

EXCLUSIVE

Inside Syria:

## Lebanon Is Still The Issue

The Israeli attacks on southern Lebanon this week served as a grim reminder to the Syrian population and armed forces that, two years and more after the start of the Lebanese civil war and long after the Syrian military intervention into Lebanon with 30,000 troops in 1976, peace is not yet at hand. For Syrian President Hafez Assad, who staked his career on his move into Lebanon, continued instability there may yet provoke an army coup d'état. For this reason, and under Saudi guidance, Assad has been seeking with some urgency to stabilize southern Lebanon and to reestablish his credentials as the main ally of the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose forces the Syrian Army fought in pitched battles during the war.

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In recent months, Assad's Syria has emerged as the chief Arab spokesman for the reconvening of the Geneva conference with the presence of the PLO or its designated representatives. Assad and other Syrian officials have bitterly attacked any sign — including those from Anwar Sadat's Egypt — that there might be a return to step-by-step diplomacy of the sort that, under Dr. Kissinger's manipulative hand, isolated Syria and forced Egypt into the Sinai Pact in 1975. Last week, Syrian Prime Minister Khleifawi said that Syria "will not accept a Kissingerian-type of policy."

Backing Syria in its position in support of Geneva and the PLO, for convergent reasons, are both France and the Soviet Union. Both countries, it seems, are not relying merely on their diplomatic representations at the Syrian presidential palace, however, but are making use of longstanding networks and agents of influence within Syria to make sure that Assad follows the straight and narrow.

But there are signs that a potential domestic political crisis in Syria may not be far off.

According to the French newspaper *Le Matin*, two competing factions have recently emerged within the Syrian military. The first is led by Rifaat Assad, the president's brother, who commands the special forces, an elite squad stationed just outside Damascus. Rifaat Assad has a well-deserved reputation as a gangster and thug, and is widely known to be a business associate of Tony Frangieh, the son of former Lebanese president

and a leader of the ultra-extremist right in Lebanon. During the Lebanon war, when President Frangieh ruled the country, Rifaat and Frangieh worked together, and it was Rifaat who oversaw most of the military operations in Lebanon.

The second faction is reportedly led by Ali Haidar, an important army commander, who is linked to Deputy Defense Minister Naji Jamil. Jamil, in turn, is a close associate of Syrian Chief of Staff Hikmat Chehabi, who was reportedly placed under house arrest during the war in Lebanon for opposing the Syrian intervention against the PLO. Chehabi, Jamil, Haidar, and perhaps Foreign Minister Khaddam — who was almost assassinated last week in Abu Dhabi — represent a group that might be called the Syrian military "establishment."

This "establishment," according to a source at the State Department, is opposed to the Rifaat Assad faction. "They think that Rifaat is 'proregime,' and not pro-Syria," he said. *Le Matin* reported that the rival units of Rifaat and Haidar almost engaged in a military clash near Damascus in the recent past. It was also this "establishment" that, according to several reports, was the center of the opposition to Assad's Lebanon policy last year. From *New York Times* reports and elsewhere, it is clear that, to a large degree, the Syrian Army is pro-Soviet as well.

To avoid losing the support the Army, fatal to any Arab leader, it is even rumored that Assad may dismiss or demote his gangster brother. A widely publicized Syrian campaign against corruption, begun last August, eventually targeted Rifaat Assad's associates in particular. The handwriting is on the wall.

Interestingly, the present prime Minister, Khleifawi, was installed by Assad in September 1976 in the wake of the massacre at the Tal Zaatar Palestinian camp by Falangist militiamen — backed by Syria. The revulsion Syria to the reports of that butchery might have toppled Assad, and it is thought that he named a traditionalist military man like Khleifawi to placate the Army which was on the verge of revolt.

Now the Jamil-Chehabi-Khleifawi group may be pushing for a reconciliation between Iraq and Syria, for years bitter enemies. Recently, Khleifawi said that Syria would welcome a rapprochement with Iraq — virtually the same day that Syrian Defense Minister Tlas called for the overthrow of the "murderous regime in Baghdad!" PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat recently spend a day shuttling between Damascus and Baghdad in an effort to ease the differences between the two countries.