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Authority E 012958

By ML NARA Date 11/7/08

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MEMORANDUM

1970-11-14, Assad, Assad
THE WHITE HOUSE

for file

WASHINGTON

November 14, 1970

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MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Harold H. Saunders *hhs*

SUBJECT: Syrian Power Struggle

*Review by [unclear] to
immediately remove press
for file*

If you wish to brief the President, these are the main points to be made at this stage:

1. Our only reports on actual personnel shifts come so far only from press reports from Beirut. There is no official announcement yet from Damascus. We know [redacted] that a power struggle has been going on in the past few days in the Baath Party National Congress, and there have been reports ever since the September invasion of Jordan of increased tension within the leadership. The press reports are sourced to Syrian officials who have escaped to Beirut. What is still in question is not that there has been some move by the military but its extent and how it will be billed.

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2. The military move is more the result of a power struggle within the ruling group than a move by a group with sharply opposing views to oust a party in power. The change is characterized by most reports as a move by the military wing of the Baath Party to take over from the civilian wing, which is itself composed of former army officers. [redacted] recent party conference indicate that the civilian wing of the party intended to submit a proposal to dismiss Defense Minister Assad, head of the military wing. Last night's move was apparently the military's response.

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3. Insofar as ideological and policy differences are involved, the civilian wing that has been ousted apparently can be characterized as more ideologically oriented and the military wing as more pragmatic. The dominant consensus among informed observers in Beirut is that the dominant faction in the armed forces has been increasingly resentful of the civilians' efforts to impose party rule over the country and to implement radical doctrines such as a "people's war" against Israel, political exploitation of the fedayeen and refusal to cooperate with non-Baathist governments such as the Egyptian. There are also reports of resentment of the extent of Communist participation in the government and, above all, of the decisions to commit Syrian forces in Jordan and then to pull them out. Beneath those differences, however, both groups are Baathists (a party with a vague Arab socialist philosophy).

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[redacted]

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E.O. 12958, as amended, Sect 3.5

ALN 01-30/1, 2, 3 (U) 1005-3-2-05

hhs
EP, 723 NARA, Date 9-25-07

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4. No fundamental policy shift should be expected. We have had reports over the summer that, if Jordan and the UAR appeared to be getting somewhere in peace negotiations with Israel, the Syrians might find a way to join the process later. If the reported shift in leadership in Damascus has any effect, it might be in the area of greater willingness at some point to join negotiations. There might also be less criticism of the UAR and Jordan for negotiating.

5. In short, insofar as this shift may make a difference, it is more likely to be a difference for the better and not for the worse.

As of 0900 EST, on the basis of reports from Beirut the latest facts seem to be: The Army now controls all communications media, borders and airport. The borders and airport remain open, and Damascus radio content is normal. Embassy Beirut reads these facts as indicating that the military wing of the party "has merely assumed in public a control which it had already established behind the scenes--notably by transferring supporters of the civilian faction from all key military posts."

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