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Central Intelligence Agency

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 June 1985

SYRIA: Assad and the TWA Hijacking

Summary

Syrian President Assad has been in contact with Amal leader Nabih Barri to urge an end to the TWA hijacking, but we do not believe Assad is willing to risk antagonizing Lebanon's Shias, the country's largest confessional group, by bringing pressure to bear on behalf of the United States. [redacted]

Syrian leverage over the Shias is limited in any case. Barri cooperates with Damascus and receives Syrian support, but he has maintained his independence and resisted Syrian efforts to manipulate Amal. Barri is less dependent on Syria than other Lebanese factions, particularly for supplies, because his forces are an urban street militia using small arms readily available in Beirut. Syrian relations with the radical Shia factions are even more tenuous and increasingly strained. [redacted]

[redacted] Assad [redacted] will avoid strong steps against the hijackers either directly or indirectly through intermediaries.

[redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, and [redacted] of the Office of Scientific and Weapons Research, [redacted] at the request of the Department of State. Information as of 20 June 1985 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments are welcome and should be directed to Chief, [redacted]

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Assad's Response to the Hijacking

Assad almost certainly sees the current crisis over the TWA hijacking as an unwelcome complication of his efforts to achieve Syrian aims in Lebanon and to move on to other issues. His summit meeting with President Gemayel two weeks ago set an agenda for reestablishing security and implementing political reforms. Meanwhile, the "war of the camps" in Beirut has brought to the fore the Palestinian and inter-Arab dimensions of the problem. Increasingly frustrated with the seemingly bottomless Lebanese morass and anxious to devote more attention to Syria's relations with the superpowers and threats to Syrian interests posed by the Hussein/Arafat initiative, Assad must find his plate already full.

Assad has done what President Reagan asked--urging Amal leader Nabih Barri to become actively involved in negotiations--but Damascus remains publicly neutral on the hijacking. The Syrians press has reported the events without a hint of denunciation and, indeed, has given prominence to the hijackers' demands. Assad does not want to antagonize his difficult allies in Lebanon at least in part because to do so would cancel the influence he has with them.

Syrian Relations with Nabih Barri and the Shias

In contrast to Syria's control over Walid Junblatt's Druze and several other Lebanese factions, Amal leader Nabih Barri has remained relatively independent of Damascus. Barri refused to join the Syrian-sponsored National Salvation Front during the 1983-84 fighting and he has strongly resisted Syrian attempts to manipulate Amal. Barri has attempted to counter Syrian efforts to coopt top Amal leaders and to constrain the activities of pro-Syrian Amal officials.

Syrian leverage over Barri is reduced by Amal's lack of dependence on Damascus for supplies. Amal receives Syrian support--and most recently cooperated at least tacitly with the Syrians in the war over Beirut's Palestinian camps--but the needs of Barri's forces are limited. Amal fields an urban street militia that uses small arms, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades, which are easily obtainable on the open market or from abandoned Palestinian arms caches in Beirut.

Syrian relations with the extremist Shia factions are even more tenuous. Damascus has tolerated radical Shia activities and has provided support to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards working with them to maintain Syria's lucrative ties to Iran, to hasten total Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, and to serve as a counter to Barri in an effort to force him to come to terms with Damascus. Syrian aims in Lebanon are incompatible with the radical Shia goal of an Iranian-style fundamentalist regime, however, and signs of increasing strains in the relationship are

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evident. Syrian troops have clashed with Shia extremists in the Bekaa Valley several times since early 1984. [redacted]

Assad has provided assistance in releasing Americans when there has been a compelling Syrian interest to do so and when the costs of Syrian actions have been minimal. In July 1983, the Syrians obtained the release from Iranian hands of kidnapped American University of Beirut President David Dodge almost certainly to let Tehran know that moving a hostage through Damascus without Syrian compliance was unacceptable. In January 1984, the Syrians released captured US Navy pilot Lt. Goodman as a cost-free gesture to hasten American withdrawal from Lebanon. Recently, on 12 June, Assad made a public appeal to the kidnapers holding hostages in Lebanon, bluntly stating his commitment to President Reagan and his opposition to the kidnapping of diplomats, but he reiterated Syrian support for the extremist groups involved and gave no hint that Syria was prepared to take action to effect their release. [redacted]

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