

Observation no: 179

Country-year: Syria 1981

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

Yes.

After the Arab defeat of the 1967 war with Israel, the two major Syrian power institutions, the armed forces and the civilian apparatus of the Ba'ath Party, engaged in a conflict. Hafez al-Assad, then minister of defense, advocated for a more unified Arab military front and an Arab political coalition against Israel, while Salah Jadid, then leader of the Ba'ath and *de facto* leader of the country, pushed for a socialist transformation of Syria, therefore cutting it from "rightist" and pro-Western countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, or Iraq. This conflict between the two leaders and institutions escalated at the end of February 1969 when Assad neutralized the Latakia and Tartus party branches and all media in the country.¹ On September 1970, the Syrian army was forced to retreat from Jordan under Israeli threats to intervene after the Syrian leaders had decided to intervene militarily in favor of the Palestinians. This defeat and a decision of the Ba'ath Extraordinary National Congress of October 1970 to relieve Assad of his military functions led him and his loyalists to conduct a successful coup against the regime on November 13, 1970. This resulted in the seizure of the civilian branch of the Ba'ath by Assad's supporters and in the arrest of Salah Jadid and of the president Nureddin al-Atassi who remained in jail until their death. Following this internal "Corrective Revolution" of the Ba'ath and subsequent purge, Hafez al-Assad's military factions monopolized the political power and Assad became successively prime minister and then president of Syria on February 1971.²

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes.

The country had experienced more than a dozen coups or coup attempts since 1949.

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.

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. 62-66.

² Van Dam, Nikolaos, p. 68.

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. The country then experienced two coups in 1966: one successful on February 23 by a “leftist” Ba’athist army faction formed by officers from religious minorities and one failed counter coup on September 8 by the deposed National Command of the Ba’ath.

Finally, after a first attempt in February 28, 1969, the November 13, 1970 coup or “Corrective revolution” led by the right-wing branch of the Baathist army faction successfully and lastly installed Hafez al Assad in power in Syria. ³

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

Yes.

Hafez al-Assad graduated from the Military Academy of Homs and became an air force officer after attending the Aleppo Flying School.⁴ He was then a founding and leading member of the Ba’athist Military Committee from the period of Syria’s union with Egypt in the United Arab Republic (1958-1961) and under the presidency of general Amin al-Hafiz up until the Ba’athist 1963 coup. From 1964, Assad was commander of the air force and was then appointed minister of defense after the February 23, 1966 coup that brought Salah Jadid to power and Nureddin al-Atassi to the presidency.⁵

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

Yes.

The sectarian, regional, and tribal composition of the Syrian armed forces and particularly the successive purges in the army during the 1961-1970 period until the access to power of Hafez al-Assad, characterized by high political instability, resulted in the Alawi to be strongly represented in the officer corps. Sunni, Druze, or Ismaili officers could still occupy high military functions but were not able to

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, pp. 205-206 & Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 34-48.

⁴ Seale, Patrick. “Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East”. Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, p. 39.

⁵ Van Dam, Nikolaos, p. 51.

challenge the authority of Assad thanks to the composition of most of the rank and file formed by Alawis and loyalists of Assad. Intra-sectarian rivalries among Alawis also resulted in Assad to eliminate Alawi opponents among the officer corps and replace them with supporters from Assad's own family, tribe, and region.⁶

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

Yes.

After the army was "Ba'athified" following the 1963 coup and the "rightist" factions of the civilian and military branches of the party eliminated in the 1966 coup, the intra-party rivalries among Alawis particularly resulted in Hafez al-Assad and his Pan-Arab supporters to take power in November 1970 and a subsequent purge of Assad's opponents among high-ranking officers and the officer corps in general.

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

Yes.

The Ba'ath was the only party ruling the country, its opponents were eliminated with the 1963 coup, and the armed forces went through a "Ba'athification" process.

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 answers to questions 5 & 6.

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

Yes.

Following Hafez al-Assad's first attempt to strengthen his power in the country on February 1969 and in his conflict with Salah Jadid, his military supporters abducted several aids and supporters of Colonel al-Jundi, Jadid's supported and chief of

⁶ Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 68-70.

Interestingly, the control of the country by Assad and by one single religious minority in power, the Alawis, resulted in more political stability and military success as the duration of the Assad regime and achievements of the Syrian armed forces along with the Egyptians in the 1973 war with Israel showed.

national security and general intelligence services. This also resulted in al-Jundi to commit suicide.⁷

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

No.

However, the Syrian military had been focused primarily on occupation duties in Lebanon during the past several years, neglecting preparation for conventional war.⁸ In many ways the army was performing governing duties, just not on Syrian soil.

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

Yes.

Rifat al-Assad, Hafez's own brother, was commander of the elite army units named Defense Companies that were stationed around Damascus and provided regime security.⁹

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 1978 Assad purged over 400 officers who had criticized the occupation of Lebanon.¹⁰

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

Yes.

⁷ Van Dam, Nikolaos, pp. 66-67.

⁸ Kenneth Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Political Science, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, MA), 1996, p. 496.

⁹ Van Dam, Nikolaos, p. 70.

¹⁰ Pollack, p. 496.

Regime security largely depended on Assad's officer's factions. The overwhelming role of the armed forces, as well as tight control of the civilian and military branches of the Ba'ath Party, made the exchange of information between the civilian and military leaders a natural process.