



INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS

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MAY 4 2001
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

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17 JUL 1976

I-7506/76

Chief, Declass Br
Dir. & Rec. Div, WHS

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

SUBJECT: Syria's Paradoxical Role in Lebanon - INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

23 JUL 1976

(U) No aspect of the crisis in Lebanon has been so confusing as the role played by Syria and its president, Hafiz Al Asad. At first sight, it would appear that Asad and Ba'athist Syria are the natural allies of the Palestinians and the Lebanese Muslim leftists. Several factors have prompted Asad to support the Christian rightist elements instead.

~~(C)~~ Asad overthrew his Ba'athist Party¹ colleagues in 1970 over disagreement with their unsuccessful intervention in Jordan during Hussein's crackdown on the fedayeen in Amman. He has led perennially turbulent Syria for six years through cautious planning and maneuvering, both internally and in the inter-Arab arena. His careful application of first political, then military force in Lebanon is an example of how he operates. Even his boldest stroke, the joint Syrian-Egyptian attack on Israel in 1973, was a carefully planned exercise which succeeded in gaining its political end: it seized the United States-and the world with the need to break the Arab-Israeli impasse. He is, in sum, a prudent and careful, but tough, practitioner of statecraft. Several political-military factors have operated to reinforce his natural tendencies and cause him to opt for a course or action which seems antipathetic to the image of revolutionary Ba'athist Syria,

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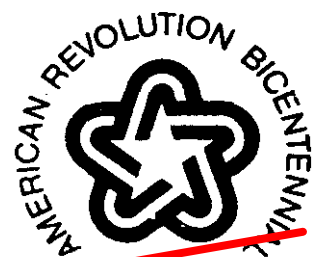
Asad heads a moderate wing of the Ba'ath Party that is at loggerheads with a radical wing of the party in Iraq. These two wings view each other as heretics. Given the hostility of his eastern neighbor, Asad is loath to see emerge on his western flank a radical leftist- and Palestinian-dominated Lebanon, almost certainly unamenable to his direction.

17 July 76

Furthermore, a radical Lebanon could drag Asad into a war with Israel at a time, place, and in circumstances not of his own choosing.

Moreover, a radicalized Lebanon would be a military liability as a confrontation state with Israel. Lebanon may never be able to field a credible military force against Israel and certainly could not do so for years. Asad would thus be forced either to extend his forces along the

¹The Arab Ba'ath Party (Ba'ath = Ar. "resurrection") espouses a philosophy of Arab unity, socialism and secularism. Founded by Syrian intellectuals in the early 1940's, it has had a checkered history of ideological splits and power struggles between its military and civilian adherents.



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Lebanese-Israeli border, a mission for which they are clearly inadequate, or to present Israel with a virtually undefended corridor through which the IDF could outflank his forces on the Golan Heights.

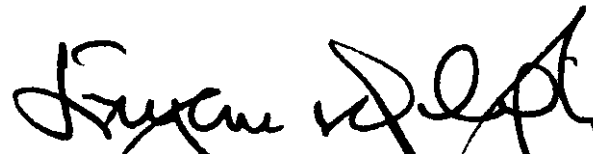
Syria's disinclination to have a radical Lebanon on its flank is a continuation of its traditionally rigid control of Palestinians in Syria. While it is extremely wary of the more radical "rejectionist" fedayeen groups, Syria clearly does not trust even the "establishment" PLO, which is an undisciplined and shifting alliance often, as now, in disarray and impossible to regulate.

~~(C)~~ Asad was the first Syrian leader to declare his willingness to negotiate with Israel. Although Syria will drive a hard bargain in negotiations, Asad and a probable majority of his countrymen see that Israel is a reality and that United States support for that reality makes an Arab military victory highly unlikely. Syria, therefore, would prefer to get on with negotiations in order to turn its attention to its need for economic development. Asad wants the Palestinians brought to heel to lessen their ability to disrupt attempts to reach a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute.

~~(C)~~ Finally, Asad is a member of the minority Alawite sect which dominates the Syrian government, although most Syrians adhere to the majority Sunni Muslim sect. He thus has a vested interest in opposing Sunni Muslim domination, which a Palestinian/leftist victory would portend, over the Christian and Muslim minority sects in Lebanon. This is perhaps a seemingly less compelling reason for Asad's behavior than the political-military considerations elucidated above, but it comes from the gut and, psychologically, it may well be the mainspring of his policy.

DECLASSIFIED
AUTHORITY EO 12958

MAY 4 2001
Chief, Declassify
Div. & Rec. Div. W-119


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Coordination:
None required.

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