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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

17 MAR 1980

SYRIA: Assad's Prospects

President Assad has committed his minority Alawite government to a risky course with his reported decision to use the military more freely to crush civil unrest in Syrian cities. This may intimidate his domestic opponents in the short run, but unless Assad is able to reestablish order quickly, it will also further erode his domestic support and could eventually bring about his ouster. By committing the military, Assad is playing his last major card to keep his regime in power. Army discipline may well collapse in the face of widespread riots. This could lead to a bloody war between Sunni Muslim and Alawite units. The Alawites, however, may choose to topple Assad before such turmoil develops in order to keep their position secure.

The latest round of antigovernment activity began late last month in Hamah, a conservative Sunni stronghold and a center of Muslim Brotherhood dissidence. Demonstrations soon spread to Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, and to several other important towns in northern Syria. Damascus remains relatively quiet despite terrorist bombings of some government stores and calls by the extremists for sympathy strikes.

In Aleppo, the Army's elite Special Forces failed to force shopkeepers to reopen in the face of intimidation by armed extremists. Violent street rioting resulted. The commandos reportedly suffered substantial casualties, prompting Assad to order armor and infantry into the city.

religious leaders and government officials in Aleppo arranged a cease-fire last weekend to give the Assad regime time to consider the dissidents' demands for greater political freedom and release of prisoners. The religious leaders gave the government until today to meet their demands,

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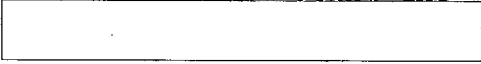
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but threatened to renew their calls for antiregime activity at noon prayer meetings if the government did not respond. Assad clearly has no intention of meeting the religious leaders' demands.

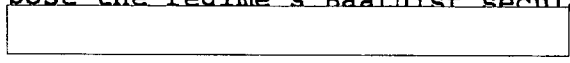


Extent of Opposition

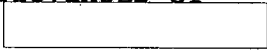
Government officials are said to be particularly worried by the extent of community support for the demonstrations. Although most demonstrators apparently are the traditionally volatile students, many laborers and small shopkeepers, already angry over the government's wage and price policies, joined the strikes voluntarily.



Prayer leaders in the mosques also supported the strikes. One mullah in Hamah evidently called for the creation of an Islamic state, reflecting conservative Sunni views that reject Alawites as true Muslims and oppose the regime's Baathist secular and socialist policies.



The recent demonstrations point to a growing Sunni alliance, including religious oppositionists objecting to Alawite domination as well as merchants, professionals, and laborers protesting the regime's economic and social policies. Assad so far shows no sign of making the major policy changes that would break this alliance. He has not made a sufficient effort to give Sunnis a greater substantive role in the government, has failed to follow through on promises to stamp out corruption, and has taken only limited steps to respond to the grievances of merchants and the wage demands of laborers.

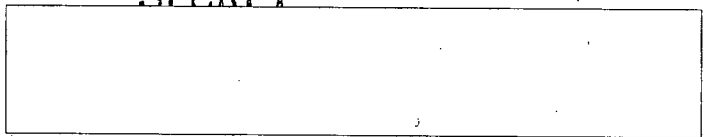


Repression Begins

[redacted] departing their home base north of Damascus yesterday--probably heading for Aleppo. Assad probably has decided to intimidate the opposition throughout Syria by making an example of Aleppo, which historically has resisted political control by Damascus. Its distance from the capital also makes Aleppo a less sensitive area to begin a crackdown.



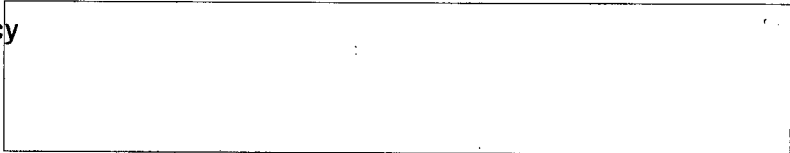
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Assad's use of the regular Army in Aleppo and elsewhere, however, risks splitting the military along sectarian lines. Like the antigovernment activists, most Army recruits are Sunnis. Although the Army units in general probably would remain loyal, as they did during disturbances in Latakia last September, some Sunni troops probably would be reluctant to fire on their coreligionists. 

If significant numbers of Sunnis were killed on both sides, sectarian animosities almost certainly would spread in the military, undermining the effectiveness and loyalty of all but the elite and heavily Alawite Defense Companies and Special Forces. Extensive use of regular military units to quell Sunni-led civil disturbances could result in refusals to follow orders, widespread desertions, and clashes between Sunni and Alawite units. 

Outlook

Although Assad appears in no immediate danger of being ousted, his dilemma is growing. He cannot allow civil disturbances to go unchecked, but repression risks increased popular resentment of his regime. He may be able to intimidate the general population and deter demonstrations for a time, but Sunni extremist attacks on Alawite government and military officials--violence that predates the recent demonstrations--almost certainly will continue. 

Assad apparently has decided to launch a major campaign to give the appearance of mass public support for the government's effort to neutralize its domestic opponents. The regime probably hopes that displays of public backing would counter what probably is a growing perception in the cities that mass demonstrations are exclusively the province of the extremists. 

As part of its campaign, the government probably will step up its efforts to "prove" that the extremists are being manipulated by outsiders such as the Egyptians, Israelis, or the US--a theme Assad has already used in a series of speeches this week. Assad is not likely to

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follow through with his threat to arm peasants and trade unionists to "liquidate reactionary gangs," although additional militia units may be established. [redacted]

The most dangerous near-term threat to Assad comes from his fellow Alawites, who are in the best position to mount a coup and want to preserve their dominance even at the expense of the present leadership. Some Alawite officers are said to be criticizing Assad's failure to allow Sunnis a greater role in decisionmaking and his inability to come to grips with the deteriorating domestic situation; further missteps could quickly cause opposition to jell in the military. The appearance of serious disciplinary problems in Army units assigned to quell civil disturbances could persuade these officers to make their move. [redacted]

Assad may be able to hold onto power for some time, but the chances are increasing that the Alawite elite will conclude that he and his unpopular brother Rifaat must go. The Alawites have no obvious alternative to Assad, although men such as military intelligence head Ali Duba and Special Forces commander Ali Haydar are likely to play a key role in any succession struggle. The Defense Companies and the Special Forces are considered the most loyal troops in Syria, but their support could crumble if the President and his brother were confronted by an Alawite consensus favoring a change of leadership. [redacted]

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