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Intelligence**

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# **Israel: Perceptions of Syria**



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**An Intelligence Assessment**

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*NESA 85-10003  
January 1985*

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# **Israel: Perceptions of Syria**



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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This paper was prepared by  Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESAs, 

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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 24 December 1984  
was used in this report.*

Israelis, both in and out of government, view Syria as Israel's most determined enemy and doubt that Syria is interested in an eventual peace settlement. They believe Syria's intense hostility stems largely from the regime's minority Alawite character, which, in the Israeli view, forces the regime to focus on an external enemy to legitimize its control. Israelis also consider Syria's aspiration to Arab leadership as a cause of Syrian hostility.

Israeli leaders believe Syria will adhere to limited agreements and tacit understandings as long as Israel retains strategic superiority. Israelis are seeking to reach a tacit understanding with Syria on Lebanon to facilitate the withdrawal of Israeli forces. They are increasingly concerned, however, that Syria may calculate that Israeli domestic pressures will compel Tel Aviv to withdraw without any Syrian concessions.

Israeli leaders are concerned that tensions arising from Syria's continuing arms buildup, Assad's outspoken defense of the Palestinians, and the close proximity of Israeli and Syrian forces in eastern Lebanon could lead to renewed local clashes or even a wider conflict. If Assad initiated an attack against Israel, the Israelis believe that it probably would be for limited political gains.

Most Israelis foresee an extended period of internal unrest in Syria after Assad leaves the scene. Although internal discord would make Syria a more unpredictable neighbor, the Israelis believe it would weaken Syria's position in the region and force the successor regime to turn inward.

Israelis expect President Assad—and whoever succeeds him—to continue his efforts to prevent King Hussein from entering negotiations with Israel and thereby foreclose the possibilities of isolation from the peace process, loss of leverage over the Palestinian and Golan Heights issues, and a reduced Arab leadership role. In the event that the peace process revives, Israel will look to the United States to counter Syrian efforts to keep Hussein on the sidelines.



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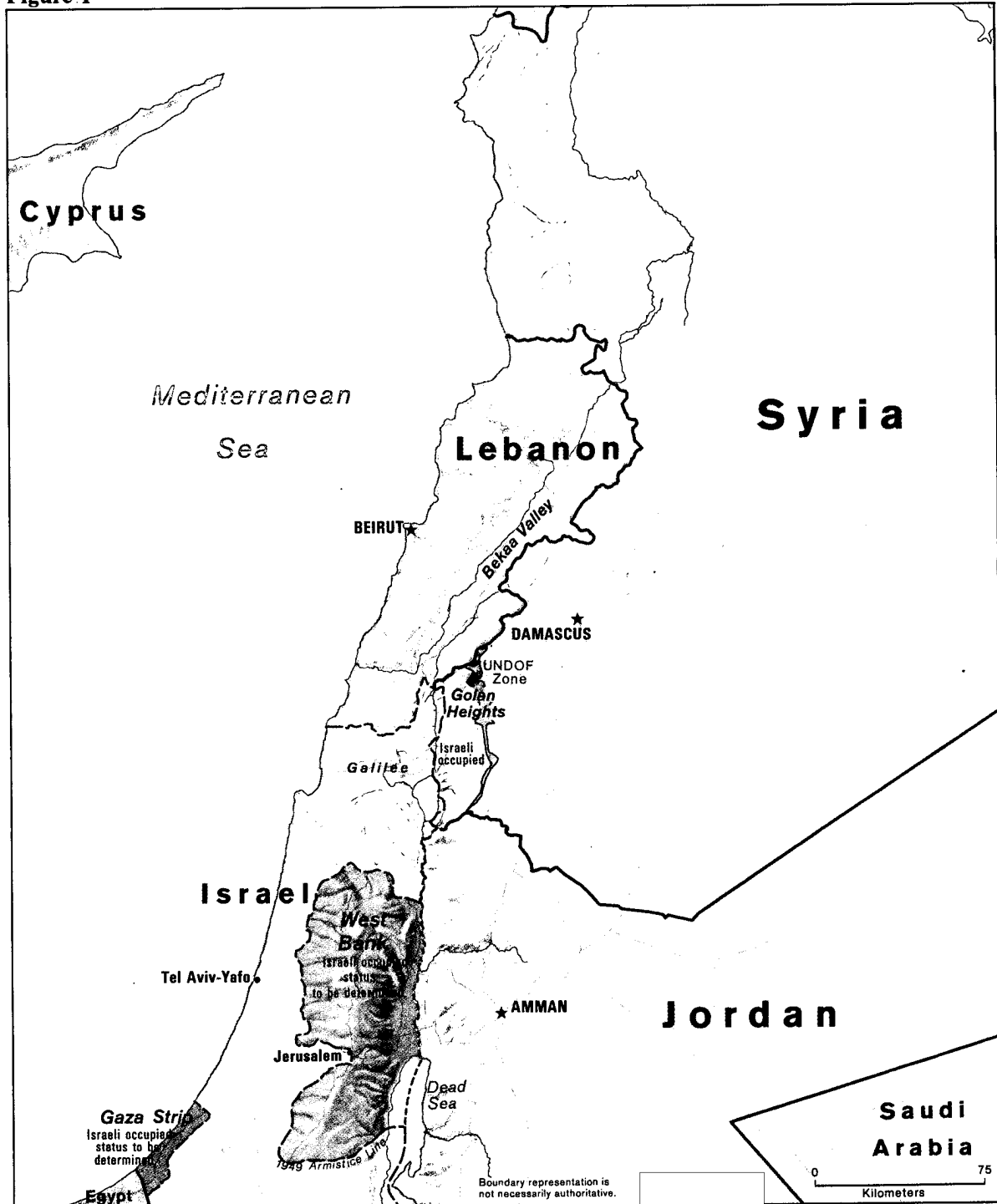
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Figure 1



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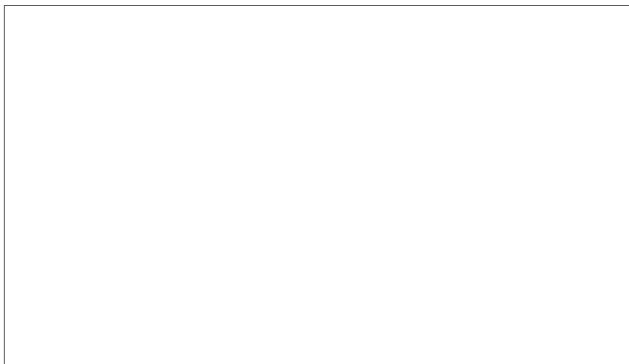
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**Israel:  
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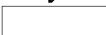
In our judgment, Israeli leaders across the political spectrum—like the overwhelming majority of the Israeli public—believe that the prospects for genuine peace with Syria are dim. Israelis remember vividly the pre-1967 Syrian shelling from the Golan Heights of Israeli settlements in the northern Galilee. They believe it would be folly to return the strategically vital Golan to Damascus. Public opinion polls have consistently revealed that a large majority of Israelis—on the order of 70 percent—support Israel's annexation of the Golan in 1981. 

Israeli thinking about the Arab-Israeli dispute has focused largely on Syria since the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979. Events of the last two years in Lebanon and within the Palestinian movement have reinforced the tendency among Israeli officials to view Syria as the dominant Arab player in the Middle East, according to the US Embassy in Tel Aviv. 




**Israel's Implacable Foe**

The US Embassy reports that most Israelis regard Syria as violent, "bloodthirsty," with little or no interest in a peace settlement—unlike, for example, their more benign view of Jordan and its intentions. Israelis are divided in their assessments of the reasons for Syrian hostility. Most  specialists cite the minority character of President Assad's Alawite regime. Those holding this view argue that the regime focuses attention on an external enemy to legitimize its control, and it will remain opposed to peace with Israel as long as the Alawis are dominant. 

Other Israeli experts ascribe Syria's hostility to aspirations to preeminence in the Arab world and to leadership of the Arab struggle against Zionism. One leading specialist maintains that Syria's hostility is not likely to diminish soon because the Syrian Ba'th Party has indoctrinated an entire generation of Syrians with its Pan-Arab and anti-Israeli views. 


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A minority of Israeli specialists contend that Syria's hostility stems from its rivalry with Israel for regional dominance. According to this view, Damascus sees the Arab-Israeli conflict as a decades-long struggle. These Israelis believe Syria intends first to create a "satellite" regime in Lebanon, then dominate Jordan and the Palestinian movement, and finally impose its will on Israel. 

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**Working Relationships Are Possible**

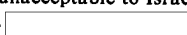
Press and Embassy reporting indicates that, despite Syria's perceived hostility, most Labor Party leaders believe they can reach limited understandings with Damascus. The Laborites cite their experience with the Syrians on the disengagement of forces on the Golan Heights in 1974 and on the tacitly understood "red lines" in Lebanon that guided Syrian military activities there in the mid-1970s.<sup>1</sup> They note that the Syrians have lived up to their basic obligations under the disengagement agreement and that the Golan has remained fairly quiet. Similarly, they believe the Syrians generally abided by the "red lines" in Lebanon prior to Israel's invasion in June 1982. 

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In our judgment, the Israeli Government would like to reach an understanding with Syria on Lebanon to facilitate the withdrawal of Israeli troops. It wants to reach an agreement defining Syria's southernmost military presence in Lebanon and minimizing infiltration into southern Lebanon by radical Shias and

<sup>1</sup> "Red lines" are meant to alert friends and enemies to alterations in the status quo unacceptable to Israel and which could trigger a preemptive strike. 

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Figure 2. Huleh Valley and Golan Heights. [redacted]



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Palestinians, including those based in the Bekaa Valley. Nevertheless, an increasing number of Israeli leaders—including Prime Minister Peres and Defense Minister Rabin—acknowledge that Syria now holds most of the cards in Lebanon. They also concede that Assad thus far has not adopted a more flexible position because of concern over the potential strategic threat posed by the presence of Israeli forces in Lebanon only 40 kilometers from the Syrian capital. [redacted]

numbers of Syrian troops and, consequently, diminish the Syrian military threat to Israel. They also conclude that Syria's involvement in Lebanon will become a major irritant to Damascus after Assad departs the scene and the successor regime struggles to preserve the precarious internal balance in Syria. As a result, they believe Israel's strong strategic position in the region probably will be enhanced. [redacted]

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We believe Peres and Rabin are increasingly concerned that Syria may calculate it does not have to offer concessions because Israeli internal political pressures will eventually force Tel Aviv to withdraw from Lebanon without an understanding on security arrangements in the south. If this is Syria's assessment, they fear that Damascus will bide its time. [redacted]

Likud leaders, on the other hand, take a gloomier view that is colored by recent events. They see Syria's presence in Lebanon as a constant reminder of the previous Likud government's failure—at great cost in Israeli lives—to achieve some of the military and political goals that guided the 1982 invasion. Vice Prime Minister Shamir, former Defense Minister Sharon, and other Likud leaders do not believe the division of Syrian military forces between Syria and Lebanon significantly reduces the military threat to Israel. They are apprehensive that Syria eventually may develop a second front in Lebanon for a future conflict with Israel. [redacted]

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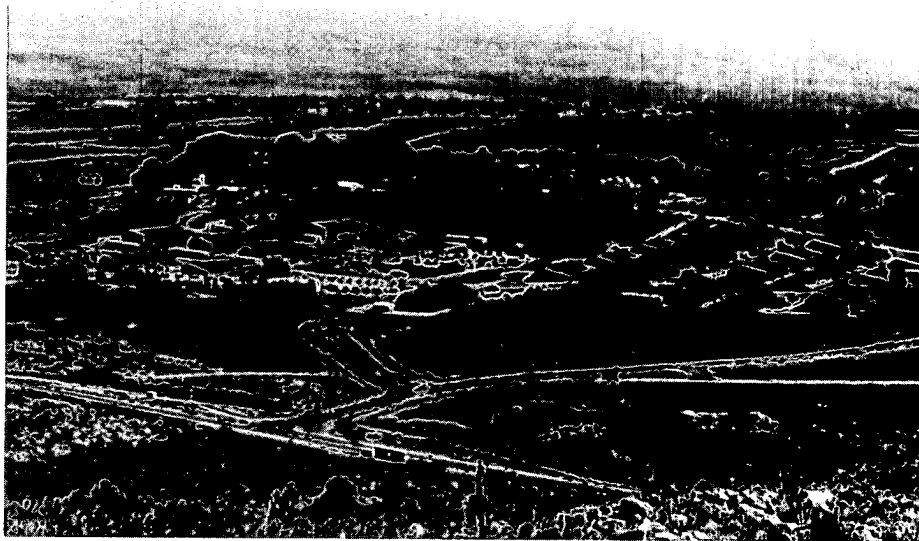
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In our view, Peres and Rabin believe that Syrian preeminence in central and northern Lebanon serves Israeli interests by promoting stability on Israel's northern border. They also believe Syria's continuing involvement in Lebanon will tie down significant

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Figure 3. Israeli armored camp in Huleh Valley. [redacted]

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**Prospects for Hostilities**

Israeli leaders know that Syria is Israel's most formidable military opponent and believe Damascus will continue its attempt to build military capabilities comparable to those of Israel. In the view of many Israeli officials, Syria is Israel's only Arab neighbor that still believes the Arab-Israeli conflict can be resolved by war, but they do not expect a general conflict with Syria to occur in the near term. They believe Syria is too preoccupied with unresolved succession problems at home and with the Lebanon imbroglio to undertake major military action against Israel. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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Israeli leaders nonetheless are concerned that tensions arising from Syria's continuing arms buildup, President Assad's support for the dissident Palestinians, and the close proximity of Israeli and Syrian forces in eastern Lebanon could lead to renewed local clashes or even a wider conflict. [redacted]

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[redacted]

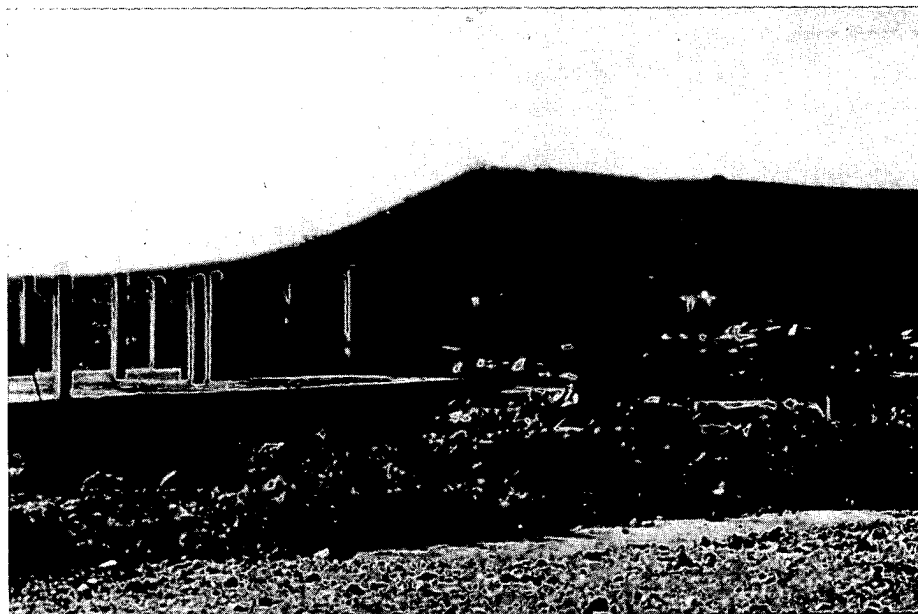
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Figure 4. Israeli SIGINT installations in Golan Heights.

[Redacted]



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Israeli leaders are concerned that Syria might start limited hostilities for political gains. Some foresee the possibility of Syrian-Israeli air clashes or a "war of attrition" in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley or on the Golan Heights. Israeli concern is heightened by Assad's determination to frustrate any diplomatic resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict that does not take into account Syria's interests. [Redacted]

In their view, Syria after Assad probably will go through a prolonged period of instability with rival personalities and sectarian and security groups competing for control. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Assad's brother, Rif'at, is seen by almost all Israeli specialists as lacking the President's sophisticated political skills, according to Embassy reporting. The Israelis see only slim chances for Rif'at to succeed his brother, but they believe Assad's loyalty to him may give Rif'at an early edge in the struggle for power. Even if he does become president, they doubt he will be clever enough to survive against his wide array of enemies in key Army and intelligence positions. [Redacted]

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**The Post-Assad Era**

Assad's uncertain health has generated intense Israeli speculation about the security and foreign policy implications of the post-Assad Syrian leadership.

[Redacted] Assad, by his shrewd leadership and calculated use of force, has made Syria more powerful and influential in the region than would have otherwise been the case. They doubt that any successor will be as effective as Assad.

Some Israeli academic observers are less confident that Assad's departure will result in prolonged instability. They maintain that the principal Alawi and Sunni contenders are key figures in the current regime and will try to preserve outward unity as they maneuver behind the scenes. They speculate that this should minimize violence and unrest, although it probably will not assure the stability that prevailed under Assad. [Redacted]

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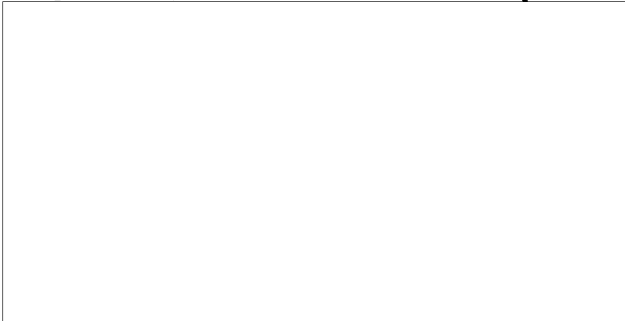
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Figure 5. Syrian checkpoint in Golan. [redacted]

On broader peace issues, Israeli officials expect Assad—and whoever succeeds him—to continue his efforts to prevent King Hussein from entering negotiations with Israel. The Syrians wish to foreclose the possibilities of strategic isolation from the peace process, loss of leverage over the Palestinian and Golan Heights issues, and a reduced Arab leadership role.

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Many Israeli officials reject the view that Damascus has complete control over Jordan's options to enter the peace process, although they recognize Syria's ability to intimidate King Hussein. In their view, Syria's leverage has been weakened by the commitment of significant political and military resources to preserve its dominant position in Lebanon. They believe King Hussein can negotiate with Israel if he will accept the risk of heightened tension with Damascus—which the Israelis believe would not be too great. They note that Hussein convened an Arab summit in Amman in November 1980 despite a Syrian military buildup along the border, although the summit failed to reach significant decisions because of a Syrian boycott.

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A small minority of academic specialists believes the transition to the post-Assad era will be relatively smooth. They believe Assad has established and consolidated a political system founded on a broad Alawi-Sunni base that would continue after his departure. Although jockeying for advantage and episodic violence are possible, according to this view, there would be more stability than most analysts expect.

**Outlook**

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In our judgment, there will be no significant changes in Israeli attitudes toward Syria for the near term, except in the unlikely event that a Syrian leader comes forward to negotiate a peace settlement with Israel. We believe such a Syrian move would cause considerable political disarray within any Israeli cabinet—regardless of its composition. Nonetheless, we believe domestic pressure in Israel would compel the Israeli Government to explore—cautiously—any Syrian peace overture.

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**Stranglehold on the Peace Process?**

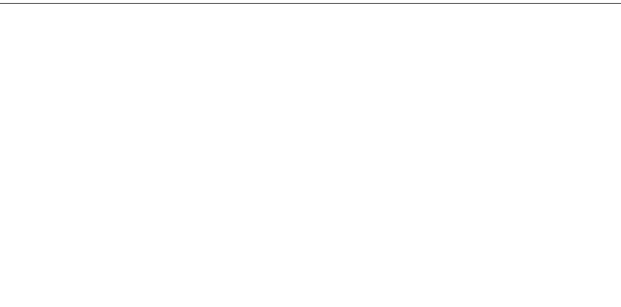
In our judgment, Israeli leaders are deeply pessimistic about the prospects for peace with Syria. They do not see much room for compromise on the issue of the Golan Heights. The Likud bloc opposes the return of any territory on the Golan to Syria, while the Labor Party's position is vague. Most Labor leaders publicly favor limited territorial concessions on the Golan in return for peace with Syria, but language to this effect was not included in the party's 1984 election platform. This is probably because they do not believe Syria would accept less than a total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, which neither Labor nor Likud contemplates.

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The outcome of the Israeli-Lebanese talks at Naqurah will have only a marginal impact on Israeli perceptions of Syria, in our view. If the talks produce an agreement on security arrangements in southern Lebanon that is acceptable to Israel, Labor Party leaders probably will conclude they were correct in their assessment that Damascus is amenable to limited working relationships with Israel. Likud leaders, however, would not change their minds. Failure at Naqurah, on the other hand, would harden both Likud and Labor attitudes. [redacted]

We believe Israeli perceptions of Syria will not be radically altered by a change of regime in Damascus. Most Israeli strategic analysts and a few academics caution that a successor regime may contrive an early crisis with Israel to shore up its domestic support.



Nevertheless, a small minority of Israeli [redacted] [redacted] are intrigued by the possibility that Rif'at may succeed his brother to the presidency. Rif'at's perceived openness to the West leads these Israelis to believe he might be inclined to reach an understanding with Israel and reduce the prospects for hostilities. [redacted]

Whatever Israeli government is in office will test the intentions of Assad's successor. Israel will want to confirm previous understandings with Syria regarding the prevention of terrorist attacks and limitation of Syrian military activity in the Bekaa Valley and on the Golan Heights. These understandings will become even more critical to the Israeli Government once its forces withdraw from southern Lebanon. Israel will closely monitor Syrian responses to Israeli artillery and airstrikes against Palestinian and radical Shia positions in the Bekaa Valley and elsewhere in Lebanon to assess the new regime's attitude toward Israel. [redacted]

**Implications for US Policy**

Israeli perceptions of Syrian efforts to strengthen Syria's armed forces and air defenses will continue to draw Israel closer militarily to the United States. In their discussions with the United States, Israeli officials are likely to underscore the possibility of an emerging military bloc—composed of Syria, Iraq, and, possibly, Jordan—arrayed against Israel after the Iran-Iraq war has ended. To counter this perceived threat, Israel will continue to seek the latest US technology and weapon systems to preserve its qualitative edge. It also will seek US assurances that the United States will counter overt Soviet moves on Syria's behalf in the event of Syrian-Israeli hostilities. [redacted]

Given Israel's pessimism about peace with Syria, Israel will continue to focus on drawing King Hussein and moderate West Bank Palestinians into direct talks. Israel expects Syria—with or without Assad—to continue to use every means to control the Palestinian movement and to prevent Hussein from entering the peace process. In the event of a new US-led effort to revive the negotiations, Israel will look to the United States to neutralize Syrian pressure to keep Hussein on the sidelines. [redacted]

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