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JACK ANDERSON

Syrian Factions Challenge Assad For Dominance

Hafez Assad, the Syrian dictator whose intransigence has been the main stumbling block to the pullout of foreign troops from Lebanon, is actively conniving to depose Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat. Yet Assad is in a vulnerable position, according to secret intelligence reports.

Assad's enemies within Syria include senior army officers, the majority Sunni Moslems, elements of his Baath Party supported by Iraq, the Moslem Brotherhood and even members of his own minority Alawite sect. He stays in power through the naked repression of a 20,000-man security force run by his brother, Rifaat.

Secret CIA and State Department reports seen by my associate Dale Van Atta assess the threats to Assad's rule from his many enemies. Any one group has abundant reason to wish for Assad's ouster or assassination, but whether any has the nerve and skill to get rid of him is debatable. At 53, Assad has ruled Syria for 12 years; like his adversaries Arafat and Jordan's King Hussein, he is a survivor.

Here's the intelligence rundown on Assad's opposition:

- Moslem Brotherhood: This radical Islamic group has been Assad's most obvious rival, but Rifaat's tank-equipped "defense companies" decimated the brotherhood. They began with an attack on several hundred of its members in Hama in February, 1982. Rifaat's thugs then went on a two-week rampage in the city that reportedly left 20,000 dead.

- Sunnis: "As Syria's first non-Sunni Moslem president, Assad has always had to contend with opposition from the country's predominantly Sunni population," the CIA reports. "To placate the Sunnis, he built a team of technicians and economic planners drawn from the educated Sunni elite, [and gave] many Sunnis highly visible and ostensibly important government posts."

These included the defense and foreign ministries, yet "the Sunnis remain effectively cut off from real power and [resent] the domination of Assad's small Alawite sect."

- Baath Party: Assad has stacked the Syrian Baath Party with Alawites, but "some members, and doubtless some military officers as well, would be willing to support an Iraqi-sponsored coup attempt against Assad," the CIA predicts. The Iraqi and Syrian Baath parties have long been at odds, and Baghdad maintains ties with exiled Syrian Baathists in Beirut.

- Alawites: This minority Moslem sect is divided into four tribes and four religious subdivisions; in other words, Assad is a member of a minority within a minority. "Dissident Alawites confront two choices," a State Department report explains: they "can either remain united with Assad and fight to the last Alawite, or ... take it upon themselves to clean out their own community."

Much of the Alawites' anger centers on Assad's brother, Rifaat, whose venal ways offend the devout and who is held responsible for the 1972 murder of a respected Alawite leader, Muhammad Umran.

- The army: Assad's most serious opposition, according to the CIA, has been among senior military officers. At least 50 officers are believed to have been involved in an abortive coup attempt in January, 1982.

To counter the threat from the military, Assad keeps several senior officers under close surveillance and arbitrarily dismisses or imprisons the most suspect as "an obvious warning to others." The State Department notes that Assad generally has tried to "dominate the military by personally clearing all promotions, transfers and retirements." He also seems to believe that no coup will be attempted as long as an external threat from Israel remains—which helps explain Assad's persistent efforts to sabotage any overall peace proposals.