintenance, and seizure.

(Assad's) Position Allocation, Maintenance, and Seizure in the Ba'th Regimes

Most theories on the internal dynamics of autocratic regime types only look at the mechanisms that enable the top leader (aka. 'strongman' or 'dictator') to retain *his* position. In contrast to this, insights on the individuals that are part of the group on whose support he depends as well as how one seizes this most influential position are sparse. The most pertinent argument is that the group with whose support a 'strongman' acquires his powerful position from the incumbent top leader, a so-called 'seizure group', would tend to choose the means 'most natural' to the resources they have.[36] For

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Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2009, pp. 1–60; as well as A. Debs and H.E. Goemans, "Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 104, No. 03 (August 1, 2010): pp. 430–45.

[35] On the prevalence of those practices, see Seale, *Asad of Syria:*, p. 59; and R. Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 80.

[36] B. Geddes, J. Wright, and E. Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 27; B. Geddes, J. Wright, and E. Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, No. 2 (2014): p. 713.

example, military officers would naturally select 'arms' and acquire power through coups.[37] Additionally, top leaders would tend to top-down install 'loyal' persons as a 'coup proofing' mechanism in the ranks below them.[38] Simultaneously, 'winning coalitions', 'the set of people who must support a ruler so that he or she remains in power', and 'selectorates', i.e. 'the set of people with political power', would need to be cultivated by the distribution of political and economic gains in return for their commitment to refrain from overthrowing him.[39] As such, the only aspect theorised about the members of such seizure groups, winning coalitions, and selectorates is that they would choose either the incumbent strongman's or a challenger's side in a manner that resembles a rational choice 'coordination game'.[40]

What happened in the post-1967 *Ba'th* regime? In their comparative study on post-war defeat choices of autocratic rulers in the Middle East, Honig and Reichardt argue that in the post-1967 defeat legitimacy crisis that erupted, the Syrian *Ba'th* Party would have 'suffered heavy criticism for its instigation of the … [war] through its escalation of hostilities',[41] because they were collectively and monolithically seen as responsible for initiating the provocations towards Israel.[42] Similarly, Geddes, Wright and Frantz view the

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[37] B. Geddes, J. Wright, and E. Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*, p. 27.

[38] P. Droz-Vincent, "The Syrian Military and the 2011 Uprising," in *Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring*, ed. H. Albrecht (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 174. For more critical discussions, see H. Albrecht, "Does Coup-Proofing Work? Political–Military Relations in Authoritarian Regimes amid the Arab Uprisings," *Mediterranean Politics* Vol 20, No. 1 (2015): pp. 36–54; H. Albrecht, "The Myth of Coup-Proofing: Risk and Instances of Military Coups d'état in the Middle East and North Africa, 1950-2013," *Armed Forces & Society* Vol 41, No. 4 (2015): pp. 659–87.

[39] Debs and Goemans, "Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War," p. 431; B. Bueno de Mesquita, *The Logic of Political Survival*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge, Mass., 2005); B. Bueno de Mesquita and A. Smith, "Political Succession: A Model of Coups, Revolution, Purges, and Everyday Politics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 61, 2017.

[40] N. Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Military Coups* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 222.

[41] O. Honig and A Reichard, "Realism or Radicalism: Explaining Autocratic Rulers' Strategic Choices Following Military Defeats in the Middle East," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 6, No. 2 (2015): p. 129.

[42] *Ibid.*

Ba'thist regime as a monolith that commenced with the coup of the so-called 'Military Committee' in 1963 and would have 'eventuated in the Assad dictatorship that still rules much of Syria as this is written'.[43] In contrast to this, Koehler argues that the loss of the war would have coincided with a power struggle between Assad and Jadid, and that Assad would have afterwards actively introduced a set of reforms that aimed at shifting the influence over the military vis-à-vis the political arm of the party in his favour as a preparation for his assumption of power in November 1970.[44] This date is then also set as the 'beginning' of his regime in specialised literature on Assad's dictatorship.[45]

This section contends that Assad's regime acquisition and consolidation was a successive process between 1968 and 1972 that also, but not exclusively, required a series of contingent elements, including Assad's individual long-standing rapport within the military, windows of opportunities, and friendship as well as own political capital of the core members of his 'seizure group' and collective fear of a (*Ba'th*) regime breakdown. Thereby, it corrects and diverges from the aforementioned scholarly analyses as well as most literature on the Syrian case in two ways. First, it does not set the seizing date of Assad's power at 1970 but 1968. Second, it shows that his 'power' in the sense of influencing and making decisions was fragile and contingent by virtue of resting on various informal personnel and economic factors and could only be consolidated until after his election in 1971. It is therefore obligatory to return to the scene of the post-defeat emergency meeting of the *Ba'th* party's Regional Command and the relationships that underpinned it.

Even though his own name had been put forward as Assad's successor as Defence Minister, Jundi reportedly voted in Assad's

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[43] Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*, p. 28.

[44] K. Koehler, "Officers and Regimes: The Historical Origins of Political-Military Relations in Middle Eastern Republics," in H. Albrecht, A. Croissant, and F.H. Lawson, *Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring*,(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 50.

[45] See, for example, A. Farouk-Alli, "The Genesis of Syria's Alawi Community," in M. Kerr and C. Larkin, *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 27–48.

favour as a 'comradely gesture'.[46] This may be attributed to the two's eight years relationship since the formation of the Military Committee – a point which will be returned to. Another factor may have been, however, that Assad himself lent his support to the proclamation of Jundi, namely that the party should firmly adhere to its militant external stance.[47] The fact that, in Seale's account, the party's post-defeat blame game is described as having only been stopped by 'the realization that, if ranks were not closed, the whole regime could be in danger.'[48] This passage highlights that there cannot only have been differences of opinion between Jadid and Assad, as Koehler claims, but that there were multiple differences of opinion.

This is best explained by the fact that since the late 1950s, the *Ba'th* bore multiple cleavages. On a transnational level, those were referred to as regionalists and nationalists camps that spread across its Iraqi and Syrian wing.[49] On the national level of Syria, there existed further diverging standpoints with some members of the Syrian military regarding the role of and collaboration with (1) Egypt and Syrian Nasserists,[50] (2) Israel and the Palestinian resistance, as well as (3) the issuance of domestic socioeconomic policies.[51]

Those cleavages successively arose in response to popular dissatisfaction with the socioeconomic policies of the *Ba'th* party as well as its struggle during the United Arab Republic (UAR, 1958-61), and were, according to Nikolaos Van Dam, exacerbated by the defeat.[52] In 1959, the perceived infringement of Syrian sovereignty by Egyptian intelligence and the dissolution of the parliamentary system during the UAR gave the Lieutenant-Colonels Muhammad 'Umran,

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[46] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 142.
[47] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 172.
[48] Seale, *Asad of Syria:* p. 143.
[49] J. F. Devlin, *The Ba`th Party : A History from Its Origins to 1966*, Hoover Institution Publications (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), p. 217; D. Pipes, *Greater Syria : The History of an Ambition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 157; Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* 133, 157; Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 49.
[50] B. Reich, *Political Leaders of the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa: A Biographical Dictionary* (Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 36; Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* pp. 142–43; Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, pp. 47–49.
[51] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 63.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Mazyad Hunaydi and Bashir Sadeq as well as Captain ʿAbd-ul-Ghani Ayyash the impetus to found the Military Committee.[53] Following the transfer of the latter three to diplomatic posts abroad, Assad, Jadid, al-Mir, al-Jundi, Captain Uthman Kanʾan and Munir al-Jirudi joined in 1960.[54] Additionally, members of the *Baʾth* party thought two of their founding fathers, Salah al-Din Bitar and Michel Aflaq, guilty of the *Baʾth* party's declining role within the UAR. The two were not re-elected in 1965 and subsequently expelled to Iraq.[55] Hence, although the Syrian public imagined the *Baʾth,* much like the abovementioned Geddes, Wright, and Frantz,[56] as a monolithic entity and thought the entire party would be responsible for the 1967 defeat, the people involved in its decision-making were actually fractured into different networks.

Inspired by the 8 February 1963 coup of the Iraqi *Baʾth* branch, the Military Committee staged a coup against the Syrian parliamentary regime in the night of 7-8 March 1963.[57] Afterwards, they formed the National Council for the Revolutionary Command (NCRC) with twelve Baʾthists, eight Nasserists and Independents, and erected socioeconomic reforms which resulted in student and peasant protests throughout the country from February 1964 onwards.[58] Against this background, it is to say that the ordinary population's blame of the *naksah* on the *Baʾth*'s aggressive foreign policy only exacerbated but not created the party's unpopular stance in Syria.[59] To control public dissent after the 1967 defeat, al-Jundi who had supported Assad in the voting and was a known loyalist to the *Baʾth* Secretary General Salah Jadid, had been nominated as the head of the party's Bureau of National Security in September 1967 and expanded the state's security and intelligence apparatus.[60]

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[53] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* p. 144; Seale, *Asad of Syria,* pp. 61–64.
[54] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* p. 144.
[55] Pipes, *Greater Syria*, pp. 155–56.
[56] Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work, p. 28, 31.*
[57] Seale, *Asad of Syria:*, pp. 75–76.
[58] F.H. Lawson, *Why Syria Goes to War: Thirty Years of Confrontation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 23–27; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 76–78.
[59] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 143.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 150.

What was Assad's relationship to Salah Jadid? Until the 1967 defeat, Assad was aligned to the Secretary General and his policies. During the March 1963 coup, both provided support for the then strongman and leader of the Military Committee 'Umran: 'Jadid bicycled into [Damascus] to take over the crucial Bureau of Officers' Affairs' and Assad lead a group that captured 'Dumayr air base east of Damascus where the entire air force was concentrated and which offered the only serious resistance to the putsch'.[61] Yet, in 1966, 'Umran, in his former role as Defence Minister, attempted to transfer Jadid's relative 'Izzat Jadid from the tanks corps, the former Head of the Officers' Administration (and by 1967 Chief of Staff) al-Suwaydani, and Major Salim Hatum whose unit secured the national and governmental radio and television station. Afterwards, a military clash with brigades loyal to Jadid erupted.[62] Despite the fact that Assad in his role, as then head of the air force, did not send his troops to support the fighting and only 'spent the morning on the telephone, cajoling and threatening officers in units around the country to bring them over to the Committee's side',[63] he was awarded 'Umran's former post in February 1966 for his loyalty to Jadid.

Since Assad had only gathered war experience during the 1956 Suez Crisis in Egypt and was 'retired' from December 1961 to March 1963, Batatu underscores that his 'career' was built on relationships rather than on military talent.[64] Arguably, Assad was lead by a pragmatic opportunism in which he 'preferred to try and patch things up or … the party to "purge itself" through its own machinery'.[65] After the vote on Assad's ousting in 1967, however, it was 'resentment' that reportedly fuelled him.[66] While this does not rule out that Assad was responsible for certain key decisions during the war, his subsequent seizure of power can be read as being, among other factors, informed by a political willingness to 'undo' what Assad perceived as political

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[61] *Ibid.,* p. 77.
[62] *Ibid.,* pp. 101-102.
[63] *Ibid*., p. 102.
[64] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* p. 198.
[65] Seale, *Asad of Syria:* p. 100, also see p. 144.
[66] I*bid.*

and military failures. Illustratively, Assad met with Russia's Defence Minister to form a new military partnership in August 1967. Additionally, he planned from December 1970 onwards the recapture of Qunaytrah with Egypt's president Anwar al-Sadat,[67] and devoted also much of his later foreign policy to containing Israel.[68] In addition, Assad leveraged the fact that (predominantly Druze) officers that were suspected to have been involved in the failed September 1966 coup attempt of Major Salim al-Hatum were still evicted from the army after the June War defeat and replaced them with his own network of loyalists (predominantly Alawis).[69]

The decisive shift in his balance of power *vis-à-vis* Jadid by virtue of loyalists happened, however, only by an interplay of several factors in his favor in February 1968. That is, that his Chief of Staff Ahmad Suwaydani, who had given - in Assad's account of the 1967 war[70] - the controversial order to have the Syrian troops fall back from Qunaytrah in the decisive night from 9-10 June and was known to be more loyal to Jadid than him, was suspected to be involved in an 'abortive coup' against Jadid.[71] Following the eviction of Suwaydani as well as 160 officers suspected to be loyal to him, Assad's close friend Mustafa Talas was promoted to the position.[72] Talas and Assad knew each other since the Military Academy in Homs. They had fought alongside each other in Egypt, after which Assad had already entrusted him to safeguard his wife and daughter Bushra back to Syria while he was jailed.[73] Talas had further proofed his 'dependability' by

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[67] *Ibid.*, p. 185; P. Seale and L. Butler, "Asad's Regional Strategy and the Challenge from Netanyahu," *Source: Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol 26, no. 1 (1996): p. 31; V. Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum: State Building, National Security, and War Preparation in Syria," in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California.: University of California Press, 2000), p. 151.

[68] Seale and Butler, "Asad's Regional Strategy and the Challenge from Netanyahu," pp. 27–28; Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria,* pp. 62–63.

[69] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, pp. 58–60.

[70] Seale, *Asad of Syria.*

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[72] *Ibid.* Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 60.

[73] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 68–69.

sending his brigade in support of the February 1966 coup and by trying Major Hatum and his loyalists since March 1967.[74]

Subsequently, Assad set on to successively remove further key stakeholders that were loyal to Jadid. In October 1968, Assad managed, by unknown mechanism, to arrange al-Mir's posting to Madrid and removed 'Izzat Jadid from the command of Syria's main strike force, the 70th Armoured brigade.[75] From 25-28 February 1969, Hafiz and his brother Rifaat who commanded a brigade that was formerly under the leadership of Muhammad 'Umran, moved tanks to several key locations, including the newspapers *al-Thawra* and *al-Ba'th*, Damascus and Aleppo radio, and the Ba'th party offices in Latakia and Tartus.[76] From 1-2 March, Rifaat further besieged Jundi's Bureau of National Security by successively arresting all drivers that moved in- and out of the building, before Jundi himself realised what was happening and shot himself.[77] It was only in November 1970, however, that Assad imprisoned Jadid and the civilian leadership of the party,[78] which is, by the specialised literature on Hafiz al-Assad's regime, usually set as the starting date of his regime.

De facto, Assad influenced and controlled Syrian decision-making already from 1968 and 1969 onwards in what is referred to as 'power dualism' (*izdiwajiyyah*) in intra-Ba'thist parlance.[79] To illustrate, when the Lebanese politician Mohsen Ibrahim met with Jadid in 1969, Ibrahim recommended Jadid to 'run'.[80] Further, in September 1970, Syria's official Head of State Nureddin al-Atasi advised the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi to meet with Assad and not with him to discuss political matters.[81] Thereby, Assad's 'power' to shape Syrian politics did not only rest on the respective influence of the members of his network of loyalists in the Syrian

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[74] *Ibid.*, p. 149; S. M. Moubayed, *Steel and Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2006), p. 90.

[75] Seale, *Asad of Syria,* p. 149.

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[77] *Ibid.*, pp. 151–52.

[78] *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 151, 164.

[79] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry,* pp. 145, 173.

[80] al-Haj Saleh, "Defeat and the State: June 1967 and Hafez Al-Assad's Syria."

[81] Seale, *Asad of Syria,* p. 162.

military and security apparatuses, as the literature on authoritarian regime formation promotes.[82] Rather, Assad's power depended on multi-layered networks of loyalists that consisted of two elements.

The first element was the respective influence and network of the members of his 'seizure group', i.e. his aforementioned long-term friend Mustafa Talas and his brother Rifaat Assad. Both were skilful players that rose to their respective positions not only because of Assad's influence, but because of their own respective military capabilities, relationships and the maintenance of their own partisans.[83] The second element was both Assad's and his loyalists' rapport with the ordinary population and the army at large.

To illustrate, Assad's and Jadid's 'power struggle' was relatively well-known among Ba'thists of the late 1960s for that Assad and his seizure needed to be cautious and their seizure of ruling power was anything but uncontested. Quite contrary, Jadid and his supporters tried to purge some of Assad's prominent supporters but failed to do so because Assad and Talas controlled the army and the army possessed Syria's heavy weaponry.[84] After

Assad had refused to grant air force support for the Palestinian Resistance in the Jordanian Black September in 1970, another attempt was made to oust Assad from the *Ba'th* party. From 30 October to 12 November, an emergency National Ba'th Congress voted again on Assad's committee membership. This time, Assad lost because Jadid held more supporters in the political wing of the *Ba'th.*[85] Yet, because Assad had pre-positioned military personnel around the conference hall, the voting outcome was insubstantial.[86] They incarcerated Jadid and Dr. al-Din Atasi, repositioned some mid-calibre personnel

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[82] See, for example, Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work,* p. 25; as well as S. Haber, "Authoritarian Government," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*, ed. B. Weingast and D. Wittman (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 693–707.

[83] F. Balanche, "'Go to Damascus, My Son': Alawi Demographic Shifts under Ba'th Party Rule," in M. Kerr and C. Larkin, *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 101.

[84] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 65; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 150.

[85] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 163.

[86] *Ibid.*, p. 164.

previously loyal to them in embassies abroad, and allowed others to flee the country.[87]

Next, Assad tried to distinguish himself from Jadid's previous political lines in the eyes of the Syrian people: In the early 1970s, he issued a set of liberal socioeconomic policies that lead to economic growth and proclaimed himself as the 'saviour' of the Syrian nation, i.e. the only one with foresight for the good of the people.[88] Furthermore, like the Ba'thist regimes before his own, Assad purged mid- and high-ranking officers from the security and military apparatuses that were loyal to Jadid and replaced them with his own loyalists until 1972, and opened the *Ba'th* membership to Nasserists.[89] While one may interpret those measures as 'coup proofing' and Seale speculates that this would be a spleen Assad acquired because of his controversial command experience during the 1967 war,[90] evidence suggests that this instalment and maintenance of multiple layers of loyal networks was the very nucleus his power was built upon. In sum, those manoeuvres, alongside the political victory of the 1973 October War, made him a popular president during the early years of his regime.[91] This was also visible in the fact that he was, in February 1971, elected with 99 percent as Syria's President. [92]

Bringing those insights from the networks of loyalists back to the controversial battle over *Qunaytrah*, it can be speculated that because the post-1967 politically exiled al-Mir not only commanded the Golan front but was also another known Jadid loyalist,[93] it seems unlikely that the political leadership under Jadid's influence would have *not* known about the controversial developments surrounding *Qunaytrah* and the above-mentioned Communique no. 66 during the war. By June 1967, Salah Jadid and his other loyalists controlled Syria's

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[87] *Ibid.*, p. 163. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 175.
[88] Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, pp. 67, 73; Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, pp. 20, 80; V. Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: London: Tauris, 1997), p. 136.
[89] Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 66.
[90] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 149.
[91] Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, 136.
[92] Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, p. 81.
[93] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 153; Seale, *Asad of Syria,* p. 149.

foreign policy as well as most of its military, unlike Assad. In this vein, the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from *Qunaytrah* was the brainchild of Jadid's military supporters, like al-Mir, and the political leadership employed the dramatized broadcast of Communiqué No. 66 in the hope of gaining support from the superpowers. Thus, while Hafiz al-Assad doubtlessly is to blame for many injustices his regime inflicted afterwards, with regards to the 1967 war, he can only be held accountable for the loss of the Syrian air force.

Conclusion: What was the role of the 1967 war for Hafez al-Assad's seizure and consolidation of power?

Drawing on an extensive literature review, this paper highlighted that diverging accounts exist on the role Assad played for the loss of *Qunaytrah* province during the 1967 war. This paper's analysis of the relationships that underpinned the situation and the meeting of the *Ba'th* party that followed the war suggested that the decisive Communiqué no. 66 was the brainchild of the Ba'th's political wing and that Assad was scolded for having put the regime in the desperate situation of being without an air force and requiring the attention and pressure of the USA and Soviet Union to stop the Israeli assault. In order to acquire and maintain his position as Defence Minister prior to the war and to rise to ruling power after the defeat, both the collective fear of the party members to be overthrown by the population as well as multiple layers of loyalists and friends, consisting of Assad's own entrusted as well as their respective ones, were pivotal.

In this regard, the 1967 defeat had a threefold effect. First, the loss of both the war and *Qunaytrah* province were an amplifier of popular dissatisfaction regarding Ba'thist policies and, thereby, a threat to the collective survival of the regime. Second, Assad interpreted the *Ba'th* internal blame game the war inflicted upon him as unfair and, according to Patrick Seale, as *the* pivotal experience that motivated him to take charge in Syrian politics.[94] Third, he used the

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[94] Seale, *Asad of Syria*.

turbulent momentum that intra-Ba'th debates as well as purges and coup-plans created to successively place his loyalists in high-ranking military positions and to eliminate those loyal to his opponent Salah Jadid. Thereby, long-standing 'rapport' or 'friendship' and 'loyalty' were currencies that underpinned all kinds of position allocations, seizures, and maintenances and highly dependent on the movements of other and opposing loyalty webs. This was visible in the fact that Assad's post-1967 membership to the Ba'th Committee was first maintained only by his comrade 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi who became two years later one of the persons he needed to eliminate during his successive seizure of power from 1968 through 1972. Therefore, Assad relied on his long-term friend Mustafa Talas and his brother Rifaat Assad who themselves relied on their own set of loyalists and friends. This multi-layered seizure group was cautious yet not uncontested, as purge attempts in 1969 and another vote on Assad's membership in the Ba'th Committee in 1970 showed.

By putting intra-regime relationships centre stage of the decision-making processes within the Syrian Ba'thist regimes of the late 1960s, these findings made contributions to the literatures on the Assad regime, the 1967 War, and potentially authoritarian regimes at large. First, the conceiving of multiple webs of loyalists as the nucleus on which 'power' within an authoritarian regime lies highlights both its contingent nature and the dynamic top-down yet bottom-up structure of the Ba'th regime. Second, this enabled us to see the ability to influence and control decisions as the crux for the identification of a 'strongman' within the regime. In Assad's case, this meant that he had this position already taken over from 1968 onwards without having openly removed his predecessor Salah Jadid. Third, the insight into the former relationships allowed us to evaluate the credibility and respective interests underlying diverging accounts on the course of the battle over Qunaytrah province during the 1967 War and brought a new alternative explanation to light. A further usage of this relational approach would enable comparison to other phases of the Assad regime, e.g. during the so-called 'troubling years' from 1976 through 1984 as well as upon the takeover of his successor and son,

Bashar al-Assad, and the Syrian Civil war (2011-now). One could further investigate if there is any kind of *intra*-regime 'learning'[95] and/or patterns in the handling of political opponents and test if this would generate new insight concerning the alleged assassinations of Kamal Jumblatt (1977) and Rafik Hariri (2005), and if a relational analysis of authoritarian regimes in other countries would be fruitful *per se*. If anything, however, a relational analysis of the 1967 Jordanian and Egyptian regimes as well as the consultation of further untranslated Arabic sources seems worthwhile to illuminate the many dimensions to the war and its outcomes for the Middle East.

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[95] For an example on inter-regime learning, see S Heydemann and R Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening,'" *Globalizations* Vol 8, No. 5 (2011): pp. 647–53.