

1981-7-15, Assad, Russia, CIA Report
15 July 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR: NIO for Warning

SUBJECT : Downing of the Syrian MIG: Syrian Intentions -- Two Hypotheses

1. The loss of the MIG yesterday in the first Syrian attempt to oppose Israeli strikes against Palestinian bases in southern Lebanon in over six months raises potentially serious questions about Syria's intentions. Despite the loss of 14 aircraft in the past two years, have the Syrians decided to renew their long-shot efforts to down Israeli fighters? Assuming that the latest incident was not merely an isolated and inadvertent accident, two principal hypotheses might be advanced to interpret Syrian motives: (a) a short-term response to the resumption last week of Israeli strikes against Palestinian targets; (b) the first manifestation of a more sustained attempt to draw the Israelis into what is intended to be a limited military confrontation which Damascus believes will galvanize the two superpowers into diplomatic intervention to restrain Israel and open the way for an international conference outside the Camp David framework.

2. Short-term response

This scenario would essentially be a repetition of Assad's decision in June 1979 to challenge Israeli raids in southern Lebanon. The Syrians at that time were under strong pressure from Iraq and Libya to defend the Palestinians, and the Libyans, at least, reportedly warned Assad that he must take action if he wished Libyan financial subsidies to continue. The Syrian venture, however, proved costly. Five MIGs were shot down on 27 June 1979, and four more on 24 September. In mid-August 1980, the Syrians again began reacting to Israeli strikes, operating as far south as Sidon-- at the cost of one MIG downed on 24 August and two more on 31 December. If the Syrians are simply beginning another cycle of token resistance to Israeli strikes in order to appease Arab and Palestinian pressures for action, Assad will proceed with caution, employing tactics of selective engagement and accepting the inevitability of further

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losses. (In July 1979, the Syrian Information Minister said his government would do what it could to limit Israeli operations, but it recognized that the Syrian-Israeli force imbalance prevented Syria from stopping the strikes.)

3. Sustained response

The second scenario assumes that the Syrians intend to conduct more aggressive intercept operations and that they are prepared to accept high risks of military escalation. Under this hypothesis, the resumption of Syrian air reactions represents the cutting edge of a deliberate attempt to provoke Israel into escalating air encounters. Assad's intention is to trigger a limited military confrontation that would provide Damascus and Moscow with a plausible pretext for a formal proposal for an international conference.

4. The underlying motive of this scenario centers on a desire to preempt expected political initiatives in the next three months by the US, Egypt, and Israel to advance the Camp David process in a way that would eventually enable Jordan to join the negotiations. Syria and the PLO of course have long suspected that this was the ultimate design of the US, Egypt and Israel, but their suspicions apparently increased following President Reagan's election.

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[] stated that Assad and Arafat were suspicious that King Husayn, in order to join the peace process, might make concessions that would violate the principle that the PLO is the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Assad was said to

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[] (In early February, the Jordanians arrested four Syrians on charges of plotting to assassinate Prime Minister Badran.)

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The Syrians early this year floated hints of greater flexibility on negotiating terms.

[] Syria remained interested in an international conference and said the USSR should be included to counterbalance the US. Brezhnev of course renewed his call for such a conference at the Party Congress in late February. About this same time, Arafat restated his interest in negotiations to

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[redacted] Syria was agreeable to a phased withdrawal from demilitarized and occupied territories, supervised by a UN peace-keeping force.

5. These hints of a coordinated Syrian-PLO-Soviet design last winter to advance an alternative to the Camp David framework may have been interrupted by the Phalange military initiatives in early April that led to the Syrian "missile crisis." With the easing of this issue, the Israeli elections, and the resumption of Israeli attacks in southern Lebanon, Assad may now believe the time is ripe to revive his earlier scenario. If this is in fact his intention, a resumption of aggressive Syrian reactions to Israeli air strikes could be his opening move in a projected chain of escalation, culminating in a demand for an immediate international conference to restrain Israel and to resolve fundamental political issues in Lebanon and Palestinian and Golan Heights questions.

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