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MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Harold H. Saunders
Rosemary Neaher *or*

SUBJECT: The Situation in Syria and Peace Talks

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Just to round out the picture on Mid-East settlement fronts, following are some thoughts on the present situation in Syria as they have evolved since the coup last fall.

Since the mid-November coup by Defense Minister Assad--and his subsequent fence-mending activities--there has been more talk about possible Syrian involvement in a settlement. Presumably the Syrians have some interest in regaining the Golan Heights. The Egyptians have indicated in the past that, when the time came, they thought they might be able to bring the Syrians along in a peace agreement. They recently told the Lebanese that they no longer consider the Syrians a serious obstacle. They have also urged Jarring to draw up a Syrian-Israeli document. But, at the very least, the UAR seems uncertain of real Syrian intentions and seems interested in throwing the issue to the Syrians so they can wash their hands of responsibility.

Background

Syria has been one of the most politically unstable of Mid-East nations and gauging the prospects for each new regime is difficult. Nevertheless, a few historical recollections shed some light on what Assad means for Syria today and what it might mean for the US.

Syria, the "sick man" of the Mid-East, suffers not only from extreme social fragmentation but also from the fact that it has never really had a sense of nationhood. Through history, that geographical area had always been ruled by some other power and, in independence, the map-carving which produced Syria did not reflect a natural geographical and cultural expression in the opinion of many, but rather a piece of land between other constituencies that were being simultaneously created. Arab nationalists in Damascus following World War I believed that the natural

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Syria should have been Greater Syria, the area which sprawled along the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Egypt and included the then Palestine and Jordan. Their hopes, of course, were dashed by the imposition of the mandate system as well as by the bitter legacy of French rule which included the creation of almost autonomous units within Syrian society based on its social divisions. These sharpened the separatist tendencies of such minorities as the Druze and Alawites (now the core of the Baath party) and further undercut Syrian potential for a sense of national unity. Among the bulk of the population--Sunni Muslims--there have been dramatic splits between rich and poor, urban and rural and economic interests centered in Aleppo in the north and Damascus in the south. There are also significant numbers of other racial and linguistic differences.

In short, modern Syrian political leadership--from which successive waves of increasingly nationalist and leftist regimes have evolved--was born in a climate of intense hatred for the repressive and divisive mandate rule and of mild shock at the kind of Syrian entity, incorporating numerous religious and ethnic Mid-Easterners, that was created. Consequently, its leaders have developed both a xenophobia and a craving for unity with other Arabs which have characterized Syria's politics for years, as well as themselves becoming issues over which the leaders would dispute. It was this kind of mentality that later produced the Baathists, the most radical Syrian expression of Arab nationalism expressed in the theme of a "unified Arab nation."

Syria entered the post-independence era with almost dead goals--internal and external unity. The lack of reality in these objectives held by the older Syrian nationalists (primarily wealthy Sunni Muslims) who had fought the French disgruntled the younger, more militant nationalists. The resulting political chaos--intensified by the loss of Palestine in 1948--brought the army in to restore order. Three coups in 1949 ushered in a new era of military rule by nationalist army officers who had, on the one hand, to combat bickering among the numerous political groupings and, on the other, to combat divisions within their own ranks (increasingly infiltrated by Baath party followers) on the big issue of how Syria would fulfill its nationalist aims.

The major problem was that--unlike Egypt--the military were never able either to rule fully or to disengage fully from rule. Tactically, they failed either to command the loyalty of the constantly feuding civilian groups or to prevent

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coup plots from unfolding within the military. Repressive measures to keep order would be followed by cosmetic arrangements with civilian leaders to legitimize regimes--an arrangement satisfying neither side and prompting a new coup. On issues, the military leaders after '49 were in the Sunni Muslim establishment--whose business dealings with Iraq were considerable--and inclined towards a socialized, centralized state favoring unity with Iraq; they were not anti-West.

Developing in opposition were the Baathists--flourishing among the younger university set--who were adamantly opposed to Western influence, extolled the virtues of nationalism, socialism, and independence and leaned towards Egypt whose philosophy under Nasser they found sympathetic. These divisions were fanned by the ambitions of Egypt and Saudi Arabia against the Hashemite dynasties of Jordan and Iraq. Sparked by resistance to the Baghdad Pact, the Baathists became increasingly competitive in the military and in the government, to the point that they were able to press upon Syrian leadership a more radical course in the late '50s--including a violent reaction to the Suez invasion of 1957 and acceptance of massive Soviet assistance. An ensuing period of political chaos and increasing communist penetration scared even the Baathists who pressed for, and won, their solution to Syrian instability at that time: union with Egypt.

Relations with Egypt became, and have remained, a thorn in Syria's side. In a time of domestic weakness, they took the plunge to merge with a sympathetic nationalism only to discover that the Egyptians would run everything. All political parties, including the Baath, were outlawed. The Syrian military types who had ruled tenuously in the '50s hang on, and a military coup by them in 1961 took Syria out of the UAR. Nevertheless, pro-Nasserist sentiments remained and were the cause of coup and counter-coup plots until 1963 when the Baath, stung by the thought of Egyptian pre-eminence, swept into power. It has remained there ever since.

It was not surprising that the Baath Party itself would be subject to fragmentation, and to problems between its military and civilian elements. Generally speaking, all good Syrian Baathis hue to the following principles: nationalism, unity, socialism, liberty and revolution; the overriding theme is that the Arab world is an indivisible political, social and economic whole. In organization and in tactics, the Baathis borrowed extensively from the communists. Intellectually, they are strange bedfellows because Baathism is above all an expression of Arab nationalism and independence which communism would, of course, inhibit. Finally, Baathis describe their

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organization as "revolutionary," supporting the need for immediate fundamental change in the structure of the Arab world to bring about a sovereign independent nation. In foreign policy terms, Baath emphasis on sovereignty theoretically implies no exclusive reliance on anyone, neither West nor East; the expression "positive neutrality" has been used.

In broad terms, in the application of these principles after 1963, two trends were apparent and reminiscent of the past. There were the "moderates" who were not against a warming of relations with the UAR and other Arab states, who favored a more liberalized domestic policy with less speed towards nationalization and who attempted to bridge the gap between Baath and non-Baath elements in government. It was this group that dominated from 1963-1966. There were also the younger officers, notably, Salah Jadid (just ousted) and the present leader, Hafiz Assad, who became the frontrunners of more radical, doctrinaire attitudes. It was under Jadid's pressure that Syria moved towards more rapid nationalization in the mid-60s; he was ardently against any compromise with the UAR and is known to have a long personal anti-Nasser history; he became an almost passionate backer of the Palestinian movement; and, finally, opposed any efforts to bring non-Baath elements into the government. After friction between the two elements, Jadid emerged on top in 1966.

Jadid

Under Jadid--who assumed the civilian title of Assistant Secretary General of the Baath Party--Syria assumed its most radical, and ultimately isolated, posture. Anti-Western propaganda reached an all-time peak; rhetoric against the UAR was almost as shrill; relations with the USSR became increasingly intimate; terrorism on the Israeli-Syrian border--a precipitating factor in the 1967 war--intensified; and, the first communist party member was included in the cabinet. The Jadid regime can also look back on shutting down the Iraqi pipeline through Syria; antagonizing Nasser by adopting a more militant posture against Israel; refusing the repair of TAPLINE; developing and using vigorously the Saïqa guerrilla group in constant forays against Israel through Lebanon and Jordan; and, ultimately, of having approved Syrian intervention in the September crisis in Jordan.

Assad

Although it is difficult to be precise on this point, it is generally felt that Assad, holder of the defense portfolio over the past two years, represents the more moderate elements of the ruling Baath clique and would be a more

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pragmatic policymaker. While it is true that Assad was an accomplice in the 1966 coup which favored Jadid, it is not entirely clear to what extent he is a committed Baathist beyond his general grooming among the Baath party following. By contrast, Jadid was known as the ideologue. Jadid's following in the party rested primarily on civilian elements more prone to share his pulsating vision of Baathism and Arab unity to the neglect of Syria's more fundamental domestic and regional problems.

Ideology is not all, however. Assad may not be able to exist very long without some reconciliation with the opposition that he has just canned. The ruling Baath is dominated by Alawites--a minority in a minority-based military regime. Many Alawites have used the Baath party as a springboard to power--perhaps the reason for Assad's support of the 1966 coup--and naturally want to retain their pre-eminence in the party. Both Jadid and Assad are Alawites and to protect their minority's favored position, they may not be able to live very long without each other. Nevertheless, he just doesn't seem to share Jadid's philosophical approach.

The general feeling is that Assad may be creating a momentum which will be difficult to brake or reverse. Assad's opening words to the public were filled with promises of reform including mention of establishing a permanent constitution, enacting new local legislation, increased observance of civil liberties, increased cooperation with other progressive Arab states and expressions for enhanced Arab unity. Of more rural background, Assad is believed to have a better chance at mobilizing public support which the Baath has notoriously lacked. He has surrounded himself with close supporters but has also brought new non-Baath elements into the cabinet, including numbers of pro-UAR figures. He has also increased the number of communists in the cabinet to two, reflecting perhaps a tactical move since Assad was reportedly short of Soviet support minutes before the coup. The Soviets had supported Jadid in the party's convention prior to the coup; he has been their primary vehicle, as an ideologue, for influence and it is felt that the Soviets miscalculated as to who would emerge from the power struggle. But they appear to have created no problems for Assad.

Finally, Assad has gotten himself elected by the party as President for seven years (as well as remaining in charge of the military). This post has usually gone to a Sunni Muslim since that is the predominant sect, in a predominantly conservative Muslim country and is the first time an Alawite has held the post. This may be part of his approach towards gaining acceptability as a political leader rather than trying to survive as the strongman in a junta and by all accounts he is judged as being popular.

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He also has appointed a new "People's Council," with only about half Baath representation (and only a small military element) and a variety of pro-Nasserites, communists, independents and professionals. They are charged with laying the foundation for a permanent constitution and exercising legislation. The Council can be dissolved by Assad.

Arab-Israeli Settlement

On the peace front, the following characterize Assad's policy:

-- Propaganda against a negotiated peace settlement, other Arab states and the West has been considerably toned down.

-- Assad moved almost immediately to assume control over the Syrian guerrilla group, Saïqa, installing his own man as its head. He has brought his guerrillas back into Syria and essentially frozen their activities. He has also stressed the need to improve regular Syrian armed forces.

-- Rumors that the TAPLINE discussions were about to re-open materialized shortly after the coup. Negotiations between Syrian and TAPLINE officials produced an agreement at the end of January and the Syrians gave the go-ahead for repairs. The government also published the terms of the agreement and their ratification in local papers.

-- Assad has followed up his first expressions of interest in reintegrating Syria in the Arab world by almost immediately joining the "Federation" of the UAR, Libya and Sudan and by fence-mending with his Arab neighbors. In December, Syria and Lebanon announced the formation of a permanent commission to "deal with matters of concern to both sides" [primarily in the trade and economic spheres] and Syria lifted travel restrictions operative against Lebanon. They also initiated a move with the Saudis to end seven months of cold-shouldering which stemmed from the TAPLINE dispute by lifting restrictions on the transit of Saudi aircraft and trucks through their territory; the Saudis followed. Syria and Morocco, operating at a Chargé level since 1965 when the Moroccans charged the Baathists with interfering in local Moroccan affairs, have resumed diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level.

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-- There is continued reporting on Assad's interest in going along in a peace settlement-- following the UAR lead-- and in improving relations with the West and particularly the U.S. Nevertheless, Assad talks publicly about mobilizing against the "enemy" and expounds on his support for the Palestinian resistance.

-- We have some reporting on Assad's official visit to Moscow in February during which both the Mid-East peace and Syrian financial problems were reported to be high on the agenda. On the peace question, he is reported to have indicated that he would follow the UAR position.

-- On financial matters, Syria faces a serious foreign exchange deficit and has been probing around for international funding, with some indication that he will be looking into factors inhibiting U.S. aid [primarily their large debts to us]. On balance, however, he is felt to be turning his attention first to the building of a political apparatus before getting involved in the technicalities of Syria's economic stagnation.

Conclusions

After four months, it is possible to make two points:

1. Assad's greater pragmatism has shown itself now in a variety of moves to put Syria back in closer touch with its Arab neighbors.
2. There is still no clear indication of what stand Assad would take toward Syria's involvement in a peace settlement. He is more likely than his predecessor to try to climb on any bandwagon, and he has refrained from criticizing the UAR. However, even the Egyptians seem uncertain about Syrian intent.

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