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National Foreign Assessment Center

Confidential

1979-5-1, Assad, Syria CIA Report

Politics in Syria [redacted]

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An Intelligence Assessment

Research for this report was completed on 1 May 1979.

25X1 [redacted]

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

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Politics in Syria [redacted] 25X1

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

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.*

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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.

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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.

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

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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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

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

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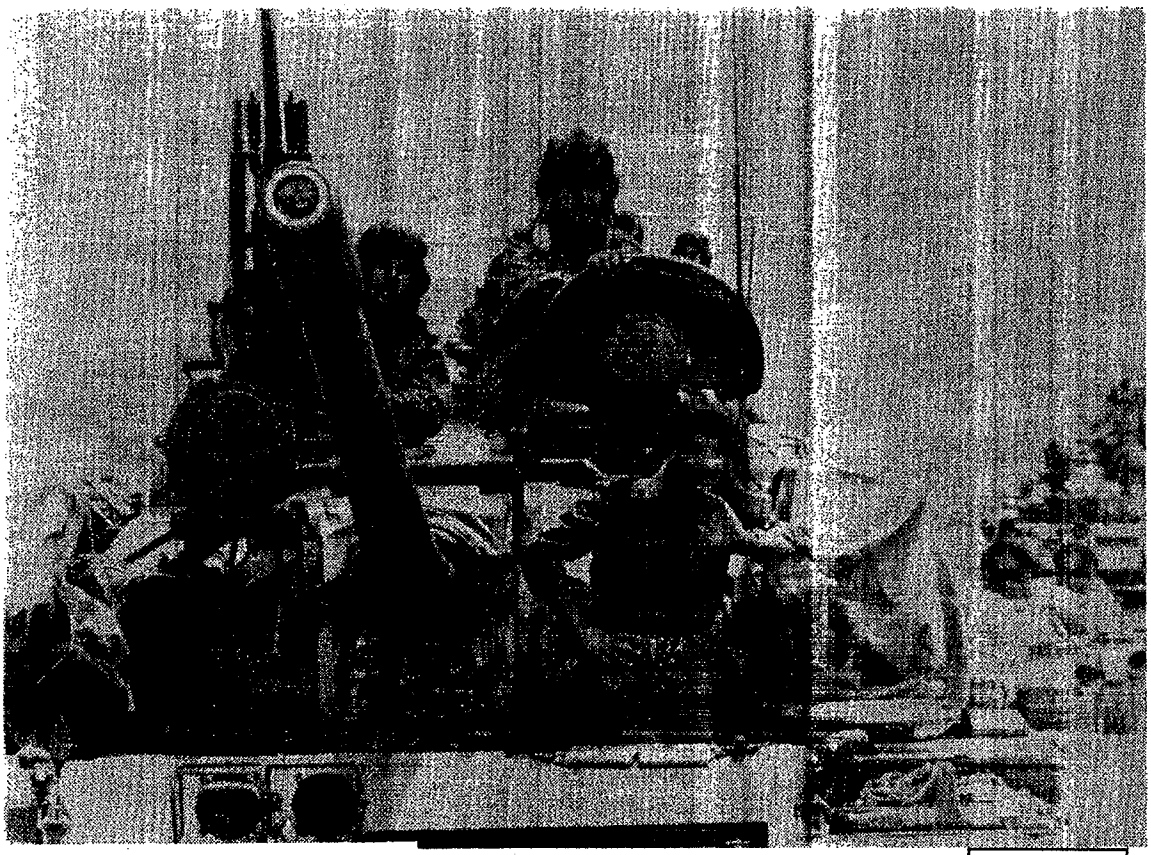

Syrian troops in Lebanon.

[redacted] © 25X1

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] 25X1

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] 25X1

Assad's Key Lieutenants

Syria's formal cabinet has little role in policymaking. Prime Minister Muhammad Halabi and Defense 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] 25X1

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] 25X1

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25X6 25X1 *Rifaat Assad, key adviser to brother Hafiz Assad, controls the intelligence network that guards the Assad family's hold on power.* (C)

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. 25X1

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. 25X1

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.

Units of the 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. 25X6 25X1

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-asssured, and very ambitious. His subordinates claim Khuli is the number-two man in Syria. 25X1

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. 25X1

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 25X6

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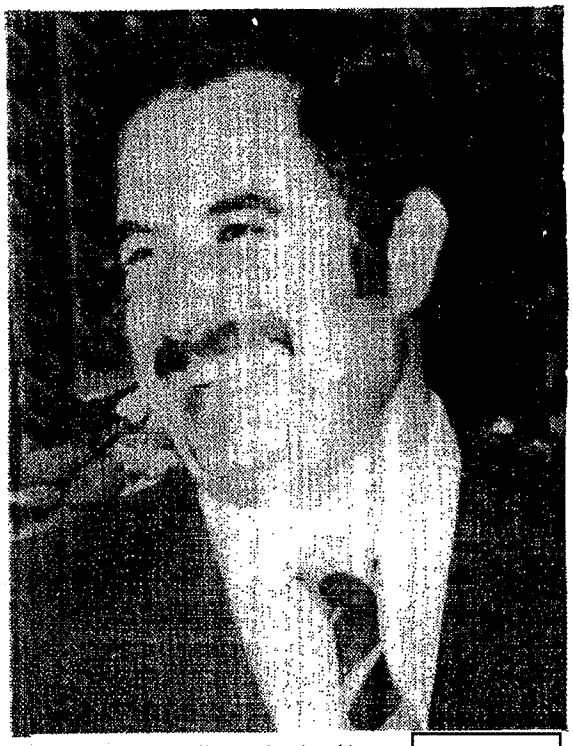

Muhammad Khuli, efficient, hardworking, and ambitious, has a strong power base in Air Force intelligence.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 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.

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

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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. 25X1

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. 25X1

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. 25X1

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. 25X1

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 110 Alawites have been listed for execution. While the 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. 25X1

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. 25X1

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. 25X1

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. 25X1

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

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25X1 *President Assad meeting President Brezhnev in Moscow, October 1978.* [redacted] ©

Egypt so closely to the US and to end close ties with Moscow. Assad and Sadat also have strikingly divergent personality styles. Sadat loves the bold and innovative move that attracts world attention. Assad, on the other hand, is pragmatic and cautious and cares little for theatrical gestures. [redacted] 25X1

Despite Syria's opposition to the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement Syria remains committed in principle to a peace agreement with Israel. Syria's terms for a settlement, however, are the toughest of any of the Arab confrontation states. [redacted] 25X1

The standard Syrian terms were summed up by Assad in an interview with the BBC in 1975.

> We feel the termination of the state of war requires the achievement of two things: first, Israel's withdrawal from all the territories it occupied in 1967; the second, the restoration of the rights of the Palestinian Arab people.

There is very little room for maneuver in the Syrian formulation. [redacted] 25X1

The Syrians are adamant about recovering all of the Golan Heights. They are unwilling to negotiate any modifications in the 1949 armistice lines, and they demand the removal of all Israeli settlements from the Heights. [redacted] 25X1

There are several elements that could complicate the border issue. The international border originally drawn between Syria and the Palestine mandate is in dispute in a few areas, particularly in the north where Israel, Syria, and Lebanon border. Moreover, the 1949 armistice accord established three small demilitarized zones in Mandate Palestine along the border in areas occupied by Syrian troops at the end of the war. Conceivably some minor adjustments might be made in these areas. The territory involved is very small, however, and would not satisfy Israeli demands for defensible positions on the Golan Heights. [redacted] 25X1

In exchange for an Israeli pullback the Syrians have said they will accept limited demilitarization of the Golan as long as an equal portion of the Israeli border region is also demilitarized. Syria would also accept UN peacekeeping forces. Assad is probably willing to discuss the timing and phasing of a withdrawal as long as the principle of a restoration of Syrian sovereignty is acknowledged by Tel Aviv. [redacted] 25X1

The Palestinian Issue

The Golan, however, is not the only issue in Syrian eyes. For Syria, as Assad told an interviewer in 1977, "Golan is peripheral, Sinai too. The Palestinian problem is the gut issue." Damascus' attachment to the Palestinian cause should not be underestimated. Assad probably cannot accept a peace settlement that does not address the issue. [redacted] 25X1

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In part, adherence to the Palestinian cause reflects the Syrians' support for what they see as a just cause—reinforced by years of propaganda. Domestic politics also play a role. Syria has almost 300,000 Palestinian refugees—a significant political force in a nation of 7 million. Moreover, the 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon are an important concern to Assad, given his belief that Lebanon's stability is essential to Syrian security. Syria simply cannot ignore the interests of the Palestinians, nor does it want to. 25X1

Assad has never been willing to state explicitly his ideas on how to solve the Palestinian problem. "Neither Damascus nor Cairo can decide about Palestine," he argues. "Only the Palestinian people can do this." Assad has, nonetheless, endorsed the concept of a West Bank–Gaza Palestinian state provided the arrangement satisfies a majority of the Palestinians. He has said that he would also accept a political link between the West Bank and Jordan if they both want it. 25X1

Assad also has insisted that UN resolutions—particularly Resolution 148—that call for the repatriation or compensation of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war be honored as part of a settlement. It is unclear how firm he is in this demand—he probably could accept some vague compensation formula if it satisfied most Palestinians living in the diaspora. 25X1

Assad's statements on Jerusalem call for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines. Nevertheless, he probably would follow the Saudi lead on this issue. As a member of the minority Alawite Muslim sect Assad would want the blessing of Sunni Riyadh to sell a Jerusalem solution at home. 25X1

Syrian Concessions

In return for Israeli concessions on the Golan and Palestinian issues, Assad is willing to offer an end to the state of war with Israel and a formal peace treaty, but very little more. Even a peace treaty is a sensitive topic. In 1975 Assad told *Newsweek* that he would sign a formal treaty, but he later retracted the offer, apparently under pressure at home from militants within the ruling Baath Party. In 1977, however, he was quoted on Radio Damascus as agreeing—in an interview with the *New York Times*—to "signing a peace treaty." In Syrian eyes this acceptance of Israel is a tremendous concession, albeit a grudging one. 25X1

Assad rejects the concept of normalizing relations with Israel as being part of a settlement. He argues that such matters as diplomatic recognition and trade are not legitimate subjects for peace negotiations. Ideally he would like to sign an accord terminating belligerence and then ignore Israel completely. 25X1

He probably is pragmatic enough, however, to understand that he will have to take some steps toward normalization. Assad already has allowed meetings to take place on the Golan Heights between Druze villagers divided by the UN disengagement zone. Damascus probably could accept other measures in a settlement such as an end to the Arab boycott of Israel and of firms that deal with Israel, third country civilian airline direct flights between Syria and Israel, and reciprocal notification of military maneuvers near the common border. Moreover, Assad has left open the possibility of a further normalization of relations after a settlement is reached. 25X1

Negotiating Strategy

Assad recognizes that by itself Syria is too weak to recover the Golan. Thus his diplomatic strategy is based on securing as much support from as many sources as possible for Syrian objectives. Unlike Sadat, Assad has carefully maintained his ties with Moscow. He has moved to develop close ties with Jordan, the Palestinians, and Lebanon, and Syria consistently emphasizes the virtues of Arab solidarity. 25X1

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The Syrian President believes that he must increase Israel's incentives for making unpalatable concessions. He believes it is necessary that Syria develop a credible military threat by upgrading its weaponry and by seeking closer ties with its archrival, Iraq. He also wants both great powers to be involved in negotiations, strong US pressure on Israel, and a negotiating framework that confronts the Israelis with the choice of a comprehensive agreement or nothing.

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Assad believes the form of negotiations is at least as important as the substance. He wants to be able to exploit Israel's desire for peace with Egypt and Jordan in order to extract concessions on the Syrian and the Palestinian issues. His opposition to the Camp David accords has the same foundation: he perceived them as providing a framework for separate negotiations.

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Assad is not eagerly waiting in the wings to join the negotiating process, and he is unlikely to enter it unless he comes to believe that Israel is eager for peace with Syria and willing to pay a substantial price.

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