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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Syria—The Next Step?

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The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency

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SYRIA—THE NEXT STEP?

PRECIS

Despite Syria's increasingly intransigent public position on future peace negotiations, we believe President Asad is still interested in talks concerning a second-stage Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights. The Syrians, however, are likely to continue to insist as a pre-condition that the PLO be recognized in some way as a party to the negotiations before they will engage in such talks.

Meanwhile, Damascus will exert maximum pressure on the US and Israel, hoping thereby to underscore an urgent need for diplomatic movement and to force concessions to Syria's negotiating demands. Between now and November 30, Asad's strategy will be to increase military tensions in order to create concern about Syria's military intentions and whether it will agree to the renewal of UNDOF. If necessary, however, Asad will go beyond mere posturing and this will lend further credibility to his "war of nerves."

The Syrians have few, if any, good diplomatic moves to play. They do, however, have a range of military options that include:

- additional troop movements, exercises, alerts, overflights, reserve call-up;
- military "incidents," including firing across the UN buffer zone at Israeli patrols, short incursions into the Israeli disengagement area, and the facilitation of fedayeen terrorist and sabotage operations on the Golan Heights;

1

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- some form of “war of attrition” involving artillery barrages;
- major military operations with the aim of seizing and holding specific objectives;
- resumption of major hostilities.

We do not believe Asad will deliberately resort to full-scale war. He may, however, take military actions short of war if his current pressure campaign fails to produce acceptable diplomatic results. Under these circumstances we believe that:

- Syria will continue to step up its pressure campaign as November 30 draws nearer. Some serious “incidents” will probably occur during this period.
- If this “war of nerves” does not produce diplomatic results, there is a good chance that Asad will increase the pressure even further by letting the UN mandate run out, perhaps while continuing to abide by the military limitations of the Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement. This would create a crisis atmosphere without provoking an Israeli attack.
- At this point, however, limited military operations by Syria cannot be ruled out and these would run a high risk of Israeli retaliation and a general escalation of the fighting.
- The situation in Lebanon could deteriorate in a way that drew in Syrian and Israeli forces. Fighting between them in Lebanon could rapidly spread to the Golan Heights as well.

The Israelis, for their part, are reluctant to take any new diplomatic initiatives concerning the Golan Heights both because of the area’s military importance and the very difficult domestic political problems that would be raised. They will be even less interested in doing so in a situation of increased tension induced by Syria.

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DISCUSSION

THE IMPACT OF SINAI II

1. The recent Egypt-Israel agreement on Sinai has left Syria's leaders frustrated. They feel President Sadat misled them and seriously undercut their own negotiating chances by making far-reaching political concessions and by not insisting that the implementation of the Sinai agreement be linked to negotiations for further Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights.

2. The Syrians insist they will not pay the political price Sadat did simply to regain another small slice of the Golan and that they will not abandon the Palestinians. Consequently, they profess to see little hope of obtaining anything at present from the Israelis through negotiations. This pessimism stems not only from their belief that Egypt has left them in the lurch but also from their concern that the US has expended what leverage it had over Israel to obtain the Sinai agreement. They do not take Israel's offer to negotiate seriously and believe the Rabin government would try to drag such talks out indefinitely.

3. Out of frustration and anger, therefore, Damascus has lashed out with increasing vehemence at the Sinai accord and Sadat. Initially, this criticism was somewhat restrained and was designed primarily to protect President Asad's flank from attack by the Iraqis and his internal opponents while he reevaluated the prospects for negotiations with Israel. But since about mid-September, there has

been a progressive hardening of Syrian public opposition to the Sinai accord that apparently reflects a growing conviction among Syrian leaders that their chances of obtaining anything satisfactory soon via negotiations are poor.

4. The current strident propaganda assault on the accord shows no signs of abating. Numerous rallies and protest demonstrations have been staged in Damascus and other Syrian cities over the past several weeks. In addition, Syrian leaders have kept up a steady stream of attacks on the accord, echoing with increasing frequency Foreign Minister Khaddam's demand that Sadat renounce the agreement.

5. President Asad has also adopted a tough, uncompromising public stance on future Syrian-Israeli negotiations. He stated flatly in a recent televised speech commemorating the 1973 war that Syria would not engage in negotiations for a further separation of forces accord unless the Palestine Liberation Organization is involved in the negotiating process. By not specifying who would have to talk to the PLO—the US or Israel—Asad may have intended to leave open the possibility of some form of new Golan arrangement without the PLO but with no political strings attached. Nevertheless, he appears to have consciously reduced his room for maneuver in order to indicate that he is not prepared to make any political concessions for an interim step toward peace.

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LITTLE LEVERAGE

6. Given Syrian pessimism, Asad probably believes he has nothing to lose by assuming a rigid public posture for the time being. Indeed, the Syrians have few, if any, good moves to play and they know it.

7. Damascus, for example, apparently expects little help from Moscow in achieving a diplomatic breakthrough. Although the Syrians value the Soviets as arms suppliers, they have not found them especially helpful in promoting their interests at the negotiating table. Moreover, the Syrians know that the Soviets have very little influence with the Israelis and believe they are unwilling to jeopardize Soviet-American relations by putting direct pressure on Washington.

8. The Syrians seem to realize that they are more dependent than ever on the US to extract concessions from the Israelis. Yet they are suspicious of US intentions and are skeptical of Washington's ability to exert pressure on Tel Aviv to negotiate in earnest. Asad, for instance, has said that he thinks the US wants to "anesthetize" the situation in the area until after next year's presidential election.

9. Nor have the Syrians been encouraged by the response of other Arab leaders to the Sinai agreement. Many of the more influential ones have remained silent, probably hoping that the quarrel that has erupted between Damascus and Cairo will somehow go away. Most important, the Saudis, who have criticized the Sinai agreement in private, have so far gone along with Sadat publicly and have even tried to encourage Asad to patch up his relations with Cairo. Thus, the Syrians probably do not harbor high hopes of persuading the Saudis to use their oil as a diplomatic weapon any time soon on behalf of Syria and the Palestinians.

MILITARY OPTIONS

10. The most important diplomatic card Asad presently holds is his power not to agree to the extension of the mandate of the UN forces stationed on the Golan Heights, which comes up for renewal again on November 30. Last year the Syrians threatened not to approve an extension of the mandate and only reversed themselves at the last moment, hoping to obtain some quid pro quo. This time Asad could decide to follow through on such

a threat. His obvious aim would be to raise tensions in a dramatic way in order to underscore the urgent need for diplomatic movement. The removal of this buffer force would increase the chances of an armed clash between the Syrians and Israelis. Although the Syrians feared last year that the Israelis might use the revocation of the mandate as an excuse to attack, Asad might calculate that the Israelis would be forced to act with restraint this time in order to avoid jeopardizing the implementation of the Sinai accord with Egypt.

11. Asad could go even further at some point by beginning another round of artillery barrages and limited ground skirmishes as he did in early 1974 to spur negotiations or by trying to seize a small portion of Israeli-held territory. If he decides to exert military leverage at all, we believe he would opt for something limited in scope that he would hope could be contained. The obvious drawback to such a tactic is that it would risk strong Israeli punitive retaliation. The Syrians' restraint in dealing with the current Lebanon crisis in part reflects their fear of provoking Israeli military reprisals.

12. In addition, of course, Asad retains the option of starting major hostilities on the Syrian front. His objective in that case, as he recently said in some off-the-record remarks, would be the same as it was in 1973: to create an international crisis that pitted the two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, against each other and forced the Saudis to employ their oil weapon in order to compel the US to put more pressure on the Israelis to give up Arab lands.

13. We doubt, however, that Asad considers a full-scale offensive as an acceptable option. He certainly recognizes that such a gamble—taken without the initial help this time of the Egyptian armed forces—could bear a heavy penalty. It would risk the certain destruction of much of his armed forces, serious economic dislocations, and the occupation of more Syrian territory by the Israelis leaving Syria in an even weaker negotiating position. Neither the Soviets nor the Saudis, whose support Damascus needs, appear prepared to underwrite such risk-taking at present. Nor could Syria count on much military help, at least during the crucial first few days, from Egypt or even Jordan, which would try to stay out of the fighting if Syria started it.

4
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14. Because negotiations appear to offer so little hope of success at present and military action is risky, Asad could choose to stick to his present hard-line posturing and bide his time. This would offer him an acceptable way out of his present dilemma and could hold a certain attraction for the Syrian leadership. While sustaining a controlled state of tension on the Golan Heights, they could turn their attention to consolidating their position at home and staking out a stronger claim to Arab leadership, which they believe Sadat has forfeited. They would especially seek closer political and military ties with the PLO and Jordan and even try to resurrect military cooperation with Iraq to strengthen their bargaining position in any future negotiations.

15. The Syrians are deeply concerned about Lebanon and have monopolized the mediation role between the warring factions. Syria is not inclined to intervene militarily but would probably feel constrained to at least keep such a decision under consideration and might threaten to restore order in Lebanon if things get much worse. At a minimum, Asad would not feel comfortable about pursuing a policy of brinkmanship on the Golan while civil war raged next door. In a worst-case situation, such fighting could compel Syrian intervention with its attendant high risk of confrontation with Israel. Fighting between Syrian and Israeli forces in Lebanon could rapidly spread to the Golan Heights as well.

16. From all appearances, Asad can afford to wait awhile if he chooses to do so. He does not appear, from what few sources of information we have available, to be under the kinds of pressure Sadat was this summer to resort to military action if he cannot obtain something soon through negotiations. With the Egyptian front "frozen," we believe Asad could probably resist any internal pressures on him to fight by arguing that Syria needs more time to strengthen its armed forces and its position generally in the Arab world.

THE ISRAELI ATTITUDE

17. Although the Israelis have offered to negotiate with Syria, Tel Aviv is reluctant to begin early negotiations for anything less than a final peace accord. Negotiating for even a limited Israeli with-

drawal on the Golan presents Tel Aviv with even greater problems than the recently concluded Sinai agreement. Strategically, the Golan is important to Israel because of its proximity to Israeli population centers. This, plus the fact the area under Israeli occupation is only about 12 miles across at its widest, has led Tel Aviv to take the position that it has almost no room to make territorial concessions as part of an interim agreement without endangering the security of Israel proper.

18. The 22 Jewish settlements in being or under construction on the Golan are another major complicating factor. The opposition of Jewish settlers in the occupied territories to any diminution of the Israeli presence there gives the government a powerful domestic political incentive to put off serious negotiations. The settlement issue cuts across party lines and the Golan settlers, although only about 2,000 in number, have considerable political clout. Every party in Rabin's ruling coalition sponsors at least one Golan settlement. Many of the settlements, furthermore, were built to strengthen Israel's claim to the area. Several lie almost athwart the present disengagement line, further diminishing the government's room to maneuver.

19. Nonetheless, Tel Aviv recognizes that there are some benefits to be gained—principally in stabilizing the Sinai agreement—in early negotiations with Syria. The Israelis, moreover, are interested in keeping the northern front quiescent and favor an extension of the UN forces' mandate on the Golan when it expires on November 30. In early October, Defense Minister Peres said that Israel would probably make a minor unilateral gesture on the Golan to encourage Syria to renew the mandate. It is possible that the Israelis might still attempt such a gesture if the Syrians do not resort to any hostile military action. They are reluctant, however, to take the initiative on negotiations, especially in a situation of increasing tension. Rabin will look to Washington to get the ball moving.

CONCLUSIONS

20. In the short term, Asad can be expected to step up his "war of nerves." This could include some limited military action, such as artillery fire and low-level incidents. The Syrians will over the next

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month in particular raise the diplomatic and military temperature in the area as the time approaches to renew the UN mandate in order to improve their bargaining position.

21. In fact, Asad has already begun this process. His remarks to *Newsweek* in September about the possibility of Syria resuming hostilities on its own, the recent shift of Syrian armored and infantry units back to the Golan front, and his recent comments to a Kuwait newspaper that the UN observer forces do not constitute an obstacle to military operations are all calculated to create uncertainty about Syria's military intentions. There have also been reports of reserve call-ups.

22. One unsubstantiated report claims that the Syrians may be planning a limited military operation of short duration to saw off a small chunk of territory held by the Israelis somewhere along the disengagement line. Such a move, if undertaken, would be designed to force the US to move quickly to contain the fighting and to refocus its diplomatic efforts on obtaining a Syrian-Israeli accord, pre-

sumably one that also contained something for the Palestinians. The possibility of a limited Syrian land-grab operation cannot be ruled out, although rumors of such action may have been planted as part of a Syrian effort to keep the pressure on the US and Israel to make some concession to Damascus before the UN mandate runs out.

23. If the "war of nerves" does not produce results, there is a good chance that Asad will up the pressure even further by simply letting the UN mandate run out while continuing to abide by the military limitations of the Syria-Israel disengagement agreement. If however, he decides to push even harder by engaging in limited military actions after the mandate lapses, he risks provoking a major Israeli response.

24. We do not think that Asad will deliberately resort to full-scale war. He knows that Syria does not have the military capability to regain the Golan Heights and that any Syrian offensive would probably result in a smashing Israeli victory and put Syria in an even worse bargaining position.

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