



# 1979-S-1, Assad, Syria, CIA Report

## Politics in Syria



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### An Intelligence Assessment

*Research for this report was completed on 1 May 1979.*



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This paper was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations and the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia. (U).

Politics in Syria

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Key Points

President Assad's cautious, calculating personality dominates the Syrian decisionmaking process. He is extremely patient and tolerant of ambiguity.

Assad's key lieutenants are the Alawite commanders of Syria's military and intelligence services, not the formal cabinet or Baath Party leadership.

Syria will not accept a peace agreement unless Israel promises to return the Golan area and satisfies most Palestinian aspirations.

Assad's diplomatic strategy recognizes Syrian weakness and is based on securing widespread Arab and international support for his objectives.

Information on the political process in Syria is extremely limited because of the closed nature of Syrian society. As a result much of the analysis in this paper is speculative. We have attempted nonetheless to identify some of the key power brokers and to describe their objectives, constituencies, and style of operation.



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Politics in Syria [redacted]

Assad's Dominant Role

President Hafiz Assad dominates the decisionmaking process in Syria. He has ruled the country longer than anyone else since independence was achieved in 1946 by erecting a relatively stable power structure based on the support of his fellow Alawite military officers, members of a Muslim minority sect that comprises about 13 percent of Syria's population.\* [redacted]

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Assad makes all the important decisions himself, especially in defense and foreign affairs. For example, Assad oversees all officer promotions, assignments, training, and travel. He has developed an intricate system of checks and balances to maintain his hold on power. None of his subordinates is allowed too much power, and each is used against the others by Assad. [redacted]

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Assad's personality strongly influences Syrian decisionmaking. He is an extremely cautious man who prefers to take incremental steps rather than dramatic initiatives. He eschews radical actions and philosophies, preferring pragmatic, moderate policies. Assad strongly objected to the strident radicalism of his predecessor, Salah Jadid, who led Syria into two defeats, with Israel in 1967 and in Jordan in 1970. Assad, in contrast, has sought to project an image of respectability for Syria. Even as a coup plotter, Assad was cautious. He could have removed Jadid early in 1970, but he waited until November of that year to ensure that his coup would be relatively bloodless and smooth. Assad can take dramatic initiatives, such as his decision to take part in the 1973 war with Israel, but even then Syria's offensive was carefully planned and prepared in advance and would not have been undertaken if Egypt had not taken the lead. [redacted]

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Assad also has a remarkable tolerance for uncertainty. He is quite willing to allow an ambiguous situation to continue when others impatiently demand a resolution of the problem. Moreover, Assad is willing to reverse

\* The Alawites are treated in more detail in appendix A.



[redacted] Patient, cautious President Hafiz Assad, supported by fellow Alawite military officers, has dominated Syria's decisionmaking longer than anyone else since Syria became independent in 1946.

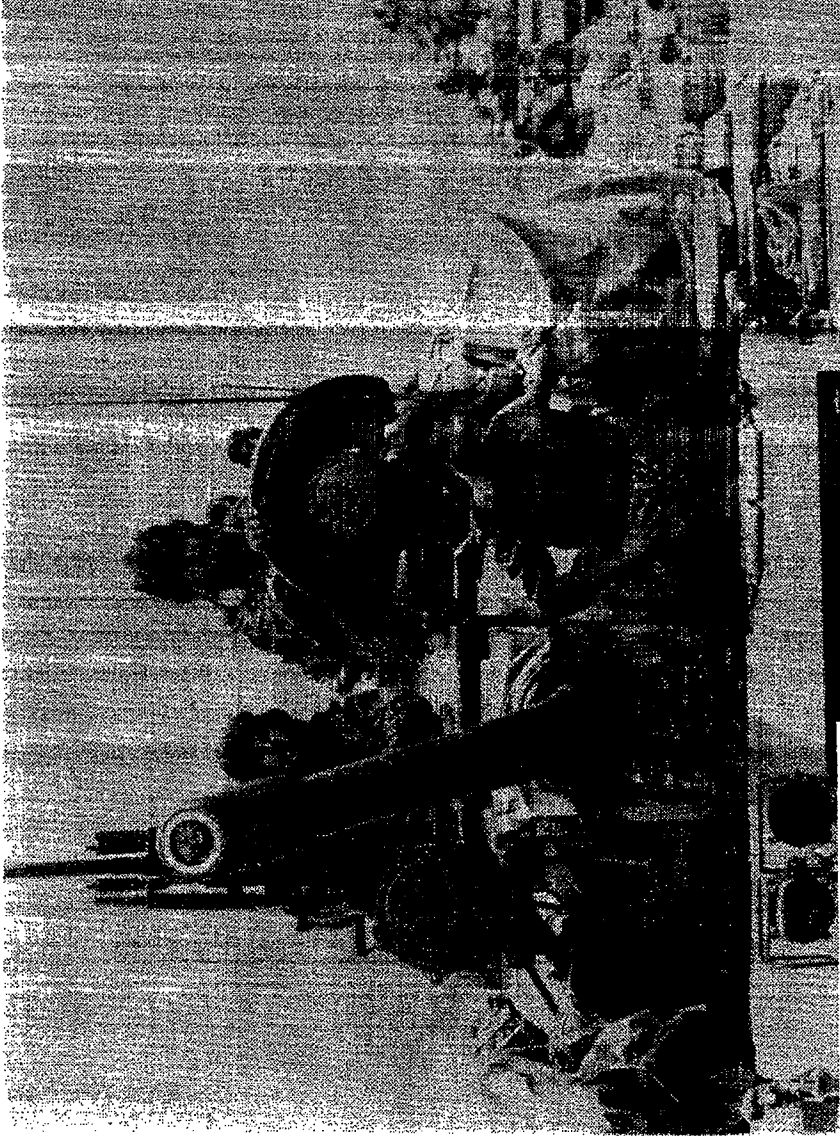
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direction and retreat from an undesirable position without apology or hesitation if the situation demands. [redacted]

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Syria's intervention in the Lebanese civil war aptly illustrates Assad's decisionmaking style. He moved his forces into Lebanon slowly and patiently, carefully judging each step to reduce the risk of disaster. He was willing to switch sides midway through the war and fight Syria's traditional ally, the Palestinians, when he



*Syrian troops in Lebanon.*

© [redacted]

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judged that Syrian interests were better served. Since early 1978 he has moved cautiously to whittle down the power of Israel's Maronite Christian allies, always pulling back from confrontation when Tel Aviv threatens to intervene. [redacted]

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Assad is a quiet, private man who puts in a long working day. He is usually unemotional, preferring to let his Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam make the fiery speeches while he remains silent. Unlike Egypt's Sadat, Assad grants few interviews and keeps his own counsel. [redacted]

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**Assad's Key Lieutenants**

Syria's formal cabinet has little role in policymaking. Prime Minister Muhammad Halabi and Defense

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Minister Mustapha Talas are figureheads with no political power base who hold office primarily to appease the Sunni majority. Foreign Minister Khaddam, as noted, is a vocal and often passionate spokesman for Assad's foreign policy but has no power base within the country. Syrian Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi and Interior Minister Adnan Dabbagh are trusted and able technocrats who only carry out Assad's policies. [redacted]

Assad relies for support on a small group of military and intelligence officers—almost all Alawites—who are extremely loyal to the President and are characterized by their discretion and secretive nature. This informal group is known in Syria as the Jamaa or "the company." [redacted]



Rifaat Assad, [redacted] ©  
key adviser to brother Hafiz Assad,  
controls the intelligence network  
that guards the Assad family's hold  
on power. (c)

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Assad's younger brother *Rifaat* is a key adviser to the President and a major figure in ensuring the regime's survival. Rifaat commands the 20,000-member Defense Companies, an Alawite-dominated elite force based primarily in Damascus. Rifaat is thus well placed to influence events in the capital. He also controls an extensive intelligence network that permeates Syrian society to guard the Assad family's hold on power. [redacted]

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In the last year Rifaat has succeeded in improving his power base in Syria. In March 1978 he helped engineer the downfall of his longtime rival, Air Force Commander Naji Jamil, and replaced him with a Rifaat loyalist, Subhi Haddad. Rifaat also helped place his friend Muhammad Halabi as Prime Minister, removing General Abd al-Rahman Khulayfawi, who had

criticized Rifaat for corruption. In July, Rifaat benefited from a major shakeup in the Army high command that placed many of his Alawite allies in key positions. Rifaat also seems to have improved his position in the Baath Party and will probably strengthen his position in the coming party elections. [redacted]

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Despite this formidable power base, Rifaat has many enemies. To Syrian Sunnis, he is the symbol of Alawite arrogance and abuse of power. There is no question of his involvement in corrupt activities. Rifaat has powerful enemies in the Alawite community. Many Alawite officers regard Rifaat as the President's bodyguard, *not* his heir, and might be willing to move against him if he tries to lay claim to the presidency.

[redacted]

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Defense Companies under his command in Lebanon have committed some of the most reprehensible abuses of Syria's peacekeeping role in that country, including the massacre of 30 civilians in June 1978 in the Bekaa Valley and perhaps the assassination of Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt. At home Rifaat is hated by many for the heavyhanded tactics of his men. [redacted]

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Air Force Intelligence Chief *Muhammad Khuli* enjoys a very close and trusting relationship with Assad—he is the President's security adviser, has been an emissary in Lebanon, is from the same village, and is an Alawite. He often performs special projects for Assad and is said to be efficient, hardworking, self-assured, and very ambitious. His subordinates claim Khuli is the number-two man in Syria. [redacted]

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Khuli has a strong power base in Air Force Intelligence. Moreover, he is related by marriage to Alawite Air Force Chief of Staff Ibrahim Hasan. [redacted]

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A major power broker is military intelligence chief *Ali Duba*. Duba's intelligence apparatus—primarily Alawite and Baathi in composition—maintains a close watch for signs of dissidence in the Army. Ali Duba has adopted a low profile [redacted]

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*Muhammad Khuli, efficient, hardworking, and ambitious, has a strong power base in Air Force intelligence.*

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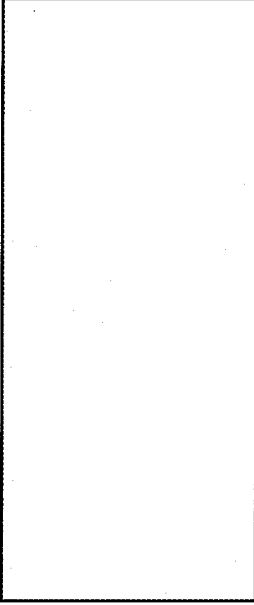
Special Forces commander *Ali Haydar*, another Alawite, commands the elite paratrooper and commando units of the Army. Many are currently in Lebanon, a factor that may have reduced Haydar's influence in Damascus, where they are usually stationed as a counterweight to Rifaat's Defense Companies. Assad's nephew *Adnan* commands a third Praetorian guard force, the Struggle Companies, also stationed in Damascus.

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Assad's immediate staff has no policymaking powers but does have some influence on implementation. An important personality is Presidential Adviser *Adib Daudi*, also an Alawite. Daudi often acts as Assad's spokesman on foreign affairs and conducts key foreign trips, such as his last minute trip to Saudi Arabia just before the second Baghdad conference. He also functions as Assad's chief of staff, overseeing his appointments and preparing his briefing papers. Assad values a careful presentation of the pros and cons of issues. He

is the first Syrian leader to have Israeli newspapers translated for his use as a source of information on the enemy, and he consults with Syrian foreign policy experts outside of the government.

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The one thing that unites all these Alawites is their goal of keeping the Assad regime in power and the Alawites dominant in Syria. Many have been extremely suspicious of Assad's efforts to improve relations with Iraq, which is dominated by Sunni Muslims. Rifaat is said to be particularly opposed to any substantive unity moves between the two Baathi regimes for fear this would weaken Alawite control and thus endanger his own position in Syria.

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#### Key Constituencies

The Syrians historically have been a badly divided community. Religious differences, regional rivalries, and the conflicting ties of Syrian versus pan-Arab nationalism produced almost a dozen coups between 1948 and 1970.

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Assad's power base is centered on the Alawite military officers who control the armed forces. The military has been the determinant in Syrian politics since the 1948 Arab defeat by Israel. The Alawites, traditionally impoverished farmers with little political power, were attracted in large numbers to the military in the 1950s as a means of self-advancement. With the Sunni officer corps decimated by coups and purges in the 1950s and 1960s, the relatively cohesive Alawites gained power.

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Assad has appointed Alawites to key command posts in the military—the armored brigades, air defense command, elite commandos, and paratroopers—and placed others in positions to monitor the military intelligence services and diplomatic service.

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Most of these Alawite officers are intensely loyal to Assad and their sect. They fear the consequences of sectarian violence if Assad were removed. There are, however, divisions within the sect—tribal and ideological—that Assad must minimize to stay in power. Assad has carefully assuaged Alawite concerns to keep their favor. [REDACTED]

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Assad also has been careful to expand his power base to include other minority groups and the Sunni majority. As noted, Sunnis are prominent, although mostly powerless, in the cabinet. Assad also constantly reiterates his commitment to basic Islamic beliefs to emphasize the Sunni's and Alawites' common Muslim identity. Nonetheless, the Sunni urban elite has little affection for the Assad government and has on occasion demonstrated its opposition by encouraging religious rioting. [REDACTED]

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Syria's ruling Baath Party, which dominates the coalition National Progressive Front, has only a nominal voice in Syrian decisionmaking. \* Assad uses the party for patronage and as a means to mobilize mass support, but he is careful to lead rather than be led by it. The Baath is generally more rigid than Assad, and it acts as a constraint in the Arab-Israeli dispute. [REDACTED]

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#### The Syrian Style

As in most societies, the Syrian ruling elite tends to see the world through the lenses of its own historical experience. Repeated coups, countercoups, and plots since 1949 have scarred the Syrian political psyche with a tradition of conspiratorial politics. [REDACTED]

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The net result has been to encourage Syrians to perceive events around them in conspiratorial terms. This perception can go to extremes on occasion. Syrians often view developments they cannot understand as plots hatched by their enemies aimed at

\* The Baath Party is treated in more detail in appendix B.

destroying their state, and this affects their decisionmaking. They continue to suspect, for example, that the Lebanese civil war was the result of an American-Israeli-Egyptian conspiracy to weaken Syria's opposition to Sinai II. [REDACTED]

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#### Opposition Groups

Assad's most dangerous potential opposition comes from within his own Alawite community. Since the Alawites form the backbone of Assad's hold on power, a serious factional split within the community could threaten him. We know of two groups of Alawites who have been unhappy with Assad in the past and who might try to move against him if the conditions were opportune. [REDACTED]

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Supporters of Assad's predecessor and fellow Alawite Salah Jadid (now imprisoned in Damascus) have tried to restore Jadid to power on at least two occasions since 1970—in November 1972 and December 1976. Assad has repeatedly purged the officer corps of Jadidists, but some secret sympathizers undoubtedly remain. Jadid probably also has supporters within the Baath, particularly among the extreme left. [REDACTED]

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Jadid's years in power—1966 to 1970—were marked by a strong attachment to pan-Arabist and leftist ideology. Syria was very close to the USSR and pursued a policy of total rejection of peace with Israel. If Jadid or his supporters returned to power, we would expect a return to these policies. [REDACTED]

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The second group of Alawites unhappy with Assad are supporters of former Defense Minister Muhammad Umran—one of Assad's rivals in the 1960s who was assassinated in 1972 [REDACTED] while in exile in Lebanon. We do not know of any attempts by Umranists to oust Assad. The Umran faction has participated as a junior partner in ruling Syria since 1972. [REDACTED]

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The Umran faction has maneuvered cautiously in the past to disassociate itself from unpopular policies without actually breaking with Assad. They have consistently refused to cooperate with the Jadidists—a division that obviously benefits Assad. [redacted]

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Youth of Muhammad by itself does not pose a threat to the regime's survival, it is a major reflection of Sunni discontent. Perhaps the greatest danger from the group is the possibility it might assassinate Assad. [redacted]

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We are not aware of any significant anti-Assad Sunni cabals in the officer corps, although some kind of Sunni-organized opposition cannot be ruled out. The Sunnis are probably deeply divided over what kind of regime they would like to see if Assad could be ousted. [redacted]

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The Youth of Muhammad have been tied to Iraq in the past and may still retain some links to Baghdad despite the rapprochement between the two Baathi rivals. The group probably also has links to other Sunni groups in Syria including the Muslim Brotherhood. [redacted]

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Syria has been plagued since mid-1976 by a series of assassinations of prominent Alawites. More than a dozen people—including one of Assad's nephews—have been killed. Most of the assassinations reportedly have been the work of the extremist Sunni group known as the Youth of Muhammad or the Lions of Muhammad. The Youth of Muhammad first appeared in 1973 in Hamah, long a Sunni stronghold. Its founder was Shaykh Mirwan Hadid, an influential, conservative Sunni religious leader and a longtime opponent of the ruling Baath Party and of Alawite primacy in Syria. In early 1973 he was one of the instigators of Sunni rioting in Hamah and Hims against a new constitution that failed to prescribe Islam as the religion of the president. [redacted]

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Hadid formed the Youth of Muhammad shortly thereafter, attracting disaffected Sunni intellectuals and youths. In July 1975 there were several clashes between Hadid's followers and Alawites in Hamah. In early 1976 a senior security official was killed in Hamah, apparently by the Youth of Muhammad. Hadid was arrested and imprisoned. After a 65-day fast he died on 19 July. His followers believe he was murdered. The regime refused to allow Hadid's family to bury him in Hamah in order to avoid further incidents, but his death was announced from minarets in Hamah and Hims. [redacted]

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Following Hadid's death, the Youth of Muhammad resolved to assassinate leading Alawites, especially relatives of Assad, to get their revenge and destabilize the regime. Rumors circulating in Damascus claim [redacted] 10 Alawites have been listed for execution. While the

One faction of the Communist Party is legal in Syria and participates in the ruling National Progressive Front. Led by one of the first Arab Communists, Khalid Bakdash, the party is few in numbers and has little influence with Assad. Its fortunes rise and fall with Damascus' relationship with Moscow. Several small anti-Soviet Communist parties operate underground but appear to be fairly well controlled and supervised by the regime. [redacted]

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#### Syria and the Peace Process

Assad continues to adhere to his own hardline approach to a Middle East settlement. The Syrians are convinced that Sadat's actions have led the Middle East away from a peace settlement and toward another war. In Damascus' view Sadat's direct talks with Israel divided the Arab world and thereby eroded its ability to use diplomatic and military pressure to secure concessions from Israel. Syria argues that Sadat's approach has encouraged Israel to be more intransigent than ever. Moreover, Damascus believes Egypt's face-to-face talks with Tel Aviv conceded one of the Arabs' most significant bargaining cards—recognition of Israel's right to exist. [redacted]

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Even before Sadat's trip to Jerusalem, Assad differed with Sadat on basic strategy, believing that the Arabs should try to strike a balance between the United States and the USSR to maximize opportunities for maneuver and to maintain a credible military threat to Israel. Although Assad shares Sadat's conviction that the United States holds the key to a negotiated settlement, he believes Sadat has been unwise to tie