

Observation no: 137 (Six Day War)

Country-year: Syria - 1966

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

Yes.

After the March 8, 1963 coup that brought to power the Ba'ath Party in Syria and its military leaders, increasing sectarian rivalries marked the armed forces and the party's civilian and military branches. Particularly, the Sunni president and army general Amin al-Hafiz tried to counter an opposition buildup of Alawis led by the chief of staff of the armed forces Salah Jadid. Finally, on 23 February 1966, a military coup led by Jadid's "leftist" supporters within the Ba'ath and backed by army units stationed around Damascus (mainly Alawi and Druze) and the Regional Command of the Ba'ath (Ba'ath in Syria) deposed president al-Hafiz as well as the National Command of the party (the broader Ba'ath).¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes.

By the end of September 1966, the country had already experienced 12 coups in 17 years.

Political and economic weaknesses during the 1945-1949 parliamentary democracy period and corruption within the regime led to three military coups in 1949: on March 30, August 18, and December 17. The post-independence period was also marked by two other coups in November 28, 1951 and February 25, 1954.

During the "Separatist period", the army and political factions successfully conducted a coup on September 28, 1961 but failed to consolidate their power with another coup in March 28, 1962. On April 1, 1962, a Nasserist faction led a failed coup but succeeded a year later, on March 8, 1963, along with Ba'athist and independent unionist officers and installed the Ba'ath Party in power.

After the post-coup "Ba'athist transformation" of the Syrian army, the Nasserists led an abortive coup on July 18, 1963. Finally, the country experienced two other coups in 1966: one successful on February 23 by a "leftist" Ba'athist army faction formed

¹ Van Dam, Nikolaos. *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1996, pp. 42-47.

by officers from religious minorities and one failed counter coup on September 8 by the deposed National Command of the Ba'ath.²

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

Yes, although not officially.

Nureddin al-Atassi was President of Syria from February 23, 1966 and General Secretary of the Ba'ath Party. However, the *de facto* leader of the country was the Deputy General Secretary of the Party and general Salah Jadid, an Alawi from Latakia that had studied at the Military Academy of Homs and had then led the Ba'athist Military Committee along with Hafez al-Assad and Muhammad Umran, two other Alawi officers. He was chief of staff of the Syrian army from August 1963 to September 1965 and then took the civilian function of assistant secretary-general of the Syrian Regional Command of the Ba'ath.³

4. Are ethnic, sectarian, or racial criteria used to exclude segments of the population from the officer corps?

Yes.

While religious and ethnic minorities disproportionally formed the rank and file after the independence and during the 1950's, the officers who occupied important military functions were mainly Sunnis (Syria's main religious group) in the 1950's. From 1949, the succession of military coups brought to power members of ethnic (however still Sunni) minorities and in the early 1960's, a purge of the Sunni Damascene officers occurred.⁴ However, it is really from 1963 with the Ba'ath Party in power, that officers from minorities increased dramatically. This is due to the fact that the Ba'athist officers that were called to reinforce the party's positions within the officer corps were traditionally from a religious minority, particularly Alawis (up to 90% of the new officers), but also Druze and Ismailis. And inversely, the political opponents purged from the army after 1963 were mainly Sunni Muslims.⁵

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

² Verified in Luttwak, Edward. *Coup d'État. A practical Handbook*. Table II Basic List of Coups and Attempted Coups, 1945-78. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979, pp. 205-206 & Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 34-48.

³ Seale, Patrick. "Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East". Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, p. 89 & Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 32 & 62.

⁴ Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 26-31.

⁵ Van Dam, Nikolaos, p. 31.

After the Ba'ath took power in 1963 and a resulting purge of political opponents occurred in the army, Ba'athist officers, and particularly Ba'athist Alawi officers, replaced the eliminated opponents. It has to be noted that however the Ba'athist ideology officially called for Pan-Arabism and the banishing of sectarian, regional, and tribal feelings, in practice, sectarian, personal, and regional preferences of the military commanders often resulted in Sunni officers to be largely discriminated.⁶

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

I cannot find evidence of this in the major histories already cited but we can assume that this was the case. See answers to questions 5 & 12.

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes.

I cannot find evidence of this in the major histories already cited but we can assume that this was the case. See answer to question 5.

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes.

On March 28, 1962, the head of the Sunni Damascene officers group led an abortive coup in order to secure the influence of his group within the army and at the government level.⁷

On September 8, 1966, a military counter coup was led by the Druze officer Salim Hatum, coreligionists, and members of the National Command of the Ba'ath deposed in February of that same year, achieved to arrest president al-Atassi and Salah Jadid in the southern city and capital of the Druze region of Jabal al-Duruz, Suwayda. The tensions escalated when al-Assad, the then minister of defense, threatened to bombard the city and sent military units. As a result, Hatum and coconspirator fled to Jordan and the coup failed.⁸

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

Yes.

⁶ Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 31-35 & 39.

⁷ Van Dam, Nikolaos, p. 30.

⁸ Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 55-56 .

Although Nureddin al-Atassi, Syria's Ba'athist president in 1966, was not a military, Ba'athist military leaders had *de facto* led the country since the 1963 coup and under the presidency of Ba'athist general Amin al-Hafiz from July 1963 to February 1966. Similarly, the country had been governed by the military before 1963 after a coalition of Sunni Damascene officers led a coup that caused Syria to split on September 28, 1961 from its union with Egypt in the short-living 1958-1961 United Arab Republic.⁹

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No.

I cannot find evidence of this in the major histories already cited.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes.

The Military Intelligence Service.

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes.

In the aftermath of Syria's separation from the United Arab Republic in 1961, internal Damascene/non-Damascene divisions characterized the officer corps. Following the March 28, 1962 failed coup, six prominent Damascene officers, including the head of this influential group, were expelled from Syria. During the first half of the 1960's, struggles for power between Sunni senior officers and a purge of the Sunni Damascene officers from strategic army units and in the Army Command greatly weakened the presence of Sunnis in the officer corps for the benefit of officers with a rural background and from minorities. Then again, after the March 8, 1963 coup, the army was "Ba'athified" and a purge of mainly Sunni Nasserist and Independent Unionist officers occurred. Finally, the February 1966 coup led by officers with a religious minority background resulted in another purge of some of the most prominent Sunni officers.¹⁰

Following the September 8 failed coup by the deposed National Command of the Ba'ath and led by the Druze major Salim Hatun that altogether gathered a majority

⁹ Van Dam, Nikolaos, p. 29.

¹⁰ Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 30-33 & 47.

of Druze officers and recruits, an extensive purge of the Druze officers occurred in the Syrian army and the Ba'ath Party.¹¹

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes.

The overlapping of civilian and military Ba'athist leaders in power since the Ba'ath Party access to power in 1963 favored constant exchanges. The Military Committee of the Party and other Ba'athist military leaders played an influential role within the government.

¹¹ Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 50-56 & 58-61 & Seale, Patrick, p. 113.