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Soviet Road to Heightened Influence In Middle East Runs Through Syria

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WASHINGTON INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—Syria is emerging as the Soviet Union's gateway to Middle Eastern diplomacy.

The Soviets are pressuring Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, their best client in the region, to maneuver his country back into the mainstream of Middle Eastern politics. Reagan administration officials believe that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's goal is to ensure that no new peace initiative gets off the ground without Soviet and Syrian help. Some officials also believe the Soviets are trying to capitalize on recent American blunders, including secret arms sales to Iran, in order to steal a march on the U.S. in the Middle East.

In the past, the tough, independent Mr. Assad has tended to spoil rather than promote peace deals. But right now he may need to cooperate with Moscow as much as the Kremlin needs a reliable ally in the region. Syria's economy—and Mr. Assad's influence—have been weakened by Syria's efforts to exert greater influence over Lebanon.

Mr. Gorbachev also is moving on other diplomatic fronts. He has taken modest steps to improve relations with Israel and with moderate Arab states such as Kuwait and Egypt. And Moscow is promoting the reunification of the Palestine Liberation Organization and a rapprochement between Mr. Assad and a bitter enemy, PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

New Boldness

There's nothing new, of course, about Soviet efforts to corner Arab support in the Middle East. What's new is the boldness and ingenuity of a Soviet campaign that includes simultaneous overtures toward Syria, Iraq, Israel, Egypt and assorted factions of the PLO. By attempting to reconcile some of these bitter enemies, Mr. Gorbachev is seeking to establish himself as the unlikely heir to Henry Kissinger and Anwar Sadat as the region's preeminent deal maker.

Syria is the key to his efforts. When Mr. Assad visited Moscow late last month, the pressure on him was palpable. The Soviets pointedly offered to keep Syria supplied with "defensive" arms, and Mr. Gorbachev noted at a dinner in the Syrian president's honor that the absence of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel "cannot be considered normal." Ac-

ording to one witness, Mr. Assad didn't blink, but he apparently got the message.

Although Mr. Assad has worked tirelessly to divide and conquer the PLO, a joint communique issued following the Syrian president's Soviet trip endorsed the goal of Palestinian unity. And following a PLO reunification meeting in Algiers last month, George Habash, the leader of the renegade Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, returned to Damascus after publicly abandoning a Syrian-sponsored anti-Arafat coalition. Rumors now are spreading that one or two of Mr. Arafat's top aides may travel to the Syrian capital soon for a meeting with Mr. Assad.

Secret Meeting

Some U.S. intelligence officials also believe Moscow encouraged Mr. Assad to meet secretly last month with yet another archrival, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, even though Syria recently began receiving resumed shipments of free oil from Iraq's mortal enemy, Iran.

Conventional wisdom has it that Mr. Assad suffered a major setback when the breakaway PLO factions he backed agreed to return to Mr. Arafat's side, at least for the time being. But the Syrians may yet emerge as the dominant power over a reunified PLO.

The Soviets may be betting that a more-moderate Syria can become the Arabs' principal spokesman in any dealings with Israel. Already, reports from Damascus say Jordan and Syria have agreed on a formula for a new United Nations-sponsored Mideastern peace conference.

U.S. Lacks Leverage

Even if it manages to shake off the Iran-Contra debacle, the Reagan administration may find it difficult to counter Mr. Gorbachev's moves. The U.S. has virtually no leverage on Syria, and Secretary of State George Shultz has been hostile to Mr. Assad since the Syrians began supporting terrorist attacks on Americans and wrecked an agreement he negotiated for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon.

Even the simplest steps to repair relations between Washington and Damascus aren't easy. The U.S. withdrew Ambassador William Eagleton after Syria was caught sponsoring a plot to blow up an Israeli airliner with more than 200 Americans on it at London's Heathrow Airport. A top Central Intelligence Agency analyst is arguing that Mr. Assad recently has curbed his support for the notorious terror-

ist Abu Nidal, but the administration can't very well restore full diplomatic relations with Syria before Britain does.

Finally, political conditions in Israel may checkmate any American attempt to revive direct negotiations between the Israelis and their neighbors. Unless the Israeli Labor and Likud parties can agree on a strategy for negotiations with the Arabs, which seems unlikely, or Labor can win enough seats in a new election to act unilaterally, which also seems improbable, there isn't much Washington can do to block Mr. Gorbachev's Syrian gambit.

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