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1982-6-9, Assad, Israel - IA Report

9 June 1982

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chairman, National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT : Escalation of the Israeli-Syrian Confrontation and the Soviet Reaction

1. Israel's operations in Lebanon signal the execution of long-standing Israeli plans not only to destroy the PLO's military and political infrastructure but to force Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon and to establish fundamental changes in Lebanon's political order. Having sustained substantial casualties in the first three days of combat, the Begin government is likely to continue the offensive until it is satisfied that a new government dominated by Bashir Jumayyil's Phalange will be established in Beirut and Syrian forces are either defeated or obliged to withdraw completely from Lebanon.

2. These Israeli ambitions collide directly with President Assad's plans to exploit a military confrontation in a way that would compel the US and the Soviet Union to intervene to halt the fighting and set negotiations in train that would resolve the Lebanese crisis and the Palestinian issue once and for all.

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3. Assad's scenario explains his high-risk decision to engage Israeli forces and to reinforce his military strength in Lebanon. He is counting on the Soviet leaders to intervene with a bid for an immediate international conference that would first arrange a ceasefire and then negotiate a general settlement that presumably would include the return of the Golan Heights to Syria.

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4. Assad's scenario already has been fatally compromised by Israel's military initiative and momentum. [redacted] the Syrians stressed the crucial importance of a move by Syria, the Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims to provoke a military confrontation with Israel "when they are ready for it." Israel has in effect preempted Assad's scenario, and the Syrians now face the imminent interdiction of their vital lines of communication, especially the Beirut-Damascus highway, and the isolation and destruction of Syrian forces in Lebanon. The reported Israeli destruction of all Syrian SAM sites in the Bekaa Valley and on the Syrian-Lebanese border [redacted] will expose Syrian forces to devastating Israeli air and ground attacks. Assad now faces a decision either to commit the bulk of his armed forces in Lebanon, gambling that superpower intervention will occur in time to avert a total military disaster, or to withdraw his forces from Lebanon as the only way to escape catastrophe and the danger of an internal upheaval in Syria that would destroy his Alawite regime.

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Soviet Reaction

5. This prospect of a Syrian military and political disaster confronts Moscow with its most dangerous Middle East dilemma since the October 1973 war. It is doubtful that Assad had secured Soviet approval of his scenario prior to the Israeli invasion on 6 June.

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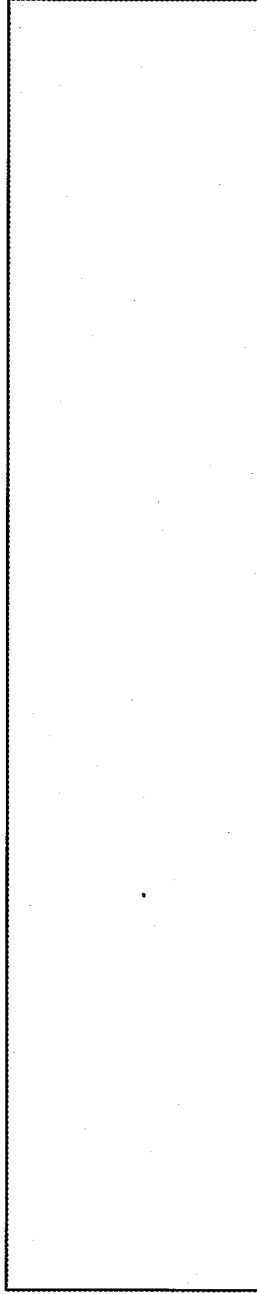
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[redacted] in judging Soviet short-term reactions, it should be recalled that Assad, in early 1980, apparently sought, but failed to obtain, Soviet and Saudi support to provoke Israel to attack Syria as the initial phase of a similar scenario that would result in an international conference giving Assad a Camp David-type settlement.

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6. The Soviets thus are caught between exasperation with Assad's obvious maneuvers to force them to intervene in order to pull Syria's chestnuts from the fire and their geopolitical imperatives to avoid an appearance of impotence in protecting their assets in Syria and the Palestinian movement. Moscow's initial response in the TASS statement on 7 June was automatic--to call on the UN Security Council to take immediate measures to curb Israeli aggression and safeguard Lebanon's sovereignty. The Soviets probably will follow up with messages from Brezhnev to Western heads of government urging joint efforts to stop the fighting and then proceed to an international conference to resolve Syria's claims to the Golan, Lebanon's future status, and the Palestinian question.

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8. Moscow will be careful to avoid an open-ended commitment to assist Syria and the PLO, but the Soviet leaders can hardly afford to limit their reaction to the present confrontation in Lebanon to the essentially passive stance they adopted during the "missile crisis" in Lebanon in April-July 1981. Their stakes in preserving the Assad regime are important but limited. Although they probably will be willing to accelerate military deliveries to Syria in hopes of deterring the Israelis from carrying the war into Syria itself, the Soviets would ponder long and hard before committing any significant combat forces to the defense of Syrian territory. These constraints, however, would not rule out the dispatch of Soviet military advisers and technicians to assist Syrian air and armored forces in Syria.

9. In the ultimate crunch, the Soviets cannot afford to hazard any military initiatives that might enable the Syrians to drag them into their war with Israel. The Soviets are well aware of Assad's repeated attempts to maneuver the USSR into underwriting Syrian adventures, and they will be on guard to block his efforts to force their hand. The Soviets, for example, must be genuinely alarmed that if Assad is faced with an irretrievable military disaster, he will be capable of such desperate actions as launching his SCUD and FROG missiles against Israeli population centers.

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10. In sum, Brezhnev and his colleagues are likely to revert to the tactics that proved effective in October 1973 in enlisting US collaboration with the USSR in bringing about an Arab-Israeli ceasefire. These tactics, of course, require that the Soviets stage what would be interpreted in the West as a credible demonstration of Soviet preparations for unilateral military intervention to protect their Arab clients if the US refuses to cooperate in securing a cessation of hostilities. The Soviets must show a putative readiness to "go to the brink," but the odds are that they would not be prepared to accept the immense risks of unilateral military intervention on behalf of Syria and the PLO if their bluff were called.

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Special Assistant for Warning

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