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OCI No. 0507/76
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Relations Between Syria and the USSR

Political Relations

Syria maintains very close ties to the Soviet Union. These ties are based on Damascus' dependence on Moscow for the supply of military equipment and economic assistance, and on Syria's desire to be able, in a crisis, to turn to the Soviets for additional political and military support. This close relationship has never enabled the Soviets to gain the hold over Syria that they once had over Egypt, however. Despite years of importuning, Moscow has failed to persuade Syria to sign a friendship treaty such as that in force with Iraq and, until recently, Egypt. Damascus' refusal to be tied to any foreign state in even a symbolic way is a result of the fervent pan-Arab nationalism espoused by Syria's dominant Baath Party.

Relations between Damascus and Moscow have cooled somewhat over the past several months, in part because Damascus feels a less urgent need to keep the Soviets happy. The likelihood of hostilities in the Middle East is at a relatively low level, and Syria's armed forces have been more than rearmed since the 1973 Middle East war. As a result of these general considerations and differences over a variety of particular issues, Syria recently has appeared to Moscow to be taking an increasingly independent policy line. The USSR, therefore, has been increasingly dissatisfied that its substantial economic and military aid investment has not been paying dividends in the form of greater Soviet influence on Syrian policy.

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The Soviets are particularly apprehensive that Syrian President Asad will go the way of Egyptian President Sadat and begin to deal unilaterally with the United States to achieve a settlement with Israel. The now aborted conference in Riyadh between Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait alarmed Moscow. The Soviets feared that Saudi money might lead Syria to improve its relations with Cairo and move closer to the US orbit. Moscow has also been unhappy with Syria's cool view of Soviet proposals to reconvene the suspended Middle East peace conference. The Soviets have long championed Geneva as the place to settle the Arab-Israel conflict because in that forum the Soviets have a role coequal with the US.

Moscow has been privately critical of the way Syria has handled its role in Lebanon, and especially about Damascus' willingness to consult closely with US officials about the Lebanese problem. Although Moscow still supports a negotiated solution to the conflict there, it would have preferred a more evenhanded Syrian policy--one that did not antagonize Soviet friends among the Palestinians, the Lebanese left, and the radical Arab states.

Other issues that have troubled Soviet-Syrian relations over the past several months include:

- Asad's crackdown on the Syrian Communist Party.
- Friction between Soviet advisers and the Syrian military.
- Syrian resistance to Soviet attempts to obtain greater use of Syrian port facilities.
- Syria's increasing inclination to look to Western rather than Soviet sources for goods and technology.
- Damascus' increasingly serious quarrel with the Iraqi government, which is also backed by the Soviets.

Despite its concerns, Moscow has not attempted to put the same pressure on Syria that it did on Egypt. Soviet arms supplies and economic aid continue to flow in substantial quantities, and Moscow has not openly criticized President Asad. Because of the deterioration in Soviet-Egyptian ties,

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Moscow still looks on Damascus as its principal foothold among the Arab confrontation states. The visit to Syria in early June by Soviet Premier Kosygin--the first such visit by a principal Soviet leader since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war--seems to be a Russian attempt to alleviate some of these strains.

Military Cooperation

Between 2,000 and 3,000 Soviet military advisers and technicians are in Syria. Damascus is believed eager to replace the Soviets with trained Syrian personnel as soon as this is feasible, but we see no signs that the Soviets will be asked to leave in so abrupt a way as was the case in Egypt. A number of Syrians are receiving training in the USSR.

No Soviet combat units are now in Syria, although a Soviet SA-6 brigade was sent into the country during the 1973 war. Its equipment has since been turned over to the Syrians, and associated Soviet personnel presumably withdrawn. In any new round of fighting, the Soviets might again send a military force to Syria, if the Syrians seemed on the verge of defeat, but it probably would only be a token size force, one more for show than action. A Soviet force of any significant size probably would not be able to reach Syria in time to affect the outcome of a new round of hostilities.

The Soviet navy has been using the Syrian ports at Tartus and Latakia since the 1973 war for the replenishment of some of its naval ships in the eastern Mediterranean. In Tartus, a Soviet repair ship regularly performs service on Soviet submarines and landing ships. With the loss of Soviet base rights at Alexandria, Egypt, Moscow has been pressing Syria for increased access to Tartus and Latakia. The Soviets apparently would like to establish shore-based naval facilities in Syria that would be under Soviet control, but have so far been unable to secure Damascus' agreement.

Arms Supplies

The USSR continues to be Syria's main source of military equipment. The Soviets have provided \$2.5 billion of military assistance to Syria since 1955, almost 90 percent since the

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June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Following the expulsion of Soviet advisers from Egypt in 1972, Damascus became the focus of the Soviet military program in the Middle East.

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Moscow responded to Syrian arms requests during the 1973

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jet fighter aircraft are being delivered this year. Moscow also has supplied the MIG-21L, a more advanced variant of the Fishbed than previously provided to Syria, and has resumed MIG-23 shipments after a [REDACTED] hiatus.

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Syria does not want to jeopardize its major source of weapons, but it is trying to reduce its dependence on the USSR. In its first important arms purchase from the West in over 20 years, Syria this year concluded an \$80 million deal with France for the delivery of helicopters and an anti-tank missile system.

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