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NSPG; re Middle East

Talking Points
Soviets in Syria

Never before have the Soviets played a direct role in Syrian defenses; never has the presence been as large as now; never has Moscow's potential presence been as large as now; never has Moscow's potential influence been so great; and never have the risks been so high that Soviets will be directly involved in future fighting with great danger of escalation.

Soviet influence, if not control, over many elements of Syria's air defenses is pervasive.

-- The SA-5--the longest range, most sophisticated system there-- is manned and operated by Soviet units.

-- Soviets also have the dominant role in operating the early warning and command and control systems that have been delivered since last summer. There are 8 major radar facilities, about 20 SAM sites altogether, and a new bunkered command post as shown on this map.

-- There are now about 6,000 Soviets there--mostly associated with air defenses--compared to about 2,000 before the Lebanon fighting last year.

-- Soviet advisors even took over command of a Syrian SAM brigade protecting the SA-5 complexes during a recent reaction to Israeli overflights of the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

The closer air defense relationship contains the seeds for friction between the two partners. Syrian Defense Minister Tlas was reportedly denied entry to one of the SA-5 sites.

If Israel were to attack Syrian territory, however, the increased Soviet presence there almost guarantees they would be immediately involved.

-- This has improved their credibility with the Syrians.

-- And Moscow probably is counting on this fact to deter the Israelis.

-- Soviet commitment to defend Syrian operations in Lebanon is more ambiguous, however, probably intentionally so.

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Still, Moscow's leverage is limited by the Syrians' fierce sense of nationalism.

-- In the Soviet-Syrian relationship, each side manipulates the other and it is never certain who has the upper hand. On balance, however, we believe Syria retains its capacity to make independent policy.

In practical terms, however, Syrian and Soviet interests coincide on most issues. Both want to thwart the Reagan initiative, weaken Husayn and maintain a radical Palestinian veto over joint Arab peace initiatives. We can anticipate that both Syria and the Soviets will play a spoiler role by keeping tensions high, encouraging terrorism and perhaps occasionally provoking limited clashes with Israel.

In the longer term the greatest danger may be the progressive impact of Soviet involvement. Increasing Soviet concern for retaining their investment in Syria will lead Moscow to create the infrastructure of agents or assets in the country -- especially in the military -- who could move in a time of trouble. Assad is conscious of this threat and will seek to minimize it. He was greatly alarmed by the events in Kabul in 1978 and purged the military of some Communists in response.

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