Shukri al-Quwwatli’s war policy during the conflict in Palestine was a disaster both for his presidency and for parliamentary republicanism in Syria. Indeed, the two had become intimately intertwined. In retrospect, it is easy to argue that Syria should never have pushed for war in Palestine. Had Syria not acted as the whip in the Arab League driving the others toward war, the United Nation’s partition plan might well have been carried out; and Israelis would have lived in a much smaller country. After all, who can deny that the Palestinians would have been better off had the Arab League not entered the conflict? King Abdullah was determined to work out a peaceful partition with the Jews; the British were ready to oversee it.

Most popular accounts of the conflict give two principle reasons to explain why the Arabs went to war. First, the Arab people considered the partition plan to be highway robbery; for it gave over 50 percent of Palestine to the Jews, although they constituted but a third of the population and owned a mere seven percent of the land. No Arab leader, the argument goes, could have accepted such a deal without being lynched. Second, Arab governments believed they were stronger than the Jews and calculated that they could overwhelm the inconsequential Zionist

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1 This is a revised version of the article originally published as: “Syria in the 1948 Palestine War: Fighting King Abdullah’s Greater Syria Plan,” in Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *Rewriting the Palestine War: 1948 and the History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 178-205. (It has also been translated and published in French, Spanish, and Arabic.) There is a new revised edition planned to come out in 2007, in which this article will appear.

forces and “push them into the sea.” Although the first argument is sound, the second is myth. The Arab leaders all hoped to avoid war, which promised few benefits and many dangers. We now know that early military assessments by the Arab League and individual states of their ability to defeat Zionist forces in the impending conflict were unanimous in warning of the superiority of the Zionist military, which outnumbered the Arab forces at every stage of the war. Certainly, the Syrian leadership was painfully aware of the weakness of the Syrian army and had little or no faith in the ability of the “Arab leaders” to cooperate effectively against the Jews or win the war in Palestine.

This begs the question then of why President Quwwatli and Prime Minister Jamil Mardam were so adamant about opposing partition and pushing for war. Indeed, Syria’s role in shepherding the reluctant Egypt and Saudi Arabia toward war is little appreciated. Of all the Arab states, Syria was the most adamant about the need to go to war. Indeed, it was the first in and the last out of the war and, thus, bears much responsibility for the extent of the nakba or disaster that befell the Palestinians as a result. So why would Syria encourage the Arab world to go to war in Palestine even as it prepared for defeat?

In short, President Shukri al-Quwwatli went to war not for pan-Arab notions of unity or brotherhood, but to prevent that very same spirit from undermining Syria’s independence. He hoped to block King Abdullah from carrying out his Greater Syria unity scheme. During the first years of independence, Quwwatli lived in constant fear that King Abdullah would invade Syria to unify the central Syrian lands which had been divided by the European powers at the end of World War One. The instability and general border rearrangements brought about by the UN’s decision to partition Palestine, Quwwatli understood, presented the Jordanian monarch with his best opportunity to realize his dream of Greater Syria, first by expanding his kingdom over the Arab portions of Palestine and then by striking north at Damascus itself. Throughout the conflict, President Quwwatli’s main concern was to halt Hashemite plans to rule the Levant. First and foremost, he had to stop the Jordanian monarch from acquiring the eastern half of Palestine, only then could he concern himself with the emergence of a Jewish state in the western half.

From the outset of the war, the primary concern of the Arab states was the inter-Arab conflict and the balance of power in the region. In this respect it is useful to view the 1948 war primarily as an inter-Arab struggle or an Arab civil war, and only secondarily as a war against Zionism and the Jews. The widespread public desire for Arab unity threatened weaker governments and

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5 The growing number of diaries, memoirs and memorandum written by Arab statesmen of the 1948 period that have now been published make infrequent mention of the threat posed by Israel. Their pages are filled with the jockeying of the Arab states.
rulers, such as Syria’s, by de-legitimizing them and pitting them against other Arab rulers in the desperate scramble for leadership of the nationalist movement that all hoped to master.

**Quwwatli, Shukri al-** (1892-1967, also spelled Qwatli and Kuwatli), Syrian statesman and first President of independent Syria. He was born in Damascus, schooled in Istanbul, and joined an Arab nationalist secret society during WWI. During the Syrian Revolt of 1925-1927, he raised money in Egypt and emerged as an opponent of the revolt leaders Sultan Pasha al-Atrash and Abd al-Rahman al-Shahbandar because of their pro-Hashemite politics. He was a founding member of the National Bloc, which emerged after the collapse of the revolt as the main party opposing the French occupation while Atrash and Shahbandar languished in exile. He became the leader of the National Bloc in 1940, following the assassination of Shahbandar, who was making a come back in Syria politics once pardoned by the French in 1937. Several top leaders of the Bloc were implicated in his assassination and fled to Iraq, leaving Quwwatli in charge.

He was elected President in 1943 and worked to liberate Syria from the French, who evacuated Syria in April 1946. In 1949, he was overthrown by a military coup led by Husni al-Zaim, who had Quwwatli imprisoned for a short period before he was allowed to go into exile in Egypt. After a series of military coups, free elections were once again held in Syria, and Quwwatli was elected President again in 1955. In February 1958, he signed the Union Pact with Egypt to establish the United Arab Republic with Gamal Abdel Nasser as president. He died in Beirut, Lebanon on June 30, 1967.

**The Initial Desire to Avoid War**

The Arab leaders wished they could defeat the Zionists and preserve Palestine for the Arabs; nevertheless, few believed it was possible. From 1946 on, every Syrian newspaper and parliamentary block warned that the country would have to go to war and demanded that the government arm the country and prepare to save Palestine. The President and his ministers closed their ears to the uproar that surrounded them. They were too busy trying to establish a measure of internal order and stability to worry about Palestine. Just keeping their governments in office for more than six months at a stretch taxed every ounce of their political skill and cunning. Moreover, Quwwatli refused to strengthen his army because he feared the disloyalty of its officers and the possibility of a coup. Instead he kept it small and scattered in rural barracks far from Damascus where it could do the least harm; its top officers were kept under constant surveillance. When it entered Palestine on 15 May 1948, the Syrian army had only 10,000 officers and men and was unequipped to fight a war, which is the most telling indication that Quwwatli did not want and was not prepared to fight a war.

President Quwwatli and the leaders of his government decided as early as 1946 that Syria could not save Palestine. 'Adil Arslan, an intimate of the President who represented Syria at the UN during 1948 and who sought to become minister of defense during the war, was a keen observer of Syria’s lack of preparation. He records in his diary that Syria's leaders were caught in a dream when it came to Palestine – a dream that he labored in vain to wake them from. In December 1946, Arslan warned the President that Syria needed to begin buying arms and to vigorously oppose President Truman's campaign rhetoric in favor of allowing more Jewish immigrants into Palestine. The American president effectively hijacked British policy in Palestine during his presidential campaign by promising to send 100,000 Jewish European displaced persons to Britain’s mandate as soon as he came to power. This reversed Britain’s policy of restricting
Jewish immigration to 15,000 a year and undermined the 1939 White Paper which had promised a unitary state in Palestine. Arslan wrote:

We brought up the situation in Palestine during a meeting with the President of the Republic, and we said that the policy of silence that we were adhering to over the American entrance into the situation is encouraging President Truman in his belief that he can grant Palestine to the Jews. Prime Minister Sa‘dallah Bayk defended the policy of silence, and the President of the Republic said: ‘The Americans and the English refused to sell us arms or to help us to reorganize our army.' I said: ‘Their refusal will continue so long as we don't open negotiations with others, such as the Russians, Czechs, or Irish.' He said, ‘No, we would only gain the enmity of the British.' They were not convinced and both agreed that the rescue of Palestine at this time was impossible. ‘Izzat Darwaza agreed with them because he believes that the Egyptians, once they get full independence, will be able to save Palestine. I became very sad about a people who delude themselves with such dreams. When Syria was not independent it cared much more about Palestine. The same will also be true for Egypt.6

Arslan’s concerns were well placed. Although Syria had won complete independence, its leaders were still under the thrall of European power. If Syria went to the Soviet Union or other anti-British power for arms, the President argued, Britain would unleash the Hashemites, giving Jordan the green light to take Syria. Rather than admit Syria’s powerlessness to the public or prepare Syrians to accept the partition of Palestine, however, Syrian leaders hid behind pronouncements of Arabism and victory. Most never believed they would be called to account for their rhetoric because they convinced themselves that Britain would never actually give up Palestine, or that Egypt would be able to defend it, some even believed that world opinion or a shared sense of human justice would somehow prevent the worst from happening. A few, like Faris al-Khuri, the Christian President of the Parliament, were bold enough to advance the idea that Syria accept the partition Palestine as the best and only viable solution.7 But they were quickly silenced.

Syria’s leaders kept their heads buried in the sand until September 1947. Arslan, at the beginning of that month continued to lament the President's inaction on Palestine. He writes:

Poor Palestine: No matter what I say about defending it, my heart remains a turbulent volcano because I cannot convince anyone of importance in my country or in the rest of the Arab countries that it needs anything more than words.... Because we have a small and ill-equipped army, we cannot stand up to the Zionist forces if they should suddenly decide to launch a strike at Damascus. We would be reduced to gathering together the Bedouin tribes to fight against them.8

President Quwwatli and his small coterie of ministers began to see that war in Palestine might become necessary only when the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine published its majority recommendation on 8 September 1947. The UN declared that Palestine should be

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6 Arslan, Mudhakkirat, (11 December 1946) p. 661 & 801.
7 Ibid., pp. 643, 653, 672, 679, 701.
partitioned into two states, one Jewish and the other Arab. Another wake-up call came later in the month when Britain announced that it would abandon its ill-conceived mandate to the authority of UN, thereby dashing lingering Arab hopes that Britain would oppose the UN decision. Widespread demonstrations broke out in Syria’s major cities. The Syrian public was unanimous in demanding Syrian intervention in Palestine; the parliament quickly gave voice to the country's wishes by unanimously calling for action in Palestine as well. The Arab League followed suit by denouncing partition in its turn. As one Syrian deputy remarked, "the public's desire for war is irresistible."9 Unable to turn back the tide of war fever that swept the country in September, the government decided to ride it into the unknown.

From the outset, President Quwwatli and his ministers prepared for defeat. They knew they could not possibly win a war they had so long tried to deny, with an army they had done their best to destroy. All the same, Syria began to swing into action faster than other Arab countries. Defense Minister Ahmad Sharabati ordered arms from Czechoslovakia, most of which later sank off the coast of Britain when the ship transporting them caught fire. Foreign Minister Na`im Antaki wired his ministers abroad to purchase arms wherever they could, but the western powers had already placed an arms embargo on the Middle East by that time, severely limiting Syria’s ability to find willing sellers. Syria’s minister in Paris, Khalid al-`Azm, thought he might get around the government ban by going directly to French arms companies to buy weapons, but he quickly discovered that he was outfoxed by the two Jewish ministers then serving in the French cabinet, who managed to foil every arms purchase he negotiated.10 `Azm did not blame Syria’s ill equipped army on the Great Powers and the embargo, however. Like `Adil Arslan, he placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Syrian government, which had steadfastly refused to build up the army until September 1947, when it was too late. He writes:

To the many who say that the Great Powers banned the export of arms to the countries of the Near East, I answer that the ban was issued only in 1947, but before that it was permitted and possible, whether from the Great Powers or from others such as Switzerland or Belgium during the years: 1945, 1946, and the beginning of 1947.... But the [Arab] heads of state contented themselves with giving ringing speeches and taking cheap popular positions while the army remained without arms or ammunition, without training or organization, and without a unified command of loyal officers.11

Unlike the Syrians, the Zionists were savvy circumventers of the arms embargo, which quickly led to their gaining an important military advantage in arms. In this regard, American Jews were

9 USNA, Memminger (Damascus) to Sec. of State, "Damascus Demonstrators Demand Syrian Army Intervention in Palestine," (27 April 1948) 890D.00/4-2748. The “irresistible” quote is from Husni al-Barazi, deputy from Hama.
11Ibid., p. 384. The first shipment of French arms arrived in Syria during the last month of 1948, after which France became Syria's major arms supplier during most of the 1950s until the Soviet Arms deal of 1956, which was also brokered by `Azm. He maintains that he could have bought arms during his first months in Paris during the summer of 1947, if only Jamil Mardam had facilitated his efforts.
particularly helpful in shipping readily available surplus WWII weapons to Israel, which they could buy on the open market. By June 1948, Israel had added three Flying Fortresses to its growing air force. They were used to bomb the Syrian front lines and downtown Damascus in July. Ironically, they hit the residence of the U.S. Attaché, slightly wounding him and destroying his home.\textsuperscript{12}

The other front where Syria took the initiative in September 1947 was in the Arab League. President Quwwatli and Prime Minister Mardam sought to coordinate with other Arab states to head off the partition proposal in the UN. Syria proposed that the matter be turned over to the International Court of Justice in The Hague; the proposal was defeated. The Arab League asked that all countries accept Jewish refugees "in proportion to their area and economic resources"; the league's request was denied in a 16-16 tie, with 25 abstentions.\textsuperscript{13}

Public pressure to go to war and Syria’s legacy as the source of Arabism help explain why the Syrian leadership took the initiative to thwart the UN's partition plans. They also explain why President Quwwatli abandoned his anti-war stand earlier than other Arab leaders. But public pressure and Arab nationalism were not the only concerns of the President; in fact, they were not his leading concerns. Quwwatli took the initiative in opposing the UN plan because he feared it would unleash King Abdullah's Greater Syria Plan. This fear dictated his diplomatic and military strategy from September 1947 on.

Abdullah Ibn Hussayn Ibn Ali was the Emir of Transjordan until independence in 1946, when he was coronated King. Transjordan would later become known simply as Jordan and the monarch known as King Abdullah.

\textsuperscript{12} Though the Syrian government complained bitterly to American officials in Damascus that the airplanes proved the U.S. was not respecting its arms embargo, U.S. officials announced that the planes had been acquired from American civilians over whom the U.S. government had no control. The Syrian government censored all press reports about the provenance of the bombers in order to avoid further stirring up the passions of the local populace. The bombing of Damascus continued for three days and took place after the first cease-fire had been accepted. USNA, Memminger (Damascus) to Sec. of State, "Syria, Monthly Political Review - July - 1948," (31 July 1948) 890D.00/7-3148.

The Threat from Jordan

After becoming the ruler of Transjordan, King Abdullah made no secret of his ambition to unite the central Arab lands of Greater Syria, which included Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. The ultimate object of his desire was a throne in Damascus. His brother, Faysal bin Husayn, had been elected King of (greater) Syria by the Arab Grand Committee at Damascus on 8th March 1920, having taken the city during the Great Arab Revolt of WWI. Only months later, the French crushed the emerging Syrian state at the Battle of Maysalun on 23 July and redrew its borders. Driven from Syria, the Hashemites, supported by many Syrians, continued to champion the legitimacy of Greater Syria. Abdullah assumed leadership of the cause when his brother Faysal, having become King of Iraq, died in 1933. No sooner did Syria and Jordan gain independence in 1946, than Abdullah called for the immediate unification of Syria under his crown, believing he could win not only British support for his plan, but also the broad masses of Arabs who were calling for unity.

Shukri al-Quwwatli had good reason to fear Abdullah’s Greater Syria Plan. His own army was small, badly trained, and unreliable. To make matters worse, the president suspected that many of his top officers had either been in contact with King Abdullah himself or his agents in Syria. The Jabal Druze, positioned on the Syrian-Jordanian border, was in full revolt against Damascus by the fall of 1947, having defied Quwwatli following his annulment of the summer parliamentary elections in the province. Its Atrash leaders, renowned for their military prowess, were threatening to secede to Jordan and had positioned themselves to act as the bridgehead for a Jordanian strike on Damascus. King Abdullah sounded out the Druze in both Syria and Lebanon about unifying their regions and giving them a large measure of autonomy within a Greater Syria in exchange for their support in helping to create it.14 A border incident could easily give Abdullah the pretext he needed for a move on Damascus.

In contrast to Syria, Jordan was a stable state. Its army, the Arab Legion commanded by British officers, was by all accounts the best trained and “by far the most loyal and efficient” fighting force among the Arab League states. Its commander, General John B. Glubb, or Glubb Pasha as he was known, always favored the notion of a Greater Syria acting as the centerpiece of British policy in the Middle East. As he explained to the British government: “It is not fanciful to imagine the Arab Legion as the nucleus of the Army of Greater Syria in the future.”15 The Prime Minister of Egypt, Nuqrashi Pasha, also acknowledged that the Jordanian army was superior to either the Egyptian or Syrian armies when he proposed to the Arab League in October 1947 that they pay for the Jordanian army to serve as the guardian of Palestine.16

16 Ibid. p. 247; Doran, Pan-Arabism, p. 113-116.
From President Quwwatli’s perspective, the war in Palestine offered Abdullah the ideal opportunity to bring down Syria’s republican regime and to push forward his ambition to reestablish Hashemite rule in Damascus. Each stage of Syrian planning for the war in Palestine makes sense when seen through the lens of President Quwwatli’s fear of Abdullah and the possibility that the Jordanian monarch would win British support for his Greater Syria plan.

‘Adil Arslan was horrified that Quwwatli was concerned about the Jordanian danger more than he was the danger of Zionist expansion. In July 1948, Arslan wrote in his diary:

Our brother Shukri has been terrified of Greater Syria for a long time. He was always anxious and slept fitfully because he was plagued by nightmares of the Jordanian army sweeping down on Damascus… But when the Palestine war came and underscored the Arab need for the Jordanian army and made clear the merits of that army, then suddenly, our friend [Quwwatli] encouraged Hajj Amin al-Husayni to declare the existence of his state in Jerusalem and began to eliminate every Syrian from the field of battle who… spoke highly of Abdullah’s army. Now, on being informed that his policy in Palestine will lead Abdullah to make a move in the Jabal Druze, his nightmares have returned.17

Arslan, like many Syrians, believed Quwwatli’s anti-Hashemite attitude was shortsighted and self-interested. Even if King Abdullah wished to annex much of Palestine to Jordan, Arslan reasoned, the Arabs should support him in order to save the Palestinians from being conquered by the Jews. So long as Jordan could keep Palestine from becoming Jewish, Syria had the moral and practical obligation to assist it. Syria’s military weakness made it a necessity, and Arabism required it. Arslan did not think King Abdullah was as bad as Quwwatli made him out to be. In May 1948, he wrote,

Shukri Bayk’s view of the Palestine problem is wrong because Abdullah does not merely want to expand his kingdom, whether it be to the West (Palestine) or North (Syria). If he can save Jerusalem with his army and participate in destroying Tel Aviv then let him have Palestine… The honor of the Arab nation is greater than that of thrones and presidencies.18

Arslan believed that because Jordan’s army was the only instrument capable of saving Palestine, Syria needed to swallow its pride and defer to King Abdullah. Quwwatli believed the opposite. To him, King Abdullah’s army and ambitions presented Syria with its greatest external threat, more important even than that of the nascent Jewish state.

To make matters worse, Jordan encircled Syria with a series of alliances during the lead up to the war. Abdullah signed treaties with both Turkey and Iraq in 1947. From Turkey, Abdullah sought support for his Greater Syria plan in exchange for Syria renouncing all Arab claims to the province of Alexandretta, which Turkey had annexed from Syria in 1938. In April 1947, Abdullah announced a treaty of “Brotherhood and Alliance” with Iraq. The two Hashemite kingdoms had long sought to form a federation. Abdullah was determined to pursue close cooperation between the Hashemite monarchies to ensure the success of his Greater Syria plan.

18 Ibid., p. 109-110.
He could not allow for intra-Hashemite competition to scuttle his plan. As one American official explained, King Abdullah’s “vision and goal was a reunited Syria in federation with Iraq.” It would be built “on the unity of the Hashemite House and the strong fundamental oneness of national aspirations.”

Shortly after Jordan and Iraq signed the Brotherhood Alliance, Iraq likewise signed a treaty with Turkey, which meant that Syria was surrounded on four of its borders by enemies, agreed on Jordan’s plan. Quwwatli could only see in this a sinister intent. He was not alone in his fears. U.S. Secretary of State George Marshal also suspected that “the treaties reflected high policy moves away from the Arab League by the two Hashemite rulers with or without British approval.” The American secretary of state suspected that the Hashemites were serious about pushing forward with their Greater Syria plan and would drag Great Britain along with them, kicking and screaming if need be. The question for many, including the Americans, was not only if Britain would stop the Hashemites, but could they. What if the Hashemites moved without Britain? Would the British give up their position in the region, which was growing ever more dependent on the Hashemites, in order to punish them?

**Britain’s Policy**

To Quwwatli, Britain’s policy toward the Greater Syria plan was of ultimate importance. Unlike the Americans or even the Saudis, who questioned Britain’s true inclinations on the Greater Syria question, Quwwatli believed that the British secretly supported and nurtured Abdullah’s plans to expand his kingdom. He believed that “Abdullah was the sheep and Britain the shepherd” on matters of high policy. Though Quwwatli badgered British officials on the Greater Syria question, insisting that they denounce it clearly and completely, the British refused to allay Syrian concerns. Instead, they trotted out their usual set of stock phrases: “Her Majesty’s Government’s attitude is one of strict neutrality” on the matter of inter-Arab rivalries. The question of Arab unity is a “matter exclusively of concern to the peoples and states of the area.” These “reassurances” fooled no one. As the US Secretary of State George Marshall correctly observed, these platitudinous formulas only “encouraged Abdullah to advocate Greater Syria.” Who could believe that they were actually meant to dissuade? President Quwwatli also believed that Britain would not retreat from the region without a fight. Iraq and Egypt both refused to renew their military treaties with Britain due to widespread public outcry, while Jordan willingly and eagerly renewed its defense agreements. Would not Britain realize that their only true base of support in the region was Jordan and the Hashemites in general?

This assessment on the part of Quwwatli was not fanciful or far-fetched. After all in February 1948, Britain signed on to Abdullah’s plan to divide Palestine with the Zionists, thereby agreeing to the first step of Abdullah’s Greater Syria plan. This was in direct defiance of the United

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20Ibid.
21Ibid.
Nations partition proposal, which called for two states in Palestine.\footnote{Maan Abu Nowar, The Jordanian-Israeli War, 1948-1951: A History of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002, p. 69.} Although the British did seek to curb Abdullah’s Greater Syria rhetoric during the fall of 1947, London’s efforts were too little, too late.\footnote{Nowar, Struggle for Independence, p. 234-35.} Quwwatli never trusted the British. It should also be remembered that the British did in fact take up the cause of Syrian unification following the 1948 war. First, during the summer of 1949 following the Hinnawi coup, when British sought to facilitate federation between Syria and Iraqi, and second, in 1956, at the time of the Suez Crises, when Britain helped develop Iraqi schemes to topple the Syrian government and unite the two countries. President Quwwatli was not wrong in his assessment of Great Britain’s grand strategic interests in the region. He was merely uncertain how far Britain would push them in 1948. But by turning against Britain, the only western power that had a direct interest in limiting the size of Israel, Quwwatli undermined all prospects of containing the chaos of partition.

The Foreign office believed that by helping Jordan acquire the Arab-designated half of Palestine it would at once limit the borders of the proposed Jewish state and preserve stability and Britain’s position in the region. Had Syria not opposed Britain so resolutely, it could even be argued, Britain would have been less tempted to place all its bets on the Hashemites. This is counter-factual history, however. The point is that Quwwatli understood Abdullah’s Greater Syria project as a serious threat. He believed that Britain would back Hashemite plans for unity in the Levant when it suited them. As the architect of Syrian independence, he was not willing to leave his borders unprotected. Syria’s desire to contain Jordan guided its policy toward the division of Palestine.

**Syria’s Attempt to Contain Jordan**

In August 1947, Quwwatli became convinced that Abdullah was planning to use military force to carry out his Greater Syria plan. During Syria’s summer parliamentary elections, the pro-Greater Syria candidates that Abdullah had hoped would win seats in parliament, faired badly. Quwwatli had been able to thwart many of their campaigns. With their lack luster showing, Abdallah abandoned hope that he would be able to carry out the merger of the two countries through constitutional means. This left him no choice but to intervene directly into Syrian affairs. On August 4, Abdullah sent the president of his cabinet to hand-deliver a letter to Quwwatli, demanding the establishment of an “All Syria Congress,” based on the one that had elected his brother, Faysal, King of “Greater” Syria in 1920. Now that the Arab states were independent, they should be unified according to the wishes of the people to create a Greater Syrian state, and thereafter its union with Iraq, he insisted.\footnote{Ibid., p. 235-36; Muhsin al-Barazi, al-Mudhakkirat Muhsin al-Barazi, 1947-1949 (Memoirs or Muhsin al-Barazi). ed. Khayriyya Qasimiyya, (Beirut: al-Rawad lil-Nashr wal-Tawzi’), 1994. p. 15.} Quwwatli was appalled by Abdullah’s insolence and said as much in a press conference he assembled to denounce the Jordanian king. He insisted that any move toward Arab unification would have to go through the Arab League and be voted on by its members.
Incensed, Abdullah went to the press and people himself. On 12 August, he accused the Syrian leaders of being “supporters of disunity, separation, and surrender” because they were obstructing “union or federation of the country.” He also attacked Syria’s “French” republican system along with its borders as being illegitimate and foreign inventions that defied authentic Arab tradition and national imperative. He said:

A mere regional republican system, founded as a result of frontiers devised for the convenience of Mandatory Powers and maintained by force of arms, can never overrule the validity of a solemn National Covenant. The National intelligence is insulted by those who claim that the covenant of the Arab League involves the retention of the Arab World in its present form which retards Arab progress by maintaining frontiers imposed by colonization.

Soon after this broadside against Syria’s leaders, Abdullah told the Beirut press that he was prepared to use “force” to return Syria to its pre-colonial and rightful borders “if he failed to secure his objective by peaceful means.” To counter Abdullah’s provocations and threats, Quwwatli decided he must construct a defensive pact tying together Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria in a formal military alliance against his Hashemite foe and to protect Syria’s independence.

The Arab world had been split into two blocs over the issue of Hashemite unity schemes from the very foundation of the Arab League in the spring of 1945. The British Ambassador to Cairo, who reported on the inaugural meeting of the Arab League in March 1945, predicted bleak prospects for Arab unity because of the “mutual suspicion and fear” of the Arab leaders caused by Iraq’s Fertile Crescent and Jordan’s Greater Syria plans to unite with Syria. He summed up his report by stating, “It was inevitable… that, in spite of rivalries between Abdullah and the Iraqi Royal Family over Syria, the two Hashemite Powers should find themselves standing together against the Egyptian bloc.”

The Egyptian bloc consisted of the countries threatened by Hashemite ambitions, or which sought Egyptian aid and protection. For them the League was a refuge. Although its stated goal was to build Arab unity, its covenant guaranteed the sanctity of the Arab state system as it had been outlined by the European powers after WWI. No border changes could be made without the approval of all League members, for it assured “the preservation of their independence and sovereignty from all aggression by all means possible.” This guarantee of independence provided considerable moral and legal comfort to weaker states like Syria. It also brought Egypt into the very center of Mashriq (Eastern Arab) politics as a counter-weight to the Hashemites and their British backers. President Quwwatli looked to Egypt and Saudi Arabia as natural allies of Syria from his earliest days in politics. When he was elected president in 1943, he threw his weight behind the creation of the League and did everything he could to augment the notion that it act as the sole legitimate arbiter of inter-Arab politics. This gave Quwwatli ideological cover to

26 Ibid., 237.
denounce the unification schemes put forward by his restless Hashemite neighbors, while claiming to be fully supportive of Arab unity.

The League’s greatest problem was that it had no teeth. Moral and legal strictures alone could not protect Syria from Abdullah’s Arab Legion. To gain real security, Quwwatli had to transform the Egyptian bloc into a formal defensive alliance. That is what he set out to do in August 1947, following Abdullah’s threat to pursue unity by force. His efforts mark the beginning of an important turning point in the formation of the two countervailing alliances: the Hashemite Bloc, which included Jordan and Iraq, and the Egyptian bloc, which included Saudi Arabia, Syrian and Egypt. The formation of competing blocs completely frustrated Arab efforts to coordination their defense of Palestine during the 1948 war. Arab divisions permitted the Zionist forces to divide and conquer with brutal effectiveness. 28

It is worth noting that the hardening of these alliances took shape not in reaction to the rise of Zionist power in Palestine but in reaction to Jordan’s Greater Syria Plan and Hashemite efforts to take Damascus. President Quwwatli, from the start, was the principal advocate and primary engine for this alliance. His efforts began in August 1947, well before Syria or the other Arab states began to mobilize in earnest for war in Palestine.

To lay the groundwork for his military alliance, Quwwatli dispatched his personal secretary and soon-to-be Foreign Minister, Muhsin al-Barazi, to visit the kings of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Barazi delivered a letter to King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bin Sa`ud in which President Quwwatli explained the seriousness of the Hashemite threat to both states and asked for a concerted response. Quwwatli explained that he would counter Abdullah’s Greater Syria plan with a unity plan of his own. Syria would announce that Jordan and Syria must unite, but that Syria would absorb Jordan, not vice versa, and that the backward monarchical system of Jordan be transformed into a republic, free from any alliance with a foreign power. Quwwatli planned to use Syria’s democracy and unencumbered independence as his trump cards. Quwwatli asked King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz to announce this plan over the radio at the same time as Quwwatli did. To add teeth to their propaganda campaign, Quwwatli also asked the Saudis to incite the tribes of Jordan to revolt against their monarch and to move Saudi troops to the Jordanian border, at which time both Syria and Saudi Arabia would demand that Ma`an and `Aqaba, Jordan’s two main southern cities, be turned over to their rightful owner, Saudi Arabia. They would begin to agitate for this transfer of sovereignty immediately. 29

The Saudi King was amenable to only part of this plan: the propaganda campaign. However, he also agreed to incite the Jordanian tribes against King Abdullah with a bit of money. On the issue of announcing that Ma`an and `Aqaba belonged to Saudi Arabia, he demurred, claiming that the dispute was being mediated by Britain. “The British were Arabia’s friends,” he said. He let Barazi know that he was not prepared to ruin his relations with the United Kingdom for the sake of Syria. When pressed by Barazi, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz admitted that he concurred with Quwwatli that the British were behind Abdullah’s stepped-up Greater Syria agitation. Why? He explained that

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29 Barazi, Mudhakkirat, pp. 18-19.
he believed “the British wanted revenge” for Egypt’s refusal to sign a new Anglo-Egyptian treaty, extending British base rights and other privileges in Egypt. In Ibn Sa‘ud’s view, Britain was the master puppeteer in the region. Every time Egypt refused to cooperate with Britain, he noted, Abdullah and the Hashemites pressed their Greater Syria plans with renewed vigor. All of these maneuverings were linked to Britain’s over-arching policy of extending its influence in the region.

The Saudi monarch did have some ideas of his own. He insisted that ‘Abdullah’s plan was in reality a “Zionist-imperialist plot” and that this should be exposed in their joint anti-Hashemite propaganda campaign. When Barazi asked the Saudi monarch whether he believed that King Abdullah could actually use the Arab Legion to take Syria and if he believed that Glubb Pasha, the Arab Legion’s British commander, would act on Abdullah’s orders even if Britain opposed them, King Abd al-Aziz fell silent, refusing to reply directly. Instead, he answered by quizzing Barazi about Syria’s internal problems and in particular about whether the government could control the Druze. In doing this, ‘Abd al-Aziz suggested that if Syria were not so weak internally, it would not be vulnerable to Abdullah’s machinations. Quwwatli would not have to plague himself with unanswerable questions about Glubb Pasha’s true loyalties, if his country found strength through unity. He advised the Syrian government to pay money to the Druze Atrash leaders, end the Druze revolt, and shore up internal unity. If Syria did these things, the Saudis returned frequently to the issue of Syria’s internal problems during their three days of discussions. Syria would have to get its own house in order before it could ask its allies to take risks on its behalf.

At the end of his talks, Barazi laid his cards on the table. He declared that Quwwatli wanted to sign a formal military treaty of mutual defense with Saudi Arabia. ‘Abd al-Aziz wasted no time in stating that such a treaty was premature. First, the Egyptians had to sign their agreement with the British; second, such a treaty would have to be negotiated through the Arab League and not as an independent arrangement. “I do not want to give an excuse to our enemies to leave the League,” ‘Abd al-Aziz declared. When Barazi insisted that the alliance was not directed against the League, but merely to counter the Iraqi-Jordanian Treaty of Friendship which had been announce earlier in the year, and to demonstrate the unity of purpose between Arabia and Syria, the Saudi monarch parried, “the understanding between us is stronger than any treaty.”

Furthermore, he explained, Egypt would be angered if it was not included. But if Egypt were included, Britain would believe the alliance to be directed against it so long as the Egyptian problem remained unresolved. Thus Barazi was stymied. ‘Abd al-Aziz would not jeopardize his relations with the British for Syria by signing an anti-Hashemite treaty. Perhaps the British would turn against Saudi Arabia itself? The King had too much invested in the British and preferred that Syria remain the stalking horse for an anti-Hashemite alliance; he advised Barazi to first approach King Farouq with the idea of a treaty: then they would see. The lesson the Syrian leaders learned from the Saudi monarch was that if they wanted Arab cooperation to stop Abdullah, it had to be in Palestine. The defense of the republican regime in Syria would be Syria’s battle alone.

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30 Ibid., p. 21.
On the eve of his departure from Riyadh to Cairo on 25 August, Muhsin Barazi cabled Damascus that the King had agreed to attack Abdullah. He wanted the attack to be made on the grounds that Abdullah was part of a “Zionist and Imperialist” plot. He wanted to see the creation of a Jewish state. Syria’s Prime Minister, Jamil Mardam, lost no time in leading the attack. He convened a press conference on the 26th to announce: 31

I did not wish to join issue with the king (Abdullah) but he published his manifesto in his capacity as Head of State. It was signed by him and was full of sophistry. Syria would welcome the annexation of Trans-Jordan to Syria because it is a part thereof. We shall fight against the scheme because it is Zionist and Imperialist and aims at partition of Palestine and the Establishment there of a Jewish State.

King Abdullah was incensed by the new accusation that he was a Zionist-imperialist agent. He instructed Prime Minister Samir al-Rifai to reply clarifying his original statement and refuting Mardam’s accusations: 32

The statement… was no more than a sincere and innocent call for complete national unity as the basis of the welfare of the nation. This unity was the declared policy and the aim of the Arab Revolt for liberation, and, as Jamil Bey himself admits, this unity is still one of his own aspirations as well as one of the hopes of every Arab who is loyal to his nation and faithful to his national principles…

I feel sure that His Excellency will not hesitate to agree with me that the aims of the Covenant [of the Arab League] were not division and separation but the reverse… There is no Arab who can deny that the unity of Syria, which is our national and political object, is anything but an important state on the way to the achievement of their ultimate ambition …

This call is a statement of national principles which aims at Unity of the different parts of one nation with the sole object of increasing its might and dignity and I regret it should be met with a charge so fantastic as to describe it as a ‘Zionist and imperialistic scheme aiming at partitioning Palestine and the institution of a Jewish State.’

Rifai defended Jordan’s position on Palestine by explaining how the King was the Arab leader most sincere in fighting for Arab unity and dignity for which all Arabs longed. He had fought for the principles of unity and Arabism from his earliest days in leading the Arab Revolt and had publicly stated to the U.N.D.C.O.P. that he rejected the institution of a Jewish state in any part of Palestine. Abdullah had fought for Arab unity in deed and not merely in word. The only reason Jamil Mardam would describe Abdullah’s efforts to build a strong, unified Arab state as a ‘Zionist imperialistic scheme,’ claimed Rifai, was because Mardam was “so barren of argument” to justify Syria’s policy of division and separation in the Arab world that he was reduced to calling white, black and black, white. Although Rifai refrained from saying it outright, he implied that the real Zionist strategy was that being pursued by Syria – using the Arab League as an excuse to keep the Arabs divided and weak. How could such a strategy help Palestine?

31 PRO, Mr. J. Scrivener to Mr. P. Garran, 28 August 1947, OF 371/61495; Abu Nowar, The Struggle for Independence, p. 233.
32 PRO. “Manifesto Issued by Samir Pasha Rifai, on 27/8/1947,” FO 371/61496; Ibid.
The war of words had begun in earnest; each side claimed to be the true representative of Arabism and to have the best interests of the Palestinians at heart; both claimed that the other was guided by nefarious designs and petty self-interest. Speaking for the Egyptian bloc, Syria maintained the moral high ground because it was truly independent of direct imperial influence and could wrap itself in the new legitimacy offered by the Arab League. Its single drawback was that it offered no realistic plan for saving Palestine, only one for frustrating Jordan’s Greater Syria designs. Jordan, which enjoyed the merit of a realistic plan to save Palestine, or, in truth, perhaps half of Palestine, was cursed by its British connection. In the dawning age of Arab independence, the Hashemite link to Great Britain was toxic. It forced Abdullah to dissemble and suggest that he intended to fight the Jews in all of Palestine when in reality he could offer only half. Neither could he argue openly that the Arabs needed British help in 1948. Growing nationalist sentiment and Britain’s own record of helping the Zionists made such an effort hopeless. The propaganda campaign was devastating to Abdullah’s reputation.

Today, pro-Hashemite historians still seek to vindicate Abdullah’s plan for its realism and to revive his reputation from the tarnishing accusations of treason that began with Mardam’s attack. The relationship between Jordan and Britain was not one of domination but “alliance” and “teamwork” after independence in 1946. They point out that no more than 50 British officers and diplomats resided in Jordan and generally left internal affairs to ordinary Jordanians. This happy relationship contrasted sharply with other mandates, such as Syria, Lebanon, or Palestine, where no less than 3,000 foreign officials meddled in the minutia of political life. Mardam’s accusations still rankle today for they cost Abdullah and those loyal to him dearly in 1948.

The propaganda war over Greater Syria and Arab unity broke out in earnest as Muhsin al-Barazi landed in Cairo. In his discussions with King Faruq, Barazi hardly mentioned the looming issue of Palestine or the nature and ambitions of the Jews. Instead, their conversation revolved around the intentions of King Abdullah and the British toward Greater Syria; both sought a way to organize the other Arab states against Anglo-Hashemite expansionist plans. Like Ibn Sa’ud, King Faruq refused to agree to a military alliance with Syria despite Barazi’s entreaties and dire warnings about Abdullah’s military plans. Barazi assured Faruq that Ibn Sa’ud was with Syria and that the Saudi monarch “spent many sleepless nights because of the problem.” The Saudi King, Barazi wrote in his journal, “considered the entrance of the Sharifs into Syria a direct threat to his country... because they would then turn and attack him.”

Faruq explained that Egypt was engaged in delicate negotiations with the British and hoping that they would withdraw most of their forces from his country. It was no time to provoke White Hall with an anti-British alliance, he explained. Instead, the King suggested, Syria, Saudi Arabia,

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33 Abu Nowar is a fine example of a pro-Hashemite historian who argues intelligently and persuasively for Abdullah. The arguments here are taken from his conclusion to *The Struggle for Independence*.
35 Ibid., p. 46.
Egypt, and Lebanon should work out an “oral” agreement about a political alliance at the next League meeting scheduled to be held in Beirut in October.  

Faruq agreed with Barazi that “King Abdullah and [the Iraqis,] Abd al-Ilah and Nuri al-Said were willing instruments carrying out Britain’s aims toward the Egyptian question, Palestine, and the Greater Syria question.” He was also convinced that Abdullah was working with the Zionists, who he called the Arabs’ greatest enemy. Because of this treachery, Faruq insisted, the most important step for Syria to take was to “expose in their public announcements the Zionist-imperialist aspect to Abdullah’s plans.” Neither King Faruq nor Ibn Sa`ud was willing to grant Syria’s chief request: a formal alliance to contain Jordan.

Barazi’s trip reveals the central role Syria played in pushing the Arab states to create a military alliance within the League to confront King Abdullah and his British backers before the Palestine issue took center stage in Arab strategic considerations. Only in September of 1947 did war seem imminent when the British announced their intent to withdraw from Palestine and the UNSCOP put forward the Palestine partition plan. Even then, Arab governments hoped that they could prevent partition by defeating the plan in the General Assembly vote, a hope that was dashed on November 29, when two thirds of its members voted for partition. But even after the partition vote in November, Syria remained the driving force behind Egyptian and Saudi decisions to commit their regular armies to the efforts to organize for action in Palestine. As always, Quwwatli’s primary motive was to thwart the aggrandizement of Jordan. At every step, he had to nudge and prod the Arab league states into action to resist the UN partition plan in Palestine. If the Arab states did not actively fight against partition, he knew, Jordan would snap up the Arab parts of Palestine with British help and be well on its way to forming Greater Syria.

Neither Abdullah nor the British foresaw any real resistance from the Palestinian Arabs to their emerging plan to have Jordan split Palestine with the Jews. The presence of the Abdullah’s Arab Legion in Palestine “signaled to the Arab population there that it was the only Arab force that could protect them against the Jews.” Furthermore, the weakness of Palestinian political leaders convinced both countries that “when the moment of truth came, the Arabs of Palestine would support the King and accept partition and annexation.”

Of course, neither Britain nor Jordan could foresee that the Arab League would be able to throw up a serious roadblock on their path to a peaceful partition during the early winter months of 1947; the Arab League had done almost nothing to organize resistance to the emerging Anglo-Jordanian plan. During the fall of 1947, the Arab League states held a number of meetings in which they promised to resist partition, but did little. The Hashemites states were able to throw dust in the air. Egypt and Saudi were happy to let the matter ride for fear of annoying Britain or having to commit treasure or troops to Palestine. They did what divided bodies often do; they established a Technical Committee of military experts to issue reports on the situation. The League appointed General Ismail Safwat, a former Iraqi Chief of Staff, to head the committee.

36[35] Ibid., pp. 52-53.
37 Ibid., p. 48.
He was tasked to “ascertain the defense needs of Palestine” and coordinate Arab military efforts. General Safwat wrote a series of reports noting with escalating alarm the growing strength of the Zionist forces and Arab weakness. He demanded a massive and coordinated Arab mobilization for war. On the whole, his advice was ignored, and his efforts to establish an overall general command failed due to inter-Arab mistrust.\(^39\)

A week after the UN partition went through on 29 November, the Arab premiers met in Cairo, where they again issued a three page report condemning the UN partition plan and promising to keep Palestine united and Arab. This time they were forced to act. Syria was willing to shoulder responsibilities the others were not. It had a forward-looking plan that Quwwatli had been preparing since September based on General Safwat’s recommendation to build an army of Arab volunteers.

Needless to say, King Abdullah understood perfectly well that Quwwatli’s plan was meant to scuttle his hope to take charge of the partition process and annex the Arab half of Palestine to his Kingdom. Barely able to contain his anger, he attacked the notion of a pan-Arab fighting force and let it be known that he was not prepared to commit Jordanian troops to combat. But if there were to be an Arab force, he insisted, it would have to be under his leadership. He could count on Iraqi support, however, all the other League states, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the Palestinians supported Syria. Interestingly enough, Abdullah was almost saved by squabbling among his opponents. During the meeting, Quwwatli received a cable from Hasan al-Banna, the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming that he could mobilize 10,000 Egyptian fighters and place them at the disposal of the Arab League. When the Arab leaders celebrated this welcome news, King Farouk became enraged. He was in the midst of a violent struggle with the Brotherhood at home, and here they were trying to upstage him in the League with expressions of nationalist zeal. Farouk walked out in protest. In the end, however, he had little choice but to move ahead with Syria’s plan, though his heart was not in it.\(^40\)

**The Arab League and Palestine**

The League states established a Palestine Committee to take overall charge of affairs relating to Palestine. Not surprisingly the League appointed Jamil Mardam, the Syrian Prime Minister and later Defense Minister, to chair the Committee, which was manned at the level of foreign and prime ministers. General Safwat’s Technical Committee was renamed the Military Committee and moved to Damascus, where it could oversee the recruitment, training, and arming of the volunteer army. Another Iraqi, General Taha al-Hashimi, a former prime minister then in exile in Syria for opposing the Iraqi royal family during the 1941 Rashid Ali coup, was appointed by Mardam as the Inspector General to supervise the new army. It was named the *Jaysh al-Inqadh* or Rescue Army; English sources usually refer to it as the Arab Liberation Army (ALA).

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Hashimi was an ideal candidate for the job from Quwwatli’s point of view. He was cultured, had plenty of experience in commanding men, and most importantly was an Arab nationalist on the outs with the Hashemites. Moreover, he was a close friend of Nabil ‘Azma, the Chairman of Quwwatli’s National Party and had strong links to Quwwatli’s trusted coterie of supporters.

Taha Al-Hashmi Pasha (right) was appointed General inspector of the Arab League organised army of volunteers, while Fawzi Al- Qawuqji (left) was to train the volunteers in a camp near Damascus.

In December 1947, the Arab League declared the partition of Palestine illegal and resolved to send 10,000 rifles and 3,000 volunteers to Palestine.

The most controversial and colorful member of the team nominated to lead the ALA was Fawzi al-Qawuqji, who was to command the volunteer army in the field. A perpetual rebel, he had participated in almost every major Arab revolt during the first half of the century. Born in Tripoli, he graduated from the Military Academy in Constantinople in 1912, fought in the First World War, first on the side of the Ottomans and then on the side of Prince Faisal, the son of the Sharif Hussein and leader of the Arab Revolt. Faisal convinced him to change sides and join his Arab forces that were marching on Damascus to establish an Arab state. He fought the French in the battle of Maysalun, in Syria and in the Great Syrian Revolt, led by Sultan Pasha al-Atrash in 1925. Following the French suppression of the revolt, he fled to Saudi Arabia with Sultan Pasha, where he remained until 1932. There he fell out with King ‘Abd al-’Aziz, who had him arrested and then expelled. For a brief period he entered the Iraqi army before decamping to Palestine in 1936 to led guerrilla operations against the British and Zionist militias until that revolt, too, was crushed. On his return to Baghdad in 1941, he joined Rashid Ali al-Kilani’s movement against the British and fought fiercely against the Transjordanian Arab Legion which entered Iraq to restore the Hashemite family to the thrown. When Qawuqji was seriously injured on the battlefield, he made his way to Germany for treatment, where he married a German woman, was arrest for a short period, and remained to 1947, when he made a daring return to Syria through France and Palestine, where he was nearly apprehended by the British.
On 25 Aug. 1936 Lebanese Fawzi al-Qawuqji (3rd right) infiltrated into Palestine heading some 150 volunteers from neighboring Arab countries. He fought the French invasion of Syria in 1920, and organized later the resistance to the French Mandatory authorities there. Exiled from Syria by the French, he served as military advisor to Saudi Arabia before going to Iraq where he held the post of lecturer at the Military Academy in Baghdad, the starting point of his Palestine expedition. He further led Arab irregular forces in Palestine during the 1948 war.

During the fall of 1947, the Syrian leadership began to cultivate him to lead the volunteer Army they hoped to establish. As one American diplomat reported in November, "He is living in a plush house in the best neighborhood in Damascus, owned by Sharabati, the minister of defense, who gives him a monthly allowance of 1,000 lire." Qawuqji explained that "the regular armies of the Arab countries would be inefficient, 'as the Arab countries are divided among themselves and cannot fight a united battle.' People's war is the solution, the Arab revolutionary revealed, adding that he had "great experience in that kind of war." Qawuqji seemed the perfect compliment to Quwwatli’s team. Not only was he experienced in fighting a people’s war, but he had also fought in Palestine during the 1936 revolt. He was an Arab nationalist like Hashimi who had fought against the Hashemites. What is more, he had found with Hajj Amin al-Husseini during 1936. For these reasons, he had the right credentials and brought with him notoriety and élan.

The appointment of Qawuqji and Hashimi to lead the ALA helped Quwwatli assure that the volunteer force came effectively under Syria control and served as an instrument of his strategy in Palestine. The fact that Hashimi was given an office in the Syrian Ministry of Defense only cemented this close relationship. Most of the officers appointed to command the volunteers were taken from the Syrian Army. A military camp in Qatana, just south of Damascus was converted into its training ground. No less than 3,000 men were to be dispatched into Palestine to assist the Palestinians in their fight against the Jews. Generals Safwat and Hashimi were promised rifles, ammunition, and 1,000,000 pounds for their efforts by the Arab League. To Quwwatli’s dismay, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt neglected to fulfill their commitment to send money and arms to the ALA during the winter months. Although both governments had voted for its creation in the public forum of the Arab League meetings, they understood the ALA would


belong to Syria and could very well suck them into the Palestine conflict in a manner they could not control.

Because of his allies’ luck warmth, President Quwwatli again dispatched Foreign Secretary Muhsin al-Barazi to Saudi Arabia and Egypt in January 1948 to make good on the promised arms and to clinch the defensive alliance he had failed to formalize during his earlier August trip. The time for equivocation was over. The situation in Palestine was deteriorating rapidly. Irregulars on both sides were grabbing strategic ground as the British prepared for complete withdrawal in May. In Riyadh, Barazi opened his appeal by reminding King Ibn Sa`ud that Shukri al-Quwwatli was his only true friend in the East and only protector against the conspiracies of the Hashemites.\(^43\)

Shukri [al-Quwwatli] is the symbol of opposition to the Hashemites and their ambitions. He is the sole guarantor of the stability of the republican order now standing in Syria and he is its protector against the conspiracies of King Abdullah and the Hashemites. If he were to fall from his place, God forbid, Syria would face the most mortal danger from the Anglo-Hashemite plots. No one but he can stand in the face of them.

Barazi insisted that Abdullah’s Greater Syria scheme was “closer than ever to realization if the partition plan should be carried out, because Jordan would get the Arab part.” If that were to happen, there would be no stopping Abdullah and the British from closing in on Syria. King Ibn Sa`ud’s son, Crown Prince Sa`ud, continued to discuss the two countries’ relations with Barazi long after his father had retired for the night. The reason the King had delayed sending arms for Palestine and hesitated to pursue a more aggressive policy toward Abdullah, he explained, was the King’s fear of Jordan. But, “that is precisely what prompted me to insist on our fulfilling our duty to help Palestine,” the Prince explained. “His Highness the King was hesitant, fearing that if we sent aid and arms, Abdullah might be provoked into carrying out his plans.”\(^44\) The Crown Prince reassured Barazi that the time had now come for Arabia, Syria, and Egypt to form a military alliance. He told him that he would have his brother, Prince Faysal, travel to Egypt to pave the way for an alliance with King Faruq.\(^45\) The Saudis also agreed to mass a number of troops on the Jordanian border to make sure their message to Abdullah was broadcast loud and clear.


\(^{44}[43]\) Ibid., p. 65-66. ‘Abd al-`Aziz was angry with Quwwatli during this meeting because the Syrian parliament refused to pass a bill allowing for the construction of a US pipeline to carry Saudi oil through Syria. Quwwatli had openly scolded the Saudi King for continuing to do business with the U.S. The King told Barazi that he did not appreciate being lectured to about nationalism by Quwwatli, especially when Quwwatli was pleading for Saudi help against Abdullah. The job of reassuring the Syrians that Saudi Arabia would assist them was left to the Princes Sa`ud and Faysal.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p. 67.
In Egypt, King Faruq declared his readiness to move ahead with the defensive agreement. He agreed that Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Lebanon would form a mutual defense block and that he would warn King Abdullah not to sign any form of treaty with the British that would damage his position. On hearing this news, Barazi explained that he could finally rest assured that Syria no longer had to fear the English and Iraqis, who had just agreed to a new treaty.\[45]\ The Anglo-Iraqi treaty, though announced, went unratified in 1948 due to large-scale demonstrations that erupted in Baghdad, causing the government to fall.

By the end of January 1948, the Hashemite bloc and the Egyptian bloc composed of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Syria took formal shape. The passage of the UN partition plan was the catalyst for the formalization of these alliances. Ever since 1937, Abdullah had been exploring the possibility of some sort of federation and later partition with the leaders of the Zionist movement and Britain. In November 1947, he and the director of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, Golda Meyerson, later to be known as Golda Meir, agreed that Jordan and the Yishuv would divide Palestine among themselves.\[46]\ A senior official in the Political Department of the Jewish Agency claimed that the deal was “entirely clear in its general spirit.”\[47]\ We would agree to the conquest of the Arab part of Palestine by Abdullah. We would not stand in his way. We would not help him, would not seize it and hand it over to him. He would have to take it by his own means and stratagems but we would not disturb him. He, for his part, would not prevent us from establishing the state of Israel, from dividing the country, taking our share and establishing a state in it, so long as it “did not interfere with the establishment of a Jewish state within the other part of Palestine.”

Abdullah, always thinking about his ultimate goal, also insisted that the Zionists agree that they would do nothing to impede his plans to take Damascus and create Greater Syria. The same Jewish Agency official stated:

\[46]\ Nevo, King Abdullah and Palestine, p.71.
\[47]\ The words of Yaacov Shimoni as quote in Shlaim, “Israel and the Arab Coalition,” p. 84.
The agreement included a provision that if Abdullah succeeded in capturing Syria and realized his dream of Greater Syria--something we did not think he had the power to do--we would not disturb him. We did not believe either in the strength of his faction in Syria. But the agreement included a provision that if he did accomplish it, we would not stand in his way.

From the beginning, Abdullah believed that war was not the answer and told Arab leaders that they could not win it in any case. Partition was the only way forward, he argued. War would bring disaster on the Arab house and cause unnecessary suffering. "Why should the Arabs try [to fight the Jews]? They will only lose many innocent lives," he told a conference of Arab leaders in January 1948. Furthermore, the Jews are people, he argued, and will have to come to the negotiating table. Better to cut a deal with them, he insisted. "After all, they [the Jews] will have to live with their neighbors."48

**Syrian Public Opinion and the War**

Arab historians have argued that Syria pushed so adamantly for war because of its special heritage as the birthplace and heart of Arab nationalism and because Arab nationalist sentiment among the Syria public and legislators could not be stifled.49 This is no doubt true. Parties on both the left and right in Syria organized frequent demonstrations demanding war; a number, such as the Ba‘th and Akram al-Hawrani’s Arab Socialist Party, organized squads of young men to go to war in Palestine as volunteers. Public pressure on Quwwatli and his government to commit Syria to the fight in Palestine was strong and Quwwatli could not ignore public opinion; It is easy to forget that Syria was the only working democracy among the principal Arab combatants. Parliament took up the call for war as vociferously as did the people it represented. As Muhsin al-Barazi told an American diplomat in April 1948, the “public's desire for war is irresistible.”50

On the eve of the parliamentary vote that would commit Syria to war, only one parliamentary deputy, Farzat Mamlouk, spoke out against it. He would later spend years in prison for his pro-Iraqi and British sympathies. In his unpublished memoirs he describes the mood in the parliament on April 27, 1948, when the proposal to go to war was first debated. Outside the parliament crowds of demonstrators had gathered to “chant in favor of war.” Mamlouk writes: 51

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48 Hashimi, _Mudhakkirat_, (13 January 1948) p. 192.
49 See, for instance, the introduction by Khayriyya al-Qasimiyya to the Barazi memoirs.
50 USNA, Memminger (Damascus) to Sec. of State, “Damascus Demonstrators Demand Syrian Army Intervention in Palestine,” (27 April 1948) 890D.00/4-2748.
51 Farzat Mamlouk, “al-Irtijal fil-Inqadh Filastin (The Lack of Preparation in Saving Palestine),” unpublished, n.d., p. 19. In 1957 Farzat Mamlouk, along with Hasan al-Atrash, Adnan al-Atasi, and many other pro-Hashimite Syrian politicians, was tried and found guilty of treason for conspiring with Iraq to overthrow the pro-Egyptian Syrian government and unify the two countries. He fled to Lebanon, where he remained until the early 1960s, when he returned to Syria. Following the 1966 coup he was imprisoned in Palmyra, where he remained for several
Their cries and chants had a profound effect on the deliberations of the chamber, particularly as the deputies were divided into three groups. The first group was composed of those deputies whose nationalist feelings were inflamed just as were the voices of the demonstrators we could hear outside. The second group was composed of “the followers,” those who automatically followed whatever the others did in all matters -- and how were they going to vote...? The last group included the experienced and judicious deputies who were unable to oppose the government on such a weighty matter for fear of the voices they could hear resounding outside. Because of this, debate was restricted to the first group. They proclaimed their views in passionate and fiery speeches without any regard for the evil toward which they were driving the country.

I did not belong to any of these three groups, thank the Lord, because of my conviction that we were completely unprepared to save Palestine. I wanted to save Palestine in deed, not in word — not with slogans, speeches, and demonstrations. This conviction of mine was based on a careful study of the facts which I had collected from my brothers, the volunteers in the Liberation Army and from my friends among the army officers.

Farzat, educated at the American University of Beirut and a friend to many of Syria’s top officers, knew what he was talking about. He reminded the assembly that Syria had no more than 10,000 soldiers, who were, moreover, untried in battle, badly equipped, and without adequate supplies, ammunition, or armor. He argued that Syria must delay the war and accept partition, if only for a few years. Furthermore, Syria’s relations with fellow Arab governments and Great Britain were in shambles. How could the Arabs fight the Jews without unity, he asked. In conclusion he stated:

We and the other Arab countries should wait for another round and another occasion when we will be prepared to save beloved Palestine. Otherwise our true condition will be exposed; the consequences will be terrible.

If we must go to war in compliance with the decision of the Arab Political Committee, then I propose that we must come to an understanding with Britain about entering into the war because the most powerful Arab armies on which we must rely in this war — and they are Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan — are subject to British orders and views. In addition we must settle our affairs with our neighbor Turkey in order to exploit its Islamism and benefit from its well known international influence and power. If we fail to do this, the war will bring only disaster and great evil to the Arab people of Palestine and to all the Arab countries.52

No sooner had Mamlouk delivered these words than the voices of the tribal shaykhs rang out in unison: "We agree with the words of Farzat." Then a deathly silence descended on the room, broken only when the Vice-President of the chamber, on a sign from the Prime Minister, announced that the meeting was adjourned until the next day. As Mamlouk was exiting the building, Prime Minister Mardam summoned him into an antechamber. He insisted on a unanimous pro-war vote the next day. “My brother,” Mardam said, “If you only knew the

years before being placed under house arrest in Duma, He spent the last fifteen years of his life writing his memoirs.

52 Ibid., p. 21.
incredible lengths to which Shukri Bayk and I have had to go in order to convince the Arab countries to enter this war, you wouldn't oppose my request; the public good demands it.”

The unanimous vote to send Syria’s army into Palestine that was delivered by the Syrian deputies the following day leaves no doubt that public opinion played an important part in convincing Quwwatli to go to war. But Quwwatli, far from trying to moderate or educate the public to the realities of Syria’s weakness and lack of preparation, acted as the principal advocate of war in the League and in Syria’s parliament. As Mardam made clear to Farzat Mamlouk on the eve of the Syrian vote, President Quwwatli needed unanimity in Syria on the question of war in order to ensure that neither Egypt nor Arabia would baulk in the final days. Syria had to lead, instructing the others in the precepts of Arabism and providing the necessary surge in nationalist fervor to carry the Arabs to war and throw caution to the wind.

**The Arab Liberation Army**

Syria’s reasons for building the Army of Liberation were several. President Quwwatli knew that the Syrian Army was undependable and useless as an instrument of war; therefore, it was much safer for Syria to influence the situation in Palestine by building up a force that was to be paid for and armed by all the Arab League countries. Egypt was to pay for 42% of the costs, Syria and Lebanon 23%, Saudi Arabia 20%, and Iraq the remaining 15%. Just as important as the financial reasons for building an Arab League force was the need to protect the Syrian army itself. By sending the volunteer army into battle, Quwwatli hoped to spare Syria from exposing its own troops to defeat, which could leave the country exposed to attack from Abdullah and possibly Jewish forces. If the volunteer army were defeated, the loss and embarrassment would be borne by the Arab League in general and the Palestinians in particular, not by Syria alone.

Another advantage to an irregular army was that it could be sent into Palestine well before the British officially withdrew from their mandate on May 15, 1948. None of the Arab states were willing to declare war openly on the British. Thus, Syria would not officially be opening hostilities against the British troops, who still bore responsibility for security in Palestine. Furthermore, if the Arab countries failed to commit their armies to fight in Palestine — a possibility which seemed likely as Egypt agreed to participate only four days before the war began on May 15, 1948 — the Syrian government would still be active. It would retain leverage in Palestine and be able to tell the Syrian public that it had done more than the other Arab countries to help the Palestinians. Most importantly, however, the ALA was to be used as an instrument to nip Abdullah’s Greater Syria plan in the bud and to keep him from expanding his state over half of Palestine.

The evolution of President Quwwatli’s military objectives in Palestine is recorded in the diaries of Taha al-Hashimi. Hashimi was an Iraqi pan-Arab nationalist and long-time intimate of Quwwatli, whom the Syrian president wanted to head the Liberation Army rather than General Safwat, Egypt’s candidate. Hashimi was ultimately appointed Inspector General of the ALA and placed in charge of recruitment and training of the troops at the Qatana headquarters. His office was in the Syrian Ministry of Defense and he met daily with Syria’s political and military

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53 Ibid.
leaders. Hashimi records that in October 1947, shortly after the UN Special Committee on Palestine recommended partition as a solution and after Syria had failed to win either Saudi Arabia or Egypt over to the idea of an anti-Hashemite military alliance, Quwwatli explained:

The Greater Syria plan will start from the Arab part of Palestine. Because of this I have ordered the Syrian army to move to the Syrian-Palestinian border. The force which has taken up position there is 2,500 men. Also Lebanon will send 1000 men to its border. As soon as the forces of Iraq and Jordan enter Palestine, we will enter and take al-Nasir and the North."54

As argued earlier, Quwwatli’s strategy in Palestine was designed from the outset to prevent Abdullah’s possible advance north to Damascus. In the best case, Quwwatli hoped to acquire some of northern Palestine for Syria. A second reason for Quwwatli’s hesitation to commit Syrian military troops was that he had failed in his early efforts to reform the army and questioned the loyalty and effectiveness of its leadership. Although the head of the military, General Atfah, swore to the Minister of Defense in May 1947, that the Syrian army was “the best of all the Arab armies, the best army in the Middle East,” the brigade commanders scoffed at this ridiculous assessment and cabled the President to warn, that “the army is not worth a red cent.”55 Quwwatli was fully aware of the problems in his military. "The real problem is to reform the Syrian army and to solve the problem of its leadership," he confided to Taha al-Hashimi in September of 1947. 56

Until the army could be strengthened, he hoped to keep it out of the fighting. In its stead he built the Arab Liberation Army. "It is imperative that we restrict our efforts to the popular movement in Palestine,” Quwwatli concluded. “We must strengthen it and organize its affairs as quickly as possible.”57 Prime Minister Jamil Mardam gave a lengthier explanation for why the Syrian army could not be sent into Palestine in November 1947, and why a volunteer army was needed.

Because [the Arab governments are undependable], I have decided... on the necessity of strengthening Palestine with arms and men and organizing their affairs and appointing a leader to take charge of their matters. The popular movement in Palestine is responsible for saving the situation, with the help of the Arab governments. This is because I doubt in the unity of the Arab armies and their ability to fight together....

If the Arab armies, not least of all the Syrian army, are hit with an overwhelming surprise attack by the Jewish Haganah, it would lead to such a loss of reputation that the Arab governments would never be able to recover.

The best thing is to leave the work to the Palestinians and to supply them with the help of the Arab governments. Ensuring an effective leadership in Palestine is of paramount importance and needs to be done with the greatest of haste. If the movement is destined to failure, God forbid, then it will be the people of Palestine who fail and not the Arab

54 Hashimi, Mudhakkirat, pp. 155.
56 Hashimi, Mudhakkirat, (22 September 1947) p. 150.
57 Ibid., (23 November 1947) p. 171.
governments and their armies. So long as the position of the Kings and Amirs is one of caution and plots, this is the only sound policy.\textsuperscript{58}

As Mardam makes clear, he knew the Syrian army could not withstand an attack by the Haganah; he knew his Arab allies were un dependable; and he did not want to risk the "loss of reputation" that would inevitably ensue. That is why he and Quwwatli were determined to limit their own involvement to in Palestine to the ALA.

When Hashimi spoke to the President a few days later about Mardam's plan, Quwwatli reiterated Mardam's concern that the government could not withstand the Syrian army's defeat in Palestine. As he had explained to Hashimi before, "the real problem is with reforming the Syrian army and solving the problem of its leadership."\textsuperscript{59} Because of these concerns, he said, "it is imperative that we restrict our efforts to the popular movement in Palestine. We must strengthen it and organize its affairs as quickly as possible. The trouble is that the Mufti [Hajj Amin al-Husayni] will not permit Fawzi al-Qawuqji to take the leadership in Palestine."\textsuperscript{60}

The next several weeks of intense negotiations between Quwwatli, the Mufti, Qawuqji and other Arab leaders over the question of who would direct the popular resistance in Palestine were a complete failure; agreement was impossible. The Mufti refused to hand control over to Qawuqji. He claimed that Qawuqji would "sell" himself to the English, and added that, "if Qawuqji accepted partition, [I] will kill him with [my] own hands."\textsuperscript{61} The Mufti insisted that Palestine did not need the volunteer army and that all money should be given directly to him.\textsuperscript{62} King Abdullah, in an effort to dismiss the Mufti, claimed he could save Palestine on his own. "Why don't the Arab countries send their armies directly to [me]?", he inquired. Meanwhile Abdullah was arming his own supporters in Palestine who rejected both the Mufti and Qawuqji.\textsuperscript{63} As for King Faruq of Egypt, he wanted nothing to do with any of them. He said, "The Arabs ought to get rid of all three of them: the Mufti, Abdullah, and Qawuqji."\textsuperscript{64} The question of who would take command of the Arab and Palestinian military campaign and what their objectives would be was never resolved.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., (15 November 1947) p. 167.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., (22 September 1947) p. 150.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., (23 November 1947) p. 171.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., (8 November 1947) p. 168.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., (22 December 1947) p. 181-82
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., (8 January 1948) p. 190.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., (21 December 1947) p. 181.
Muhammad Amin al-Husayni (ca. 1895-1974), also spelt al-Husseini, was a Palestinian Arab nationalist and Muslim religious leader. A member of Jerusalem's most prominent family, his most important positions were as Mufti of Jerusalem and President of the Supreme Muslim Council.

Quwwatli and his growing squad of military advisors despaired of ever getting their military operation off the ground. Little or no help came from the other Arab governments. All of them were reluctant to get involved, and they wanted to put off any decision about war until the end of the mandate, which eventually arrived on May 14th 1948. Quwwatli's situation looked hopeless and Hashimi insisted that he would have to get volunteers from the Syrian army to join the ALA and become the kernel of a rapid-deployment force, if he wanted it to be effective. Quwwatli did not like this suggestion. He could see that the Syrian army would get sucked into the fighting one way or another, which was just what he wanted to avoid. But what choice did he have? Already the Ba'ath Party, Akram Hawrani, and other leftists were beginning to organize their own volunteer units, asking for weapons and public donations of food and supplies, and claiming that "true Arab nationalists" would have to take the war effort into their own hands, because the government did not care about Palestine.

As the pressure on Quwwatli grew, he became increasingly unstable, and his moods began to swing between the extremes of enthusiasm and despondency. Taha al-Hashimi remarked that in their meetings Quwwatli would at times get worked up into a "state of fanatical enthusiasm" for their efforts, and at others he would become completely unnerved and, sink into a disheartened state of despondency and irresolution. He feared the position of the Arab governments, and what the newspapers and radio broadcasts were saying. His strength of leadership would drain out of him and he would see that there was no hope so long as the Arabs were in such a state of division and their governments so hesitant.

When Quwwatli became agitated, he often shocked his advisors with his emotional outbursts. In late December, days before the first movement of the ALA into Palestine, Ismail Safwat asked

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Jamil Mardam what the mission of the ALA was: "Was it expected to destroy Zionism in Palestine or just hold Arab positions for some political goal?" Mardam responded that all the ALA had to do was hold on to some northern positions. Quwwatli then flew into a rage and contradicted his prime minister. "He said it was to destroy the Zionist threat altogether as the governments had been saying, otherwise they would be subject to the mockery and dissatisfaction of the people." This was the first that any in the room had heard of "this new plan of political objectives." Quwwatli's advisors were dumbfounded by the President's response and sat in stony silence as they waited for someone to break the uneasy quite.67

President Quwwatli’s volatile mood swings brought on by the stress of pursuing an unwinnable war caused him to lose his sense of judgment on numerous occasions. During one of the President's low periods, a poor man off the street managed to make his way into a presidential meeting by insisting that he could make an atom bomb out of a "secret liquid" he had prepared. Officials from the Ministry of Defense wanted to throw the disheveled man out onto the street, but the President insisted he be allowed into the meeting. The man explained that to complete his experiments he needed only a plane, bomb casings, and several hundred Syrian pounds in order to make an atomic weapon. Quwwatli immediately became hopeful and ordered the Defense Minister to prepare for the experiment without delay. "A man in need is a man who will believe anything," Hashimi riley observed in his diary.68 The small group of men that were the president’s constant advisors and supporters would rally his spirits. Soon Quwwatli would bounce back from depression to regain the fighting spirit and resolve for which he was much admired. When demonstrations, which were becoming a regular feature of the capital's streets, took place, he would descend into the throngs to give one of his trademark fiery speeches:

The Syrian nation... will not hesitate to do its duty toward Palestine until the end. Even if the fight continues for hundreds of years as did the Crusades, final victory will belong to the Arabs. Syria is the birthplace of Arabism. We will preserve the Arabism of Palestine.69

On 5 January, as the first strike into Palestine was being planned, Quwwatli again flew into a rage. “If the Arab governments do not send help immediately,” he said, Syria will announce that it "will carry the burden alone," and show the Arab countries what their governments were really made of. When his military leaders pointed out that to do this Syria had to open a front in the south of Palestine, Quwwatli exclaimed that he would “send troops through Jordan by force,” despite Abdullah's objections.70 It is hard to know exactly what motivated such presidential outbursts. Everyone knew Syria had no means to attack the Jews in earnest or send its army through Jordan. Perhaps the president was just letting of steam? Perhaps he was grandstanding for his advisors, hoping to persuade them that he was a true Arab nationalist and desperate to save Palestine? Perhaps he was seeking to lay the blame at the feet of the “dishonest” and “corrupt” Arab leaders as he planned for limited operations himself? Even Quwwatli’s closest

68 Ibid., (12 December 1947) p. 189.
69 USNA, Memminger (Damascus) to Sec. of State "Monthly Political Review - Syria - January 1949," (31 January 1948) 890D.00/1-3148; "Damascus Demonstrators Demand Syrian Army Intervention in Palestine," (27 April 1948) 890D.00/4-2748.
70 Ibid., (5 January 1948) p. 188-89.
advisors were never sure when he was striking a pose and when he was genuine. It did not inspire confidence.

By did January, Quwwatli's resolve had evaporated in the face of Arab squabbling and he slipped toward despondency. Hajj Amin al-Husseini had informed the President that he would never cooperate with Qawuqji and the ALA. He reported that he had 12,000 men under his command - a wild exaggeration - and sent Quwwatli a list of their expenses, salaries, and military needs, which he expected Syria and the Arab League to supply him. Moreover, he demanded that all military operations in Palestine be handed over to his command. The Mufti was determined not to be swept aside by the jostling Arab leaders who had their own designs on Palestine. During a discussion of the Mufti’s demands between Quwwatli and his commanders, Quwwatli "threw one of his fits." He screamed:

If the Palestinian People want to make the Mufti commander of everything in Palestine, then [I] will be more than happy to give him everything. That way [I] could rid [myself] of all the responsibility which rests on [my] shoulders, and all the problems [I] face in trying to save Palestine. [I] could relax. By pushing forward with [my] efforts to defend Palestine, [I] am risking Syria's very independence, an independence which is absolute and in which every Syrian takes pride, an independence won with tremendous sacrifice.

Of course, this would mean that the Palestinians would be defeated, the President explained. "For twenty years, the Mufti's actions in Palestine have never been successful; they have only led to one defeat after another."71

The President knew he was gambling with the future of the Syria he had worked so hard to create. Quwwatli had done more than anyone to stir up and harness the passions of pan-Arabism, both to undermine French rule and to elevate himself to the top of Syria's political heap. Now, however, Arabism threatened to destroy everything he had won. Syria's colonial past had made him the ruler of a small Syria. But he had become more than just the heir to Syria's limited borders, reduced ambitions, and republican regime: he had become their most fervent guardian and advocate. In the two years since winning independence Quwwatli had struggled to eliminate pro-Hashemite sentiment in Syria by policing Syria's borders, shutting down Jordan's consulate in Damascus, and arresting Greater Syria agitators. He had done everything possible to inoculate the army, state institutions, and political parties against foreign influences.

The Palestine War, however, revived all the sound and fury of pan-Arabism, Greater Syrianism, Islamism and every other “ism,” which undermined the legitimacy, integrity, and independence of his smaller troubled Syria. Quwwatli was torn between the logic of the state he actually ruled and the state Syrians dreamed of. The war in Palestine should have forced him to choose between the two, but he insisted on standing for both. To tell Syrians that they were small Syrians with limited capabilities, who could afford only small hopes, was something he refused to do. Perhaps no statesman could have advocated a smaller Syria and survived politically? If Quwwatli did not defend the notion of a smaller Syria openly, his strategy for organizing and deploying the volunteer Arab army in Palestine is proof enough that he defending it in reality.

71 Ibid., (10 January 1948) p. 190.
The Failure of the Arab Liberation Army and Quwwatli’s Moment of Truth

The Arab Liberation Army was hastily assembled. The volunteers came from a number of different countries. By the end of January 1948, some 3,800 mujahids were receiving rudimentary training at the army base in Qatana. Some had already slipped over the frontier into Palestine. Their numbers included 1,100 Iraqis, 700 Palestinians, 100 Egyptians, 40 Jordanians, 40 Yugoslavs, and 1,800 Syrians. Much of the fighting was done by the ethnic and religious minorities as well as the rural poor. In September 1948, for example, the population of the Qatana camp was 2,242 of whom 605 were Kurds, 320 "Syrians," 750 Alawites, 210 Bedouins, 65 North Africans, 185 Palestinians, 107 Hawranis. The staff officers preferred to use Circassian and Kurdish units as shock troops instead of Arabs because of their "personal bravery," as one officer explained.

`Adil Arslan describes how one day over 1,000 Assyrians led by their “king” showed up at Qatana to the surprise and wonderment of the Syrians. They had traveled down from the Jazira in the far northeastern corner of Syria, where the French had given them refuge in 1936 following the Iraqi massacre of the Assyrians in 1936. The Iraqis had accused them of treason for their faithful service to the British; perhaps the Assyrian king believed the reputation of his people could be salvaged by fighting for a sacred Arab cause? Most volunteers came without arms or training. The Arab League stated that the Liberation Army was to build to 16,000 men, but this number was never achieved. It is doubtful that the number of effective soldiers fighting under Qawuqji ever exceeded four thousand; they probably numbered fewer. In mid-April, Col. Safwat claimed that no more than 3,000 volunteers were fighting under ALA command in Palestine.

The first units of fighters began to cross the Syrian border into Palestine at the end of January 1948. But it was only in March that Fawzi al-Qawuqji himself moved into Palestine to establish his headquarters at Nur al-Shams, where he was to extend his control over northern Palestine. Throughout February, the Arab press talked up the ALA and its plans, filling its readers with optimism and a sense of patriotism. Al-Ahram's special correspondent in Damascus wrote on 9 February:

72 USNA, McGrath (Damascus) to Sec. of State, (2 October 1948) 890D.00/10-148. This report also claims that there were no arms at the time to outfit the trainees.
73 USNA, Hinton, (Damascus) to Dept. of State, “Visit of Legation Party to Syrian Front,” (23 July 1948) 890D.00/6-2348. The attitude of the staff officers toward these shock units, Hinton remarked, was similar “to staff officers the world over.” They “praised” them while looking on them with “condescension.” “Their attitude seemed to be, ‘Look at these poor bastards. They don't know any better than to lead these attacks, but don't tell them as they are extremely valuable to us.’”
74 Arslan, Mudhakkirat 1948, p. 111. Arslan claims the majority were Druze, Circassian, and Ismaili.
Well-informed sources reveal that the Arab leaders have decided to stage the first phase of their attack on the Jews in Palestine in the coming week…Instead of the scattered battles that have taken place in Palestine until now, Palestine will be divided into three main fronts, so that military operations can be coordinated according to a master plan. Al-Qawuqji will command a front including northern Palestine and the coastline, including Haifa, Jaffa and Tel Aviv. He is now in Beirut, working on the final details of his plan.

On 15 February, Al-Ahram's correspondent in Beirut reported: "The Arab forces are ready to launch the Jihad outside and inside Palestine according to a master plan, to be implemented in several phases…. Four thousand mujahidiin [guerillas] are fighting alongside the Palestinians inside the country, while hundreds of others are awaiting the orders of General Ismail Safwat to cross the borders under the command of Fawzi Al-Qawuqji.” As for the Syrian and Lebanese armies: “Their forces constantly patrol the borders and carry out frequent military maneuvers before the Zionist settlements.” Fawzi al-Qawuqji was quoted as saying: "Major military operations have not started yet, but when the war breaks out, we will stun the Jews and the whole world. The war may last for a month; it could last for a century. But we will surely win.”

It was little coincidence that the vast majority of the ALA units were stationed in the regions that Abdullah planned to annex. As Michael Doran argues, “with his headquarters in the northern West Bank, al-Qawuqji stood watch, as it were, against the incorporation of the area into the Jordanian kingdom.” Only a few hundred ALA troops were sent to regions, such as Haifa, Acre, or toward Jaffa-Tel Aviv, which witnessed the most intense fighting, had the densest concentration of Palestinians, and needed the most help. Consequently, local Palestinian militias with little training, minimal command, and almost no ability to coordinate their resistance were left to face the centralized Zionist command alone. It did not take long before they were overrun. Most Arab inhabitants who fled the cities during the spring of 1948 believing that the Arab “master plan,” would soon unfold allowing them to return within weeks.

But there was no master plan. In fact, no Arab leader had any intention of coming to the defense of the Arab cities along the coast. Quwwatli was thinking about “political objectives” and intent on frustrating Abdullah’s plan. We do not know how specific Syrian plans were. Perhaps even the Syrian commanders did not really know themselves. Taha al-Hashimi’s detailed and daily diary entries demonstrate that he was constantly probing for solid and realistic objectives for the ALA, but Quwwatli remained elusive and intimidated his commanders with his tantrums. Mardam feared to contradict his president, but always nudged him for the minimum involvement and least exposure to risk.

It is in this context that we must understand the mercurial actions of Fawzi al-Qawuqji, who turned out to be one of the great disappointments of the war, his record of rhetorical bravado

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76 All Ahram quotes from Anis and Abdel-Latif, “Fawzi Al-Qawuqji.”
77 Levenger, Military Preparations, p. 200.
78 Doran, Pan-Arabism before Nasser, p. 120.
contrasting so sharply with his record on the ground, which was one of hesitation, immobility, and excuses. As soon as he arrived at his Palestinian headquarters in March, Yehoshua Palmon, one of the Haganah’s ablest intelligence officers and a fluent in Arabic speaker, went to meet Qawuqji on David Ben-Gurion’s orders. He was to persuade him to “keep out of the fight between the Haganah and the Mufti’s forces.” Palmon had gotten his hands on important intelligence from German wartime documents that implicated the Mufti in Qawuqji’s arrest in Germany; he passed it on to Qawuqji in order to salt the wounds of the feud that had rankled between him and the Mufti since they had fallen out during 1936 Palestinian uprising. Palmon insisted to Qawuqji that the Mufti was the only reason that a peaceful solution had not been found to the Arab-Jewish conflict and that it would be best for everyone if he and his forces were eliminated, then they would be able to negotiate following the departure of the British and avoid open hostilities. Qawuqji agreed that the Jews would teach the Husaynis “a good lesson,” but that he needed “one military victory in order to establish his credentials.” Palmon could not promise him a victory. If the Jews are attacked, he said, “they would fight back.” Qawuqji refused to give Palmon any clear promises, but the Haganah intelligence officer left the meeting satisfied that the ALA would not come to the aid of Jerusalem and the Husaynis.

Three days after the Palmon-Qawuqji meeting, the Haganah launched Operation Nachshon, in which the Haganah cleared Palestinian villages on both sides of the Jaffa-Jerusalem road in order to break through to the isolated Jewish population of Jerusalem. The Jihad Mugaddas, or Sacred Crusade as the Mufti’s militia was named, was in charge of the defense of Jerusalem. It asked for immediate help from the ALA and President Quwwatli. Some sources blame the refusal of the ALA to come to the defense of Jerusalem on the perfidy of Fawzi al-Qawuqji, noting that when he was telephoned for urgent supplies of arms and ammunition, Qawuqji stated he had none to give. But President Quwwatli and Jamil Mardam were just as adamant about refusing to help the Husaynis defend Jerusalem.

On 5 April, a day after the commencement of Operation Nachshon, `Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, the charismatic cousin the Mufti and commander of the Jihad Mugaddas, arrived in Damascus to plead for help from the political leadership of the ALA. He begged Quwwatli and the members of the ALA Military Committee for weapons, artillery, and whatever support he could offer. The situation around Jerusalem was desperate, `Abd al-Qadir explained. Should the Zionists break through to Jerusalem, the entire Palestinian resistance movement would be doomed, its lines of communication severed, and spirit sapped. Jerusalem was not only the capital of Palestine, but it was the symbol of the Arab and Muslim holy cause. Nevertheless, Quwwatli refused `Abd al-Qadir assistance. Hajj Amin al-Husayni had refused to cooperate with Quwwatli and the Arab League from the start, Syria would make no sacrifices for him now `Abd al-Qadir stormed out of the meeting to make his way back to his embattled city, he screamed in rage at Quwwatli and the Committee: “You are all traitors. History will record that you lost Palestine.” Four days later on 9 April, `Abd al-Qadir was killed defending Qastel, a small hilltop town that stood sentinel at the

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80 Avi Shlaim interviewed Yehoshua Palmon in 1982, the results of which he published in “Israel and the Arab Coalition,” p. 85-86.
gates of Jerusalem. Today, he is honored by Palestinians as their greatest warrior and martyr of 1948.

One leading Palestinian officer, who fought with `Abd al-Qadir, later concluded that, “the Arab Liberation Army’s mission was to wreck the organized resistance of the *Jihad Muqaddas* in which the young men of Palestine enlisted.” This conclusion is perhaps too harsh. Certainly, Quwwatli had no love for the Husaynis for they had kept him from realizing his original plan of organizing the Palestinian resistance and resting control of the internal Palestinian situation from either Abdullah, the Mufti, or the Jews. But by April, he had pared down his ambitions considerably. The most he could hope for was to retain a sizable hunk of the North.

April was the decisive month of fighting between local Palestinian militias and Zionist forces. Beginning with Operation Nachshon and ending with the fall of Haifa on April 22, the Arab community in Palestine began to collapse and panic. Quwwatli was forced to make a number of difficult decisions. The decision to abandon Jerusalem was only his first. Much more difficult was the decision at the end of April and beginning of May whether to come to the defense of the ALA itself, when the Haganah and Palmach sent forces north to take the Safad region, at the very heart of ALA territory.

The moment of truth for Quwwatli came at the end of April. As Jewish troops moved north, Quwwatli and the Arab League Palestine Committee commanders stationed in Damascus began to receive pleas for help from their beleaguered fighters in Palestine. A young colonel named Adib Shishakli was in charge of the ALA’s Second Yarmuk Brigade of 800 men and responsible for protecting the much of the Galilee and region around Safad, a town of 15,000. By all accounts, he was a able and courageous officer, who, unlike Qawuqji, believed he was really in Palestine to fight and took his duties seriously.

Adib ash-Shishakli was born in Hamgh, Syria in 1909 and was assassinated in Brazil on Sept. 27, 1964, by a Druze seeking revenge for Shishakli's bombardment of the Jabal Druze. He served as an officer under the French Mandate and fought valiently in Palestine during the 1948 War. He overthrew the Syrian government in December 1949 and dominated Syrian politics until his own overthrow in 1954. He was the third military strong-man to take power in 1949. He tried to rule through civilian politicians during the first part of his rule, but on April 6, 1952, he abolished all political parties and tried to fill the vacuum by creating his own party--the Arab Liberation Movement (ALM). In a July 1953 referendum, he had Syrians approve a new constitution making Syria a presidential republic with himself as president. The subsequent Chamber of Deputies was packed with ALM deputies, the major parties having boycotted the election.

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In April, the Palmach Third Battalion of 930 men began to close in on Safad with orders to “speed up its evacuation.”\textsuperscript{83}\cite{Abbasi} As Shishakli’s men ran out of ammunition and suffered desertions, he demanded immediate reinforcements, forcing Quwwatli to decide whether to send arms he had in reserve for the Syrian army, or, even worse, to send in the army itself to shore up the ALA. He hurriedly contacted Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan to see if they could help, but to no avail; they could not help. Glubb Pasha, the commander of the Jordanian Arab Legion, insisted that Syria send its army into Palestine to shore up the ALA. For his part, King Abdullah answered in “riddles,” according to Taha al-Hashimi, saying, “What will be, will be” and “For everything there is a season.”\textsuperscript{84}\cite{Hashimi} To make matters worse, General Ismail Safwat, the commanding officer of the Arab League Military Committee, returned from Amman later that day with the news that Abdullah demanded to be named Commander in Chief of all the Arab forces. Taha al-Hashimi records that at this point President Quwwatli, already under intense pressure from the demands of the ALA and his deteriorating domestic position, flew into a rage worse than anything he had seen before. Hashimi records:

The gist of what he said was that King Abdullah wanted to play games and that the English were goading him on in order to exploit the situation to impose a treaty on Syria. Our independence is a thorn in their side and they want our army to be first into battle so that it will be destroyed. When it is, they will pretend to come to our aid and for that they will exact the price of our enslavement.

The British are preparing the road for Abdullah to spread his influence across Palestine and Syria. They cannot stand to see Syria independent and, thus, only want us to send our army in to destroy it. Independence has cost us too much. Never, never will I sacrifice our army which is the only thing protecting us from Abdullah’s influence, etc. That is the trap into which I must avoid falling at all costs.

I hold the honor of my country very dear. I sacrificed everything I had in order to win its independence. Syria alone is the heart and brain of Arabism. Syria is independent and proud of its independence. We have made a great effort to help Palestine. But I do not want to gamble away my army if it is the only thing protecting Syria from these games and conspiracies. If King Abdullah wants to send in his army, let him send it in. I welcome him. But if he wants Syria to bear the brunt of the Palestinian problem alone, well that will never happen.\textsuperscript{85}\cite{Ibid}

Quwwatli was at his wit’s end. Having fought so hard to build and fund the ALA as an instrument of Syrian policy, he was now compelled to stand by as it was destroyed. He gave the word to General Safwat that Syria had done as much as he could to help the Palestinians. Safwat was left to give the bad news to Shishakli. He said: “What can I do? The Eye sees, but the arm is short [al-’ayn basira, wa-al-yad qasira].”\textsuperscript{86}\cite{’Arif}

\textsuperscript{83} Abbasi, “The Battle for Safad,” p. 32.
\textsuperscript{84} Hashimi, \textit{Mudhakkirat}, (25 April 1948) p. 215
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 217.
\textsuperscript{86} ’Arif al-’Arif, \textit{Nakbat Filasin wa-al-firdaws al-mafqūd} [The Palestine Disaster and Paradise Lost], West Bank: Dār al-Hudā, [199?] p. 305.
To do more, Quwwatli calculated, would be to walk into a well-set Anglo-Jordanian trap—a conspiracy to strip Syria of its independence and open the door to Abdullah’s Greater Syria. Abdullah knew full well that Quwwatli would let the ALA be crushed; it must have been a delicious moment of triumph. To top off his nemesis’ humiliation, Abdullah could demand to be named Supreme Commander of the “allied” Arab forces just as Quwwatli tasted the bitter fruit of military defeat. He knew perfectly well that, Quwwatli would never actually give him authority over Syrian troops. Having suffering one indignity after another at the hands of the Arab League, forced by Egypt and Syria to bow to the demands of the “Arab nation” and vote for the establishment of the ALA and condemn the partition of Palestine, he could now turn the tables. Quwwatli would have to carry forward the great public drama of “the united Arab nation” fighting shoulder to shoulder against the hated Jewish enemy. He would have to publicly name Abdullah Supreme Arab Commander. It was Syria’s turn to pretend.

Safad fell to the Palmach on 9 May. Its remaining Arab inhabitants were expelled; many fled to hastily assembled refugee camps in Lebanon, others to Damascus, where they crowed into schools that were emptied out for them. On 1 May, there were a little less than 700 Arab fighters in Safad, of whom 444 were local village volunteers, 218 of whom possessed arms. By 9 May, only 200 fighters remained because of desertion and flight. Most had run out of ammunition well before the 9th as desperate telegrams for supplies to Quwwatli and the ALA command in Damascus went unanswered.87 Somewhere in the vicinity of 700 Jewish forces quelled the last fighters on that day.

The Syrian Army’s Role in the War

The Syrian army played a limited role in the war. Historians continue to subscribe to the notion that the Arab armies planned and intended “to destroy the infant Jewish State, through occupation of its entire area by force”88 and that the Arab leaders wildly overestimated their own strength and underestimated the strength of the Zionist forces.89 The small number of troops that Syria deployed at the Palestinian border speaks for its limited goals. In May 1948, just before Syria sent its troops into Palestine, British intelligence estimated that Syria had no more than 4,500 men available to fight in Palestine.90 Glubb Pasha estimated the number of Syrian troops available for duty in Palestine did not exceed 3,000; the CIA in late June counted a “total of 2,500 effective men” stationed near the Syrian border, 1,000 deployed in Palestine and 1,500 near it on the Syrian side.91 Quwwatli pursued a cautious policy in Palestine.

Syria tasted the first bitter fruits of defeat during its initial thrust into Palestine six days after the beginning of official hostilities on May 15. Its forces were repulsed at the village of Samakh and

the *kibbutzim* Degania A and B at the border region just south of Lake Tiberias. Three hundred Syrian soldiers were killed or wounded, largely by Israeli machine-gunners and artillery.\(^2\)

In the Syrian press and parliament, the reaction to this defeat was immediate. No one hesitated to point the finger at the government and its failure to adequately arm or prepare the military. In response President Quwwatli dismissed his Chief of Staff, General `Atfah, his second in command, `Abd al-Wahhab al- Hakim, and all the officers of the First Brigade which had been defeated. He also dismissed Defense Minister Ahmad Sharabati, giving Prime Minister Mardam the defense portfolio. Quwwatli elevated the tough talking and combative Colonel Husni al-Za`im, the head of the Gendarmerie, to become Chief of Staff.

Despite Syria’s initial losses, its forces quickly regained moral under Za`im and were able to occupy a thin strip of Palestinian land running the length of its border during the first two months of the war. Much of this territory was easily taken for the border had been originally drawn by the British in 1923 with water in mind, not its defense. The Palestine-Syrian border was drawn so that all of the Jordan River, Lake Tiberius, and the Hula swamp would be included in Palestinian territory. To ensure the Syrians would not have access to the water, the British had also included a strip of land on the Syrian side: 10-meters wide at Lake Tiberius and ranging from 50 to 400 meters wide along the Jordan River right up to Hula. Palestine also received a thin salient of land stretching east between the Syrian and Jordanian border along the Yarmouk River, the Jordan’s largest tributary, out to the town of al-Hamma – today’s Hamat-Gader. All of this territory east of the Jordan River and Lake Tiberius was indefensible and easily taken by Syrian troops. The Syrian army also managed to cross the Jordan River just south of Lake Hula to occupy Kibbutz Mishmar Hayarden and defend it against several Israeli counter-attacks.\(^3\)

Syrian forces also established a foothold in the extreme northeastern corner of Palestine, just east of the Jewish settlement of Dan. Thus, Syria occupied three distinct enclaves within Palestine in the northern, central, and southern regions of the 1923 border. These three enclaves added to the thin strip of land stretching along the eastern perimeter of the Jordan and Tiberius added up to 66.5 square kilometers of land. It would become part of the demilitarized zone following the 1949 armistice signed between Syria and Israel and remains contested between the two sides to this day.\(^4\)[44]

Other than the two offensive operations to grab villages across the Jordan River, the Syrian army remained largely inactive during the 1948 war. The ALA survived in the northern Galilee until November 1948, when it was driven into Lebanon by Jewish forces that were moved up from the south. The Syrian government persisted in denying assistance to the ALA during the summer of 1948, effectively “condemning them to death,” in the words of `Adil Arslan.\(^5\)

Taha al-Hashimi spent much of his energy during the late summer and fall of 1948 trying to dismiss Fawzi al-Qawuqji, the commander of the ALA. Qawuqji and many of his officers lost

faith in the Arab leaders when they refused to send him arms or deploy their armies to help him. Disaffected, Qawuqji began to take matters into his own hands and by August 1948 stopped accepting orders from Syrian leaders or his direct commanders on the Arab League Military Committee.

Hashimi explains that Qawuqji began to plot with Syrian and Lebanese officers belonging to Antun Sa’ada’s Syrian Nationalist Party as well as with pro-Hashemite officers and King Abdullah to overthrow the government in Damascus.96 ALA leaders report that Qawuqji planned to march his men into Lebanon, where, with the assistance of the Syrian Nationalists he would overthrow the Lebanese government first, then take Syria, and ultimately unite with Jordan and Iraq. As Hashimi explains, "In this way [Qawuqji] believes that the movement will result in the unification of the Arab countries and the establishment of a republic. Then he will attack the Jews and push them out of Palestine."97 Many of the commanders of the ALA, who were Syrian and had volunteered for the dangerous mission of leading the volunteer Arab troops in Palestine, returned to their commands in the Syrian army following their year of brutal disappointment and deception in Palestine to become revolutionaries and nourish dreams of overthrowing the corrupt political order that had used them so badly in Palestine. The sentiments of the officer corps were summed up by Colonel Fadl Allah Abu Mansur, a Druze officer who wrote:

The war in Palestine ended with the truce, and the soul of every member of the army was filled with bitter disappointment and resentment at the entire situation and at the politicians whose thoughtlessness had caused the disaster. Each of our souls was filled with grief and the conviction that despite our lack of war materiel and despite our small numbers, we could have saved Palestine if only... And that “if only” was directed at Shukri al-Quwwatli and everything he stood for.98

Colonel Adib Shishakli, one of the true heroes of the ALA, would lead a successful coup in 1949 and rule Syria for four years. Fawzi al-Qawuqji, the life-long rebel, died in Beirut in December 1976, largely a forgotten man. He left behind him memoirs, in which he tries to give some account of his failure in Palestine. He explains that inter-Arab rivalry made his task impossible. President Quwwatli was determined to stop King Abdullah’s Greater Syria plan. In turn, Abdullah feared that the other Arab League states were planning to divide up Jordan. In the end, his main task, as he came to understand it, was not to fight the Jews so much as to “prevent a war between the Arab states.” It is worth quoting him at some length:

Perhaps King Abdullah was determined to realize his Greater Syria plan by means of Palestine. This possibility more than any other troubled the Syrian Government. And as for Iraq, which would send its army to the field of battle in Palestine by passing through Transjordan, how might it possibly act? Would it aid Jordan in the realization of the project? And as for ’Abd al-’Aziz bin Sa’ud, ... he had to be prepared to act when the real intentions [of King Abdullah] became clear.

96 Hashimi, Mudhakkirat, p. 234. For further confirmation that Qawuqji was planning a coup see: Hani al-Hindi, Jaysh al Inqadh, Beirut, 1974, p. 112.
97 Ibid. (21 November 1948) p. 246.
His Excellency President al-Quwwatli one day asked me, “What are the steps that must and can be taken to prevent the occurrence of his grave danger?” I answered that the Army of Liberation in Palestine can prevent that because it will prevent a war between the Arab states. It will enable you to take the precautions that you consider necessary without those precautions influencing the course of the war between us and between the Jews in Palestine. So the president immediately gave the order to send a division of the Syrian army to the Palestinian-Jordanian border, where it remained frozen in place.

His Highness `Abd al-`Aziz bin Saud demanded that some territory be allocated to him in Transjordan, where he could concentrate his forces in preparation for the intervention in Palestine.... King Abdullah feared the request and avoided complying with it. He believed the real intention behind the request was to occupy Transjordan on the basis of a conspiracy between President al-Quwwatli and King Ibn Saud, according to which the northern section would go to Syria and the southern section, including Aqaba, to Ibn Saud. With urgent insistence, King Abdullah demanded from the Iraqi government that it immediately send a force to Transjordan in order to thwart any Saudi-Syrian conspiracy. An Iraqi brigade, comprised of mechanized artillery and infantry, arrived in Transjordan; as a result His Highness King Abdullah regained his confidence and relaxed. Egypt favored the Saudi-Syrian camp, and promised to supply it with aid. But this camp did not rely much on that aid.

Each Arab state feared its so-called sister state; each coveted the territory of its sister, and conspired with others against its sister. At one of the meetings of the Arab League Council in October 1947, the Egyptian prime minister, Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi Pasha, announced...that Egypt would provide military support to Palestine...but the Egyptian army would not participate in combat.... As I mentioned above, each Arab state feared its sister state: this was the situation in which the Arab states found themselves as they prepared to save Palestine; and this, first and foremost, is what troubled them. Only after this, very far after this, came the problem of Palestine itself. 99

Conclusion
One could argue that President Quwwatli achieved his absolute minimal strategic goals in 1948. He preserved Syria’s independence, took a very thin strip of Palestinian land, and kept King Abdullah from carrying out his Greater Syria plan. Although Quwwatli and the Arab League failed to organize or take command of the Palestinian resistance as they had hoped, they succeeded in doing irreparable damage to both Abdullah’s and Britain’s standing and strength in the region. Despite Abdullah’s acquisition of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, his prospects for further expansion were ruined. The King’s reputation never recovered from the 1948 fiasco. The accusation that he was a traitor to the Arab cause still clouds his name. Internally, Jordan was overwhelmed by the 400,000 angry and destitute Palestinian refugees that poured across its borders. Moreover, Syria’s army grew to 18,000 men during the war, making a Jordanian invasion of the country impracticable. The King did not relinquish his Greater Syria dream. He remained a fighter to the end and continued to look for allies among Syria’s divided officer corps in the hope of organizing a pro-Jordanian coup in Damascus. His threat of taking direct action against Syria, though, lost its teeth.

Like his southern neighbor, Quwwatli’s own foreign policy also lay in ruins following the war. By overburdening the fledgling Arab League with responsibility for the war, he discredited it as a vehicle for organizing Arab ambitions. The pitiful record of the League in 1948 underscored its impotence as an agent of Arab nationalism and unity. The chant taken up by the Arab public, that the loss of Palestine was due to the corruption of Arab kings and presidents, was the product of the League’s failure. It had institutionalized the very real divisions in the region, rather, than smooth them over or point the way toward greater unity.

Far from damping public ardor for unity schemes, the nakba fanned their flames. Only unity seemed to promise Arab strength and an antidote to defeat and humiliation. National identity in Syria became ever more confused as politicians insisted on the eradication of the “foreign borders of Sykes-Pico.” The lesson most Syrians drew from the war was that a revolution in the Arab status quo was necessary. Very few took the view that the competing unity schemes were the source of inter-Arab enmity and distrust – that Syria needed stability, not revolution. Syrians cast about for unity at any price; many insisted the faster the better.

Iraq, almost over night, replaced Jordan as the north star of Syrian unity efforts. In tandem with this shift, Aleppo, Syria’s northern capital emerged as the base of a new opposition party, the People’s Party. It turned to Baghdad for a solution to the country’s problems. Aleppo’s opposition leaders argued that only through federation, or better yet, complete unity between Syria and Iraq could the Arabs ever hope to dislodge the Israelis from Arab land. Quwwatli and the Damascenes who had monopolized power since the country’s formation. Perhaps unity would set the country on a firmer path to strength and righting the wrongs of 1948?

Linked to President Quwwatli’s fate was that of Syria’s republican form of government. Quwwatli had become the main champion and symbol of Syrian republicanism. His battle against the notion of a monarchist Greater Syria forced him to sharpen his defense of republicanism. He insisted that it was the true expression of the people’s will and the natural order of things in Syria. All the same, he could not tell the Syrian public that he was for Syria first, or that Syria was too weak to rescue Palestine. Above all, he could not say that the Arab nation was a mirage or that in reality the Arabs belonged to a collection of states that were bitterly divided. Quwwatli was caught between his newfound Syrianism and his life-long dedication to Arab nationalism. Although he was known as the “hero of Syrian independence,” he had also sworn never to raise the Syrian flag above that of the Arab nation.”

Quwwatli helped turn the 1948 war into an Arab civil war, which Israeli forces ably exploited to conquer Palestine. Though the Arab armies did not openly fight each other, their actions were mutually destructive. By refusing to cooperate with each other and by willfully standing by as Zionist forces destroyed one Palestinian militia and Arab army after the next, the Arab

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100 Abd Allah Fikri al-Khani, Jihad Shukri al-Quwwatli fi sabil al-istiqlaal wal-wahda (Shukri al-Quwwatli’s Jihad for Independence and Arab Unity), Lebanon: Dar al-Nafa’is, 2002, p. 11.

101 See Avi Shlaim’s article in Rogan and Shlaim, The War for Palestine, pp. 79-103, for a good analysis of how Zionist forces were able to exploit Arab divisions.
governments forfeited any chance of saving Palestine. Their inability to agree on what they wanted in Palestine precluded the establishment of a common battle plan and quickly led to the demoralization of their military commanders and troops in the field. Not surprisingly, the anger and disappointment that grew out of this bitter experience quickly turned back on the Arab rulers themselves. The assassination of Egypt’s Prime Minister Nuqrashi Pasha in 1948 by a Muslim Brother, King Abdullah’s assassination in 1951 by a vengeful Palestinian, and the overthrow of Egypt’s monarch in 1952 by the Free Officers all have their roots in 1948. But Syria, the country that pushed hardest for war, considered itself the beating heart of Arabism, and was the last to sign an armistice with Israel, was perhaps hardest hit by the pervasive sense of popular disappointment and the belief among the military that its leadership had let them down.