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ABSTRACT

Syria has had six presidential palaces over the course of the twentieth century; two of which were situated on the slopes of Mount Qassiun overlooking the Syrian capital in the neighborhood of al-Muhajirin. Built side-by-side by different owners, they witnessed Syria's shift from Ottoman rule to the French mandate, and then to Syrian independence and the string of coups and countercoups starting in 1949. This paper tries to look at the evolution of the two Syrian palaces and the life that unfolded within their walls. It also documents their human history, not just of kings and presidents but also the often forgotten staffers who worked with them.

BIO

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and chairman of The Damascus History Foundation. In 2023, he was a visiting Mohammad Ali Fellow at Durham University. His latest book "The Makers of Modern Syria" was published by Bloomsbury Press in 2024, and his forthcoming book is an English translation of Fakhri al-Barudi's memoirs (American University of Cairo Press, 2025).

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Introduction

Unlike the US where this is one White House, or France, where there is one Elysée Palace, Syria has had six over the past 100-years. They are the Nazim Pasha and Mustapha Pasha al-ʻAbed palaces in al-Muhajirin on the western slopes of Mount Qassiun, overlooking the ancient capital of Damascus (founded in 1905 and 1910 respectively), the Diyafa Palace in Abu Rummaneh (founded by President Adib al-Shishakli in 1953), the al-Rawda Palace in the al-Rawda neighborhood of Damascus (founded by President Hafez al-Assad in 1978), the People's Palace on Jabal ʻAntar (1991), and Tishreen Palace, which were also established by Assad as a presidential guesthouse in the mid-1990s. This paper is dedicated to the first and second, both located in the neighborhood of al-Muhajirin. One remains standing as of 2024 while the second was demolished in 1974. Combined, they hosted fifteen heads of state but most historians fail to differentiate between them, simply referring to them as the Syrian Presidential Palace.

"IN MISSION AND STRUCTURE, THE TWO PALACES WERE REPUBLICAN..."

In mission and structure, the two palaces were republican, but at their core, both had traces of monarchism left behind by King Faysal I, Syria's only king in the twentieth century. Many of those practices were introduced first by the Ottomans and then by Faysal before trickling down into the republican era, given that most of Syria's political elite were trained in the royal courts, either of the sultans or that of Faysal. Neither of the Syria' palaces has received a proper history chronicling their origins and occupants. It's not just the history of stone, but of the ordinary life within their chambers, whether of presidents and their families or those who worked in their daily orbit, the courtiers and staffers, who remain completely

unknown to history: secretaries, administrators, typists, translators, guards, and drivers. Three of them lived long enough to tell their story, and were vital in documenting the history of the two palaces: Munir al-Ajlani, director of the palace in 1941-1943 (who died at the age of ninety in 2004), Suhayl al-Ashi, military escort to President Shukri al-Quwatli in 1945-1949 (who died at eighty-eight in 2006) and ʻAbdullah al-Khani, secretary-general of the palace in the 1950s (who died at the ripe age of ninety-six in 2020).

Despite their advanced age, these men tried to diligently piece together a comprehensive oral history of the place in which they worked during their younger days, relying on mental notes, old photographs, and their private papers. There were visible gaps in their memory, leaving behind plenty of questions that remain unanswered. But they were the only living memory of the Syrian presidency prior to the short-lived union with Egypt in 1958. There is absolutely nothing on the human history of the presidential palace, neither at the British National Archives in Kew, nor at the French National Archives at Nantes. More surprisingly, nothing could be found at the Museum of Historical Documents in Damascus, which houses the archives of the Syrian state from the late Ottoman era up to 1958.

In essence, the Muhajirin palaces were not very different from that of other palaces in the Arab World. One year after leaving Syria, King Faysal was enthroned in Iraq, ordering construction of the two-floor Qasr al-Zuhoor in Baghdad. With just eight rooms, it was much smaller than the one left behind in Damascus and far less impressive in terms of architecture. In 1937, his son and successor King Ghazi built the al-Rihab Palace of Baghdad, where his son and other family members were massacred during the 14 July Revolution of 1958. In Cairo, King Farouk's splendid palaces, Qasr al-Qubba (built in 1872) and Qasr ʻAbidin (opened in 1874) were both occupied by the Free Officers after the toppling of the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. Qasr al-Qubba had a much longer life than the two Muhajirin palaces, witnessing the funeral of King Fouad in 1936, and that of Gamal ʻAbdul Nasser in 1970. In its chambers, King Farouk wedded the sister of the Shah of Iran, and many years later, it is where the Shah spent his final exile after being toppled in 1979. It is now one of the palaces of Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Qasr ʻAbidin was designed by a large number of Egyptian, Italian, and French decorators, and is now also owned by the Egyptian Presidency, with parts of its wings opened to the public and transformed into museums.

In similar fashion, the two Muhajirin palaces chronicle the political history of Syria over the course of twentieth century, although they have witnessed no assassinations, massacres, or bloody revolts. The Damascus court was more than just physical space revolving around the towering figure of its one king

or many president. It wasn't just for the management and distribution of power, but rather, a place of social and political relationships between leaders and both their staffers and subjects, and a venue for hosting Syria's political, cultural, and economic elite during the first half of the twentieth century.

Ironically, much of the court culture that emerged under Faysal was copied, with very little innovation, either from the Ottomans or his family's British allies. This is rather strange for a nation that took great pride in having fought colonialism, considering the Ottomans no different from the British or the French. Faysal had promised to do away with everything Ottoman, from laws and regulations to language, court titles, and governance. The court culture was seemingly too strong, however, and deeply-rooted in the collective psyche of the nation, to be erased. It outlived both Ottoman rule in Syria, and that of King Faysal, but was modified over time, blending monarchism and republicanism, and sacramentalism with secularism, with the end result being a unique blend of culture and norms.

The Syrian republic we know today was established in 1932, and despite that, the two palaces continued to be viewed as a royal court, both by their occupants and staffers, and by the nation at large. The crux of that attitude is rooted in early Islam, when immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim nation chose a successor (caliph) to rule them, a term that literarily means successor to the prophet. His first successor Abu Bakr al-Siddiq was referred to as *Khalifat Rasul Allah* (successor to the prophet) and upon his death in 634, his successor Omar Ibn al-Khattab as *Amir al-Mu'mineen* (Prince of the Believers). In the collective psyche of the Muslim nation, the sovereign was now king of the Muslim Empire.

With the fall of Ottoman rule in 1918, Syrians began searching for a caliph to rule them now that the Ottoman sultanate was over. The idea of a republic never crossed their mind, until it was introduced by the French twelve years after their occupation of Syria. Briefly in 1920, the Syrians had their only king, Faysal I, and when he was dethroned, continued to treat all of his successors with the same homage that had been reserved for previous sultans and caliphs, although sacramental attribution was gradually downplayed for a more secular approach. The president became the focal point of power and patronage, the man-in-charge of the *ummah*, and thus, to be treated not very differently from kings, regardless of the fact that he was technically serving at his job for a specific period of time, and not staying for life. The clerics of Damascus claimed that a president was a modified form of caliph, who ought to rule by the boundaries of Islamic Sharia and pass laws penned on his behalf by an Islamic jurist whom citizens have to obey. The difference between caliph,

"...UNDER THE OTTOMANS, GOVERNORS SENT FROM ISTANBUL USUALLY STAYED IN THE SPACIOUS HOMES OF THE OLD CITY..."

king, and president became blurred and their duties and functions began to overlap, both in the minds of the rulers and their subjects.[1]

Nazim Pasha Palace

Under the Ottomans, governors sent from Istanbul usually stayed in the spacious homes of the Old City, with their large courtyards, brimming lemon trees and gushing water fountains. Some had up to thirty rooms on their second floor, put at the disposal of rotating governors by wealthy notables wanting to win favors with Ottoman officialdom. Some decided to establish palaces of their own, like As'ad Pasha al-'Azm, who ruled Damascus in the eighteenth century, ordering construction of the famous 'Azm Palace in the heart of the ancient al-Bzurieh Market. It took 800 workers to build over a period of three years, and his palace would remain property of the 'Azm family until 1920, when it was sold to the French government.[2] Others Turkish governors like Midhat Pasha (1878-1880) decided to lodge at government headquarters in Dar al-Mushiriyya, facing the Hamidieh Market.[3] It was always safer for governors to sleep next to their troops, after a rebellion had killed one pasha in 1831, and a bloody uprising led to the toppling and execution of another in 1860.[4]

In July 1897, celebrated Ottoman statesman Husayn Nazim Pasha became governor of Damascus. He

lodged briefly at the home of Mahmud al-Barudi in al-Qanawat, outside the Old City, but declined to make it his permanent residence, looking for open space upon which he could build a new home, just like As'ad Pasha al-'Azm had done in 1749.[5] His advisers took him on a tour of the Old City, but nothing seemed to satisfy his taste until he reached al-Muhajirin, then a tiny make-shift neighborhood on the slopes of Mount Qassiun, established in the early 1890s to accommodate Muslim emigrants coming from the Balkans (*muhajirin* means emigrants in Arabic).[6] An additional cluster of Muslim refugees would soon arrive from the island of Crete, fleeing sectarian violence in September 1898.[7] Most of land in al-Muhajirin was owned by members of the illustrious 'Azm family, relatives of As'ad Pasha, whose ancestors like him had been governors of Damascus throughout most of the eighteenth century.[8]

Standing upon a rocky hilltop overlooking the city's orchards, Nazim Pasha admired the gentle breeze, asking his escorts: 'What is it wrong with the Damascenes? Why don't they build here what can potentially become an unparalleled summer resort?' Apart from a few mud houses scattered behind him, there was no construction anywhere in sight, making the spot exceptionally attractive for the pasha. One of his escorts replied: 'But who would agree to live in this exile, where it takes at least an hour to reach the market, or pray at the Umayyad (Mosque).[9] ' Nazim Pasha decided to become the first gambler, offering to buy a plot of land from Shafiq Mou'ayyad al-'Azm, a prolific writer and translator who would soon be elected deputy for Damascus in *Meclis-i Mebusan*, the Istanbul-based Ottoman parliament.[10]

Khorshid al-Masri

Hoping to win favors with the new governor, Mou'ayyad al-'Azm offered to give him the land for free, but Nazim Pasha insisted on paying fifty gold coins, reportedly five times its estimated worth.[11] A talented Egyptian architect, Khorshid Wehbe al-Masri, was hired to build a palace for him in al-Muhajirin, inspired by the magnificent imperial buildings of Berlin and Vienna.[12] Khorshid Bey had studied modern irrigation and architecture in Germany, on a state scholarship provided by Tawfiq Pasha, the khedive of Egypt, graduating in 1875.[13] He established a reputation for himself both as a great builder and sportsman, excelling in construction, weightlifting and wrestling.[14] He would carry heavy blocks with his workers from the hills of Mount Qassiun to al-Muhajirin, taking pride in his strength.[15] Khorshid Bey abhorred smoking and urged his laborers to quit tobacco, offering extra pay to those who complied.[16]

He built a two-floor villa for Nazim Pasha on 10,000 square meters, created entirely from white stone, with wooden doors and arched windows frames.

A basement came underneath the building, serving as the palace kitchen, with an eight-room storehouse. The first floor housed the pasha's dining room and study, while living quarters were on the second floor for Nazim Pasha and his children. Separating the two floors was a wide marble staircase, draped with a large red carpet, later used for official functions of the Syrian presidency. A three-level garden surrounded the palace, stretching south towards its back door, filled with apricot trees, white jasmines and a large water fountain feeding off Yezid, a small river that ran through al-Muhajirin and was part of the fabled River Barada. Yezid was a tiny river, named after the second Umayyad caliph, Yezid Ibn Mu'awiyya. The residents of al-Muhajirin used its water to drink, bathe and irrigate their courtyards.[17]

Nazim Pasha's Palace

Nazim Pasha's decision to live in al-Muhajirin inspired Turkish and Syrian officials to relocate to the same neighborhood. Once considered a desolate exile, al-Muhajirin became suddenly one of the most sought-after districts of the city, and two its early residents was Bahaa Bey, a scribe at the Damascus Municipality, and his colleague Mohammad Bashir Hajjo, an architect. Hajjo had come to Damascus in 1893 to help rebuild its Grand Mosque after a fire.[18] Street names were still uncommon in Damascus and people would refer to them by the names and professions of their occupants. Hajjo's street was dubbed Zuqaq al-Muhandis (Alley of the Architect), echoing a narrow stretch in Marjeh Square, behind the Grand Serail, popularly called Zuqaq Rami (occupied by a third-tier employee at the Damascus Municipality named Rami Bey).[19] The main road over which the Nazim Pasha's palace came to be was called *Share' Nazim Pasha*. In the 1920s and after the French occupation, it was renamed Rue Nazim Pasha, and bestriding two blocs, was given the street registry number 20-21.

According to 'Abdullah al-Khani, a long-time employee at the future presidential palace, 'Life came to the palace in 1905, when Nazim Pasha finally settled in his new house.[20] ' This means that he resided at the palace for one year only, before being recalled to Istanbul in March 1906. He was eventually to return as governor for one year in 1909, and then for an additional six months in 1912. Khani entered the palace as an employee in 1947, recalling conversations with octogenarian neighbors who could still remember the three eras of the Ottoman governor. When the pasha was summoned to Istanbul, he had still not settled the bills of Khorshid al-Masri so he put up the palace for sale.[21] It was only logical thing to do, now that he was leaving Syria for good, or so he thought. Two Damascenes offered to buy; Beshara al-Asfar and Mustapha Pasha al-'Abed. Asfar was a wealthy Christian creditor while 'Abed was governor of Mosul in present-day Iraq and his brother was

an influential adviser at the court of Sultan ʻAbdulhamid II.[22] He offered to buy the palace for seven thousand Ottoman coins and Asfar nearly doubled the bid, offering 12,000 gold.[23] Khorshid eventually bought it for 5,000, writing off the 1,000 debt that Nazim Pasha owed him for having constructed the palace ten years ago.[24] Up till then, the al-Muhajirin Palace had been lit be kerosene lamps and scented candles to ward off malaria-carrying mosquitos, before electricity came to Damascus in February 1907. The Grand Umayyad Mosque was lit first, followed by the Ottoman Faculty of Medicine in al-Baramkeh, and then, the home of ʻAbdul Rahman Pasha al-Yusuf in Souq Sarouja, who led pilgrims on their annual journey to Mecca.[25] His residence was the first private home in Damascus to receive regular 24-hours of electricity. The al-Muhajirin Palace was the second, during the occupancy of its second owner, Khorshid al-Masri.

After marrying a Syrian widow, Khorshid settled permanently in Damascus and raised her only son, Hamdi al-Idlibi. The Nazim Pasha Palace became home for his new family, and pretty soon, the Damascenes began referring to the adjacent neighborhood by his name, 'Khorshid.' We don't know whether Nazim Pasha retained the palace until permanently leaving Syria in 1912, or if he moved out upon his first recall in 1907. At the Department of Real Estate Registry in Damascus, one finds a document with consecutive property owners, starting with Nazim Pasha and ending with the Syrian Presidency. It only mentions shares, with no dates of purchase.

The palace during World War I

Khorshid treated his adopted son Hamdi with paternal care and affection, sending him to study medicine at the American University of Beirut (AUB).[26] Hamid al-Idilbi set up a successful clinic on Salhieh Street, not far from the Syrian Parliament, marrying Ulfat Omar Pasha in 1929, who would soon become one of Syria's foremost novelists, taking on the pen name, Ulfat al-Idlibi. Their wedding was held at the al-Muhajirin Palace and some of her popular novels were inspired by her youthful days behind its high walls. Khorshid then took Hamdi to the Houran province in southern Syria, where they bought a plot of land he planned to develop with modern irrigation and machinery.[27] Cash shortage forced him to rent his home to the Ottoman government shortly before outbreak of World War I. The al-Muhajirin Palace was put under the command of Djemal Pasha, commander of the Fourth Army and one of the main officers of the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP). He had led successfully co-led a coup against Sultan ʻAbdulhamid II, toppling him in April 1909.

A ruthless officer, Djemal ruled Syria with an iron fist, famously executing twenty-one Arab nationalists on 6 May 1916. One of them—ironically—was

Shafiq Mou'ayyad al-ʻAzm, owner of the very same property on which the al-Muhajirin Palace had been built.[28] Under Djemal Pasha, the al-Muhajirin Palace became a symbol of tyranny and oppression, and locals avoided walking past its high walls. When they did, looked straight down at their feet, without daring to take a glance at one of its windows, so as not to be accused of spying on Djemal Pasha.[29]

Towards the end of the war, Djemal Pasha recalled to Istanbul and replaced by his namesake, Djemal al-Mersini, also known as Djemal Pasha al-Saghir (the small). A far less capable, and much less feared officer, he moved out of the Muhajirin Palace and settled into the Victoria Hotel near Marjeh Square, another edifice inspired by German architecture, built in 1879. The hotel was better guarded and safer for Djemal al-Saghir, who by September 1918, had become besieged behind at his office. Four centuries of Ottoman rule were coming to an end, and there was nothing he could do to stop or slow down the rapid collapse of law and order. Police stations had closed their doors, and there was nothing but chaos on the streets of Damascus. In mid-summer 1918, Nazim Pasha's palace had been transformed into a military hospital at Djemal al-Saghir's orders, catering to wounded soldiers and those diagnosed with cholera, typhoid and syphilis. Its electric power was turned off and the hospital had to once again rely on scented candles after Ottoman authorities switched off all electricity in Damascus, no longer able to pay its bills.[30]

Avoiding capture by the Allies or death at the hands of Arab guerrillas, Djemal Pasha fled Damascus on the night of 27-28 September 1918. It marked victory of the Great Arab Revolt, launched against the Ottomans from the deserts of Arabia in 1916. It was commanded by Sharif Hussein Ibn ʻAli, the aging emir of Mecca whose troops camped on the outskirts of Damascus in September 1918.[31] A temporary government was established by the Algerian emir, Sa'id El Djezairi, whose grandfather Emir ʻAbdelkader had led a seventeen-year insurgency against the French occupation of Algeria. Emir Sa'id did not bother move into the al-Muhajirin Palace, as he already owned a fabulous house in near Bab al-Faradis, one of the seven gates of Damascus right behind the Umayyad Mosque.[32] His home was far bigger than Nazim Pasha's villa, guarded with Algerian soldiers.[33] Due to its proximity to the Umayyad Mosque, it was also far more symbolic than that of Nazim Pasha.

The palace under King Faysal (1918-1920)

Emir Sa'id's interim government was short lived, however, and it was toppled by Colonel TE Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, on 1 October 1918.[34] He stayed in the city for four nights, supervising the triumphant entry of Emir Fayal, second son Sharif Husayn, on 3 October 1918. The city was

liberated from 400-years of Ottoman rule. Like Nazim Pasha before him, he too stayed first at the home of Mahmud al-Barudi, before moving into a new villa in al-ʻAfif, not far from al-Muhajirin.[35] The building in al-ʻAfif became his home, and it was later occupied by the French, then bought by the French government after independence in 1946, and now serves as premises of the French Embassy in Syria. Office and court were set up at the al-Muhajirin Palace.

Government employees began selling their homes throughout the city and moving to al-Muhajirin, or areas close to it in order to be close to their new ruler and show up within minutes, at his doorstep when summoned. The neighborhood suddenly became epicenter of power in the new Syria, and was transformed into an upscale area coveted by the city's rich and famous. War Minister Yusuf al-ʻAzma relocated to al-Muhajirin from his family mansion in the Old City, and so did Finance Minister Fares al-Khoury who lived in the Christian quarter. Faysal's doctor, adviser, and last foreign minister ʻAbdul Rahman Shahbandar left his family home in al-Qaymariyya, also in the Old City, and rented a small apartment in al-Jisr al-Abyad, next to al-Muhajirin. The more cabinet ministers flocked to its residential quarters, the more expensive its property became. At the palace, they were instructed to bow in Faysal's presence, and never to turn their backs on him when exiting his court.[36] They had to walk backwards until reaching the doors of his office, and to only walk straight and upright after leaving his sight.[37]

As Faysal settled in al-Muhajirin, life returned to the palace, almost overnight. All hospital beds and medical equipment were shipped out to the Hamidian Hospital in al-Baramkeh, and brand-new furniture was bought instead, all paid for by Faysal's father in Mecca; a staggering 733 Egyptian pounds.[38] Although not a single foreign head of state visited him during his brief rule in Syria, his staffers ran a proper court with scheduled appointments, minute-takers, and detailed agendas. All his encounters were with Syrian political and military figures, but very unlike the casual tent gatherings that he employed during his days in the Arabian Desert. Gone were the Arabian mattresses on which Faysal would sit cross-legged with his supporters, sipping Arabic coffee. Guests were required to show up in gentleman attire, wearing frock coats, hats, or the classic *tarboosh*.

A young Islamic judge, Sheikh Taj al-Din al-Hasani, was appointed secretary-general of the Royal Palace.[39] The son of a celebrated Muslim scholar with disciples across the Middle East, he would later become prime minister of Syria, then president in 1941. But back in 1918 Sheikh Taj was still a young man, at thirty-four, two years younger than Faysal. Well-versed in Islamic history, he treated Faysal with the same homage that Umayyad caliphs would have expected from their courtiers, centuries aback. Most of the other courtiers were of the same age, bringing a lively culture to the palace. They of them were bachelors; young, impassioned, and ready to work twenty-four-hours a day. Faysal's younger half-brother, Emir Zayd was just twenty-two, and was given an office on the second floor of the Royal Palace, serving as deputy to the emir.[40]

The Royal Palace was also a cosmopolitan work place, packed with Iraqis, Lebanese, Palestinians and non-Damascenes from the rest of Syria. Faysal chose a seasoned Ihsan al-Jabiri from Aleppo to serve as head of the Royal Diwan. Born in 1878, he hailed from one of Aleppo's most powerful families, and his father was the city's mufti. Jabiri studied law and began his career in the Ottoman civil service, first as scribe, then inspector, and finally bureau chief to Sultan Mehmed V.[41] His deputy, Nasib al-Bakri, was a thirty-year old Damascene notable whose father had been a member of Sultan ʻAbdulhamid II's inner circle.[42] The head of chamberlains was Jaafar Pasha al-ʻAskari, an Iraqi from Kirkuk born in 1885. Jaafar Pasha studied at the Ottoman Military College and received advanced training in Germany. He fought in the Dardanelles, and was arrested by the British during World War I before defecting to join the Arab Revolt. With the 1918 liberation of Syria, he was first appointed military governor of Aleppo and then attached to Emir Faysal's private office.[43] Under his command were three military escorts who never parted the emir's side and given an office next to his, also on the second floor. One was an Iraq from the Dulaim tribe, and two were Syrians from Damascus. Fakhri al-Barudi (aged thirty-three) was one of them; and Faysal had lodged at his father's home when first entering Damascus.

In future years he would become a national celebrity, patron of the arts, and co-founder of the National Bloc that fought the French in Syria. The third chamberlain was Jamil al-Ulshi (aged thirty-six), a defected officer from the Ottoman Army who hailed from the ancient neighborhood of al-Shaghour in Old Damascus. Jaafar al-ʻAskari went on to become two-time prime minister of Iraq, before he was killed in 1936, and so did Jamil al-Ulshi, who assumed the same job in Syria, first in 1920 and then again in 1943. Both would say that they learned the art of politics from Faysal during their brief tenure at the al-Muhajirin Palace.[44]

The first and last queen of Syria

Young courtiers were not the only new addition to the palace, which now, also got its first queen; Princess Huzaima Bint Nasser. She came to Damascus in early 1919, traveling from Mecca with her three daughters and only son, Emir Ghazi, who would

later becoming king of Iraq after succeeding his father in 1933.[45] Faysal lodged them at his al-ʿAfif mansion, but allowed the children to visit the palace in the early afternoon to play in its vast gardens, under supervision of European nannies, or take outdoor classes with their stern Damascene instructor, Safwat al-ʿAwwa. One of Faysal's daughters was permanently crippled; Princess Fawqiyya, having fallen from the hand of a nurse at infancy.[46] She couldn't walk, but would smile when seeing her father wave from his office balcony.

Faysal refused his wife any official duties in Syria, fearing that conservative Damascene society would not allow it. Unlike her Egyptian counterpart Nazli Sabri, who was named sultana by her husband King Farouk, and then queen, Huzaima only got the royal title after her husband was enthroned in Iraq in 1921. Her twin sister Misbah was married to his brother, Emir ʿAbdullah, and in 1946, became the first queen of Jordan. Huzaima was rarely seen in public while in Damascus, and absent even from her husband's coronation ceremony.[47] Her activity was restricted to raising the children, hosting Syrian ladies for weekly receptions on Tuesdays, and adding a feminine touch to the palace, making sure that its corridors and bedrooms were kept clean, tidy and royal. Although she never moved into the palace, her job was to make sure it was run in an orderly manner, like any ordinary Syrian housewife.[48]

A king with no throne

Faysal called for nationwide elections in 1919, creating the country's first parliament, known as the Syrian National Congress. On 8 March 1920, he was crowned king by congress president Hashim al-Atasi, who declared the day as Syria's official Independence Day.[49] Two ceremonies were prepared; one public, to take place at the Damascus Municipality, and the second private at al-Muhajirin Palace, attended by the royal family and entourage.[50] Neither event was too fancy or dramatized beyond the collective cognitive understanding of Damascene society. Ahead of the coronation, a talented Damascene calligrapher, Abu Sulayman al-Khayyat, was commissioned to decorate a special section of the second floor of the palace with Islamic inscriptions.[51] It was separated from the rest of the living quarters, and furnished with brocade-covered sofas inlaid with mother of pearl and ornate walls. Although there was no actual throne in Faysal's kingdom, and no crown, his courtiers staff it the Throne Room.[52] One wall carried the inscription 'Justice is the Basis of all Rule,' by fourteenth century Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun.'[53] In the 1950s and 1960s, presidents would take souvenir photos next to its calligraphy, either with important guests or with their prime ministers.[54]

The Syria of 1920 was not prepared for any of the pomp and grandeur that came with royalty. Faysal wanted an elaborate throne, similar to that of King

George V or Sultan ʿAbudlhamid II.[55] Palace staff searched all the mansions of the Old City, but were unable to find a 'throne' fit for the occasion. He had to eventually settle for a bulky mosaic armchair, borrowed from a member of the Damascene Farra family. The 'throne' was polished exclusively for the event, with its thick, green upholstery changed into rich crimson. It was eventually returned to its owner, when the king had finished his ceremony.[56] Faysal got a humble coronation, nothing when compared to the coronations of the Qajar shahs of Iran or the monarchs of Great Britain. His family were noblemen by birth known as the Hashemites, tracing their blood line to the Prophet Mohammad. That lineage entitled them to the honorific title of *ashraf* (noblemen) and at birth, Faysal was registered at birth as 'al-Sharif,' which earned him respect in society and obedience on the battlefield. That however, is where royalty ended.

The Coronation

All over Damascus, posters were plastered with a detailed schedule of the coronation, due to begin at exactly 2:00 pm on 8 March 1920. Cabinet minister, parliamentarians and retired officers were required to show up in dark morning suits decorated with medals and sashes. They were seated in the front rows facing Faysal, who reached the City Hall in Marjeh Square in a horse-driven coach driven by two white Arabian mares. As the entourage moved slowly through the heavy crowd, people chanted: '*Aash al-Malik'* (Long Live the King). Faysal was perched on a small platform with a draped canopy wearing his military fatigues, covered with a white scarf and black robe.[57] This was the same uniform worn during his father's revolt against the Ottomans. Standing next to him was his eight-year-old son Emir Ghazi, Grand Mufti Sheikh ʿAtallah al-Kasm, Greek Orthodox Patriarch Gregarious IV Haddad, and the Chief Rabbi of the small Jewish community Yaacoub al-Dannoun.

Performing the rituals from a balcony overlooking Marjeh Square was speaker of parliament Hashim al-Atasi and its secretary ʿIzzat Darwaza. They pledged allegiance to their new king, and who in return, made them an oath to obey God, respect all religions, and equality of all his subjects.[58] The markets of Damascus remained open for three festive nights, and evening parades were staged throughout the country. The highlight of the ceremony was when an official stamp was sent to the royal guests in a sealed envelope, issued by the Department of Posts & Telegraphs. It carried the official proclamation of Faysal as king of Syria, decorated with Oriental design and the words: 'In Commemoration of United Syria's Independence.' A total of 750 stamps were issued on that day, equal to the number of invited guests, posted on an official letter signed by Hasan al-Hakim, director of Posts & Telegraphs. As the coronation ceremony was taking place in Marjeh Square, twenty-one

celebratory shots were fired from twenty-one cannons perched atop Mount Qassiun, not far from al-Muhajirin. As the cannon fire boomed marking the beginning of Faysal's rule, employees at the Department of Posts & Telegraphs were stamping the stamped document. When the last cannon ended, they rose in choreographed order and broke their stamps in two, signaling the ceremony over.[59] This was strange for Syria, unheard of before and never practiced later; loosely based on the Lord Chamberlain of Buckingham Palace breaking his wand to mark the end of his service to the British monarch. Faysal had never attended a monarch's coronation, but must have heard of its rituals from his British advisers, ranging from Colonel Lawrence to his trusted friend, Gertrude Bell. The Wand Breaking Ceremony had last been practiced at King Edward VII's funeral in 1910, exactly ten years before Faysal's crowning in Damascus. Syrian protocol seems to have copied it in reverse to mark the beginning of Faysal's reign.

Syria's new constitution said that Faysal would rule Syria until death, but his era collapsed much earlier than that. He was dethroned by the invading French Army on 24 July 1920, then exiled first to Haifa in British Palestine and subsequently to Europe, with orders never to return. He never did, but the dream of restoring the Syrian crown lasted well beyond his death at the age of fifty in 1933. Immediately upon his departure, the French Mandate was imposed on Syria, in accordance with the wartime Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, between Great Britain and France. By 1 August 1920, Syria had come fully under French occupation, and so had the Royal Palace. France's first High Commissioner Henri Gouraud decided to reside in Beirut, but lodged at the Damascus palace during his frequent visits to Syria. In early August, he hosted a dinner for the Damascus elite at the al-Muhajirin Palace and among the guests was Faysal's last finance minister, Faris al-Khoury. A celebrated statesman, he had served as MP in the Ottoman parliament and would become speaker of the Syrian parliament in 1936, then prime minister in 1945. Gouraud spoke of the beauty of Damascus then looked around the grand hall, mischievously asking: 'Gentlemen. Was this not the palace of King Faysal?' Gouraud knew that it was. So did every Syrian in the room. Offended, the sharp Khoury retorted, 'Yes Your Excellency, King Faysal resided here. This palace was originally built by an Ottoman governor named Nazim Pasha. Djemal Pasha used it during the war, and now you are its occupant, Excellency. We had dinner, right over here, with every one of them. Look at the strange twist of fate; all of them are gone now.[60]' He then winked at Gouraud and raised a toast of French wine: 'But we have remained…and so has the palace![61]'

Gouraud divided Syria into mini-states, establishing the State of Damascus with boundaries that stretched to Homs and Hama.[62] Its seat of power would

"…KHORSHID RETURNED TO HIS OLD HOME UNTIL HIS DEATH…"

be Faysal's old palace, into which the new governor, Haqqi al-Azm, was installed in December 1920. Although not officially president or king, 'Azm ruled from the royal palace until 24 August 1922, when he was forced to leave by termination of the rent contract with Khorshid Bey. The Egyptian owner had not set foot in the palace since 1914 but Haqqi al-Azm had a hard time parting ways with the premises. He had tremendously enjoyed the prestige of his job and wasn't going to give it away that easily, so he had to be forced out by policemen with guns.[63] Khorshid returned to his old home until his death at the age of 100 in 1939. With his passing, his adopted son Hamdi rented the premises to the Iraqi Consulate in Damascus, from 1940-1943.

The palace of Mustapha Pasha al-'Abed

In 1932, France created the modern republic of Syria, and Mohammad 'Ali al-'Abed was elected as the country's first president. Trained at the Sorbonne University in Paris, the sixty-two-year-old'Abed was a wealthy aristocrat from a powerful family whose father had served in the court of Sultan 'Abdulhamid II. Although the sultan had been dethroned since 1909 and dead since 1918, the 'Abeds continued to show complete loyalty to his family, like providing his eldest son Emir Mehmed Salim (who lived in Damascus) with a monthly stipend

of fifty gold coins.[64] Emir ʿAdel Arslan, a ranking Lebanese contemporary statesman, describes in his memoirs how ʿAbed would bow in the presence of the sultan's children, 'just like when they were living in Istanbul.[65]' The respect was mutual, and ʿAbdulhamid had named his youngest child ʿAbed, in honor of his Syrian friend and confident.[66]

President Mohammad ʿAli al-ʿAbed was an old man by standards of the 1930s, having served as Ottoman ambassador to Washington DC back in 1908. President Theodore Roosevelt received him at the White House, and ʿAbed was enchanted by his buccaneering spirit and love of knowledge.[67] He developed a genuine admiration for the Roosevelts, and through them, learned to understand American politics.[68] So impressed by the order and administrative structure of the White House, he promised to create something similar in Syria in 1932.[69] His late uncle, Mustapha Pasha, had originally offered to buy the al-Muhajirin Palace from Nazim Pasha back in 1907. When that failed, he built a palace that looked strikingly similar, west of Nazim Pasha's residence, separated by a roundabout which had since been renamed Khorshid Square. Mustapha Pasha ordered his architects to copy the design of Nazim Pasha's palace, down to the smallest detail, creating a two-store replica with similar gardens on exactly 10,000 square meters.[70] Some even claimed that he had hired Khorshid al-Masri to build the palace for him.[71]

In 1910, the ʿAbed palace was completed, nineteen years before the death of its founder in 1929. Ownership went to his son Hawlu, a Cambridge University-educated agronomist, who decided to present the premises to his cousin Mohammad ʿAli on the occasion of his inauguration on 11 June 1932. Syria's new flag was hoisted on its mast; a white, green, and black tri-color, with three red stars in the middle.[72] Until then, President ʿAbed was living in his father's old mansion in Sarouja, outside the Old City. A splendor from the nineteenth century, it bestride three streets and had three huge courtyards. The mansion was nevertheless unfit for the presidency, tucked deep within the crooked overlapping alleys of Damascus. Foreign dignitaries would have had a hard time getting there, no car or motorcade could enter, and ʿAbed would have found difficulty in managing its security.[73] With that in mind, he agreed to move into his uncle's al-Muhajirin palace, making it the official premises of the Syrian Presidency. Orders were given to the Damascus Tramway to extend its railway to the gates of the ʿAbed palace, to facilitate the travel of citizens seeking the president's audience and favors.[74]

Palace rent

Contrary to popular lore, the palace was not given to ʿAbed for free and he was required to pay a monthly rent, provided by the Ministry of Finance. In

1935, the Damascus press ran a legal notice from the heirs of Mustapha Pasha al-ʿAbed, demanding a 300-gold coin increase in rent from their cousin, the president.[75] The article does not specify what the original rent for the palace was, only saying that the current contract between them and the state expires on 13 July 1935, three years into the ʿAbed presidency. In the late 1940s, the rent was fixed at 9,000 SP per year ($4,000 USD) and Hamdi al-Idlibi tried raising it to 11,000 SP, but didn't pass with the parliamentary budget committee.[76] The annual palace budget stood 250,000 SP ($114,155), including 3,500 SP ($1,600 USD) for a monthly presidential salary.[77] It was a small budget by any standard, compared to the Ministry of Defense's budget that stood at a whopping 82 million SP in 1956.[78]

Staffers under the ʿAbed Presidency

President ʿAbed ruled Syria longer than any of his predecessors, from June 1932 until December 1936. With relative longevity came new norms at the presidency. He used his family's massive wealth to bankroll palace activities, mostly generated from successful investments in the Suez Canal Company, the Panama Canal, and shares on Wall Street.[79] He also owned vast agricultural plantations in al-Ghouta, the agricultural belt surrounding Damascus, and had inherited ownership of the Victoria Hotel after his father's death in 1924. ʿAbed hired Najib al-Armanazi, a prominent lawyer who like him, had studied at Sorbonne University in Paris, making him secretary-general of the Presidential Palace.[80] Armanazi had been secretary of Syria's first post-Ottoman parliament, which crowned Faysal king in 1920. The French-trained civil servant, Emir Kazim El Djezairi, was commissioned as bureau chief to the new president.[81] Khalil al- Saadawi, a public servant of Libyan origins, was employed as assistant head of the presidential office.[82] He would continue to work at the palace for the next four decades, serving under every president from Mohammad ʿAli al-ʿAbed to Hafez al-Assad.

Eight policemen were commissioned to guard the ʿAbed palace, rotating in shifts at its front gate. A staff sergeant from the Damascus Police, Amin al-Kurdi, was hired as the president's driver.[83] ʿAbed's old tutor Pablo, an Italian, was given an office on the second floor, next to that of the president, serving in unofficial capacity as adviser on protocol (his salary was paid for ʿAbed's own pockets, not by the Syrian government).[84] In total, ʿAbed employed sixteen people at his palace, who continued to work by his side until his resignation in 1939.[85] The new president had been raised in Ottoman courts and tried copying some of their culture, insisting for example that his ministers appear at official functions wearing brocade and silk, with different uniforms and gold laces for different titles and ranks.[86] Thirty ranks of bureaucracy emerged under his administration, although his court was small by royal standards; a

total of sixteen people including his eight staffers, guards, typists, and a cook. Many things were still lacking at the palace, however, like a press office (which was only introduced in the 1940s), and a security apparatus, which was only formed in 1958.

The Presidential Family

President ʿAbed had traveled extensively throughout his life, frequenting plays and operas in London and New York. To mark the beginning of his term, he invited a professional theatrical troupe to stage a play at the gardens of the Presidential Palace.[87] They put on a performance of Verdi's Aida, which had been commissioned by Khedive Ismail to mark opening of the Cairo Opera House in December 1871. It was the first show of its kind on the presidential premises, reflecting ʿAbed's worldly views.[88] Up till then, acting, singing and dancing had been shunned by conservative Damascene society, considered un-Islamic.

The president's cosmopolitan and liberal lifestyle was also mirrored by the social activism of his daughter Layla, a beautiful young girl who had studied at a convent school in Beirut.[89] Briefly in 1925, she married then-head of state Subhi Barakat, under whom her father was serving as minister.[90] The marriage didn't last very long, ending in divorce, which is frowned upon in conservative societies like Damascus. That didn't prevent Layla from becoming active in all kinds of social engagements, sometimes acting as her father's secretary after he became president in 1932.[91] This would make her the first staffer at the presidential palace, even if in an unofficial capacity.

Layla's mother, thirty-seven-year-old Zahra al-Yusuf was also a cosmopolitan woman who became the first of Syria's first ladies.[92] One might consider her the second since her daughter had been married to a head of state in the 1920s, but the republic was still undeclared back then. She hailed from Damascene aristocracy; her brother was a pasha, and so were her father and grandfather, all groomed in the splendor of Ottoman courts. She owned three entire villages in al-Ghouta, five in the Beqqa Valley, and twenty-four on the Golan Heights, along with the entire shore of Lake Tiberias in Palestine, making her the wealthiest woman in Syria.[93] The post of first lady was tailor-made for Mrs. ʿAbed, despite it being both unconstitutional and completely unheard of in Syria, probably inspired by her brief stint in Washington DC. It was there and in her capacity as wife of the Ottoman ambassador that Zahra had met Edith, the wife of President Theodore Roosevelt.[94] Edith was the first wife of a US president to hire a salaried secretary, creating an official staff for the Office of the First Lady. Zahra didn't hire a secretary but relied on her daughter to handle her official engagements. She also used the presidential premises to

"DAMASCUS SHUT DOWN AND TWENTY-THOUSAND PEOPLE MARCHED IN THE OLD CITY..."

host weekly meetings of the Gout de Lait Society (Drop of Milk), a charity that she chaired since 1922, providing fresh milk for babies of families in need.[95] She also renovated the Presidential Palace, changing its curtains and furniture into crystal white, wishing her husband a 'white presidency.[96]'

A fall from grace

But life at the palace was not all white for the ʿAbeds. In 1933, parliament was dissolved by the French for refusing to sign a Franco-Syrian Treaty of Friendship, triggering major demonstrations across Damascus.[97] A boycott of the Damascus Tram brought public transport to a halt, making it difficult for visitors to reach ʿAbed at his palace. In 1936, a sixty-day strike was staged throughout Syria; Damascus shut down and twenty-thousand people marched in the Old City, demanding his resignation, which finally came in December 1939.[98]

The king of Greece and Shah of Iran

Before leaving office, ʿAbed's offered to leave the office in the hands of the presidency, provided that it continues to pay rent to his cousins. The palace would be occupied by Hashim al-Atasi in 1936-1939, and then by Sheikh Taj al-Din al-Hasani from September 1941 until his untimely death in January 1943. Sheikh Taj had first

entered the palace as its first secretary-general in 1920; not the ʻAbed palace but the Nazim Pasha one used by King Faysal. The Sorbonne-educated Munir al-ʻAjlani was hired as his bureau chief, while Armanazi stayed along as palace secretary-general. ʻAjlani also happened to be the new president's son-in-law.[99] He was an accomplished essayist, law professor, and co-founder of a popular daily, *al-Nidal*.

During the Sheikh Taj presidency Syria was declared officially independent from the mandate, although French troops would remain until the guns in Europe went silent in 1946. Commemorating the event, the Ministry of Interior issued a collection of postal stamps carrying Sheikh Taj's picture next to tricolor of the Syrian Flag, only this time, there was no stamp breaking ceremony. On 27 April 1942, Foreign Minister Fayez al-Khoury cabled world capitals declaring Syria independent. King George II of Greece paid Sheikh Taj a state visit, becoming the first foreign head of state to enter the ʻAbed palace. They had two choices, either to lodge him at the Orient Palace Hotel where Allied officers stayed during World II, or renovate the palace to accommodate him. Sheikh Taj and his son-in-law went for renovation, adding emblems of the Greek monarchy to a special bedroom created exclusively for the king. Sheikh Taj moved out of the palace briefly during the king's stay, returning to his original family mansion in al-Halbuni. He wanted to give George II some privacy.[100] Before him, the Iranian Crown Prince Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had also been hosted at the palace in March 1939, stopping in Syria while to Egypt, where he was to wed Princess Fawzia, the sister of King Farouk.[101] He was received with a Guard of Honor at the gates of the ʻAbed Palace, where Hashim al-Atasi decorated him with the Order of Merit, Excellence Class.[102] The future *Shahenshah*, or king of kings, did not spend the night at the palace, only staying for lunch with the Syrian president.[103]

Returning to the Nazim Pasha Palace

Sheikh Taj died unexpectedly on 17 January 1943. No other president had died in office, creating a sudden power vacuum for which none of the palace staffers were prepared.[104] It was the also the first time that the presidential palace gets a presidential funeral, and would remain the last until Hafez al-Assad died in 2000. All other presidents died long after they left office, either assassinated or in jail and/or exile. Heading the procession was acting president and Prime Minister Jamil al-Ulshi, and the president's bureau chief Munir al-ʻAjlani, rubbing shoulders with Lebanese president Alfred Naccache and the British ambassador to Syria and Lebanon, Sir Edward Spears. Sheikh Taj's familiar white turban was placed neatly atop his coffin, which was driven through the silent streets of Damascus on a cannon, shrouded with the Syrian Flag. Green-turbaned dervishes from the Sufi order danced at the gates of the Presidential

Palace, swirling next to the Guard of Honor, marching in impeccable white uniforms.

Despite having proclaimed Syria independent, the French were still in control of the country and appointed ʻAta al-Ayyubi to replace Jamil al-Ulshi, as both head of state and premier. An old school Damascene notable, Ayyubi had served as MP in the Ottoman Parliament, then minister of interior both under Faysal and the French Mandate. Briefly in 1936, he had been prime minister of Syria. Neither he nor Jamil al-Ulshi moved into the palace, which was shuttered by the ʻAbed family.[105] Ayyubi was also a wealthy aristocrat who owned a large villa in a neighborhood called Nuri Pasha, smaller than the Presidential Palace but no less impressive in terms of architecture. He didn't need a new home, certainly not for his interim presidency which ended on the day that Shukri al-Quwatli was elected president; 17 August 1943.

The palace under Shukri al-Quwatli (1943-1949)

Quwatli's first act as president was to immediately move out of the ʻAbed palace, not wanting to take over the desk, furniture, and belongings of a deceased president, describing it as a bad omen.[106] The old palace was still there, only a few minutes away, and it would be easy to move all the furniture and documents from one place to another. The new president called on Hamdi al-Idlibi, asking to re-rent the palace, and signed a five-year contract with him until August 1948. Not much little had changed in the palace since Quwatli last visited under Faysal back in 1920, apart from adding bathrooms to the basement and the expansion of its gardens. Hamdi al-Idlibi had planted thirty pomegranate trees, three almond trees, 100 cactuses, 500 pine trees and two fig trees.[107] A mechanical well had been added for irrigation, feeding off the waters of Yezid River. Quwatli would greatly improve the palace gardens in future years, hosting foreign guests like Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Egyptian diva Um Kalthoum and King Husayn of Jordan.[108] According to popular lore, Nehru picked flowers from the palace gardens, and pinned one to his jacket while addressing the United Nations General Assembly.[109]

Quwatli would wake up at 7:00 am and be at his office by 9:00.[110] Friendly meetings not related to work would be held at his home over a cup of morning coffee. Before heading to the palace, he would stop by his mother's residence every single morning. At work, he established standard culture, receiving foreign dignitaries until midday, community leaders, ministers, politicians and ordinary folk. Quwatli had spent his exile in Cairo between the years 1949-1955 where he was highly impressed by the order and ceremony at ʻAbidin Palace. Citizens wanting to meet him had to fill out an application either in person or through post mail. For

lunch, Quwatli would take a two-hour break with his family then head back to work, where he usually stayed at the palace until past midnight. An observant Muslim, he made sure to pray five times a day, and never missed prayer time regardless of how busy he was.[111]

It was under Shukri al-Quwatli that the Presidential Palace began taking its modern form in terms of size, reach and duties. He expanded its staff aggressively, hiring the Montpellier University-trained lawyer Muhsen al-Barazi to replace Najib al-Armanazi as secretary-general. Armanazi had served with every president since Mohammad ʻAli al-ʻAbed but was now transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he became ambassador to Egypt. The office of deputy secretary-general was founded, and assigned to ʻIssam al-Inklizi, a Damascene lawyer and tennis champion whose father had been executed by the Ottomans in May 1916.[112] Quwatli took special attention to the sons of martyrs, making Khalid al-ʻAsali, the son of another of Djemal Pasha's victims, director of protocol. ʻAsali was also an accomplished artist who was charged with designing the emblem of the Syrian Republic: Hawk of Quraysh, tribe of the Prophet Mohammad.[113] King Faysal had left Syria before a court of arms was designed for his short-lived kingdom, and all his successors seem to have missed this important detail until Quwatli came up with his emblem, which remains in official use, despite minor adjustments, as of 2024. Khalid al-ʻAsali had to also draw up new rules of presidential protocol, sometimes confronting unexpected problems rooted in Puritan Damascene society. Women dignitaries visiting the president were invited to walk into the room before their male counterparts and be seated next to the president, upsetting traditional Muslims. Former Prime Minister Lutfi al-Haffar, a long-time supporter and friend of Quwatli, was deeply superstitious and despised the number thirteen. He would refuse to be seated at presidential dinners if he were the thirteenth guest, nor ride in the palace automobile with the license plate #13.[114]

A Christian novelist from the ancient city of Sednaya, Fouad al-Shayeb, was made director of the Media Office—another novelty founded by President Quwatli—and assisting him was ʻAbdullah al-Khani. Quwatlī had originally hired him for his impeccable English during the stormy winter of 1947, to follow-up on discussions over the Palestine Partition Plan at the United Nations.[115] He would listen to them live on BCC and translate them into Arabic for the president. Quwatli also hired ʻAbdul Majid Tarabulsi as head of the presidential diwan, with Rizqallah Touwaji as accountant, ʻAbdul Hadi Diab as second accountant, and Amin Kiwan as typist, assisted by an office secretary named ʻAbdul Wahab Zein al-ʻAbedin.[116] All of them were Damascene natives from the upper-middle class.

Quwatli's escort Suhayl al-Ashi recalled:

He always became nervous before we left the palace premises for any official route within the city. He feared that we would cut off roads so he could pass, and this tormented him greatly. He gave very strict instructions not to make a fuss over his entourage, and took this matter very seriously. Motorcades and roadblocks were off limits. He also insisted that the presidential automobile stop at traffic lights, which were still cardboard at the time, changed manually from red to green by a policeman.[117]

The Syrian Parliament allocated three automobiles for the Presidential Palace. One was a black luxury Packard, used personally by the president, followed by a DeSoto for Secretary-General Muhsen al-Barazi, and an old Chrysler for running palace errands.[118] When Syria finally got its independence from the French in 1946, Quwatli said that he wished to drive around Damascus in a convertible, but since none of the palace automobiles fit that desire, he had to rent a car from a merchant on Baghdad Street, using funds from his own treasury.[119] As for security, Quwatli's palace was guarded by sixteen policemen, up from just eight in 1932, who took turns at securing the front and back doors of al-Muhajirin Palace.[120] A special room was set up to accommodate them, built at the outer edge of the palace gardens. Two sentry points were stationed at the front entrance, and two at its inside doors, guarded by sword-carrying soldiers in white uniforms.

The Presidential Palace post 1946

On 29 March 1949, Shukri al-Quwatli was toppled by a bloodless coup, staged by army commander Husni al-Za'im. The Presidential Palace was shuttered, and all its staffers ordered to return home.[121] Za'im ruled Syria for a total of 137 days and between April-June 1949, he stayed at military police headquarters in Marjeh Square, but after being 'elected' president on 26 June 1949, moved into the Nazim Pasha Palace, becoming its sixth occupant after Nazim Pasha, Khorshid, the two Djemals, and King Faysal. Husni al-Za'im was eventually arrested and shot on 14 August 1949. Former president Hashim al-Atasi was called out of retirement to assume power, ten years after having resigned. Atasi by then was an old man, approaching the age of eighty. His wife, Ward Shan al-Atasi, had died in 1946, making him the first palace widower. Atasi was a native of Homs, and since he had no home in Damascus, decided to live and work at the palace, setting a precedent and creating a modest bedroom for himself on its second floor.[122] He was the first and last leader to make the presidential premises both work space and home, but made very little additions to the place, only hiring a new secretary-general, Khalid Shatila, who had previously worked at the Foreign Ministry.[123] He also brought a new military escort named Maamoun Tahseen Bey, the son of celebrated artist Sa'id Tahseen Bey.

Hashim al-Atasi had tremendous respect for discipline, put on display to welcome Prince Philip the Duke of Edinburgh on 29 June 1950. Dressed in white suite matching Philip's white military uniform, the president welcomed him with red carpets—but not in the Throne Room since his wife, Elizabeth, was still not the queen of England. Instead, a reception was held at the palace courtyard, followed by a banquet.[124]

Syria gets its third palace

President Adib al-Shishakli moved into the palace in 1953, with his young bride Fatina al-Fanari; a traditional housewife who rarely engaged in public activity.[125] There was one major hotel in town; the Orient Palace facing the Hejaz Station, and it dated back to the 1930s. This is where all state guests were lodged, and Shishakli reasoned that a presidential guesthouse should be built to accommodate the increasing number of foreign guests like former US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and American writer Helen, and US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in 1953.[126] Construction began at the tip of the palm-tree lined Abu Rummaneh Street. The Diyafa Palace was a palace by name only—it had none of the extravagance of either the Nazim Pasha Palace or that of Mustapha Pasha al-ʿAbed; no calligraphy, no ornate walls and no Throne Rome. It was simple, small, and cozy, and was only completed after Shishakli fell from grace in February 1954.

Quwatlī returns to power (1955-1958)

With the departure of Shishakli, Hashim al-Atasi returned to power to complete what remained of his presidential term starting 1 March 1954. He was then replaced by Shukri al-Quwatli, who was re-elected president in August 1955. The trusted ʿAbdullah al-Khani was tasked with handling the transfer of power, in his capacity as director of protocol at the Nazim Pasha Palace. In the early 1950s, he had obtained a UNDP grant to study royal protocol at Buckingham Palace and presidential one at the Elysée in Paris.[127] Dressed in black tuxedos, two presidents entered a convertible and were driven to Parliament on ʿAbed Street. Atasi sat to the right, with Quwatli at his side. The speaker, Nazim al-Qudsi, awaited them at the gates of parliament, where a musical band was awaiting them. The two presidents then exchanged documents outlining the transfer of power, with president of the Supreme Court serving as witness to the ceremony. One was stored at the Presidential Palace, and the other in Parliament. They were then driven to al-Muhajirin Palace, this time with Quwatli seated to the right and Atasi to the left. A grand luncheon was held in Atasi's honor, before a presidential entourage escorted him to his native Homs, as soldiers took a final salute.

Two former staffers, Khalid al-ʿAsali and ʿAbdul Majid Tarabulsi, had left the palace and transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Khalil Saadawi was still onboard; the only palace veteran from the early 1930s, now serving as head of diwan. ʿAbdul Wahab Zein al-ʿAbidin was still the palace typist and the new president hired a new accountant named Mohammad Jajeh, a new Armenian cook, and a new personal secretary, Omar al-Nus, who happened to also be an accomplished poet with a PhD in law from the Sorbonne University in France. Quwatli also brought a new military escort, Najm al-Din Naqeshbendi, to replace his former escort, Suhayl al-ʿAshi, who had since become commander of the Homs Military Academy. On 9 November 1955, Quwatli named Fouad al-Halabi, the former director of the Hejaz Railway, as secretary-general of the Presidential Palace.[128] Together, these men helped run the palace affairs during the second half of the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War.

Final occupants

The Presidential Palace would remain in official use until being shuttered at the start of the Syrian-Egyptian union of 1958. President Gamal Abdul Nasser preferred Qasr al-Diyafa to Qasr al-Muhajirin, because of the spacious street that lay before its perfectly suited balcony, from where he could address the Syrian masses. Crowds camped outside Qasr al-Diyafa for three days non-stop, waiting for Nasser to address the nation. Entire families filled Abu Rummaneh Street, from toddlers to aging men and loudspeakers were placed at the balcony of Qasr al-Diyafa to bring Nasser's voice ringing loud and strong throughout the Syrian capital. The palace was more convenient for Nasser, who worked from a modest office in Cairo and was unimpressed with the lavish palaces left behind by King Farouk. Throughout the years of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961) Qasr al-Diyafa became the official seat of power in Damascus, while the old al-Muhajirin Palace was closed, without being returned the ʿAbed family. It would eventually reopen in December 1961 to welcome Syria's new president Nazim al-Qudsi, two months after a coup toppled the union republic.

When the Ba'ath Party staged its coup on 8 March 1963, Syria's new strongman Amin al-Hafez moved into the palace, followed by his successor Nur al-Din al-Atasi in March 1966, and then, by Hafez al-Assad in March 1971. The palace was then confiscated by the Syrian government and its property was moved entirely to the Office of the President. Assad ran Syrian affairs from al-Muhajirin throughout the 1970s, famously welcoming US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger after the October War with Israel, and in June 1974, hosting US President Richard Nixon. In the autumn of 1978, he went for a new building next to Abu ʿAlaa al-Maari Square, right behind the popular al-Rawda Mosque in upscale Damascus. The decision came in the midst of his confrontation with

the Muslim Brotherhood, after security became a major concern. Scores of his top officers and officials had been killed in target attacks by the Brotherhood, who threatened to assassinate Assad. By then, the neighborhood al-Muhajirin had become overcrowded, which made it impossible to secure the palace balconies or its vast gardens. Like Qasr al-Diyafa, Qasr al-Rawda was also not really a palace; shabby, old, abandoned, and originally designed to serve as a three-star hotel. It had no gardens and no courtyards, and was dull, dark and unimpressive. But it was easy to quarantine from the rest of the neighborhood, and barricade from all four corners. For Assad that was more than enough.

Assad stayed at this premises until 1991, when he moved into a far better palace called Qasr al-Shaab (People's Palace), a large building of Carrara marble stretched across 31,500 square meters high atop a southern part of Mount Qassiun called Jabal ʿAntar. The hilltop had been carved out of the original mountain by the waters of River Baradā. The palace itself had been under construction since 1979, and its beautiful brass gates were created by the world-famous Syrian Jewish metalworker, Maurice Nseiri. The entire plateau of the mountain was added to the palace premises, making it the largest in Syria, with a presidential office view perpendicular to the main minaret of the Umayyad Mosque, designed by world-famous Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, winner of the 1987 Pritzker Prize for Architecture. He had also designed the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the Tokyo Olympic Arena. Assad famously welcomed US President Bill Clinton at this palace in 1994, and it was at its main hall that world leaders assembled to pay their respects upon Assad's death in June 2000, ranging from Jacques Chirac to Vladimir Putin. The al-Muhajirin Palace suddenly became old, far less impressive—and somewhat démodé. It remained closed from 1978 until 2010, when it was refurbished by Syria's new first lady, Asma al-Assad.

With the sudden collapse of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024, the old Muhajirin Palace was opened to the public for Friday picnics – for the first time in its long history – and its rightful owners are now trying to regain the property after scores of Syrians have petitioned their new president, Ahmad al-Shara, demanding restoration of prime real estate confiscated by the Assad regime. That includes Assad's own home in central Damascus, once the property of Saudi-based Syrian physician Rashad Pharoan, his summer home in Zabadani, property of Syrian industrialist Anwar al-Dassouki, and ultimately the Muhajirin Palace, ownership of the family of Hamdi al-Idilbi. Unfortunately, it was looted by the mob on the night of Assad's fleeing to Moscow, and it remains unclear how much of its artefacts, treasures, and paintings, remain intact. President Shara settled into the newer Qasr al-Shaab, also partially looted on the very same night, but not fully, due to its size. His brother Maher, a

"...WHILE THE PALACE NOW HAS AN ENTIRELY NEW STAFF, AND A NEW FIRST LADY..."

physician, has now been appointed as a new secretary-general since April 2025, while the palace now has an entirely new staff, and a new first lady, Latifa Droubi.

End notes

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