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# Syria and Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Spoiler or Participant?

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An Intelligence Assessment

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June 1985

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**Erratum**

Notice to recipients of DI Intelligence Assessment *Syria and Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Spoiler or Participant?*, NESA 85-10133,

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Please affix the attached text to the top of p. 4 of your copy.

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interests are not ignored and that no Arab state or alignment will emerge with sufficient clout to do it real damage.

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# **Syria and Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Spoiler or Participant?**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This paper was prepared by [ ] of the  
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It  
was coordinated with the Directorate of  
Operations. [ ]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESA,  
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*NESA 85-10133  
June 1985*

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**Syria and Arab-Israeli  
Negotiations: Spoiler  
or Participant?**

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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 6 May 1985  
was used in this report.*

Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad will continue to hold out for a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement and reject partial solutions to the conflict. There are no indications that Assad feels a sense of urgency or that he is prepared to exchange the benefits to Syria of an uncompromising position for the political risks of reversing course. On the contrary, Assad and his senior foreign policy advisers appear genuinely convinced that the passage of time will weaken Israel and strengthen the Arab position.

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The Syrians can substantially raise the cost to King Hussein and PLO Chairman Arafat of participating in a peace initiative that excludes Damascus. Assad already is moving politically to block the emergence of a moderate Arab alignment and to heighten divisions within the PLO. The Syrians have supported nearly 40 terrorist operations against Jordanian and moderate Palestinian interests since early 1983, and we believe Damascus is prepared to up the ante.

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Assad's roughshod tactics make him the object of disdain and fear among other Arab leaders, but Syria's so-called isolation is not a serious handicap because its goals in the Arab-Israeli conflict do not differ significantly from the public positions taken by many Arab governments. The impact on Syrian policy of strains in its relations with the other Arab states is minimal. Donor aid plays an important role in the Syrian economy, but Syria has the advantage of receiving assistance from several mutually antagonistic benefactors.

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We believe Assad's near-term strategy is to maximize the gains of prolonged stalemate. He extracts Arab financial support and Soviet arms as the "price" of Syria's being a confrontation state while challenging moderate Arab leaders to demonstrate any payoff from a policy of compromise. Assad's call for continuing struggle against Israel is widely accepted in Syria. It would be far more difficult for the regime to foster a public commitment to peaceful coexistence than to maintain popular support for the conflict.

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Several circumstances could prompt a shift in Syrian policies to a more violent approach. Progress toward Jordanian-PLO talks with Israel will provoke an escalation of Syrian pressure on Jordan, and Assad might instigate a major military crisis. Diminished Syrian involvement in Lebanon over time might open the way for a more aggressive Syrian policy toward Israel. Assad's death or removal from the scene will leave

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Damascus preoccupied with internal politics, but a less experienced successor probably would not continue Assad's comparatively cautious approach to the conflict.

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Damascus has not foreclosed the option of a negotiated settlement, but we believe Assad, before embarking on negotiations, would insist on assurances—verging on a guarantee—that concessions by the Arabs will be at least matched by concessions from Israel. Meanwhile, the Syrians will continue to probe Washington's willingness to support Arab demands over Israeli opposition. Assad wants signals that the United States will adopt a more "neutral" role, but the Syrians probably regard any such steps as only minimal preconditions for further dialogue.

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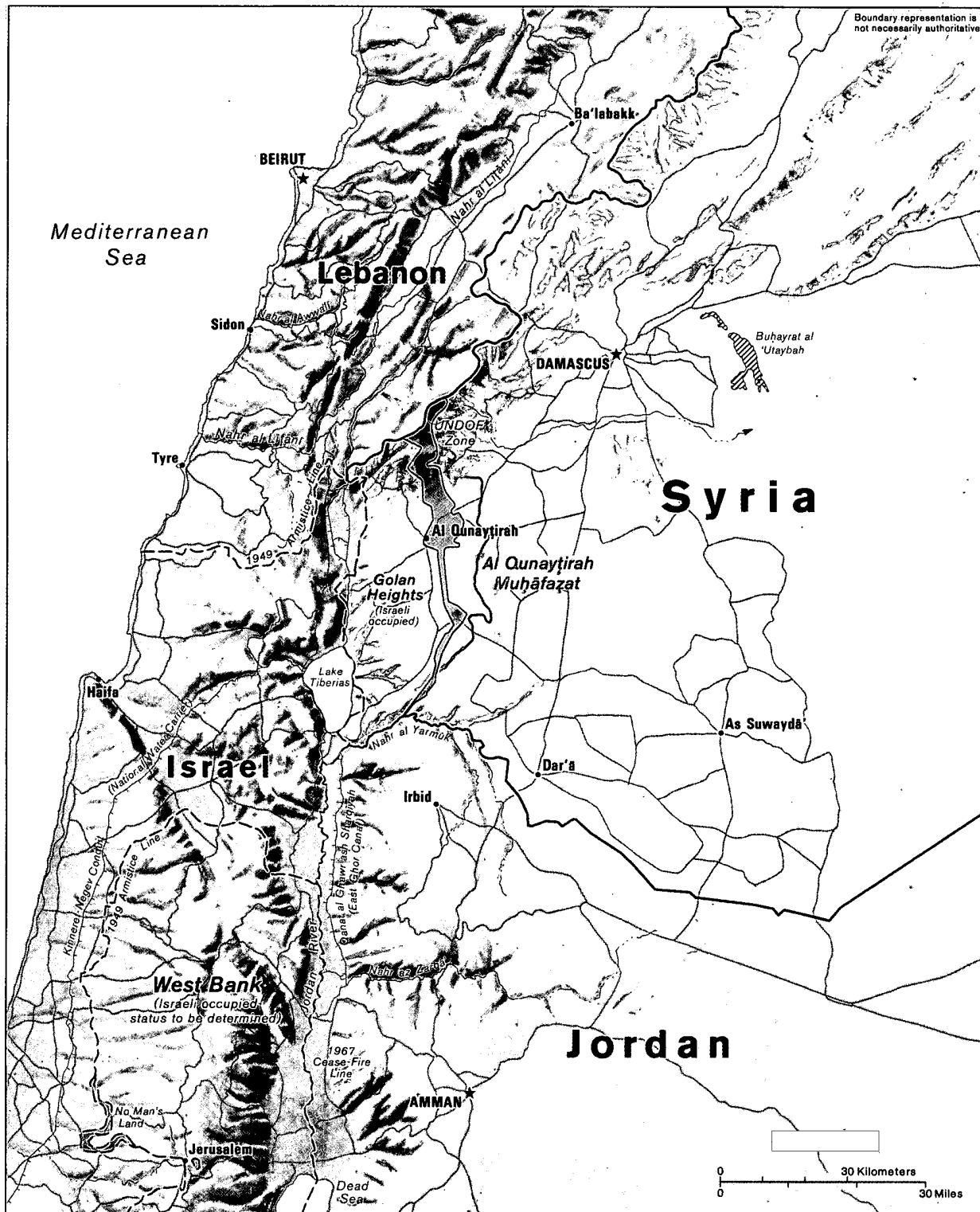
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# **Syria and Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Spoiler or Participant?**

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President Hafiz al-Assad's basic objective in the Arab-Israeli conflict is to nullify Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights and restore Syrian sovereignty.

The Golan Heights and Palestinian issues are closely linked in Syrian thinking, in our view.

Assad believes international indifference to Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights means Israel would have little reason to relinquish the territory if Syria's Palestinian "card" is eliminated.

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The Syrians are likely to continue to tell their Arab neighbors and the United States that a resolution of all issues in the conflict is impossible unless the Arabs together offer Israel no alternative to a comprehensive settlement. Damascus sees an international conference as the only negotiating format likely to advance Arab aims. According to the US Embassy in Damascus, however, the Syrians believe there is no hope now for negotiations in which Israel can be expected or pressed to make concessions.

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## **Pressure on Jordan and the Palestinians**

In our view, Syria will continue to maneuver to block Arab support for the Jordanian-PLO framework agreement and to organize Palestinian factions opposed to Arafat. We believe Syrian-supported terrorist attacks against Jordan and the Palestinians also will continue to be a prominent element in Syrian strategy.

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Syrian diplomatic moves since February have been a continuation of efforts over the past several years to counter political initiatives by the moderate Arab states. One element of Assad's strategy has been to revive the "Steadfastness Front" of radical Arab states to block the emergence of an Arab consensus favoring a Jordanian-PLO peace initiative, Egypt's return to the Arab fold, or the convening of an Arab summit that might sanction either step. Syrian efforts culminated in a meeting with senior officials from

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The Syrians assign almost equal importance to achieving a settlement for the Palestinians. The fate of the Palestinian people is a volatile issue in Syria, where—despite the passage of time—popular resentment remains high over the establishment of the state of Israel and the disruption of numerous longstanding family and commercial ties between Syria and Palestine. Moreover, Vice President Khaddam's recent complaint to US officials that a partial peace could prompt an escalation of Palestinian resistance probably reflects a genuine security concern. With the presence in Syria of nearly 300,000 Palestinian refugees, Damascus long has found it necessary to balance its rhetorical and material support for the Palestinian cause with measures to enhance its control over the Palestinian population. A key element of Assad's policy is to keep a tight leash on the several thousand armed Palestinian guerrillas inclined to fight where and as they want and who are often contemptuous of the authority of the states in which they reside.

Damascus has competed with Jordan and Egypt for control of the Palestinian movement since the Ba'th Party consolidated its hold on power in Syria in the mid-1960s. The Syrians' pride in their country as the birth place of Arab nationalism and the Ba'th Party's credentials as heir to the Arab nationalist and anti-Zionist causes are at stake. Assad's legitimacy rests partly on his leadership of the Ba'th Party and his articulation of the Syrian commitment to the Palestinians.

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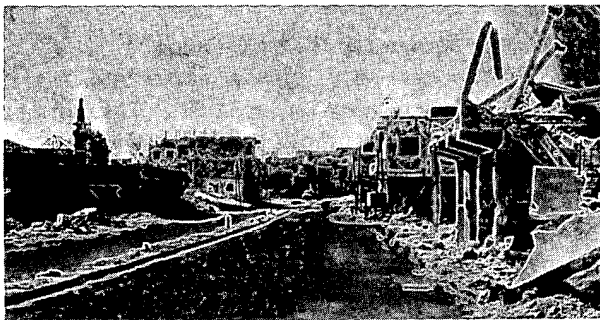
***The Golan Heights Issue***

Until 1967 the region now known as the Golan Heights formed about two-thirds of Al Qunaytirah province, one of the country's most productive agricultural regions. During and after the 1967 fighting, much of the population—including an estimated 100,000 Syrians and some 13,000 Palestinian refugees—fled or were expelled from the area.

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The Golan Heights has both strategic and symbolic importance for Damascus. The Israeli military presence deprives Syria of the terrain advantage on the front, and Israeli electronic intelligence installations and other observation posts give excellent coverage of Syrian military activity at least as far east as Damascus. The Israelis destroyed much of the town of Al Qunaytirah before pulling back under the terms of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, and the Syrians have left it unreconstructed and unpopulated as a monument to Israeli "hostility and aggression."

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The devastated town of Al Qunaytirah on the Golan Heights has never been rebuilt.  
Top: Remains of downtown section.  
Bottom: Looking west over destroyed city toward Israeli positions.

Libya, South Yemen, and Algeria in late March, although the participants in the meeting did not achieve unanimity of views on inter-Arab disputes.

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With Syrian encouragement, Palestinian factions opposed to Arafat's swing toward moderation announced in late March the formation of the "Palestinian National Salvation Front." The groups and prominent personalities comprising the new "front" include George Habbash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Syrian-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, the Fatah dissidents led by Abu Musa, the Popular Struggle Front, the Palestinian cadre of the Syrian Ba'th Party known as as-Saiqa, the Palestine Liberation Front, and prominent individuals such as former Palestine National Council Speaker Khalid al-Fahum.

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Damascus clearly hopes to use the "Salvation Front" to increase political pressure on Arafat and to provide an institutional basis to draw away Arafat's supporters. The founding declaration of the front specifies that it does not seek to supplant the PLO and that it is a "temporary framework for enabling the PLO to regain its national line." Local observers, however, note that its role as Syria's surrogate is transparent. The Syrians also pose a direct threat to Arafat and his supporters.

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**Is Syria Isolated?**

Syria's roughshod tactics put Damascus at odds with many of the moderate Arab regimes, but we believe Syria's goals are not sharply at variance with popular opinion in the Arab world or with the positions held by many Arab governments on Arab-Israeli issues. The US Embassy in Damascus notes that Syria's "isolation" is more a matter of moderate Arab aversion to the aggressive means the Syrians employ than disagreements over substance:

- Syria's goal of removing the Israeli presence and influence from Lebanon, the West Bank, and Jerusalem is shared by every Arab country.
- Assad's tough position on Palestinian rights is a basic tenet of mainstream Arab opinion.
- Syrian insistence on comprehensive negotiations to settle the conflict meets with widespread Arab approval.
- Assad has accepted UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and no longer challenges Israel's right to exist. After opposing the 1981 Saudi peace plan, Syria grudgingly accepted the 1982 Fez Declaration and participated in the Arab League followup discussions.
- Damascus is more outspoken in its criticism of Cairo than most Arab regimes, but the continuing failure to achieve progress toward Palestinian autonomy lends credence to Syrian criticism of the Camp David accords, in the eyes of many Arabs.
- Syria's radical stance on many issues in the United Nations and other international forums leading to frequent votes in opposition to US policy is typical of many Arab and Third World countries. ☐

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Assad's success in forcing the abrogation of the Israeli-Lebanese troop withdrawal accord last year strengthened his political position in responding to moderate Arab disgruntlement with Syrian tactics. The subsequent Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon

allows Assad to trumpet the value of dealing with Israel from a position of strength and to assert that time is on the side of the Arabs. The recovery of occupied Arab territory without having to make concessions gives Syria a highly emotional political victory that it can exploit to undermine support for moderate Arab maneuvers. ☐

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The impact on Syrian policy of strains in relations between Damascus and other Arab capitals is minimal. US Embassy officials note that Assad simply ignores Arab complaints about Syrian ties to Iran or to the Soviet Union because the financial and military support the Syrians extract from these relationships costs little and breaking these ties would offer comparatively little benefit. The Syrians also balance areas of disagreement with areas of agreement—posing as potential mediators in the Gulf war, for example, and claiming to impose a degree of moderation on Iranian war strategy. In any case, we believe Damascus is confident that, in the event of a war with Israel, most of the Arab states would come to Syria's aid. ☐

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Despite the important role of donor aid in Syria's economy, Syria's susceptibility to economic pressure is also minimal. The presence of modest but sufficient oil and gas reserves; relatively abundant water and fertile agricultural land; and a surfeit of engineers, doctors, and technicians give Damascus greater latitude than many of its neighbors possess. The Syrians receive assistance from a variety of sources—including the Gulf Arab states, Iran, and the Soviet Union—and the likelihood is low that all of these donors would cut back aid simultaneously. ☐

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Assad almost certainly concludes that Syrian "isolation" is a transient result of current political maneuvering among the Arab states and that he has considerable room to stake out a counterposition. He has made a significant effort to block the formalization of an Arab consensus that would ignore Syrian interests or lead to a cutoff of Arab financial aid. Nevertheless, he probably is confident that Syria can exert sufficient pressure on its Arab neighbors to assure that its

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**The Domestic Context of Syrian Policy**

In a speech to the People's Assembly in mid-March 1985, Assad inaugurated his third seven-year term as President by hammering at the theme that Israel—with US support—will make few, if any, concessions to the Arab states and that the struggle will go on. He concluded that Syrians will have to make continuing sacrifices to achieve Arab strength and unity. [ ]

committing himself. Assad's experience in Syria's coup-prone politics of the 1950s and 1960s instilled in him an instinct for caution. [ ]

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**Dialogue With the United States**

The US decision in 1981 to conclude a "strategic alliance" with Israel is cited by Syrian officials as a watershed in Assad's evaluation of Washington as a broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite the subsequent suspension of the agreement over an issue vital to Syria—the Israeli Knesset's decision to extend Israeli law to the Golan Heights in December 1981—the chairman of the Syrian parliament's foreign affairs committee says Assad's mind was already made up. The Syrian official says Assad had become convinced that Washington would not grapple with the problem of obtaining concessions from the Israeli side that, in his view, any mediation would entail, according to the US Embassy in Damascus. [ ]

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Assad's call for continuing struggle has been well received by the Syrian people, according to the US Embassy in Damascus. Many Syrians regard Israel as a dangerous enemy bent on expansion. Embassy officials believe it would be far more difficult for the regime to foster a public commitment to peaceful coexistence than to maintain popular support for the conflict. In contrast to the case of Egypt's unilateral foray into peace diplomacy—made possible in part by the acquiescence of a strong middle class in the view that the Arab-Israeli conflict was obsolete—the Embassy notes that even the most Westernized, moderate Syrians support Assad's confrontation with Israel. [ ]

Nevertheless, in our judgment, Assad believes that the United States must ultimately be involved if the conflict is to be settled. Assad doubts that the United States is prepared to support Arab demands, but he is determined to maintain a dialogue. A former US Ambassador to Syria has characterized Assad's ambivalent attitude toward the United States by quoting an early leader of the Islamic community: "And even if there be one hair binding me to my fellow men, I do not let it break; when they pull, I loosen, and if they loosen, I pull." The quotation can be cited to imply that Assad at least wants to preserve links between Washington and Damascus. [ ]

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The minority sectarian character of the Assad regime also is a limiting factor on the President's ability to reverse course. Assad has a firm grip on power, but his Alawite sect constitutes less than 15 percent of the population and Alawite predominance is deeply resented by the majority Sunni community.<sup>1</sup> In our view, Assad has long feared that any concessions to Israel without a significant return would be widely viewed in Syria as a sellout of the Arabs by minority Alawites and might generate coup plotting or popular opposition to the regime. [ ]

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In our judgment, Assad's leadership style also militates against bold departures in Syrian policy. [ ] Assad characteristically avoids risk, carefully assessing potential costs and benefits and waiting for a situation of maximum advantage before [ ]

In effect, Assad wants a US role in the region, but on his terms. Since the abrogation of the 17 May 1983 Israeli-Lebanese agreement, Assad has said that an "unbiased" US role in the Middle East is needed and would be welcomed by Syria. Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shara' told US officials last February that, if the [ ]

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United States does not seek to achieve a comprehensive peace in the region, there is no future for a peace effort. Analysis [ ]

[ ] suggests that their terms for improving relations between Washington and Damascus include the following. [ ]

**Recognition of Syria's Role as a Key Player.** [ ]

[ ] Assad resents the West's depiction of him as a spoiler. Vice President Khaddam is emphatic in insisting that Syria cannot be excluded from a settlement.

[ ]

**Revision of the Reagan Initiative.** The Syrians were critical of the Reagan initiative on several counts. Damascus took the position that the initiative was flawed because it failed to consider the Golan Heights or recognize those Palestinians who have been refugees since 1948. The Syrians rejected the language in the initiative on Israel's need for defensible borders, arguing that history has shown Israel to be the aggressor. [ ]

**A "Balanced" US Role.** Assad argues that, if the United States is not neutral, talks between Washington and Damascus are a "dialogue of the deaf." [ ]

[ ]

**Clarification of US Positions.** In a meeting with the US Ambassador in Damascus in mid-February, Foreign Minister Shara' probed for US views on the Golan issue, as well as US reaction to the Hussein-Arafat framework agreement. [ ]

[ ]

[ ]

**Assurances That Pressure Will Be Brought To Bear on Israel To Make Concessions.** We believe that Assad will continue to balk at Middle East peace negotiations unless he is confident of the outcome. He wants the United States to exert strong pressure to extract Israeli concessions that Arab leaders can use politically to distract attention from concessions they make. Saudi Foreign Minister Sa'ud told US Embassy officials in Riyadh in late March that the Syrians are not opposed to negotiations but that Assad—unlike Sadat—will not enter into negotiations unless he has a clear understanding of the extent of US support for Israel. [ ]

Syrian comments on the nature of its dialogue with the United States, in our view, reflect an effort to probe Washington's willingness to support Arab positions over Israeli opposition. Assad is deeply skeptical that he can afford to run any political risks by relying on the United States to achieve a settlement he can sell to the Syrians, the Palestinians, and his Arab neighbors. [ ]

[ ]

**The Soviet Factor**

Soviet leverage over Assad's decisions is limited and has not swayed Syrian decisionmaking on critical national security issues. The extensive Soviet military support for Syria since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 has helped Assad pursue more assertive

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policies, and a slowdown or threat to cut off military aid is one Soviet step that might have some effect. The one time Moscow tried this option—to oppose Syria's intervention in Lebanon in 1976—proved counterproductive. The Soviets probably would attempt it again only as a last resort. ☐

Syrian military in challenging Assad. Assad's call in his recent inaugural address for "sacrifices" by his countrymen illustrates the usefulness of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a justification for or distraction from the poor performance of the Syrian economy. ☐

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Syrian support for an international conference under UN auspices signals a slight shift in its approach to Soviet involvement in the peace process. The Syrian response to the Soviet international conference proposal of July 1984 was lukewarm—in part because Damascus almost certainly saw the initiative as an effort by Moscow to curry favor with Jordan and the Arab moderates. Nevertheless, US Embassy officers speculate that the Syrian reaction and subsequent Syrian support for a UN-sponsored conference reflect a preference for broader international participation that might reduce the potential for Soviet disruption of a Geneva conference. According to the Embassy, Arab concern about the Geneva formula—that it carries the danger of polarization between Americans and Israelis on one side and Soviets and Arabs on the other—is shared in Damascus. ☐

Assad also takes advantage of the continuing unresolved issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict to keep his Arab opponents off balance and strengthen his claims to Arab leadership. Assad's argument that negotiations now would only lead to Arab "surrender" is a public slap at Egypt and challenges Hussein and Arafat to show how the strategy they have adopted will produce results equal to the comparative "success" of Assad's uncompromising stance in Lebanon. The Syrian press regularly gloats over the "failure" of Egypt's "enormous concessions," pointing to the unresolved Palestinian issue and continued strong US support for Israel. Likewise, Syrian media manipulate popular ideological themes—anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, and Arab unity—to portray Jordan's relationship with the United States as willingness on Hussein's part to betray the Arab cause and facilitate US "hegemony" in the region. ☐

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#### **Syrian Strategy**

The Syrians almost certainly recognize that the chances for a negotiated settlement on terms they will accept have diminished steadily since Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and the signing of the Camp David accords in 1978. In their view, Egypt's separate peace with Israel has divided the Arab states, reduced the incentives for Israel to make concessions on the Golan Heights or the Palestinian issue, and diminished US willingness to consider Syrian or Palestinian interests. Syrian strategy in light of their interpretation of the prevailing conditions is likely to continue to include at least three elements ☐

**Playing a Spoiler Role.** Despite Syrian aversion to the charge that Damascus plays the role of spoiler, we believe Assad is determined to prevent progress in any peace initiative in the region that excludes Syria or does not meet Syrian conditions. Damascus almost certainly believes King Hussein's negotiations with PLO Chairman Arafat are vulnerable to Syrian countermaneuvering politically and Syrian terrorist threats, although a scholar who recently interviewed Assad believes he is worried that US support for the initiative will encourage the King and Arafat to proceed despite Syrian opposition. Progress toward talks between Israel and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation almost certainly would prompt increased Syrian pressure. ☐

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#### **Maximizing the Benefits From Prolonged Stalemate.**

The continuing confrontation between Israel and the Arab states serves several Syrian interests. Damascus extracts roughly \$700 million a year from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states under the terms of an agreement concluded in Baghdad in 1978 to support the confrontation states. Continuing Soviet arms deliveries on highly favorable terms and the attention directed to the threat from Israel probably contribute to the apparently low interest on the part of the

**Seeking a "Strategic Balance."** The Syrian concept of "strategic balance" was coined by President Assad following the removal of Egypt from the ranks of the

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confrontation states to signal a shift in Syria's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. [ ]

[ ]

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We believe that at a minimum Damascus uses the concept of an evolving "strategic balance" to convey publicly and privately that there are alternatives for the Arabs to immediate negotiations. Assad probably uses the term to sum up his view that, without a unified Arab position, Israel has no reason to make concessions now but that time is on the side of the Arabs. [ ]

[ ]

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Assad appears in no hurry to move toward a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Syrians on numerous occasions have shrugged off the suggestion that there is any urgency in starting talks. Early this year, a senior UN official told US Embassy officers that the Syrians expect no peace with Israel for at least 10 years and that the UN command for forces on the Golan Heights has been urged to build a new headquarters near Damascus in anticipation of a lengthy stay. [ ]

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#### Alternative Scenarios

Syrian strategy in the Arab-Israeli conflict could shift to a more activist—and probably more dangerous—approach in response to several developments. If talks between Israel and a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation aimed at a settlement on the West Bank appear imminent, we believe there is a high probability that Assad will at least threaten a military crisis. If Syrian involvement in Lebanon diminishes over time, Damascus might focus greater attention on Arab-Israeli

issues and choose renewed conflict, a new Arab peace initiative, or a combination of both. When Assad dies, a weaker, less experienced successor probably could not continue Assad's adept balancing of threats and accommodation. [ ]

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**Conflict With Jordan.** Damascus has used military forces to apply pressure on Jordan on two occasions—during the Jordanian-PLO crisis in 1970 and in late 1980—and could undertake military action again to thwart a new peace initiative by King Hussein and Arafat. In November-December 1980 the Syrians fielded two armored divisions, totaling about 28,000 troops, on the Jordanian border to warn Hussein not to pursue an anti-Syrian alliance with other Arab leaders then meeting in Amman. Jordan countered by deploying at least two and possibly three divisions to its northern border. At the height of the crisis, Syria had about 500 tanks, 400 armored personnel carriers, and 270 artillery pieces facing an approximately equal Jordanian force. [ ]

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Syria's lowest risk military option in response to a Jordanian-PLO peace initiative would be a show of force along the border. Combined with a terrorism campaign, a demonstration of force would show Syrian resolve to oppose Jordan's diplomatic moves and create a crisis atmosphere that might disrupt them. Egyptian or Saudi support for Amman almost certainly falls short of willingness to get involved in an open conflict between Syria and Jordan. In the context of a military confrontation, we believe the moderate Arab alignment is likely to evaporate. At the same time, a show of force would not commit Syria to open warfare, although Damascus would have to be willing to accept the risk that border clashes might occur that could lead to war. [ ]

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Damascus could step up the pressure on Jordan by initiating low-level border clashes on the pretext of preventing terrorist infiltration into Syria. Jordanian support for anti-Assad Muslim Brotherhood terrorists was one of the pretexts for the 1980 crisis. Border clashes, if carefully controlled, could stop short of a major conflict and offer Damascus the option of launching airstrikes or ground attacks if Assad concludes that greater pressure is necessary. [ ]

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25X1 Airstrikes on Jordan would raise the ante considerably and could embroil Iraq or Israel in the conflict.

[redacted] Syrian airstrikes into Jordan would force Amman to implement contingency plans for attacking Syrian airfields, which are hardened against airstrikes and are well protected by Syrian air defenses. Despite the qualitative superiority of Jordanian pilots, the Jordanian Air Force would take heavy losses unless the Iraqi Air Force provided substantial support. Baghdad probably would begin moving an armored or mechanized division and send air and air defense forces to aid Amman within a day or so, although the Iraqis might have difficulty resupplying them. Only Israel, however, could bring the necessary force to bear quickly enough to thwart Syria's attacks. [redacted]

25X1 As a last resort, Syria could conduct a limited offensive aimed at destroying a substantial part of the Jordanian armed forces and seizing northern Jordan. Outnumbered and outgunned, and without significant reserves to call upon, the Jordanian Army might slow the Syrians, but Amman ultimately would have to sue for peace. The risks of this option would be substantial, particularly as the Israelis would be tempted to attack Syria's flank, but so would be the rewards—upsetting the status quo and derailing any moves toward peace negotiations. [redacted]

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25X1 We believe that, if the advantages for Damascus of a prolonged stalemate steadily diminish or if Assad's death leaves the regime under the leadership of an inexperienced successor, there is a significant risk that the Syrians might miscalculate and initiate a conflict.

With Soviet assistance, Damascus has fielded new armored units, nearly completed the mechanization of its infantry, added new air squadrons equipped with some of the latest Soviet aircraft, and significantly improved its air defense capabilities. The Syrian military, with Soviet help, also has built up its electronic warfare capability and improved training in all services.<sup>2</sup> Improved capabilities might encourage Damascus to act more aggressively, pursuing policies that might lead to war or accidentally touch off a conflict. [redacted]

**Assad's Death.** Assad's disappearance from the scene is unlikely to have positive implications for the peace process. His relatively cautious and pragmatic approach to policy contrasts sharply with the more radical policies of his predecessors. His successor almost certainly will lack even the marginal negotiating latitude that Assad has gained from providing Syria with stable rule for the past 15 years. [redacted]

A less stable successor regime and Israeli concern about the reliability of an untested leader will complicate—not simplify—reaching a negotiated settlement. An unstable regime in Damascus would be unlikely to risk compromises with the United States and Israel and might adopt more aggressive policies in Lebanon or in support of Palestinian terrorist operations that would risk an Israeli response or a war by miscalculation. Conflict within the leadership of a new regime might contribute to erratic shifts in policy, heightening Israeli concerns about Syrian intentions. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

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**Implications for the United States**

In our view, Syrian policy in the near term is most likely to center on maintaining a stalemate in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Damascus will seek to forestall the emergence of an Arab consensus favoring a Jordanian-PLO peace initiative. The Syrians also will continue to support terrorist attacks against Jordanian and moderate Palestinian officials to signal their determination to up the ante if there is progress toward peace negotiations over Syrian objections.

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A Syrian decision to join in a peace initiative, although unlikely given Syrian preconditions, cannot be ruled out. Assad might calculate that evolving circumstances are reducing the benefits to Syria of continuing confrontation and lessening the political risks of reversing course. A strengthened Arab consensus—including Syria and incorporating Syrian demands—favoring negotiations, together with assurances of a financial payoff from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states in return for Syrian moderation, could contribute to a shift in Syrian thinking. The involvement of other Arab states would strengthen Syria's negotiating position and enable Assad to share the blame for unpopular compromises or lack of progress.

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Assad has a well-deserved reputation as a tough negotiator, but he is a pragmatist who has concluded, and abided by, both a formal agreement with Israel—the 1974 Golan Disengagement Agreement—and numerous tacit understandings. There is no indication that he has ruled out indefinitely the possibility of a negotiated settlement. Indeed, Assad periodically has floated trial balloons for a multilateral conference alternative to the step-by-step approach. In mid-1984, Assad publicly expressed support for UN Security Council Resolution 338, calling for an international conference, and in an interview recognized Resolution 242 as a context for a settlement. In the interview, Assad claimed that Syria “is just as eager to seek peace as we are to achieve military parity.”

Moreover, in our judgment, Syria's harsh rhetoric obscures some tactical flexibility in the Syrian position. Vice President Khaddam disputes the US interpretation of the meaning of “land for peace,” for example, claiming that UN Resolution 242 means simply that Israel should withdraw from all occupied territory in return for a state of nonbelligerency. Yet, on the Golan Heights issue, we believe the Syrians probably would accept UN peacekeeping forces and demilitarization on both sides of the border. They might also agree to a prolonged withdrawal that could leave Israeli forces on the western rim of the Golan for some time. Similarly, the Syrians endorse the Palestinians' right to self-determination, but we doubt they are committed to an independent state. If strains in Syrian-Jordanian relations ease, Assad might accept a political link between the West Bank and Amman.

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Nevertheless, we believe the Syrians are unlikely to commit themselves to any peace initiative without assurances prior to negotiations that concessions by the Arabs will be matched or exceeded by concessions from Israel. Assad's current strategy makes Syria a central player in inter-Arab politics—notwithstanding the moderate Arabs' resentment of his tactics—and the payoff for Syria's role as a confrontation state is considerable. The benefits to Syria of a hardline policy, in any event, exceed what Assad expects he might gain by risking a reversal of Syrian policy.

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In our view, Syrian criticisms of US support for Israel and US policy on the Palestinian issue reflect genuine Syrian concerns. Israel's proximity to major Syrian population centers, its demonstrated military superiority, and the fusion in Israeli politics of religion and nationalism have given rise to a conviction on the part of Syrian leaders that Israel is a dangerous enemy bent on expansion or on weakening its neighbors. Palestinian radicalism threatens the internal stability of the Arab states and also could draw Syria into renewed conflict with Israel at a time and place of the Palestinians' choosing.

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Syrian expressions of confidence that a policy designed to isolate Damascus cannot work probably are genuine. Syria's long border with Jordan—and the numerous Palestinians who oppose Arafat's negotiations with King Hussein and are willing to accommodate Syrian demands in exchange for Syrian support—gives Assad a range of options to impede moderate Arab political maneuvering. In the unlikely event that economic pressure is brought to bear on Syria, Damascus almost certainly is confident that belt-tightening, heavier dependence on the Communist countries or Iran, or manipulation of the Gulf states will see the country through. [ ]

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[ ] we see little prospect of a reversal of Syrian policy in the immediate future. The Syrians probably would welcome signals of a more "neutral" US role—abandonment of a step-by-step Middle East peace process that excludes Damascus; a restatement of US opposition to Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights; or stronger recognition of Arab, as well as Israeli, security interests—but Assad probably would regard such steps as only minimal preconditions for further dialogue. [ ]

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