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To : The Secretary  
 Through: S/S  
 From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *TLH*  
 Subject: Syria's Ba'thi Leadership in Disarray.

Western and Beirut press allegations that a "military coup" was carried out in Damascus on February 28 appear to be somewhat sensational and exaggerated. Reliable information is lacking and while political conflict unquestionably is going on within the Syrian regime, the outcome remains unclear. It is reasonably certain that the key issues feeding the crisis include personal rivalries and ambitions, concern over Syria's isolated position in the Arab world, and differing views on Syrian-Soviet relations.

The Principal Players... Syria has known little else but periodic power struggles for over two decades. The emergence in 1963 of the Ba'th Party as the ruling group held out the likelihood that an ideologically based political party with a program, however ill-conceived and muddled, would be able to provide the institutionalized administration necessary to maintain a viable state. Instead, however, personal rivalries, soon stripped the Ba'th of its ideological veneer and the traditional contest for power has continued without interruption.

In the current episode, Defense Minister Hafiz al-Asad is attempting to expand and consolidate the considerable, but incomplete, measure of control he has exercised since October 1968. At that time he challenged Salah Jadid, Assistant Secretary General of the Syrian Ba'th Party, who had been the

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behind-the-scenes strongman for almost three years. Asad succeeded in weakening Jaddid's position by bringing to bear his stronger influence within the armed forces and dismissing Jaddid's chief allies in the cabinet, Premier Yusuf Zuayyin and Foreign Minister Ibrahim Makhus. Although the confrontation took place during a Party conference, Asad was not able to depose Jaddid as Assistant Secretary General, the most important post in the Ba'th hierarchy. Furthermore, Zuayyin and Makhus were transferred to party work, although apparently with only minor responsibilities. Asad's claim to undisputed regime leadership thus was not fully realized.

The vital support for Asad's moves in October, and his subsequent actions in pursuit of total control, came from key army officers. Instrumental among them has been Deputy Defense Minister and Chief of Staff Mustafa Talas, one of the most freewheeling and pragmatic spirits in the Syrian Ba'th. In October, Asad also turned to Head of State Nur al-Din al-Atasi to provide continuity of civilian administration. Atasi had long been linked with Zuayyin and Jaddid, but he has had an unblemished record as an opportunist, and he agreed to replace Zuayyin as Prime Minister, while retaining the virtually powerless post of Head of State. Atasi, who additionally serves as Secretary General of the Ba'th, did not sever his connections with Jaddid, however, and the two men appear to be Asad's leading antagonists in the current leadership dispute.\*

...And What Separates Them. Personal rivalries and ambitions are as much factors in the current power struggle as any of the substantive issues involved. Asad and Jaddid were co-conspirators in the coup d'etat which overthrew the moderate wing of the Ba'th in February 1966. Jaddid then became the strongman,

\*Jaddid is still the Assistant Secretary General, but the extent to which Asad has diluted his power will depend on the outcome of the Ba'th Party Conference scheduled to begin March 20.

and Asad appeared content as his chief supporter. Together they withstood several challenges, sometimes feigning a split between them to flush out opponents. The incongruity of two nearly equal leaders working together indefinitely, however, made it inevitable that they, too, would eventually come into conflict, particularly over the division of responsibility in the placement of army officers. Asad's strength in the army steadily increased, as he managed to thwart the appointment of pro-Jadid officers to key posts and to secure these assignments for his own supporters. This tactic has been basic to leadership contests in Syria. Even before the dust settles on the present crisis, Asad and Talas may be considering the possibility that a similar clash between them is in the making.

Syria's deep isolation in the Arab world is of great concern to the Asad group. Asad's primary reason for wanting to improve relations with some Arab states appears to lie within the context of the Arab-Israeli problem, and he probably intends to be more forthcoming in the area of military cooperation. The country has been out of the Arab mainstream since early 1966, and its extremist policies have prevented any meaningful participation in Arab efforts toward developing coordinated positions, political and military, in the period since the June 1967 war. It has consistently refused to adopt a more flexible position on peace settlement efforts, and despite its having joined with Iraq and Jordan to form the Eastern Front Command in August 1968 Syria has been an obstacle to the effective functioning of that joint defense arrangement. The Command has not worked well largely because of Syrian reluctance to agree to many of its proposals. The Damascus regime, for example,

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has repeatedly vetoed any exchange of forces with Jordan and it has at least twice accepted, and later rejected, suggestions to station Iraqi troops in southern Syria to augment the Iraqi force already in Jordan.

Syria's obstinance in cooperating with Iraq and Jordan stemmed from its poor relations with both: Iraq, which is ruled by a wing of the Iraqi Ba'th hostile to the Syrian Ba'th, because it harbored anti-regime Syrian exiles and aided them in plotting against Syria; Jordan because it had a moderate government. Asad has urged a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement since the Iraqi Ba'th recaptured control in Baghdad in July 1968, regardless of its different orientation, and he has made some effort toward that objective. Iraq, for its part, has recently indicated interest in improved relations by drastically reducing, and perhaps withdrawing, its assistance to Syrian exiles and by sending an emissary to Damascus during the height of the current controversy to confer with leaders of both contending factions. UAR and Algerian officials also visited Damascus during that period, but press reports of intense mediation efforts are overstated.

Syria's moves to better its position in the area must, of course, have Cairo's blessing. Nasser is believed favorably disposed toward Asad, and the prospects for closer ties would improve if Asad gained full power in Damascus. Relations between Egypt and Syria, however, will continue to be conditioned by the bitter memories of their ill-fated experiment in unity from 1958 to 1961.

Heavy reliance on the USSR has been an important factor in every major Syrian leadership quarrel during the past three years. Asad and his supporters want to reduce the considerable Soviet influence and presence in Syria, although they recognize that close links must be maintained for political and

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economic reasons. Jadid had sided with Zuayyin and Makhus, perhaps the most pro-Soviet of Syrian officials, during a debate on Syria's Soviet policy at the October 1968 Ba'th conference. He did so even though he is believed to have been biased against the USSR, largely because he regarded Soviet treatment of him during his Moscow visit in early 1967 as inadequate and insincere. Reports that Asad raised the subject with a demand for cancellation of plans for a Soviet naval visit to Tartus, approved unilaterally by Zuayyin and Makhus, have not been substantiated. Asad later sent a high-level military delegation to France and ordered that inquiries be made elsewhere in the West in an attempt to lessen Syria's virtually total dependence on Soviet arms.

The increasingly close relations with Moscow after February 1966 gradually reached the point at which the Soviets viewed support for their new "client" as a basic policy requirement in the Middle East. Despite this closeness, however, the Syrian-Soviet relationship has not been trouble free. The most extreme Arab state on the Israeli problem, Syria acutely mistrusts peace settlement efforts. It has therefore regarded Soviet views and initiatives toward that end with deep suspicion and resentment. Soviet attempts during the latter part of 1966 to persuade Syria not to encourage Arab guerrilla activities against Israel were greeted coldly in Damascus and were only partly successful. Similar treatment was accorded Moscow's efforts after the 1967 war to mute Syria's insistence on a "national liberation war" as the only solution, to persuade Syria to accept Soviet and Western cooperation in the UN for a peace formula, and to encourage Syria to join in a coordinated Arab position toward a political settlement. Syria steadfastly resisted those pressures,

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categorically rejected the November 22, 1967 Security Council Resolution which the USSR had endorsed, and refused to recognize the mandate of special UN envoy Dr. Gunnar Jarring. Syrian suspicions reached a peak with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko's sudden visit to Cairo in December 1968. Convinced that the USSR and the UAR were concocting a plan that would be detrimental to Arab interests vis-a-vis Israel, the Syrian regime sent its Foreign Minister to Cairo in early January to demand an explanation of the Gromyko visit.

Likely Outcome. Asad now appears to have reasonably firm control of the regime. Continued strong support in the army and the security forces should enable him to uphold his position even if he cannot completely dominate proceedings at the forthcoming Ba'th Party conference. The extraordinary session, scheduled for March 20, was called by Asad's opponents in an attempt to undermine him. Asad's failure to gain majority support for his views would increase the prospects for armed confrontation. Endorsement of his authority, on the other hand, would substantially enhance his position. It might even provide enough stability to enable him to turn away from domestic affairs long enough to deal with some regional policies, a luxury no Syrian leader in many years has enjoyed.

The current power struggle will have little effect on US-Syrian relations. They could hardly be much worse and Asad's regime probably would not be any more troublesome than its predecessors. Although Asad is a moderate in the Syrian context, Syria's basic orientation as a "progressive, anti-imperialist" and socialist state and its uncompromising hostility toward Israel are not expected to change.

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