
BY ELIE CHALALA

When Syria sent men and tanks into Jordan in 1970 to defend the Palestinians against King Hussein’s pro-Western regime, the U.S. strongly opposed this intervention. A majority of the Syrian leaders at that time were openly sympathetic to the Soviet Union, a fact that alarmed American policy makers. From their perspective, a Syrian victory over the Jordanian regime would have been a victory for Syria’s ally, the Soviet Union.¹ But Hafiz Assad, who was then Syria’s Defense Minister and the Commander of its Air Force, opposed his country’s intervention as much as the U.S. did and refused to provide air cover for the Syrian troops entering Jordan.

The Reagan administration and many of its supporters in the media and Congress, however, have chosen to ignore Assad’s disinclination to engage in brinkmanship. They characterize his policy in Lebanon as irresponsible, explaining his presence in that country as being motivated by an anti-American attitude, by a desire to push the Middle East into a major war that could engulf the two super powers, and by a historical ambition to absorb Lebanon into a reconstituted “Greater Syria” which would then be integrated into the Soviet bloc.²

This scenario is based on a number of assumptions regarding Syrian behavior, one of which is sectarianism. Assad – as a member of a minority sect (Alawites) whose position on popular issues such as Palestine and Arab unity is questioned by the Sunni majority – would advocate radical positions on these very issues in order to quell any doubt and consolidate his power position.³

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Praetorianism constitutes another assumption. Its advocates argue that the Syrian regime is ruled by a small military elite which lacks popular support because it precludes input from large segments of society. As a result, the regime has become weak and faces increasing opposition by large sectors of the populace. To diffuse domestic discontent and rally support, it is argued, such a regime would pursue adventurist policies and resort to wars.4

The evidence tends to disprove the influence of such assumed factors as sectarianism and praetorianism in the conduct of Syria’s Lebanon policy.

For example, the 1976 intervention on the side of the Christian Rightists was carried out against the wishes of the majority of the Syrian people, most of whom are sympathetic to the Lebanese Muslims and the Palestinians. This intervention was approved by both the U.S. and Israel,5 states which have rarely been popular with the Syrian people or the ruling coalition of the Baath Party and the Army. Furthermore, even when the Syrian Lebanese Christian alliance passed through several crises during the 1978-1982 period, the Assad regime refrained from catering to Syrian popular sentiment by helping the Lebanese Muslims and the Palestinians to defeat their adversaries. Once again in 1984, Assad has shown remarkable detachment from popular sentiment in Syria and Lebanon by refraining from forcing the Christian Rightists to compromise the economic privileges and the power they have held since 1943.

It would be a gross mistake, therefore, to explain Syrian political behavior purely as the outcome of sectarian and praetorian factors. Certainly, some Syrian policy makers are influenced by such factors, but it is incorrect to assume they would take precedence over much more important factors such as the state’s national security and the interests of the ruling elites.

Lebanon is a perfect illustration of how these important factors have played a paramount role. My contention is that Syrian policy toward Lebanon has been dictated by two major interests. The first has been to protect the territorial integrity of the Syrian state, i.e. to ward off any threat that would strategically weaken Syria, to challenge any move that interferes with its efforts to regain the Golan Heights, and to oppose any policy that could threaten the territorial unity of Syria by disrupting the communal coexistence among the sectarian groups that make up the state. The second major goal has been to maintain the Ba’thist regime, that is, to strengthen Assad’s hold on power and protect the interests of his power base, the Army and the Baath Party.6

Syrian involvement in Lebanon between 1976 and 1984 will be divided into

4 Ibid.
5 See Ze’ev Schiff, “Dealing with Syria,” Foreign Policy, No.55 (Summer 1984), p. 97. On Israel’s approval of the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, one can only recall what an Israeli official said at the time: Israel and Syria share a “parallel strategic analysis” of the situation in Lebanon. Newsweek, October 25, 1976, p. 59.
6 These interests are hardly radical by Western standards. Hans J. Morgenthau defines the interest of a “peace-loving” nation in terms of national security based on the integrity of the national territory of the state and the maintenance of its institutions. See Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 553.
three phases: the first phase began when Syria entered Lebanon in 1976 in support of the Lebanese Christian Rightists against the Leftist coalition forces of the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinians; the termination of this support by 1978 marked the beginning of a period of strained relations with the Christians and an uneasy alliance with the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinians; the third phase began with the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and has seen a significant increase in Syrian military and political support for all the Lebanese forces opposing the Christian Rightists, and during the same period the Syrians have modulated their policy in an attempt to lessen the dependence of the Christian Rightists on Israel and eliminate the Israeli presence and influence from Lebanon.

Syria: A Guest Who Did Not Need to Be Invited

When the Neo Baathists (a radical group of Syrian officers that included Assad)\(^7\) seized power in 1966, Israel threatened to overthrow their regime,\(^8\) calling it reckless and irrational. In 1970, when Syrian troops entered Jordan in what is known as Black September to defend the Palestinians against King Hussein, the Israelis threatened the Syrians with war if they did not cease their military intervention. According to many accounts, the Israeli threat produced the desired effect: Assad withheld air support which forced the Syrian troops to retreat. When the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, Israel warned Syria not to intervene on behalf of the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinians. As in 1970, Assad took the threat seriously, for the Israelis were being consistent with a policy they were to hold until 1976, that is they would oppose the entry of Arab armies into Jordan and Lebanon and consider such a move a casus belli.\(^9\)

The Lebanese National Movement, with Palestinian assistance, could have seized power in Lebanon in the early phase of the Lebanese Civil War had they enjoyed Syrian support. This was a disturbing possibility: Assad feared that the civil war could drag Syria into an untimely war with Israel.\(^10\) Furthermore, an Israeli intervention could result in the occupation of southern Lebanon, a humiliating and dangerous situation for Syria and the Baathist regime because it would have placed the Israeli army closer to the Bekaa Valley, the “soft underbelly” through which Israel could

\(^7\) The term “Neo-Baath” refers to three radical political factions which emerged within the Baath Party in the early 1960’s and gained full control in February 1966. See Avraham Ben-Tzur, “The Neo-Baath Party of Syria,” *Contemporary History*, vol. 3, no. 3 (July 1968).
\(^9\) Schiff, p. 100.
\(^11\) This concern is noted by Itamar Rabinovich, who writes that “Lebanon’s military importance for Syria derives from its territory rather than its army. Syrian military planners have always worried that Israel might use the Bekaa Valley (a much better route than Jordan) in order to bypass the Syrian army and threaten Damascus.” Rabinovich, “Syria,” in Edward A. Koldziej and Robert Harkavy, eds., *Security Policies of Developing Countries* (Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1982), especially pp. 4-5.
mount a flank attack on Damascus and avoid the heavily fortified Syrian defense lines along the eastern Golan Heights.\footnote{11}

The possibility of a threat to Syria’s territorial integrity stems not only from bringing Israeli forces closer to the Lebanese Syrian border. There was also the possibility of the religious conflict in Lebanon spilling over to Syria because of the historical ties between the Lebanese and the Syrian peoples.\footnote{12}

A defeat for any Lebanese religious community would have created fears in the corresponding Syrian community: while Sunni Muslims constitute two thirds of the Syrian population, the remaining third is made up of Alawites, Ismaelis, Christians, and the non-Arab Kurdish and Armenian communities. Maintaining a harmonious relationship between these various communal groups has always been a priority for the Assad regime. Any policy that would jeopardize communal coexistence in Syria would certainly cause friction among the different sectarian and ethnic groups, perhaps reproducing some of the conflicts occurring in Lebanon which could lead to major challenges to the state.

This scenario might appear to be a remote possibility since many believe that a “spillover” is unlikely because the Syrian Christians are “assimilationists” and as such are perfectly integrated into the Arab Islamic society.\footnote{13} The possibility of a “spillover” is ever present however. Its problematics were discussed by Eric Rouleau:

\begin{quote}
The sectarian differences [in Syria] which are disappearing are reappearing due to the double effect of the Lebanese conflict and the propaganda of the Muslim clerics....Certainly, a replay in Syria of the Lebanese conflict seems unthinkable. However, fanatical viewpoints, expressed in private or within the walls of the mosques, create a feeling of insecurity among the Christians and catalyze their solidarity – a natural reflex within any minority – with respect to their Lebanese counterparts, even when they do not approve of the ideology and the behavior of certain Maronite leaders....As in Lebanon, promoters of sectarian hatred are motivated less by religious considerations than by ulterior political motives. The insidious propaganda carried out by three extreme rightist [religious Syrian] groups...aims to mobilize the masses of the Sunni Muslims against the government, which they accuse of being dominated by the Alawites who are linked with the Christians.\footnote{14}
\end{quote}

This danger was acknowledged even by those who openly disagreed with Assad’s

\footnote{14} Ibid., p.6.
\footnote{15} Ibid., pp. 5-6
intervention on the side of the Christians. A representative of the Arab Socialist Union in Assad’s government, Fawzi Kayali, said at the time that the religious conflicts nurtured in Lebanon by the Israeli American imperialists aim at Balkanizing the Arab world and threaten to infect Syria.\textsuperscript{15} If the possibility of a “sectarian spillover” onto Syrian territory was not totally unthinkable, and Israel and the U.S. were the only countries who could have benefited from such strife, was it not then irrational for the Syrians to have intervened on behalf of the Christians who were in an alliance with the Israelis and the Americans? To analyze the Syrian intervention in such terms would be to assume that Assad conducts his foreign policy on the basis of ideological beliefs. However, the Syrian president had reached the conclusion as far back as the late 1960’s that ideological commitments such as those to Pan-Arabism could jeopardize Syrian interests. He had already translated this lesson into practice in the 1970 Jordanian crisis.

Understanding the intervention on behalf of the Christians rather than the Palestinian-supported Muslims, therefore, requires a different logic. Assad’s strategies were rationally calculated, in that they were based on a cost benefit analysis.

Even if Assad’s intervention on the side of the Christians were to increase Sunni discontent with his rule, he appeared to have calculated that the problems posed by allowing the Lebanese Civil War to go unchecked were greater than the other risks involved. Furthermore, a number of other factors encouraged him to adopt the policy he did. The Syrian president knew that no power, Arab or otherwise, would come to the aid of the Christians’ adversaries. The only Arab country with longstanding support for them was Egypt. But since 1974, the Palestinians and their Lebanese allies had been in open conflict with Anwar al-Sadat over his Sinai II agreement with Israel. Furthermore, averting a Christian defeat in Lebanon would preclude Israeli intervention and avoid the wrath of the Americans.

Forestalling a Lebanese Leftist and Palestinian victory was also motivated by a second major Syrian interest, i.e. the maintenance of the Baathist regime. Threats to the Syrian regime come not only from the right, but also from the supposedly progressive, the Pan-Arabist, and even other Baathist forces. The Syrian Iraqi split is a good illustration of this potential, with the two Baathist regimes continuously plotting against each other while claiming adherence to the same principles.

A radicalized Lebanon could thus have posed a serious threat to the Assad regime. Lebanon had served as a haven for opposition groups to various Syrian regimes since the 1950’s, but Lebanese governments had rarely supported any of these groups. Assad feared a change in this longstanding official attitude in the case of a power takeover by the Lebanese National Movement. He was suspicious of the loyalties of the majority of the parties that made up this movement as well as P.L.O. chairman Yasser Arafat. Already faced with domestic opposition, Assad feared that if these radical forces were to seize power, they would provide a safe haven for his exiled opponents and would also channel support to his domestic opposition. These fears gain credibility when one considers the role Iraq could have played, given its animosity toward Syria and the resources it could put at the disposal of a new Lebanese regime as well as the Syrian opposition. Assad thus had every reason to work toward reinstating
the pre 1975 status quo while providing token support for limited reforms in the Lebanese socio-economic and political system.

It can be argued that Assad was damaging his progressive credentials by preventing a victory of the Lebanese National Movement and Palestinian alliance in 1976. In fact, his opposition did exploit the intervention to discredit him. Nevertheless, the risks of intervening were far outweighed by the risks of not intervening.

In short, during the first phase of his Lebanon policy, Assad sought to avoid a crisis with Israel similar to that of 1970, or a possible Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon which could weaken Syria strategically. He also worked to prevent the establishment of a radical Lebanese regime that could have posed a threat to his own regime.

A Short-Lived Alliance

The level of intensity of the Lebanese Civil War decreased following the Syrian intervention in June 1976. But this was not the end of direct Syrian involvement in Lebanon. The Syrians remained in the country while their policy of open alliance with the Christian Rightists shifted, a change that crystallized in 1978. This shift was motivated by the same goals Syrian policy makers had been trying to achieve through their 1976 intervention in Lebanon.

The failure of the 1976 intervention, which was intended to force the Christians to sever their ties with Israel, had left Syria and Assad’s regime strategically vulnerable.

Once they were saved from sure disaster in June 1976, the Christian Rightists themselves became a threat to Syria. Their intentions were clearly stated by an eminent rightist following the intervention: “We’ll rid ourselves of the Syrians after liquidating the Palestinians and the Progressives with President Assad’s help.”

Unlike their adversaries, the Christians refused to allow the entry of the Syrian army into the areas they held. Instead, with military assistance secured from Israel through contacts initiated during the civil war and maintained thereafter, the Phalangists [followers of the most powerful Christian political party] solidified their position in these areas and started to build the economic and political infrastructure of a state of their own.

While the Christians showed willingness to compromise with their opponents immediately after the Syrians intervened, later on they abandoned this stance and instead advanced unreasonable demands such as the expulsion of the P.L.O. and even the Palestinian population in its entirety from Lebanon, demands which were obviously unacceptable to the Syrians. They advocated this line despite the fact that Syria proposed no radical changes in the Lebanese socio-economic and political system which would require the Christians to give up privileges they had historically enjoyed.

On top of all this, the Christian Rightists categorically rejected Assad’s demand that they sever their ties with Israel. As a result, tensions built up and by 1978 were exploding into clashes. The Christian Rightists now drove out the token Syrian force

\[16\] Cited by Rouleau, p. 7.
operating in their area. Syrian-Christian clashes, particularly the short sieges of East Beirut in 1978 and Zahle in 1981, increased tensions in the Middle East and brought Israeli intervention and American condemnation of Syria’s actions.

Assad terminated his alliance with the Christians and militarily confronted them because their policies posed the very threat he was trying to avert in 1976, i.e., the establishment of a Christian state that might provide Israel with political and military privileges.

This Syrian policy shift was also encouraged by two major developments in the Middle East. One of these was the failure of the Geneva Conference in 1977. The conference’s aim of finding a comprehensive settlement to the Arab Israeli conflict had interested Assad because it was an appropriate vehicle for regaining the Golan Heights. By supporting the Christian Rightists, Assad could show his good will to the U.S. and Israel, and thus invite cooperation on the return of the Golan Heights. When the Geneva conference failed, however, he lost faith in the U.S. and no longer saw the need to accommodate the Christian-Rightists. In short, they ceased to be a diplomatic asset.

The second development behind the 1978 Syrian policy shift was the visit of Anwar al-Sadat to Jerusalem in 1977. This visit breached an unofficial agreement among the Arab states whose territories had been occupied in 1967 that prohibited negotiating separate agreements for the recovery of these territories. Sadat’s new approach weakened the Arabs and deprived them of the leverage of their unity as a means of pressuring Israel into making genuine concessions. Egypt’s separate peace could only benefit the Israelis: with the strongest Arab military power neutralized, Israel would lack any incentive to negotiate with the rest of its opponents and would even be tempted to ignore them.

These two developments increased Assad’s concern over the future of the Golan Heights. And in order to counter what he called Sadat’s separate peace, Assad had to work out his differences with the P.L.O., a rift that was intensified by Syria’s intervention on the side of the Christians against the Palestinians. Although the P.L.O. was engaged in peripheral wars with the Syrian army and the Phalangists in Lebanon, as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians it remained an important source of political power which Assad hoped to exploit to his own benefit. By becoming such a power through their quest for self-determination, the Palestinians had not only gained the support of most of the Arab states but also cultivated the support of a sizeable majority of the world community. If Assad could agree with the P.L.O. on a policy that Syria and the Palestinians would jointly negotiate the future of the West Bank and the Golan Heights, he would be better off than facing the Israelis alone.

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17 “Assad is interested in a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict if the necessary conditions are met. Important here is an Israeli withdrawal from all the Arab occupied territories in return for an Arab commitment to make peace with Israel. This must include a solution to the Palestinian problem.” Talcott Seely in an interview with Al Majalla (an Arab weekly), no. 182, August 6-12, 1983, p. 13.

18 On this opposition, see Alasdair Drysdale, “The Assad Regime and its Troubles,” MERIP Reports no. 110 (November-December 1982), especially pp. 4-5.
Such an agreement, however, could not be reached while Assad remained in alliance with the Christians. The end of his tolerant attitude toward the provocative behavior of the Phalangists was a sign of this change in strategy.

Assad’s shift of alliances in this period was also in response to domestic opposition that had developed in reaction to his 1976 intervention, and his concern that this opposition would gain momentum in the wake of his failure to sever the tacit Christian alliance with Israel.

One of the most important groups alienated by Assad’s 1976 intervention in Lebanon was the Syrian Army, a key institution which was historically socialized into Pan-Arabist Baathist ideology. Army discontent had led some officers to “refuse assignments to the expeditionary forces in Lebanon, while others expressed disapproval of the military intervention.”

Assad’s own party was a second major group in the opposition. Despite his preponderant role in Syria’s policy making process, the Baath Party still had some impact. It is a doctrinaire party in which a significant percentage of its membership are disciplined and militant advocates of Pan-Arabist and socialist ideology. Given the party’s definition of the Palestinian question as one of the foremost Pan-Arabist issues, the intervention against the P.L.O. elicited sharp debates among Baathist leaders. Many were very disturbed by Assad’s policy which did nothing to prevent the Christian Rightists from slaughtering the inhabitants and leveling the slums of several Muslim suburbs and Palestinian refugee camps, including al-Maslekh, al-Karantina, al-Nabaa, Debayeh, and Jisr al-Basha, during the months of January and February of 1976. Discontent among party members reached its peak when the Syrian army stood by a short distance from the Palestinian refugee camp of Tel al-Zaatar as it fell to the Christian Rightists in August 1976 and over 2,000 residents were massacred.

Assad’s pro-Christian Rightist policy had also angered some Syrian leftist groups.

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20 Rouleau, p. 5. There were also press reports at the time that many of the officers who disobeyed such orders were executed.
22 Rouleau, p. 3. On these massacres, see Kamal Salibi, Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon, 1958-1976 (Delmar: Caravan, 1976).
23 The representative of this group in Assad’s government, Fawzi Kayali, had called upon the Syrian president to be wary of the negative consequences of his intervention in Lebanon. He is quoted as having said that Hafiz Assad would “meet Nasser’s fate if he falls into the Lebanese trap laid by the imperialists and their Arab allies,” adding the pro-Western Arab states “pushed the Egyptian leader into the Yemenite snare before drawing him into the June 1967 war, which sealed his defeat.” See Rouleau, p. 4.
During the early stage of the Syrian intervention in 1976, the Syrian Communists had found it difficult to endorse a policy of crushing a revolt in which their Lebanese comrades were taking part. The Arab Socialist Union, which enjoys support in major Syrian cities, demonstrated its opposition to Assad’s policy on more than one occasion. Similarly, a Baathist group loyal to Iraq expressed its opposition by assassinating several Syrian Baathist officials between 1977 and 1978. On the religious right, the Muslim Brothers’ opposition to Assad’s regime had been longstanding. Inflamed by the death of one of their leaders under torture in a Syrian prison, they exploited Assad’s support for the Christians in their attacks on the Baathist regime. The 1978 shift, therefore, was geared to defuse this multiple but disunited opposition: it was also meant to avert the strategic threat posed by the Christian-Rightist alliance with Israel. Had Assad not withdrawn his support from the Christians at this time, he not only would have risked the creation of a Maronite mini state, but he would have lost the support of diverse Syrian political groups, including the Army and the Baath Party, the two main pillars of his regime. At the same time, Assad cautiously refrained from engaging in policies that would bring condemnation from the U.S. or provoke full scale war with Israel. While he wanted to make the Christians feel the costs of allying themselves with Israel, he did not join forces with their opponents to defeat them. In the words of Abdel Haleem Khaddam, Syria’s former foreign minister and currently one of three vice presidents, the emergence of a clear victor could be equivalent to partitioning Lebanon rather than unifying it. Furthermore, Assad’s attitude was one of cooperation when the U.S. intervened in 1981 to arrange a ceasefire between the P.L.O. and Israel.

Syria’s Sudden Embrace of Radical Tactics

Despite Assad’s extreme caution, what he had tried to prevent in 1976 finally took place in 1982 when the Israelis did invade Lebanon. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon was an immediate strategic setback for Syria and a disgrace for the Baathist regime. Israeli forces occupied southern Lebanon, parts of Mount Lebanon near the Bekaa Valley, most of the western part of the Bekaa province, and by late August all of Greater Beirut. With the western Bekaa under Israel’s control, Damascus was within artillery range of Israeli tanks. However, Assad has never been reckless in a crisis. The Syrian president could have responded in several ways when Israel attacked the Syrian Army in 1982. He could have launched a full scale war, but this has not been a viable option since the 1973 October War. Although he had continued to build up his army, it was not

24 See Drysdale, “The Assad Regime and its Troubles.”
preparing to defeat Israel in a conventional war. Furthermore, the economic and political changes Assad had introduced in Syria since 1974 did not suggest that he was preparing for war. Instead, he chose to press for Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

To achieve this, he decided upon the moderate course of a partial withdrawal, pulling his forces back from the south, from west Beirut and from parts of Mount Lebanon to the Bekaa Valley rather than to Damascus. Assad then explored the diplomatic option in the hope that his cooperation with the U.S. would secure Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. He negotiated with Philip Habib, Reagan’s special envoy to the Middle East, to arrange the P.L.O. withdrawal from west Beirut in August 1982, and obliged the Americans by agreeing to receive large numbers of Palestinian fighters in Syria. In a further proof of good will, Assad sent his foreign minister to Washington three times following the 1982 Israeli invasion.

But Assad’s moderation availed him nothing. Instead, he was handed another humiliating defeat by the U.S., Israel and the Gemayel government in concert, in the form of the May 17th agreement. Syrian interests were entirely neglected in the peace negotiations. The agreement Secretary of State George Schultz delivered to Assad during his visit to Damascus merely legitimized and formalized the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon as far north as Jebel al-Barouk. The Syrian president had no choice but to reject it.

While Syria had helped the P.L.O. and the Lebanese resistance fighters since the fall of 1982 to mount “hit and run” military operations against the Israeli occupation, such assistance increased significantly after Lebanon concluded the security agreement with Israel. It was extended to larger Lebanese groups like the Shiites and the Druze to wage military operations against the Lebanese Army, the Christian Rightists, and the Multi National Forces, specifically its American and French components. Major battles involving all the Lebanese warring parties took place in September 1983, mainly in the Chouf Mountains and the southern suburbs of Beirut. These military confrontations lasted throughout the fall and winter and culminated in the collapse of the Lebanese Army on the 6th of February, 1984 and the virtual abandonment of the May 17th agreement on March 5th of the same year.

The maintenance of the Baathist regime was an important factor behind Assad’s decision to escalate the conflict in Lebanon in the fall of 1983. Aside from the necessity of ridding Syria of the strategic disadvantage it suffered as a result of Israel’s formalized occupation of large parts of Lebanon, the Syrian regime was under tremendous pressure from domestic opposition that had been steadily gaining strength since the late 1970’s.

Between 1978 and 1982, Assad’s domestic policies had seriously harmed many Syrian groups. By 1980, the opposition had gained significant support that expressed itself in mass demonstrations, and although the opposition was mostly dominated

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26 Schiff, p. 105.
27 More on Assad’s domestic opposition can be found in MERIP Reports, no. 110, especially the articles by Alasdair Drysdale, Hanna Batatu, and Fred Lawson.
by the urban based Muslim Brothers, other political groups participated as well. The most serious challenge to the Assad regime, however, was the February 1982 Hama uprising, when a small war between government troops and the people of Hama lasted throughout the month and resulted in at least 10,000 dead and the destruction of over 70 percent of the city.28

Assad had every reason to expect that his domestic opposition would gain momentum in the wake of the 1982 defeat and consequently begin to seriously threaten the Baathist regime. The opposition would exploit the national humiliation to discredit the Syrian regime and Assad’s policies. It would criticize his ill-planned military strategy, his inadequate training of the air force pilots and the officers manning the Bekaa missile installations. Yassir Arafat’s sharp criticism of Syria’s refusal to fight alongside the Palestinians had provided further ammunition for the Syrian opposition which might now be expected to foment an Army led coup or organize new “uprisings” in Syrian cities.

Such opposition was successfully neutralized by Syria’s escalation of the Lebanese conflict between fall 1983 and winter 1984. Many Syrians began to think that Assad “wasn’t that bad after all.” His success in forcing the Gemayel government to abrogate the May 17th agreement with Israel was perceived as a victory and proved that Assad had not been a “defeatist.”

Was Assad Not So Bad After All?

Assad’s behavior following the collapse of the May 17th agreement shows him to be consistent in his Lebanon policy: his primary concern has been to make sure that changes within Lebanon do not jeopardize Syria’s major interests. Furthermore, his conduct proves that he has no desire to absorb Lebanon into a “Greater Syria.”29

A unified Lebanon has been a prerequisite for accomplishing the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon, which is Assad’s primary goal. For example, even though the Shiites and the Druze played a key role in forcing the demise of the Lebanese-Israeli accord, Assad has not endorsed their demands for the resignation of Gemayel and for political and economic reforms in the Lebanese system. One reason for his refusal is the strong Christian opposition to these demands. Assad’s stance in 1984 is due less

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28 Assad’s lack of such an ambition is discussed by Talcott Seely in two interviews with Al Majalla (August 6-12, 1983, no. 182, p. 16, and March 24-30, 1984, no. 215, p. 13).
29 An example of Assad’s appeasement of the Christians is his attitude toward Suleiman Franjieh, who according to many sources caused the failure of the Lausanne Conference. Instead of terminating his relationship with Franjieh, a personal friend, Assad called upon one of Franjieh’s critics, Walid Jumblatt, to cease his criticism of the former Lebanese president. This was reported by Al Majalla, May 5-11, 1984, no. 221, p. 25. Another illustration of Assad’s good will toward the Christians is his approval of the Gemayel government providing security guarantees to Israel, i.e., that it will not permit “crossings” (by Palestinian commandos) through the Lebanese border to Israel. The Syrian president made this statement in an interview with Patrick Seale that was published in Al Majalla, June 2-8, 1984, no. 225, p. 9.
to his acquiescence to Israeli and American intervention on behalf of the Christians than to his belief that appeasement of the Christians is a precondition for ending the civil war and subsequently unifying Lebanon.

A Lebanon partitioned into cantons, either formally or *de facto*, would delay Israel’s withdrawal if not strengthen its occupation of the south and thereby continue to threaten Syrian interests. If every Lebanese community were to gain control of its own area, the occupation of the south would cease to be an important national issue since it would not concern all the Lebanese but only the southern Shiite community. Furthermore, Israeli proxies might succeed in establishing their own canton in the south, whose existence they would be likely to ensure by legitimizing Israeli domination in southern Lebanon through a peace treaty or security agreement. Such a development would make the possibility of an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon even more remote.

On the other hand, a unified Lebanon would be an asset to Syria. Hence Assad’s conciliatory attitude toward the Christians. A Lebanon whose Christian population is secure would be able to use its long standing ties with the West to help pressure Israel out of southern Lebanon. Given Assad’s 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, he is at a disadvantage in mobilizing Western support for Israeli withdrawal. A unified Lebanon therefore emerges as an important step toward accomplishing Syrian goals.

To conclude, Assad’s Lebanon policies have aimed to defuse crises and avoid confrontation with Israel. He has shifted alliances in response to developments on the ground while consistently pursuing the same goals. There is little evidence that Assad has pursued extremist policies in Lebanon, but it would also be wrong to argue that Syrian policy in Lebanon has been passive. It resorted to force in 1976, in 1978, and in the 1982-1984 period when its interests were at stake.