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## THE SECRETARY OF STATE

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November 19, 1970

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1970-11-19, Atassi, Assad

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

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SaundersSubject: An Analysis of Latest Events  
in Syria

We should not attach undue importance to the recent power play in Syria in which the military faction of the ruling Baath Party has apparently forced the civilian wing of the Party into submission. While the military group under Minister of Defense Hafiz el Asad has reportedly seized control of all government institutions and has arrested the top leaders of the civilian wing of the Party, including the leading party ideologue, Saleh al Jadid, this could well be a temporary rupture between the two rival factions who have been jockeying for position for several years.

From the standpoint of USG policy interests, the emergence of the military faction as undisputed leaders of Syria would be advantageous. This faction is more pragmatic and less doctrinaire than the civilian wing. It is disposed to expand and improve its relations with other countries and to rely less exclusively on the Soviets for outside support. It favors relaxing the strict government controls over the economy and has even talked about setting up a Parliament and a Constitution. It would probably be willing to consider seriously accepting the Security Council Resolution of November 22, 1967 in certain circumstances.

However, the point is that the military faction will probably not remain in undisputed control of the regime and will probably not be able--or willing--to

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change Syrian policy in any major way. The reason for this is that the military Baathists are to a great extent beholden to the civilian wing since there are two overriding considerations which must continue to influence their actions:

- (1) their desire to perpetuate Baathist supremacy in Syria, and
- (2) their desire to keep the Alawites in control of the Government.

Both the Baathists and the Alawites are a minority in Syria. The former represent a tightly-knit, highly organized Arab socialist-nationalist party which advocates the union of all Arab states under a socialist system. While the Party has branches in all Arab countries, it has a narrow power base in Syria. To maintain clearcut Baathist supremacy the two factions must stick together or at least not oppose each other.

The Alawites, who represent 12 percent of the population and are a splinter Moslem group, have long been the underdogs in Syria. Asad is an Alawite as is Saleh al Jadid, his adversary. They and their Alawite compatriots in both factions have used the Army and the Baathist Party apparatus as a springboard to power. Accordingly, an irreparable split between the two Party factions would weaken Alawite control and threaten their dominant position in the regime.

Therefore, we do not expect any important foreign policy changes to flow from the recent Syrian developments because if this happened the civilian Party wing would probably be alienated from the military faction and, as a result, both the Bath Party as a whole and the Alawites who run it would probably suffer an eclipse. The one modification in Syrian policy which might nevertheless evolve from the current events is a more forthcoming Syrian posture toward other Arab states as a substitute for Syria's erstwhile isolation. This much

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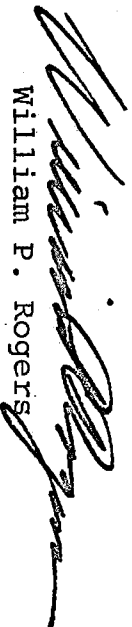
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Asad might succeed in achieving as a result of his power play without the risk of losing Baathist civilian cooperation. He could sell this policy as a necessary step toward seeking to fill the vacuum created by Nasser's death.

It is too early to predict whether there will be a change in Syria's policy of support for the fedayeen and of opposition to the Jordan Government. The military faction has been suspicious of Saiga, the fedayeen instrumentality of the Baath civilian wing, because of the fear that Saiga was being developed as a counterpoise to the Army. But this does not necessarily mean the Asad group opposes fedayeen action per se or will seek to place obstacles in the way of the fedayeen movement. Regarding Jordan, we can probably assume that for a number of reasons, Syria will be unlikely to intervene again for some time to come.



William P. Rogers

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