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Syria and the Middle East

Can it be a force for peace in the area?

Syria has been much in the news lately. Still, most Americans don't quite know what to make of it. We hear about Syrian involvement in terrorism and know of its hostility to Israel. But we are not sure just what role it plays in the Middle East. Syria doesn't clearly come into focus. It deserves a closer look.

What are the facts?

■ Syria is a "client" of the Soviet Union. It's their most trusted ally in the region. It is the Cuba of the Middle East. The principal enemies of the USSR and Syria are the United States and Israel. Ironically, Syria has great understanding of Israel's role as defender of Western interests. Because Syria realizes that it's only Israel that stymies Soviet hegemony in the Middle East and insures U.S. influence in the area and in the Gulf region.

■ Syria is the most destabilizing influence in the Middle East. It is in war-like conflict with every one of its five neighbors. Syria claims large areas of Turkey. Over the years, Syria has launched many armed incursions against Jordan and it is only the threat of being confronted by Israeli military force that has prevented Syria from attempting a full-fledged takeover of that country. There is mortal enmity with Iraq and its leaders, which has caused Syria to make common cause with non-Arab Iran in the destructive Gulf War. Syrians consider Lebanon to be part of their own country and have now virtually occupied and annexed it. But their main fury is directed against Israel, because it represents an intolerable "non-Arab presence" in the area, because it has wrested the Golan Heights from Syria, but mostly because it is (rightly) perceived as a bulwark of Western influence and civilization, both of which Syria totally rejects.

■ Elimination of U.S. influence in the Middle East is where Syrian and Soviet wishes intersect. The interests of the Soviet Union are global and those of Syria regional, but their aims coincide. The Soviet Union is, of course, desirous to see the U.S. retreat from the Middle East, enabling the Soviet Union to extend its dominion over the entire region, which is close to their own strategic "soft underbelly". It would also give them

control over the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf, the lifeblood of the Western world. Syria enthusiastically cooperates in the effort to dislodge the U.S., because the U.S. and its ally Israel stand in the way of the dream of "Greater Syria".

■ Syria's immediate military aim is to build to "strategic parity" with Israel. This would enable Syria to wage war with Israel, if necessary without the assistance of any of the other Arab States. To that end, it has so far acquired over \$19 billion worth of the most advanced and sophisticated Soviet armament. This includes the most advanced Soviet fighters, the most advanced missiles, and major capability in chemical weapons, the most formidable and sophisticated air defense system, a tank force greater than that of France and England combined, and a promise by the Soviet Union of atomic weapons for "when the need arises". "We Syrians are not afraid to push the button", says Defense Minister Mustafa Talas.

■ Terror is the most pervasive aspect of the Syrian regime. Syria perceives of terror as a legitimate tool for furthering its national objectives. That terror is conducted by Syrian organizations sponsored by or affiliated with the government, or indirectly through "clients", primarily the Palestinian, Iranian and Libyan terror factions to whom Syria extends warm hospitality and support. Syria uses terror against Israeli and Western targets, or against Arab elements that do not conform to the Syrian policy line. But they reserve their most brutal terror against those suspected of internal opposition. In 1982, President Assad put down a rebellion in the town of Hama. Over 25,000 people were ruthlessly killed. *The New York Times* said President Assad ". . . turned half the town into a parking lot".

Syria is the leading ally of the Soviet Union and the outstanding enemy of the U.S. in the Middle East. The Syrian regime is one of unmitigated terror, of human rights violations, of ruthless persecution of political and religious minorities — especially, of course, the pitiful remnants of the Jewish population, who are not allowed to emigrate and are kept as hostages in the country. Syria is in conflict with every one of its five neighbors. Its political and military aim is the destruction of Israel, the establishment of "Greater Syria", and the elimination of any influence of the United States in the immediate area and in the Persian Gulf.

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