

Observation no: 153 (Yom Kippur War)

Country-year: Saudi Arabia - 1972

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

No.

King Faysal bin Abdul Aziz al Saud was in power since 1964 following the abdication of his half-brother king Saud. King Faysal was the son of Saudi Arabia's founder, Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al Saud also known as "Ibn Saud", who had captured Riyadh and unified central Arabia by defeating opponent Arab tribes. Ibn Saud established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 and imposed a system in which he would designate an heir and an "heir apparent" as a way to counter rivalries among the various branches of the extensive al Saud family. Ibn Saud had designated Saud, his eldest son, as heir, and Faysal, one of his other sons, as heir apparent. Following Ibn Saud's death, the two brothers engaged in a decade-long power struggle that ultimately resulted in Saud's resignation and Faysal's designation as Saudi Arabia's new monarch.¹ King Faysal ruled Saudi Arabia from 1964 until his assassination by one of his nephews on March 25, 1975.²

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No.³

However, officers inspired by Nasser's Arab nationalism allegedly mounted a coup plot against the monarchy in 1954. Again, the Air Force in November 1962 and army supporters of Saudi nationalist and republican movements in June-July 1969, planned coups attempts against the monarchy. The result was a purge of politicized nationalist officers from the armed forces and the monarchy's tighter control over military commands.⁴

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

No.

However, like all the princes of the House of Saud, king Faysal received a basic military formation during his youth and was even designated by Ibn Saud to lead

¹ Kéchichian, Joseph. *Faysal, Saudi Arabia's King for all Seasons*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008, pp. 15-16 & 55-88.

² Kéchichian, pp. 192-193.

³ 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, p. 205

⁴ Kéchichian, pp. 113-114.

expeditions to conquer and secure the control of territories within the Arabian Peninsula in the years preceding the Kingdom's formal establishment in 1932.⁵

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

Yes.

King Faysal established that the army, air force, and navy would primarily recruit from urban populations while the officers of the Saudi National Guard (SANG), the irregular land force of Saudi Arabia, would belong exclusively to loyal tribes.⁶ Within the SANG or "White Army", the special battalion named *Fowj* was composed of recruits carefully chosen for their loyalty to the king. The *Fowj* recruits secured key regions and areas and have been historically used to limit the regular army's ability to plan a coup. The *Fawj* also served to integrate and allocate funds to tribes and Bedouin leaders.⁷ Finally, the Saudi Shia minority, mainly inhabiting the oil-rich Eastern province, has historically been discriminated from all state institutions as Shi'ism is still considered by the Saudi Wahabbi state ideology as "heretic".

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

Yes.

The Saudi royal family maintains tight control over the military high command structure. The command relationships have historically been highly personal and "*informal relationships in general define real authority and promotion*". Up until today, most of the senior command positions are given to direct members or relatives of the royal family and depend on "*longevity, conservatism, or personal loyalty rather than performance*".⁸ Non-members of the royal family started to be appointed for senior positions mainly during the professionalization of the army during the mid-1970's.⁹

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

No.

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

⁵ Kéchichian, pp. 27-31.

⁶ Kéchichian, p. 111.

⁷ Cordesman, Anthony. *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Military and International Security Dimensions*. Military Leadership, Organization, and Manpower. Westport & London: Praeger & Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003, pp. 177-178.

⁸ Cordesman, Anthony, p. 47

⁹ Kéchichian, p. 115.

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

No.

The coup attempts during the 1950's and 1960's pushed king Faysal to emphasize professionalization and modernization of the armed forces rather than its politicization. This was an attempt to eliminate Arab nationalist ideas among officers influenced by the successes of Nasser in Egypt and the Free Officers in Iraq.¹⁰

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

No.

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

The National Guard would, however, be used to crush the Shia uprising in the Eastern province in 1979 following the Islamic revolution in Iran the same year.

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

No.

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

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

Yes.

The Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) or "White Army" is an irregular force commanded by the third ranking person in government and is separate from the Ministry of Defense. The SANG's primary purpose is to defend internal security threats and support the Saudi Arabian land forces in this task. While the regular armed forces focus on external security and are kept outside of the cities, the SANG and its loyal tribal unit, the *Fowj*, operate in urban areas.¹¹ The National Guard has been commended from 1963 to 2010 by Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman al-Saud, the current King of Saudi Arabia as of February 2013.¹² The SANG, being

¹⁰ Kéchichian, pp. 114-115.

¹¹ Tahtinen, Dale. National Security Challenges to Saudi Arabia, *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, 1978, pp.15-16.

¹² Cordesman, Anthony, p. 46

disconnected from the regular army but well organized and equipped, has historically protected the royal family from potential coups from the regular armed forces.¹³

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

No.

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

However, the National Guard has an Intelligence Directorate that focuses on broader intelligence and internal security.¹⁴

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

Yes.

Saudi nationalist officers sympathizing with anti royalist groups such as the Popular Democratic Front, the National Front for the Liberation of Saudi Arabia, and the Federation of Democratic Forces were arrested and purged from the army after the discovery of a coup plot in June-July 1969.¹⁵

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

Yes.

The presence of members of the royal family in senior positions within the regular and irregular armed forces (SANG) imply that communication between the civilian and military officers in Saudi Arabia was permanent.

¹³ Cordesman, Anthony, p. 179

¹⁴ Cordesman, Anthony, p. 259

¹⁵ Kéchichian, p. 114.