

Introduction to Farouk al-Sharaa's Memoirs: *The Untold Story* Published by the ACRPS

About this book

These are the memoirs of Farouk al-Sharaa, arguably, one of the most important, if not the most important Arab foreign ministers serving in the second half of the 20th century. The memoirs recall the times under President Hafez al-Assad, offering an exceptional historical testament to the events lived in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and the greater Arab Levant in general, but also in the world, as perceived through the prism of the Arab region. That this account was written by a highly-cultured politician well able to sift the wheat from the chaff, rumor from reality, and opinion from fact only adds to its significance.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies was in the process of being set up at the beginning of 2010, when its founder and director Azmi Bishara implored Syrian vice-president Farouk al-Sharaa to write a memoir of his time as foreign minister. He was not the first to suggest this, members of al-Sharaa's family had previously tried to persuade him. At the time, it was still unclear whether the Center would actually publish the memoirs. What mattered was to open a living archive; a resource for the benefit of coming Arab generations, a service to Arab diplomacy, in particular Syrian diplomacy, as well as an invaluable resource for researchers and historians. The decision was made to appoint historian Mohammed Jamal Barout, a researcher at the Center, to assist in collecting together the main documentary sources, and to review the official records available at the time so as to refresh the rich memory of the author.

Primarily, our focus was on the Syrian-Israeli negotiation experience. Israeli diplomats and generals such as Uri Saguy and Itamar Rabinovitch, have recounted the Israeli account, while Dennis Ross, Madeleine Albright, and former president Bill Clinton, among others, have given the American version of events. The Syrian version, however, has remained untold: numerous interpretations have emerged, but Syria itself has throughout kept tight-lipped. As a result, we suggested to Farouk al-Sharaa that he entitle his memoirs *The Untold Story*. He needed little convincing that the world had to know the Syrian version of the negotiations, and that Syrian diplomacy would need it in the future to learn from the experience. Vice-president Sharaa temporized, perhaps to consult with the Syrian leadership, but in the end he agreed to write his account and work commenced.

We already had high regard for Farouk al-Sharaa's competence and abilities, but he surprised us with his refined style, astute comments, and ability for sharp observation and portrayal of personalities. The book contains critical new information that far exceeded our estimation. The reader will find their knowledge of events in the Arab region since the 1980s deepened by a new familiarity with the details of Syrian diplomacy and foreign-policy decision-making. Readers will also emerge with greater confidence in the justness of the Arab cause in their conflict with Israel, which has repeatedly squandered opportunities for peace.

The historical backdrop is interwoven with the author's own life story, as he goes back to his childhood and youth, offering a glimpse into the allure and implications of Arabism for a young intellectual in Syria in the middle of the 20th century, whilst simultaneously providing an account of the military coups and power struggles in Syria and inside the Baath Party.

The book's chapters on President Hafez al-Assad's relationship with his brother Rifaat and relations with Iraq and Saddam Hussein, as well as details of the relationship with Yasser Arafat and the intervention in Lebanon are no less significant than the vital material on the Syrian-Israeli negotiations from Madrid up until the failure of the Geneva Summit between Clinton and al-Assad, whose details appear for the first time in this book.

Readers of al-Sharaa's memoirs may criticize the fact that the book does not deal with wider critical matters in Syria, particularly ones concerned with the nature of the regime and its relationship with the people. Many issues, it might be observed, are narrated from a very specific perspective. Our response to these comments is that the author is writing from the viewpoint of his work as foreign minister, and that the most important things he has to tell us are related to the foreign policy of his country; the value of the book is thus inherent in his unique perspective. This perspective is privy to the details and secrets of affairs of state and evaluates them, not from the viewpoint of a researcher or historian, but from the viewpoint of an honest intellectual eyewitness who remains true to his view of affairs. He writes about what he saw and thought at the time, but does not stint from providing the reader at times with astute comments, and at times with retrospective assessments, moreover, ones that don't lack an emotional dimension.

Take for example this comprehensive evaluative review that appears in the final chapter of the book: "On the plane back from Geneva to Damascus on March 27, we assessed what had happened after a long period of silence. The plane had reached cruising altitude after takeoff and the roar of the engines had abated and the wings stabilized. The heart of the assessment lay in the fact that the "great game" that the Israelis had begun as "advocates for peace" and the Americans as "honest brokers" had been revealed. Syria had justifications for adopting peace as a strategic option: the Soviet Union had collapsed at the beginning of the 1990s, there was no Egyptian or Arab backbone since the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, there was no strategic depth provided by Iraq since the collapse of the National Charter and the absurd wars with Iran and Kuwait that followed, there was no vestige of the Damascus Declaration left to speak of, after its security part was annulled at royal request. This is actual history and cannot be toyed with. Also a fact, is that despite all this, the Israeli settlers who had stolen Syrian land never felt secure there."

This book was completed in April 2011, but we decided to delay its publishing because of the tragic events unfolding in Syria. That delay extended considerably until we felt that publication could be put off no longer. We do not know what fate has in store, and it is impossible to wait to find out. This is Farouk al-Sharaa's book, and it was our duty and responsibility to publish it once we sought permission from the author.

We are proud to offer this invaluable book, entrusted with us, to the general reader.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies