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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

1969-11-3, Attassi, Assad, Tlass

PARTICIPANTS:

Mahmud El Yussef, Damascus manager, Tapline
(and RCA Agent for Syria)
Norman K. Pratt, First Secretary of Embassy

(Note: Joe Breidi and David Dodge joined
the conversation while it was under way)

DATE & PLACE: November 3, 1969, Tapline Office

DISTRIBUTION: AMB-2, POL, POL/EX, ECON-1, CF-2

Mr. El Yussef, who was visiting Beirut offices of Tapline for the day, said he had been able to come to Beirut from Damascus despite the frontier closure because he had flown down.

He said that the origin of the Syrian attack against Lebanon just ending had stemmed from an effort by Saleh Jadid and the Baathi extremists with Soviet backing to upset the regime in Lebanon. He thought one possible Soviet motive was revenge against Lebanon for the recent Mirage affair. This group was able to bring Hafiz Assad and Mustafa Tlass into agreement with their plans. This expectation was that the Syrian attack would bring about a confessional split in Lebanon which in turn would split the Lebanese army after which a military coup in Lebanon might result. This expected coup would then lead to others as it did in Syria with the eventual emergence of a Socialist regime.

These expectations proved to be wrong and it appeared that Mustafa Tlass would bear the brunt of the blame. He said that the Lebanese resistance at Rashiya cost the Syrians heavily, their casualties having been quoted "at least 20 dead". Thus the leadership bowed to pressure from a group which he identified as "the younger Syrian army officers" to withdraw. (Mr. El Yussef later commented to Mr. Chandler of Tapline that Tlass may lose his position as a result of this affair).

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- 2

He did note that the Syrian army as such had not gone into action and that the heavy artillery used in the attack was that of the PLA, a unit of 1,000 to 1,500 men having been moved up from Jordan for this purpose.

He said that the Syrian press attacks on Lebanon, the U.S., including the oil companies, had been violent. Despite the cease fire, he expected the press would continue its campaign for a few more days to obscure the fact of the Syrian failure. As examples, he handed over two articles from recent issues of al Thawra, the Syrian government paper in Damascus.

In an aside, he illuminated the decision-making process within the Politburo by stating that the key decision makers were the three military members: Hafiz Asad, Mustafa Tlass and Rabah Tawil. He said that the six civilians on the Politburo would always go along with any decision that the three military were prepared to make.

Mr. Breidi of Tapline joined the conversation at this point claiming that he had been the day before at the military headquarters at Ablah in the Bekaa. He claimed the military had inflicted casualties of "120 dead" and that the commandos had lost heavily in materiel, including Kalashnikovs still in their plastic wrappings. He then went on describing how the Iraqi General Ammash had stayed "72 hours" longer than he had planned just to support Helou. His mood can only be described as exultant over the Lebanese victory.

In reply to a direct question from Dodge, El Youssef said that he expected that the frontier would open up soon again.

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