

# Syrian Defense Minister General Mustafa Tlas: Memoirs, Volume Two

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Syria has played a significant role in the events that have occurred in Iraq. Syria's borders offered a means of escape for many Iraqi Ba'athists, possibly including Sadija, Saddam Hussein's wife. U.S. forces have pursued Saddam loyalists into Syria, and Syrian leaders have been warned not to destabilize coalition efforts in Iraq. Syria also supports the Lebanese terrorist group Hizbullah and other Palestinian militant rejectionist groups. The UN has called on Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon, which has been under Syrian domination for three decades.

Syria, an enigmatic nation, was once ruled by the shrewd dictator, the late Hafiz Al-Asad. Former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas and Al-Asad had a lifelong relationship and together rose through the ranks of the divisive politics of Syria's military establishment.

Syria's role in the Arab-Israeli wars was enigmatic, and Syria's scholars and military leaders have yet to research it fully. Few Syrians have written about their experiences, partly because of Syria's highly compartmentalized society. Only after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's death did Egypt begin publishing books on the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1973 Yom-Kippur War. Syrian books on the Arab-Israeli conflict are not as prevalent as are Egyptian books. Dozens of volumes that explore many angles of the 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, from economics to military tactics, have been published in Cairo.

Not only has Tlas written books about Syria's military and political history, he has also written books of poetry, general Arab history, and a history of the military tactics of the Prophet Muhammad. His writings reflect a rabid anti-Semitism and belief in conspiracy theories, but this should not stop U.S. military planners from learning what shapes his mind. Tlas's two-volume memoirs, *Mirat Hayati* (Reflections of my life), describes his experiences from 1948

to 1967, with commentary on a range of subjects that shaped his political and military philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Tlas's is a unique memoir that offers a rare glimpse into Syrian political-military thinking and the personal views of an extremely powerful figure within the Syrian regime.

Tlas was born in 1932 in a small village near Homs. French General Charles DeGaulle visited Tlas's village in 1943, where DeGaulle spoke to Syria as an ally, not as a protectorate, greatly influencing Tlas. Tlas added DeGaulle's books to his required reading list and studied DeGaulle's military campaigns and political rise to the presidency.

Israel's formation as a state in May 1948 and the defeat of the seven Arab armies also affected Tlas's views. Many revisionist writers blame the Arab's defeat on leaders who were more concerned with other landgrabbing leaders, or leaders who adopted the Palestinian cause to divert popular opinion, than they were with winning the war. Tlas believed the old Arab nationalist theory that the United States, France, Britain, and the Soviet Union conspired to create Israel. When Tlas describes the first Arab-Israeli War, he fails to consider Israel's infant defense force's resourcefulness or its tactical ability on the field.

The combined Arab forces' debacle in the first Arab war reverberated within Arab capitals. Colonel Husni Zaim used the momentum of discontent to lead a successful coup d'etat in 1949—the first time an Arab military strongman had overthrown a government in the Middle East. This ushered in a series of military takeovers and the permanent intervention of the military in the political life of many Arab nations.

During a second coup in 1949, Colonel Sami Al-Hinnawi came into power amid more violence involving the purging of Zaim and his inner circle. Tlas's goal had been to become a literature teacher but took a position in Syria's military academy

in 1950. His emphasis on education never left him, and he insisted on developing a learned armed force.

At the academy, Tlas was influenced by Lieutenant Colonel Mufleh Ali, who taught that the Palestinian War was a psychological one. He predicted this alone would topple Middle East governments. (Egypt, Iraq, and Libya had all experienced military coups that removed their monarchies.) Mufleh advocated a ceaseless campaign against Israel to be conducted by vanguard groups within Israel and on its borders. He instilled in Tlas the need to pursue other avenues of state power, such as waging a diplomatic war of attrition by bringing the Soviet Union and other great powers to an appreciation of the Arab view of the Palestinian situation.

Tlas studied French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's military campaigns, focusing on Napoleon's use of favorable terrain to equalize the odds of winning wars. He also studied Akram Deery's translations of Napoleon's infantry tactics and memorized the parts that dealt with mobility and logistics.

In 1951, the Ba'ath Party and the Arab Socialist Party merged. During this time, Ba'ath party founders, Michel Aflaq and Syria's Foreign Minister Salah-al-Din Al-Bitaar's roles were defined within the new Syrian government. Aflaq became the ideologue and Al-Bitaar assumed the day-to-day functions of the Ba'ath Party. This facade of union was critical to Tlas, because the Syrian armed forces contained pockets of political officers (Communists, Nasserists, Nationalists, Rejectionists, and Ba'athists).

## Flight Training for Tlas

Tlas and Al-Asad were assigned to the newly established air force academy in Aleppo. Cadets were trained on single-propeller De Havilland trainers with a cadet-to-instructor ratio of 6 to 1. The school had eight aircraft: six for training and

two for maintenance studies and spare parts. During one mock engagement, Tlas failed to conduct proper air maneuvers and was told he could not continue his air training. He told the senior air instructors his dream was to become chief of the general staff and that some day he would move divisions and brigades across the field of battle. Because the only subject Tlas excelled in was aerial navigation, his instructors suggested he enroll in the tank corps. The dismissal did not embitter Tlas; rather, he left with an appreciation for air dominance in planning ground attacks. He became one of only a few Arab officers who could communicate air coordinates to support ground units.

Many military theorists influenced Tlas's tactical thinking, including—

- German Field Marshals Erich von Manstein and Heinz Guderian, who shifted the center of ground tactics to the tank and formulated the plans for the massive air and tank assault that overwhelmed French forces in 1940.

- German General Erwin Rommel, whose desert campaign strategies led Tlas to consider Rommel's material as vital reading for ground infantrymen.

- Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz, whose introduction to *On War* was published in French military magazines.<sup>2</sup>

- Russian Field Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who planned and executed the defeat of Nazi forces in the Soviet Union and whose commentaries were Tlas's first introduction to Soviet doctrine.

- DeGaulle, whose use of the French resistance within Vichy France to undermine Nazi power and augment allied efforts provided examples to Tlas for Arab resistance movements within Israel.

- U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose ability to maintain coalitions during World War II taught Tlas the importance of coalition-building, which he used to build the Syrian-Egyptian union in 1958 and during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Tank command instructor Captain Abdul-Ghani Al-Dahman became Tlas's mentor. Al-Dahman taught Tlas tactical armored theory, military strategy, and combined tactics (armor, infantry, artillery, and airborne

assaults in a concentrated effort in the field), using examples from World War II film footage and readings about Nazi campaigns in Poland and France. He also focused on urban tank battles between the Soviet Union and invading Nazi forces.

Al-Dahman had a passion for studying warfare, specifically defensive maneuvers, concentration of fire, and visual and radio communications between tank formations. His students practiced in trucks mounted with 7.5- and 8-millimeter (mm) Hotchkiss machineguns. Al-Dahman was also instrumental in moving the tank school from Homs to Damascus, providing Tlas his first encounter with an actual tank—a surplus World War II Sherman. In 1954, Tlas was engaged in summer maneuvers and was totally immersed in learning his craft. His training included staff rides to the Golan and Israeli borders to study the 1948 Arab battles and to mark the sites of martyrs who had fallen during the first Arab-Israeli War.

### Mine Training

In 1955, Tlas studied the types of mines he might encounter in the field and took courses in waterborne mines (antiship and antisubmarine variants). Rommel was Tlas's main source of inspiration for mine deployment in a mechanized infantry environment. Tlas's chapter, "Panzer Tanks," illustrates his appreciation for German mechanized infantry tactics. One of his basic courses included mine identification, breaching, and bridge construction.

Tlas witnessed the ascendancy of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and blamed Nasser's death on Israeli intelligence. He pieces together a fantastic conspiracy theory that involves the herbalist doctor, Ali Al-Atfi, who Tlas alleges poisoned Nasser. In reality, Nasser had been battling diabetes and heart disease for many years before succumbing to a heart attack; doctors had long been urging him to lighten his schedule and reduce his public appearances.

In late 1955, Tlas was commissioned a junior lieutenant in the 25th Armored Brigade in Qatana (a town between Damascus and the strategic Golan Heights city of Kuneitra). He met brigade commander Major Toumah al-Awadallah, a dominant

figure in Tlas's military career who inspired him to study the Israeli Golani brigade. Al-Awadallah was harsh with Tlas and, as a member of a political faction opposing Ba'athists, reassigned Tlas to the Syrian-Turkish front during hostilities between the two nations in 1957. Al-Awadallah recognized Tlas's talent as an instructor and assigned him to translate French manuals on tank operations and the 75-mm gun—knowledge that was then imparted to noncommissioned (NCO) officers and troops.

### The Baghdad Pact

Tlas commented on what he considered the "evils" of the Baghdad Pact, which united Great Britain with Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey to contain the Soviet Union. He believes Britain and the United States are on a crusade to undermine Arab nationalist aspirations and that a united Arab front could counter superpower influence and destroy Israel. Tlas's hostility toward Israel has not lessened his keen interest in its deterrence strategy, which began in 1955, the year border hostilities between Israel and Syria increased after Damascus signed a mutual defense treaty with Cairo. Tlas's perspective of Israel is typically one-sided, with Israel consistently playing the role of aggressor. He does not mention the guerrilla attacks launched from Syria against Israel, only Israel's commando raids, specifically those launched from the sea.

On 6 March 1956, Syrian President Shukry Al-Quawaty, King Saud bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, and Nasser met in Cairo. After a week, they announced 11 points on which the 3 governments agreed to mutually support one another. Tlas outlines five of the points that are of military interest:

1. A comprehensive plan to coordinate and ensure the sovereignty of any Arab nation under threat.

2. A comprehensive defense plan to confront any external hostilities on any Arab nation.

3. The development of a plan to undermine nations who provide Israel's armed forces with recruits and volunteers for its defense.

4. The development of a plan to confront the threat posed by the Baghdad Pact to pressure Arab

governments into an alliance with the West.

5. A plan to support Jordan against external pressures.

The agreement followed a massive Czechoslovakian arms deal that doctrinally changed the Syrian military. Tlas describes large amounts of military hardware, including the T-34 tank, being offloaded at the Syrian port of Latakia. The 25th Armored Brigade received new equipment and a new unit commander—Al-Dahman—Tlas's old instructor from tank school. Al-Dahman was probably selected to command because of his experience in teaching tank tactics and to help absorb the Soviet equipment into the Syrian army.

Nasser asked Jordan's King Hussein to dismiss General John Glubb, the head of Jordan's Arab Legion, and who Nasser felt was a Western agent. Glubb's removal was not easy because Glubb had brought expertise; a bevy of British military and technical officers; and £25-million grant to be used entirely to sustain Jordan's armed forces. To persuade Hussein to discharge Glubb, the Jordanian Arab Legion, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria pledged funds to compensate for the lost British aid. Syria sent Jordan a brigade and \$8 million in military aid.

Political discord within the Syrian army, which was headed by General Shawkat Shukair, led violent Ba'athist party elements to attempt to assassinate Arab Socialist leader Colonel Adnan Maki. Tlas implies this division over political affiliation was an Achilles' heel for Syria during the time Turkish troops massed on the Syrian border in 1957 and during the union with Egypt between 1958 and 1961.

Tlas describes many conspiracy theories, including the 1956 covert plan to overthrow Syria concocted by Iraqi Chief of Staff General Dagestani, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, and members of the British intelligence. The plan called for sowing civil unrest within Syrian political factions, executing police actions to restore order, and instituting a government favorable to the Baghdad Pact. Tlas believed the plan was to secure Israel's northern border before Israel, France, and England attacked Egypt during the 1956 Suez Crisis. Tlas did not back his asser-

tions with any documentation or scholarly research, however. He also includes a theory of U.S. CIA involvement with the Islamic Brotherhood in 1954 in an attempt to assassinate Nasser.

**The 1956 Suez crisis.** In response to Nasser's destabilizing influence in the region (such as threats to Israel and the nationalization of the Suez Canal), France, England, and Israel participated in Operation Musketeer to regain control of the Suez Canal and, possibly, stimulate the removal of Nasser from power. The main military theater was around the Suez Canal and the Sinai. Because of the mutual defense pact between Cairo and Damascus, Syria participated in several incidents. Tlas's unit was sent to the Golan, where some minor engagements occurred.

Tlas describes a heated exchange between Zhukov and Foreign Minister Nikolai Bulganin in persuading the Soviets to publicly side with Egypt. The Suez Crisis signified the end of the colonial powers of France and England and the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers. Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev successfully negotiated the disengagement of Anglo-French and Israeli forces from Egypt.

Tlas recognized that Egypt and the Arab world scored a political victory in this conflict, although not a military one. If the region was to triumph over Israel, it would need to win at least one military war against Israel. Tlas, as head of Syria's Army, used his observations of the 1956 Suez Crisis to help plan the 1973 Yom-Kippur War.

**The Syrian-Turkish quasi-war.** Syria was openly hostile to the Baghdad Pact and accused Turkey of massing troops on its border to execute a U.S.-backed invasion. The Soviet Union supported Syria's charges, and Cold War tensions ensued, beginning with UN involvement and ending with Turkish and Syrian forces on the brink of hostility. Al-Awadallah, hoping to rid the army of Ba'athist influence, sent many Ba'athist officers, including Tlas, to the Turkish front. Tlas went from being an instructor at Syria's tank school to commanding several tanks and facing Turkish troops.

**Union with Egypt, 1958.** Syria's military and political leaders met weekly in early 1957 to discuss unification with Egypt to deter Syria's neighbors from meddling in Syria's internal affairs and to save it from internal divisions. The short-lived union eventually became the United Arab Republic.

Al-Bitaar, who met with Nasser in December 1957 to discuss the possibility of forming such a union was surprised to see Syria Army Chief General Afif Al-Burza there, even though both men had been part of the weekly deliberations. (It is important to note that these deliberations took place without Syrian President Al-Quwatly or Defense Minister Khalid Al-Azm's knowledge.) Al-Bitaar swallowed his surprise and joined Al-Burza in outlining Syria's internal strife and highlighting how communists, led by Khalid Bikdash, had controlled neighborhoods in Damascus and turned the Kurdish minority against the central government.

Al-Bitaar and Al-Burza complained that Iraq and Turkey, as members of the Baghdad Pact, had sent arms to Syrian rejectionists and had engaged (with U.S. encouragement) in overt military threats on Syria. Syrian senior officers convinced Nasser that unifying with Egypt would bolster Arab nationalism and bind the Syrian public in national unity. They told Nasser it was the only way to rescue Syria from civil chaos, but Nasser remained reluctant to enter into a unification agreement.

When Al-Quwatly learned of the unification talks, he also learned that 14 senior officers, who represented the bulk of command authority for the Syrian armed forces, were involved. Al-Quwatly feared a coup attempt and announced publicly his desire to unify with Egypt, which further pressured Nasser to agree to Al-Burza and Al-Bitaar's demands.

Nasser accepted unification with Syria (subject to a popular referendum between the peoples of Syria and Egypt) but mandated that all political parties in Syria be abolished and Syria's military divorce itself from politics. Al-Bitaar agreed to give up Ba'athist party politics to save Syria from civil strife. The decision did not come easy, however, as he was a cofounder of Ba'athism.

The two countries discussed the type of union they should become—a federal union like the United States, with two states under a single federal seat of government, or something other? On 22 February 1958, Syria and Egypt officially became the United Arab Republic (which disbanded in 1961).

Border skirmishes between Israeli settlers and Syrian farmers led to artillery exchanges between the two nations, with Syria's 1st Army challenging Israel's tanks. Tlas convinced his superiors of the need for a swift mechanized armor attack to challenge Israeli forces. Because of his bold recommendations to higher headquarters, Tlas was assigned to build up defensive units and reconnoiter the approaches to Tel Sheban. Tlas's unit set up kill boxes for Israeli armor and laid mines in the avenues opposing forces were most likely to use.

One of Tlas's most astonishing revelations is the planning of the 1958 Iraqi coup that brought down Iraq's monarchy. Iraqi Colonels Abdul-Kareem Qasem and Abdel-Salam Arif began planning a coup with their Syrian counterparts while stationed in Jordan. Al-Awadallah kept in contact with the Iraqi military officers while in Jordan without the knowledge of his commanding officer Colonel Suhail Ashi. Khalooq Ibrahim Zaki, an Iraqi student studying in Damascus, served as a conduit between Qasem and members of Syria's 2d Military Directorate (Intelligence).

Tlas's strategic discussions are peppered with events that happened in Iraq, including the 1958 deployment of U.S. Marines to Lebanon. Iraq's strongman, Qasem, was convinced Nasser was trying to assimilate Iraq into the United Arab Republic, a deal that would have led to purging the many officers who helped plan the 1958 coup and, in particular, the members of the Iraqi Ba'athist cells. In 1959, Nasser, with the help of Syrian Ba'athists, purged Syrian communist cells. Tlas believes this was a mistake as it further divided Syria's already politicized armed forces. In 1959, Syria made the decision to adopt Soviet military doctrine and Soviet-made weaponry.

Tlas spent part of 1959 on the Sinai front training Egyptian troops on the

operation and tactics of the T-34 Tank—part of Nasser's deliberate strategy to have Syrian Ba'athist officers assigned to Egypt. The Egyptians were trying to depoliticize and control Syria's army. Tlas and Al-Asad spent over a year in Egypt, learning hands-on lessons in practical land navigation

During unification, Syria's air force graduated only 16 pilots. Before then the average had been 57 new pilots a year. The Egyptians used psychological examinations to disqualify Syrian candidates, giving choice command positions to Egyptian officers. Military and internal security apparatuses were under the exclusive purview of the Egyptians. All these things worked against Egypt and Syria's unification, and Syrian officers grew embittered.

**The 1967 Six-Day War.** The Israeli air force lightning strike that neutralized Syria, Egypt, and Jordan's air forces set the stage for ground operations in the Sinai and the Golan Heights. Tlas highlights key battles on the Syrian front and discusses the strategic implications of Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, which lasted from 5 to 11 June 1967.

Tlas, an armored brigade commander, assessed the war in terms of territory lost. Egypt, Syria, and Jordan lost 89,359 square kilometers. Tlas discusses Israel's new strategic depth and air force ability to conduct deeper tactical strikes from bases in the Sinai and the West Bank. Tlas was concerned with Israel's expanded radar capability and its early warning systems in the Sinai, Golan, and the West Bank.

The book ends with Tlas becoming the armed forces chief of staff and deputy defense minister in 1967. Patrick Seale's book, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, the definitive biography of Al Asad, contains several references to Tlas's career that Tlas does not cover in his own memoirs.<sup>3</sup> For example, Tlas scarcely mentions his role after the 1963 coup, in which he became a member of the military committee that governed Syria. Also missing is an account of the ad hoc tribunals he presided over after the Hama (Homs) rebellion of 1964 and the pivotal role he played in forcing Ba'athist founder Aflaq out of Syria, which increased Al-Asad's power. Tlas's

role in the 1967 war was more than just a tank brigade commander; he was the deputy defense minister and was instrumental in purging officers to help Al-Asad tighten his grip on the army. Tlas also does not discuss the use of Palestinian guerrillas in the order of battle against Israel.

A major criticism of Tlas's memoirs is that he does not tell the reader the order of battle of the Syrian armed forces either. Throughout the two volumes he mentions armored units, brigades, and regiments but never tells how many tanks or armored carriers were at each level of the organization. This is frustrating, particularly when he is describing Syrian battles with the Israelis in the Six-Day War.

Tlas's memoirs should have importance for American military planners because by his own admission, he views the United States as an enemy. America's interest in Tlas should be equivalent to its interest in Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap. As U.S. forces become more involved in the Middle East, it is vital the United States study such personalities as Tlas.<sup>4</sup> **MR**

#### NOTES

1. Mustafa Tlas, *Mirat Hayati* (Reflections of my life) (Tlas's publishing firm, Dar Tlas, published the memoirs between 1991 and 1995.)

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

3. Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

4. For more information about Syria, see Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Politics 1945-1958* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1986). Seale explains the prominent role of Syria's army in its political life. See also Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), for a discussion of Hafiz Al-Asad's rise to power and how he maintained a hold on the Syrian military establishment.

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