

DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
BRIEFING PAPER1978-1974-4-1, Assad, Jews, US  
SECRETSYRIAN JEWSIssues and Talking Points PaperThe Issue

The question of Syria's treatment of its small Jewish community, which numbers about 4,000, has again come to the fore. It threatens to render even more difficult the task of conciliation between Syria and Israel and to cause widespread protest by Jewish and other groups in the United States.

Jewish groups in this country have for years agitated against the Syrian Government's refusal to allow Jews to emigrate and other discriminatory practices (notably restrictions on the travel of Jews within Syria, disarmament from public employment, from the holding of drivers' licenses and from telephone service for their private homes.) However, two recent incidents have caused particularly sharp public outcry:

- at the end of February this year four young women from the Syrian Jewish Community in Damascus were murdered, apparently while trying to leave Syria illegally. Subsequently, the Syrian authorities announced that four men had been arrested and charged with the crime. Two of these men, however, were Jews (Joseph Shalouh and Azour Zalta), and the Syrians have been accused of making these two Jews scapegoats.

- in March we were informed that two Jewish youths had been found murdered near the Syrian-Lebanese border, apparently also in an attempt to escape Syria.

There are in addition two earlier cases, involving the suspected kidnapping of Jews from Lebanon by Syrian security services, which have caused considerable emotion. In the fall of 1972 Mr. Albert Elia, a leader of the Lebanese Jewish Community was kidnapped from Beirut. Mr. Elia was active in the clandestine transit of Jews from Syria to Lebanon, and it was suspected that the Syrians were behind his disappearance; indeed, according to a recent intelligence report he is in a prison in the Damascus area. In the fall of 1973 two young Syrian Jewish men (Isaac Gadelì and Albert Hasbani), who had escaped to Lebanon were kidnapped in Beirut and have not

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been heard from since. They also are believed to be in Syrian prisons, or perhaps dead.

The Department has received a large number of letters of protest over these cases, including quite a few letters from Congressmen and Senators. Mr. Sisco has been approached by representatives of influential Jewish organizations asking that the U. S. help; the head of the New York Syrian Jewish Community has approached USUN to ask that we intervene with the Syrians in the case of the two men charged with the murder of the four girls; and the Israeli Embassy sent the Department a note on April 18 (copy attached) formally requesting that the U. S. "use all the means at its disposal and exert its influence upon the Syrian Government" to permit free emigration of Syrian Jews, to free those imprisoned, and to abolish restraints upon the Syrian Jewish Community. On April 17, a large but peaceful demonstration was held outside the Syrian UN Mission; among those participating were senior political figures from New York City and State.

In 1971 we approached the Syrian Government with an offer to admit to this country all Syrian Jews with close relatives in the United States (these were estimated at some 300-400 persons). The Syrians made no reply. Since that time we have not raised the issue of Syrian Jewry with the Syrians, because we have had no direct channel of communication with them until your visit to Damascus last December and we have not felt that our intervention would be useful. However, your negotiations with the Syrians and your visits to Damascus have raised hopes among groups in this country, and on the part of the Israeli Government as well, that it might be possible for you to intervene with the SARG on one or another of the outstanding cases, or to press for freedom of emigration for Syrian Jews as an entity.

The Syrians are extraordinarily sensitive about this issue. Syrian officials maintain both in public statements and privately that there is no discrimination against Jews; they do not deny that Jews are forbidden to leave the country but claim that this is for security reasons, i.e. they would go to Israel. It is difficult to imagine how the Syrians could think that four thousand persons (many of them elderly) could significantly strengthen Israel, even if they all should choose to go to Israel, which seems unlikely. However, the Syrians

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have shown no signs of relenting, either on the matter of emigration or as regards the suspicion in which they hold their Jewish Community.

Talking Points

We do not believe that U.S.-Syrian relations have yet reached the stage where you could usefully raise this subject with President Asad (which would be the only effective way of doing it). We do think that it could be taken up at some stage after a disengagement agreement is reached between Israel and Syria, possibly when discussions are begun on Palestinian refugees; the Syrians would be more likely to understand our concern for Syrian Jews if it is expressed parallel to concern over the justice for the Palestinians. At such time, it might be possible to negotiate the transfer elsewhere of the entire Syrian Jewish Community.

However, should you think the proper atmosphere does exist in your upcoming talks with Asad for bringing the subject up, you might approach it in the following general way:

- Jewish groups in the United States have pressed me to raise with you the question of Syrian Jewry; I do so not out of any desire to meddle in Syria's internal affairs - we recognize this to be entirely a Syrian internal matter - but because public emotion in the U. S. over the issue risks complicating our efforts to reach a settlement of the Middle East conflict.

- It occurs to me that one of the ways of dampening emotions over this issue, and of improving Syria's image in the U.S., might be to revive a proposal the United States made to your Government in 1971, which is that we would admit to our country Syrian Jews who have close relatives in the United States. This would have a very positive impact on American public opinion and there would be little danger that these people would want to go onward to Israel once they reached the U.S.

We would not recommend your specifically mentioning the case of Albert Elia or the two young men who disappeared from Beirut in the fall of 1973 (the Syrians have never

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acknowledged having them and would almost certainly take offense at the suggestion that they were involved in the kidnappings), or of the two men charged with murder. You might however be able to use a general formulation, something to the effect that any other measures the Syrian Government might see fit to take to defuse the issue of Jews in Syria would of course be helpful to the attainment of our common goal.

Department of State  
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