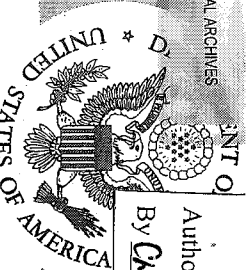


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 INTELLIGENCE NOTE
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USSR-SYRIA: MOSCOW WELCOMES ASAD

The primary significance of Syrian Premier-Defense Minister Hafez al-Asad's February 1-3 visit to the Soviet Union appears to have been Moscow's full acceptance of the new Syrian regime after initial caution and restraint last year. This acceptance and the importance the Soviets attach to the visit was evident from the prominent roles as hosts played by Moscow's leading triumvirate of Brezhnev, Podgorny, and Kosygin, and the emphasis on bilateral relations in the discussions. Regarding international affairs, the usual joint communique was probably more interesting for what it left out than for what it said, and there obviously were differences of opinion at least on the public posture regarding a political settlement in the Middle East.

Initiative and Timing. This was Asad's first trip to Moscow since he assumed full control of the Syrian government last November. In view of the long history of Syrian dependence on Soviet economic and military aid and Asad's presumed interest in continuing this relationship, a fence-mending trip to Moscow was not particularly surprising. Since the Soviets

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had reportedly openly espoused the cause of Asad's opponents, they naturally would have fence-mending of their own in mind assuming they wished to continue their involvement in Syria. The only questions then would seem to have been, when and where should the meeting take place and at whose initiative? In the absence of any hard evidence, this is still difficult to establish. However, in view of Moscow's senior-partner status and the Soviets' concern over the February 5 ceasefire deadline rushing to confront them, it seems likely that the Kremlin was the initiator. Without suggesting that the maximum objectives are known, it is nevertheless possible to say that the results were probably less than each side hoped for.

Middle East. It came as no surprise that this subject was the focus of the communique's international section or that Moscow failed to persuade Asad to publicly endorse UN Resolution 242 or the principle of a political settlement, although Kosygin publicly raised these issues during the delegation's visit. Neither were the Soviet leaders able to get Asad to openly acknowledge the legitimate rights and interests of Israel, but only of the Arabs, including the Palestinians. In this connection, both sides agreed that it was "imperative to strive for the most rapid and complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from all Arab territories occupied in 1967." Although the Soviets would presumably have preferred to have Asad give a complete and specific commitment to their own Middle East

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Authority NND 969049By CM NARA Date 6-12-03

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- 3 -

policy, what was said was not inconsistent with that policy and was relatively moderate in tone. Also the Soviets could take some comfort from the fact that Syria under Asad has tended to keep its head down on this issue, and it is not inconceivable that Brezhnev and company elicited a confirmation of the promise Asad had reportedly given to the Egyptians earlier to continue to refrain from public and possibly even private opposition to a political settlement. Clearly this would be a half loaf for Moscow, but better than none. Further compensation for the Soviets was to be found in Syrian espousal of Soviet positions on issues largely extraneous to Syria such as Vietnam, disarmament, Germany, and a European Security Conference.

Bilateral Relations. This subject probably and understandably held the greatest interest for Asad and his delegation. The line-up on both sides left no doubt that all aspects -- political, economic, and military -- of Soviet-Syrian relations were reviewed. There was mutual agreement that the growing cooperation in all spheres was in the common interest and mutual satisfaction was taken in the progress of this cooperation.

On specifics, both sides expressed the desire "to continue" cooperation in the fields of oil, power, railways and electrification. And for their part, the Syrians expressed "sincere gratitude" for Moscow's "selfless aid" in developing the Syrian economy, strengthening its defense capability and training its national cadres. This formulation apparently

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- 4 -

takes care of past and ongoing projects, and Asad would seem to have received assurances the Soviets would not withdraw support from projects in train. As far as new commitments are concerned, the picture is less clear. However, competent authorities are to be instructed to continue their efforts to define cooperation projects for Syria's third five-year plan, 1971-75. Typically such statements fuzz the question of military aid. This one was no exception. There is no hint regarding either old or new commitments. Nor is there any mention of debt rescheduling, a subject presumably high on Asad's agenda in view of Syria's chronic financial problems.

On the political side, the communique proclaimed Soviet approval of Syria's "progressive social and economic course," and called for the further development of relations between the Soviet Communist Party and the Ba'ath Party -- a ploy for a more intimate type of party-to-party relationship which Moscow has been pursuing with the UAR and other select regimes in the Third World.

Regardless of what was spelled out, implied, or left unsaid, Asad's visit would probably have to be judged moderately successful from both the Soviet and Syrian points of view. At least the apprehensions of both sides were probably allayed somewhat and the lines of communication were renewed.

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