

The Soviet response to the Syrian invasion of Lebanon in 1976.

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Title page photos:

Upper photo: Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev.¹

Lower photo: President Hafez al-Assad and PLO leader Yasser Arafat.²

¹ Holtland, Jenne Jan, «Hafiz al-Assad & Brezhnev. Plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose».

² Cohen, David. «Emergence of Palestinian Identity».

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Abstract

On 1 June 1976, Syrian army units rolled into Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War. They fought against the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the left-wing Lebanese National Movement (LNM). Both Syria and the PLO were important clients of the Soviet Union (USSR), which was locked in a Cold War competition with the USA. The Soviet leadership became critical of the invasion and asked the Syrians to withdraw. However, Syria kept on fighting and only agreed to a ceasefire after Saudi Arabian mediation in October 1976. The Soviet-Syrian relationship was normalized in April 1977 when the Syrian president visited Moscow. This thesis investigates the Soviet response to the Syrian invasion of Lebanon from June 1976 to April 1977, and details why it reacted the way it did.

Existing scholarship disagrees about whether the USSR knew about and supported the invasion. There are also different views about how much political, diplomatic, military and economic pressure Moscow exerted towards the Syrian regime.

WikiLeaks and CIA documents from the period are used to shed new light on this very tense period in Soviet-Syrian relations. Patron-client theory, focusing on the patron's goals and the client's threat level, is applied to analyse the Soviet-Syrian relationship. The USSR had political and strategic goals to keep Syria as a client. The Kremlin did not support the Syrian invasion; nevertheless, it was afraid Syria would shift side in the Cold War. Seeing the superpower struggle as a zero-sum-game, such a loss was unacceptable for the USSR. Syria on the other hand was dependent on the USSR for military support, but its military threat level was low during 1976-77, and this increased Damascus's influence over Soviet policy. In addition, Syria relied more on the Arab Gulf States than the USSR for economic aid.

The Soviet leaders put a political, diplomatic, military and economic pressure on Damascus. To not lose Syria as a client, the pressure was limited. Meanwhile, to keep the PLO as an independent client, Moscow gave a restrained support to the PLO-LNM by political, diplomatic and military measures, directly and through Egypt, Iraq and Libya.

By backing the PLO-LNM's attempt to gain power in Lebanon by force, the Soviet strategy is seen as offensive. The PLO-LNM was weakened by the Syrian invasion, and the USSR's policy was not successful. However, the USSR maintained Syria as a client.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The relationship between Syria and the Soviet Union and its successor state Russia, is a relatively long-lasting phenomenon in a politically unstable Middle East. Since the Soviet Union (USSR) allowed its satellite state Czechoslovakia to sell weapons to Syria in 1954, the two countries have mostly been close. Both the USSR and Syria sought to influence events in the Middle East, and often found themselves on the same side in regional conflicts. The USSR faced the United States of America (USA) in the Cold War, and Syria became an important Soviet client in the superpower struggle. Nonetheless, the USSR and Syria openly expressed their disagreements with each other on certain topics. The Palestinian issue, one of the region's most difficult and controversial, turned out to be one of these.

In the early 1970s both the USSR and Syria were supporting the Palestinians in their conflict with Israel. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) became a Soviet client receiving political, economic and military support. The PLO had established itself firmly in Lebanon, where the Maronites, a Catholic Western-oriented group, had played a dominant political, economic, military and cultural role for decades. Muslim and left-wing groups claimed more influence and political reforms and united into the Lebanese National Movement (LNM). The PLO supported the LNM, but the Maronites refused to give any concessions, and fighting erupted into the Lebanese Civil War 1975. Syria, ruled by President Hafez al-Assad's, assisted the PLO-LNM alliance, and the USSR backed this policy. In the first half of 1976 the PLO-LNM were on the offensive and pushed the Maronites back to their core areas.

On 1 June 1976, Syria intervened in the Lebanese Civil War and soon fought against the PLO-LNM coalition. The USSR initially remained relatively silent and in the opinion of some observers even seemed to support Assad. Soon, the Soviet leadership grew increasingly critical of the Syrian invasion and asked Assad to withdraw from Lebanon.³ In spite of this, the Syrians pressed on, the Soviet criticism and pressure increased during the autumn. The relations turned sour and the dispute developed into the most serious strain in Soviet-Syrian relations during Assad's 30 years in power.

³ The research literature uses both *invasion* and *military intervention* about the Syrian actions on 1 June 1976. This thesis uses both terms interchangeably.

The Arab League mediated in the conflict, and made a ceasefire agreement with Assad and the PLO at the end of October 1976. Fighting in Lebanon scaled down, nonetheless, relations between Moscow and Damascus first normalized when Assad visited Moscow in April 1977.⁴ The Syrian army stayed on in Lebanon as a so-called peacekeeping force securing Syria strong political, military and economic influence for almost three decades.⁵

Research question

To better understand the limits of Moscow's influence and Damascus' autonomy, this thesis investigates the period immediately following the Syrian invasion of Lebanon in June 1976. The Lebanese Civil War and Syrian invasion have been thoroughly analysed in the research literature. On the other hand, Moscow's policy towards the events has not been the sole focus of any research since the late 1970s. With new sources available through WikiLeaks and downgraded CIA-documents, a fresh view of the events is taken in this thesis.

The research question is: What was the Soviet response to the Syrian invasion of Lebanon in June 1976, and why did it react in this way?

Limitation of time, actors and themes

The Soviet and Syrian policies towards the PLO seemed to be relatively well aligned at the start of the Lebanese Civil War. Diverging goals became apparent soon after the Syrian army rolled into Lebanon on 1 June 1976 to stop the alliance of left-wing Muslim-PLO groups from winning over Christian militias. This makes June 1976 a natural starting point for the study. The Soviet political and diplomatic pressure decreased after the Arab-League mediated agreement in late October. Nevertheless, Soviet coercion continued in the military relations until April 1977, and this marks the end point of this thesis.

The advantage of going deeper into a short time period is the possibility to analyse more closely the leaders' handling of specific situations and re-evaluate earlier research. Analysing reactions to some singular events gives hints and sometimes evidence of the parties'

⁴ The Lebanese Civil War continued with until the Taif agreement ended hostilities in 1989.

⁵ The Syrian army left in 2005 after huge demonstrations protested against the alleged participation of Syria in the murder of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005.

interpretations of the situation, and this again gives indications of their overall policy thinking. The USSR supported the PLO and leftist alliance, but could have done much more to back them up. On the other hand, one may wonder why the Russians chose to assist an armed liberation movement instead of an important Arab state. The Kremlin's decisions were naturally affected by its considerations regarding the regime in Damascus. However, the USSR was in a Cold War with the US and Soviet concerns for that relation naturally affected the Kremlin's reactions. By looking at the most tense period of Soviet-Syrian relations this may point to limits of influence and clarifying the main priorities. The focus is on the parties' strategic political goals and how they used diplomacy and political pressure, military force or economic measures to achieve these. This thesis investigates policies of the Soviet era; however, to vary the language the adjective *Russian* will be used interchangeably.⁶

The Lebanese Civil War was a complex conflict with many parties who changed alliances over the years. The war started as a Christian-Muslim fight, progressed to a Leftist-Rightist struggle and was portrayed as a Syrian/Rightist-Palestinian conflict.⁷ The Civil War functions as a backdrop for this thesis and the general development of the fighting will be described. The focus will be on the specific interactions between the Soviet Union, Syria and the PLO.

Why is this topic important?

There are at least two reasons to study the events of 1976 more closely. On one hand, as we will see in the research literature, there is disagreement about what actually happened between the USSR and Syria, and some of the circumstances have not been fully disclosed. On the other hand, some of the conflicts from 1976 continue, although in a different form today. To solve them, there is a need to better understand what the parties' actions and goals were, and what influenced them.

After the Lebanese Civil War, the Palestinians in Lebanon were weakened, and are still split and struggling for statehood. Nevertheless, a new political party and militia, Hezbollah grew

⁶ It is common in the literature about the Soviet Union to use of the term *Russian*. Moscow and Kremlin are other terms used.

⁷ CIA, «Lebanon's dissolution: Futures and consequences», 14. 1 August 1976. All CIA references in this thesis are from 1976, unless specified otherwise.

to become a strong actor. Hezbollah, made up of local Shia Muslims, has taken over some of the features of the PLO. They have a strong position in Southern Lebanon, are allied to Damascus and clearly opposed to the US and Israel.⁸ There are also claims that Russia is linked to Hezbollah.⁹

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow's interest and capacity of dealing with the Middle East decreased. After Hafez al-Assad died, his son Bashar al-Assad became president and maintained the Syrian troops in Lebanon. However, when the Syrian regime was accused of murdering the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, Assad came under strong local and Western pressure to withdraw from Lebanon. The Cold War between the USSR and the US was over, and Moscow was too weak to hinder a humiliating Syrian withdrawal. Nonetheless, in a characteristically unstable region, the situation soon turned full-circle. In 2011 an uprising in Syria turned into a war in which 400,000 people have been killed and over 11 million forced to flee their homes.¹⁰

As rebel forces seemed close to defeat the Syrian army in September 2015, Russia sent in its air force and combat troops, saving the regime in Damascus.¹¹ However, in 2017 Moscow withdrew parts of its forces from Syria. This made it hard for the government to gain a complete victory and in practice ensured the conflict to rage on.¹² The Russian role is particularly interesting, as it seems calibrated to keep Assad in power at the same time as President Vladimir Putin says he is willing to pull the troops out «quite quickly» if it is to Russia's advantage.¹³ Assad claims that in spite of different opinions, the Russians have never in their 60-year long relationship tried to dictate Syria.¹⁴ Moscow's has interests in Syria, but how much influence it has over Damascus is not fully known and important to clarify. Getting a better understanding of the historical interests, goals and limits of Moscow's involvement may be helpful to understand its role in the Syrian war today.

⁸ Iran, which is distinctly allied to both Syria and Hezbollah, has also been purchasing advanced Russian weapons. Stratfor, «Iran: S-300 Missile System Deployed To Fordow Nuclear Site». 29 August 2016.

⁹ Nizameddin, Talal. «Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon: Russia and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Nexus». *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (2008): 475-500. The Daily Beast, «Russia Is Arming Hezbollah, Say Two of the Group's Field Commanders». 1 November 2016. Elbaz, Michel. «Dangerous liaisons: Covert "love affair" between Russia and Hezbollah». 24 May 2005.

¹⁰ United Nations News, «Syria conflict: 2017 deadliest year for children, UN aid official reports». UN News, «Syria in numbers».

¹¹ This was only the second Russian foreign intervention since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The USSR invaded Afghanistan to save a communist regime friendly to Moscow. The Russians met strong resistance from US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan-backed guerilla groups and fought a costly war until Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew the Soviet forces in 1988. In 2008, Russia intervened in Georgia.

¹² Sputnik News, «Putin Orders Withdrawal of Russian Troops from Syria». 11 December 2017.

¹³ Al Jazeera, «Putin: Russia military 'will stay' in Syria - but not long-term». 8 June 2018.

¹⁴ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), «President al-Assad interview given to Mail on Sunday – VIDEO». 6 June 2018.

Method: Sources and the use of sources

Primary sources

This thesis is based on English-language sources as Russian and Syrian sources are difficult to access and need translation. WikiLeaks and declassified CIA documents are the main sources. A document collection made by the Institute of Palestine Studies has been used to review political leaders' speeches and statements from the period.¹⁵ In addition, I conducted interviews with Palestinian and Lebanese academics and political activists in Lebanon during the autumn of 2017. Newspaper articles from Western media like *The New York Times* have also been used.¹⁶

WikiLeaks is a non-profit multi-national media organization and associated library that has published more than 10 million documents since 2006.¹⁷ A huge part of the material is from US embassies, the oldest dates back to 1966.¹⁸ The organization has won several awards and had been cited in more than 28 thousands academic papers and US court filings by November 2015.¹⁹ Similar leaks have been made earlier; however, never before has the public had access to documents on this scale and with the ease that the Internet provides.

The huge amount of documents presents another challenge. Just to get an overview of what exists, skim, read and piece the information together is a large task. Because of the vast number of documents, the need to search and sort required a solution. WikiLeaks' has its own search engine on its website with a possibility to search for documents by words, phrases and dates of production. I have systematically used a combination of search words like «Syria», «Assad», «Soviet», «pressure», «invasion», «Lebanon» and PLO». ²⁰ When I found an interesting topic like «Tartus», the Syrian port which the USSR required access to, I went further by searching for «Tartus» combined with «Soviet» etc. The resulting files

¹⁵ The Institute of Palestine Studies in Beirut publishes a yearbook of international documents dealing with Palestine.

¹⁶ *The New York Times* of 1976-77 is accessible on the Internet.

¹⁷ WikiLeaks was founded by its publisher Julian Assange in 2006. The 10 million documents are published on its own website. WikiLeaks, «What is WikiLeaks». 3 November 2015.

¹⁸ Shane and Lehren, «Leaked Cables Offer Raw Look at U.S. Diplomacy». In WikiLeaks' «Syria files», there are more than two million emails from Syrian sources, however, they are dating from August 2006 to March 2012 and have not been relevant for this thesis. WikiLeaks, «Syria Files». 5 July 2012.

¹⁹ The Economist New Media Award (2008), The Amnesty New Media Award (2009), TIME Magazine Person of the Year, People's Choice (highest global vote) (2010) among several others. WikiLeaks, «What is WikiLeaks». 3 November 2015.

²⁰ By using WikiLeaks' search engine with the words «Soviet, influence, Syria, Lebanon» 3,840 hits came up. These were distributed on 15 different groups of sources, which is possible to select between. The largest, by a clear margin, were e-mails from the private US company Stratfor with 3,171 documents. WikiLeaks, «Advanced search.»

appear in chronological order, and it is also possible to narrow down the findings to any period by setting start and final dates for the search. The documents appear in an electronic format, which facilitates specific searches for key words. The search engine works satisfactorily and it has not been necessary to use other methods to find or sort the documents.

The CIA has downgraded approximately 930,000 documents, with a total of more than 12 million pages since 1999. The documents were previously only available to the public by visiting the National Archives in Maryland. In January 2017, they were released online on the CIA's website.²¹ They cover many topics and activities from the 1940s to the 1990s, including the issues approached in this thesis. A declassification review of 25-year old records is regulated by an Executive US order. Consequently, new batches of documents are regularly released and posted online to the public's access. Some of the latest declassified documents used in this thesis were approved for release relatively recently, in July 2016. The President's Daily Brief, classified as *Top Secret* at the time, has been one of the main sources. Although other important international events took place in June and July of 1976, Lebanon figures on or close to the top in these briefs every day. As the superpower-rival the USSR was involved, we can assume that the conflict had top priority for Moscow as well. The search function on the CIA-website does not result in a chronological list of documents, and the documents are in pdf-format. This makes it more time-consuming to find the relevant information.

In addition, six interviews were conducted with Palestinian and Lebanese academics and political activists in Beirut and Sidon, Lebanon on 6-16 November 2017.²² Some of them were present at the events in 1976, others heard about them from people who were there. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and each lasted 1-2 hours. They were semi-structured in the way that I had a list of questions and at the same time let the interviewed people talk freely. All were willing to have their names published. As will be evident in the

²¹ The documents are in an Electronic Reading Room. CIA, «The CIA's Secret History Is Now Online», 2017. The search results on the CIA page do not appear in chronological order, and this makes it more time-consuming to find relevant the documents.

²² A list with names of the interviewed, date and location is given in the appendix of sources. At the time of the interviews, the time-scope of the thesis was from the Syrian invasion of Lebanon to the fall of the Soviet Union, 1976-91. Therefore, the questions asked were broader than the present research question.

following chapters, some of the questions asked became redundant as the research progressed, thus some of the interviews provided somewhat limited information.²³

Finally, I visited the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut, which provided access to a book with a collection of relevant documents for 1976.²⁴

Source criticism

Some of the critical questions are: Who has produced the source, and what was the intention of sharing the information? Can we trust that the documents are real and the information trustworthy? We will take a closer look at the main sources.

WikiLeaks: There are several uncertainties regarding WikiLeaks. Who originally leaked the documents to WikiLeaks, why did they do this, and did they make any selections? How has WikiLeaks treated them? What we have is only a part of all the documents produced, for instance in June 1976 there are almost no documents available. The people leaking the documents may have published everything they got access to, or consciously selected what we can see. It may not be representative of what happened, and the trustworthiness and reliability is up for discussion.

The WikiLeaks material from 1976-77 is all from the USA, and it may have been published to present the US government in a bad light. The founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, is known to be critical of US foreign policy and he or others in the organization may have selected certain documents while keeping others. There have also been speculations that Russia may have been behind the leaks.²⁵ However, I have not found criticism about the authenticity of the documents.²⁶ Still, one should keep in mind the possibility that some reports may have been created or edited. On the other hand, by manipulating documents WikiLeaks would run the risk of losing credibility.

²³ The original time-scope for this thesis was from 1976 until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

²⁴ Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*. Beirut: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978.

²⁵ «In the present case, WikiLeaks has a history of releasing information that — whatever you may think about how it was acquired — proves authentic and often reliable. We know that because, to my knowledge, no one has proved any of their documents fraudulent despite having great incentive and opportunity to do so. People and agencies whose documents have been leaked have, in arguing over them, conceded (usually tacitly) that they are what WikiLeaks purports them to be. For example, when Snowden leaked information showing that U.S. intelligence agencies were monitoring German chancellor Angela Merkel's cellphone, President Obama reportedly apologized — he didn't tell Merkel not to believe everything she reads in the papers». McCarthy, «What Should We Make of WikiLeaks as a Source?»; Gibney, Alex. Can We Trust Julian Assange and WikiLeaks?». *The New York Times*. 8 August 2016.

²⁶ Carroll, Lauren. «Are the Clinton WikiLeaks emails doctored, or authentic?». *The New York Times*. 8 August 2016.

Five million of the WikiLeaks-documents, the so-called Global Intelligence files are e-mails from the US private company Stratfor during 2004-11.²⁷ This constitutes about half of the total number of files, and it is interesting to take a closer look at the company. Stratfor is a Texas-based intelligence corporation producing and selling geopolitical analysis.²⁸

Stratfor admitted that they had been hacked but would not confirm or negate the validity of the files published by WikiLeaks.²⁹ It was probably difficult to break into and steal five million documents from a world-leading intelligence company; however it is probably even more complicated to change or create vast amounts of documents to make them appear as real. It would be very time- and resource consuming and require great insights in many complicated and confidential questions. That strengthens the argumentation that the documents are real, but does not prove it. The authenticity of two of the documents I can personally confirm. One is an e-mail I sent and received an answer to regarding a book I was to receive as a Stratfor subscriber in 2011.¹ Another contains my contact information and subscription details. Both of these were included in the leaked documents I checked.

CIA documents: The authenticity seems to be quite clear. Manipulating US Presidential briefs and other official documents would probably create a domestic and international scandal and seems highly unlikely. However, not all the information in a document has been revealed. In most reports, single sentences, paragraphs or even whole pages are visibly blanked out. Other papers have not been published at all. The reason for concealing information has partly been to protect US personnel, and the names of the sources involved, from publicity and any potential danger. In addition, some US internal discussions and actions would surely set the US in a bad light even today.

General for WikiLeaks and CIA documents: The vast majority of the texts were internal reports, overviews etc. based on intelligence and meant to make a basis for analysis and decisions. They were not meant for publication framing actors or situations in certain ways for the public. This gives them more credibility than interviews and public statements meant

²⁷ WikiLeaks, «Search the GIFiles».

²⁸ News and analysis are sold openly to subscribers including huge corporations, arms manufacturers and US authorities including security organizations.

²⁹ Stratfor, «Stratfor on the Wikileaks Release».

to have political influence. Still, the US personnel involved had not necessarily been in the room where information was first shared or decisions made. On the other hand, the US had an extensive network, probably the largest in the world, of diplomats, intelligence agencies and other connections with officials meeting many of the actors relevant for this thesis. The US analysts seemed to have very good access to information on the Syria-Lebanese theatre. The Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam in one instance told the US ambassador to Damascus that «your information is extremely precise».³⁰

From the sources accessed, it becomes clear that all the main parties of the Lebanese Civil War to a certain extent spoke with the Americans. The US allies and Arab friends and sympathisers of course talked with the US, but even the opponents, the Russians, the Syrians, and the PLO did so. All parties would naturally further their own goals and interests. Still, the meetings included information, argumentation and views that in turn can be used to say something about their real intentions. Even the issues a party does not talk about can tell something about their position. For instance, a lack of reaction to a kind of event which the party usually responded to, may say something about a change of priority.

Interpretation: To a large extent the sources describe expressions of political leaders' and actions and transactions of states and organizations. The US origin of the documents creates several challenges. The USA has had strained, and for years conflictual relations with the Soviet Union, Syria, and the PLO. The American officials taking notes and writing minutes and reports often met the informers; nevertheless, they were not participating in the parties' internal discussions and decision-making meetings. They may have got hold of the information indirectly, via others, or through different forms of electronic surveillance. The Americans had their own view of the parties and the situation they were involved in, and that has necessarily influenced their presentation of the events. To get a better understanding of their real opinions and thoughts it is necessary to interpret them.

The US analysts analysed and commented many of the Soviet, Arab and Western statements, events, newspaper articles and broadcasts. The parties, as a part of their

³⁰ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET ROLE IN LEBANON», 1. 4 August 1976. All WikiLeaks references in this thesis are from 1976, unless specified otherwise.

conflicts, also led a propaganda war manipulating information to influence people. Some of the analysed texts clearly had political and propagandistic intentions without base in reality, others are more uncertain. The US analysts compared the texts with other information they had access to and this helped them and, in effect, the later historian to get a more reflected and clear picture of what really happened. Many of the analysts were experienced, were present on the ground at the time and produced valuable information.

However, the US personnel could not have a complete overview, let alone detailed knowledge, about a complex situation where so many parties acted in secrecy. On top of that comes their ability to select, validate the reliability, interpret the real intentions and goals and analyse information. Obviously, this opens for many possible misjudgements, still by viewing the sources together as a whole, a degree of certainty appears.

Taken together, we see that it is difficult and sometimes admittedly impossible to understand the situation from the parties' perspectives or to get a complete picture of what really happened and why. Therefore, the picture a reader gets is necessarily incomplete. Still, what actually is available contains new and valuable information.

Ethical considerations: The criticism of WikiLeaks has primarily been that individual names have been published in the documents, which may put the people mentioned in danger. The material included in this thesis was made by public servants and some of the names of the sources for the information are also mentioned. However, since the information is openly accessible on the internet, the relevant authorities, that is Syrian, Russian, Palestinian and Lebanese government agencies, have probably seen them already. This thesis is based on documents that are publicly accessible, and not by breaking in to steal any information. In sum, I do not see any ethical problem in using WikiLeaks.

Interviews: Regarding the people interviewed, they offer descriptions of events that shed light on details and provide a closeness other sources cannot provide. However, the people who were present took part in a very complicated conflict with many events taking place at the same time and at different places. They lived with the manipulated media coverage referred to above. They may have forgotten details, misinterpreted or purposely selected

parts of the events when they gave their accounts. Therefore, it is important to see the interviews together with the other sources.

Secondary sources - Research literature

The Soviet reactions to the Syrian intervention was not an isolated policy but took place in an overall framework of Soviet relations with 1) the Middle East, 2) Syria, 3) the PLO. Syrian relations with the PLO and the involvement in the Lebanese Civil War is also important to take into consideration. To place the research question into the field of these relations I present an overview of the most relevant research literature.

Soviet-Middle East relations

Several books on Soviet-Middle East relations have been published.³¹ The relationship with Syria, the PLO and the Syrian 1976-invasion of Lebanon were just some of several topics covered. Consequently, the coverage of the events in 1976 is in general brief. Two of the most renowned researchers who have also written specifically about Syria and the intervention of Lebanon are Galia Golan and Robert O. Freedman, both American. These writers will be referred to throughout this thesis.

Golan has written several books, book chapters and articles on Soviet policy towards the region.³² She is Darwin Professor emerita of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she was chair of the Political science Department. In 1990, she wrote *Soviet Policies in the Middle East – From World War Two to Gorbachev* including book chapters about Syria and the PLO.³³ Freedman, an American political scientist holding appointments at the Baltimore Hebrew University and Johns Hopkins University wrote several books, book chapters and articles on Soviet-Middle East relations.³⁴ His first book *Soviet Policy toward the Middle East*

³¹ Laqueur, Walter. *The Struggle for the Middle East – The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1958-68*. 1972. Landis, Lincoln. *Politics and oil: Moscow in the Middle East*. New York: Dunellen Publishing Company. 1973. Dawisha, Adeed and Karen Dawisha. *The Soviet Union in the Middle East – Policies and Perspectives*. 1982; Sella, Amnon. *Soviet Political and Military Conduct in the Middle East*. 1981. Breslauer, George W. *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*. 1990;

³² See the bibliography for Golan's publications.

³³ Golan, Galia. *Soviet Policies in the Middle East – From World War Two to Gorbachev*. 1990.

³⁴ Freedman has a Ph.D. degree in International Relations from Columbia University. He has also been assistant Professor of Russian History at the United States Military Academy and Associate Professor of Political Science and Russian at Marquette University. Baltimore Council of Foreign Affairs, "Crisis in United States Israel Relations". 2015. See the bibliography for Freedman's publications.

since 1970 came out in three editions during 1975-82. He published another book *Moscow and the Middle East* in 1991.³⁵

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, a few books were published. After this however, the area faded from interest for most researchers.³⁶ While articles continued to be written, few books were published until well into the 2000s.³⁷ To present a Russian perspective, Yevgeny Primakov is included. Primakov worked as a Middle East journalist in the 1960s, was an academic in the 1970s and later became head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Minister of Foreign affairs and Prime Minister, a rather unique combination. He published a part memoir, part history book in 2009.³⁸

Soviet-Syria relations

Regarding the USSR's general relations with Syria, only three English language books have been published and they were all written during the final years of the Cold War. Efraim Karsh, an Israeli-British historian, wrote a booklet *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years* in 1988.³⁹ He analysed the relations from when Assad came to power in 1970 to 1988, with one chapter on the Lebanese crisis. Karsh came out with a revised and expanded book three years later.⁴⁰ Karsh wrote that the Lebanese Civil War «constituted the backdrop against which Soviet-Syrian relations played out some of their most trying moments».⁴¹

Pedro Ramet is an American political scientist and professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Based on two and a half years of data compilation, he wrote *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955 – A Troubled Alliance*, the most voluminous research on the topic, in 1990.⁴² Ramet's speciality, though, was not the Middle East, but

³⁵ Although it focuses on the Soviet policy since the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, it gives a long introduction to the decades from World War II to 1979.

³⁶ Vassiliev, Alexei: *Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism*, 1993; Hollis, Rosemary (eds.). *The Soviets, their successors and the Middle East – Turning point*, 1993; Goldberg, David H. and Paul Marantz. *The Decline of the Soviet Union and the Transformation of the Middle East*, 1994.

³⁷ Nizameddin, Talal. *Russia and the Middle East 1999*; Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?*, 2007; Ginor, Isabella and Gideon Remez. *Foxbats over Dimona. The Soviets' Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War*, 2007; Khalidi, Rashid. *Sowing Crisis – The Cold War and the American Dominance in the Middle East*. 2009. Nizameddin, Talal. *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*, 2013; Sekulow, *Unholy Alliance: The Agenda Iran, Russia, and Jihadists Share for Conquering the World*, 2016.

³⁸ Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs, Behind the scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the present*, 2009.

³⁹ The book has 103 pages plus notes and appendices. Karsh, Efraim, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years*.

⁴⁰ The book has 182 pages plus notes, appendices and bibliography. The expanded space is given to military economic and other dimensions. However, the analysis of the events in Lebanon were hardly updated, and the space dedicated to Lebanon was actually less than in his first book. Karsh, Efraim, *Soviet policy towards Syria since 1970*.

⁴¹ Karsh, *Soviet Policy towards Syria since 1970*, 22.

⁴² Ramet, Pedro, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955 – A troubled alliance*. 262 pages including notes.

Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe. The book covers the relations from the 1950s to 1990 and discusses the Lebanese crisis in parts of a chapter. He also refers to the Syrian intervention as a low point in Soviet-Syrian relations.⁴³

In addition, a PhD thesis about the 1970-1980 period has been written.⁴⁴ Jonathan Chanis in his 1987 dissertation at the City University of New York says the USSR misjudged Assad's intentions and capabilities in Lebanon.⁴⁵

Several books dedicate a chapter or considerable coverage to Soviet-Syria relations. Galia Golan and Itamar Rabinovitch co-wrote a book chapter in 1979.⁴⁶ In a 1991 case-study comparing Soviet-Syria with US-Israeli relations, David Roberts, Moshe Efrat and Robert O. Freedman, wrote a chapter each.⁴⁷ Some articles regarding the relations between Russia, Syria and Lebanon have also been published.⁴⁸ Since the fall of the Soviet Union no books on Russia-Syria relations were published until 2016.⁴⁹

The USSR and the Lebanese Civil War

The only research specifically treating the Soviet Union and the Syrian invasion in 1976 are two articles and a book chapter from the late 1970s. The first article, again written by Robert Freedman, appeared in 1978.⁵⁰ The next year Ilana Kass, a political scientist wrote an article «Moscow and the Lebanese Triangle».⁵¹ Kass had written a Soviet-Middle East special study and later wrote a book about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Freedman's and Kass' articles give a chronological presentation of the events, and are primarily based on Soviet, US and Arab newspapers from 1976. The experienced Christian Science Monitor

⁴³ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955 – A troubled alliance*, 114.

⁴⁴ Chanis, «Soviet policy toward Syria». Another Ph.D. thesis by Azzedine Souyad, «The Soviet Union in Syria's foreign policy 1970-1980 Ideology versus regime interest». University of Exeter, 2000, has not been available.

⁴⁵ Chanis, Jonathan A. *Soviet policy toward Syria and the lessons of Egypt*, 248.

⁴⁶ Golan, Galia and Itamar Rabinovich. «The Soviet Union and Syria: the Limits of Co-operation» in *The Limits to Power: Soviet Policy in the Middle East* edited by Ro'i, Yaacov, 213-31. 1979.

⁴⁷ Efrat and Bercovitch, *Superpowers and Client States in the Middle East*. Freedman,

⁴⁸ Articles about the relations between Russia, Syria and Lebanon: Freedman. «The Soviet Union, Syria, and the crisis in Lebanon»; Spechler, «The Politics of intervention The Soviet Union and the crisis in Lebanon». Several research articles about the Soviet-Syria relation have been published: Golan, «The Soviet Union and Syria since the Yom Kippur war»; Hannah, «At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era»; Karsh, «Soviet-Syrian relations: The troubled Partnership» and Kreutz, «Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East».

⁴⁹ The first, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict - Moscow's domestic, regional and strategic interests* was written by Nikolay Kozhanov in 2016. It primarily treats the relations since the war started in 2011. Later other books treating the Russian role in the war came out.

⁵⁰ Freedman, Robert O. «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76». *Jerusalem Journal of International relations*. Vol. 3 No. 4 (1978): 60-93.

⁵¹ Kass, Ilana. «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle». *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 33 No 2 (Spring 1979): 164-187. Ilana Kass is professor of Military Strategy and Operations at the National War College, US National Defense University. She has been a member of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and has written extensively about the Middle East. Godson and Wirtz. *Strategic Denial and Deception: The Twenty-First Century Challenge*, 242.

correspondent James F. Collins wrote a book chapter about the Soviet policy during the Lebanese Civil War.⁵² Collins also worked at the Soviet Office at the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the US Department of State.

Soviet-PLO relations

Two books and some book chapters and research articles have been written on Soviet-PLO relations.⁵³ Golan issued the first book in 1980, *The Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization*.⁵⁴ It covers in detail the Soviet policy towards the PLO from its creation in 1964 when Moscow ignored the organization, to supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state in the late 1970s. The Lebanese crisis is treated in a separate chapter. Golan wrote another book, *The Soviet Union and National Liberation Movements* in 1988 including the policy toward the PLO.⁵⁵ Roland Dannreuther's *The Soviet Union and the PLO* from 1998 is the most recent book on Soviet-PLO connections. It deals with the relations from the formation of the latter party in 1964, to the collapse of the former in 1991, and includes a chapter on the Civil War in Lebanon. Dannreuther stresses the ideological part of Soviet policy, however Golan comments in a book-review that this ideology is overemphasized.⁵⁶

A majority of the literature has been written to analyze Russian policy towards the Middle-Eastern actors, not the other way around. One notable exception is a Rashid Khalidi's article, «Arab Views of the Soviet Role in the Middle East».⁵⁷ Most of the books about Soviet-Syria and Soviet-PLO relations have been written by American or Israeli researchers. Because of Israel's security situation they had a strong interest in understanding the cooperation between its enemies. The overwhelming majority of literature was published during the Cold War or in the two or three years after it ended.

⁵² Collins, James F. «The Soviet Union». In *Lebanon in Crisis* eds. P. Edward Hale and Lewis W. Snider, 209-23. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1979. Collins, based in Beirut, was a Middle East correspondent from 1965 to 1978.

⁵³ Articles: Golan, «The Soviet Union and the Israeli Action in Lebanon». Golan, «The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon». Book chapter: Gurevitz, Baruch. «The Soviet Union and the Palestinian Organizations» in *The Limits to Power: Soviet Policy in the Middle East* edited by Ro'i, Yaacov. Pp. 254-81. 1979.

⁵⁴ Golan, Galia. *The Soviet Union and the PLO: An uneasy alliance*. 1980.

⁵⁵ Dannreuther, Roland. *The Soviet Union and the PLO*. 1998.

⁵⁶ Golan, Galia. «Book-review: Reviewed Work: *The Soviet Union and the PLO* by Roland Dannreuther». *Slavic Review* Vol. 58, No. 2, (1999): 491-492.

⁵⁷ Khalidi, Rashid. «Arab Views».

The Lebanese Civil war

There is an extensive literature on the civil war in Lebanon and the Syrian involvement. Some relevant works are: Adeed Dawisha's 1980 book and Naomi Weinberger 1986 book about the Syrian intervention in Lebanon;⁵⁸ Patrick Seale's 1988 Assad biography,⁵⁹ and Hanna Batatu's 1999 sociological study about Syria.⁶⁰

Writers and media

Most of the writers were employed by Western institutions, and the majority of the newspaper articles are from Western media. Several of the main researchers were Israeli or employed at Israeli academic institutions. As the Cold War lasted until 1991, and the conflict between Syria and Israel has continued until today, the presentation will be affected by this both through the sources accessible to the writers and views belonging to one part of the conflict. Also later Western researchers may be naturally affected in their view of the former enemy, the Soviet Union. Syria continues to be seen as an opponent of the West. The effects are not necessarily conscious, but a writer's identification with a particular political view affects how events and actors are seen. It is necessary to take into account how this may have influenced the texts.

The Cold War bias described above also applies to the Russian sources, just in the opposite way. In addition, in Russia, the media has been less than free, and open debate about foreign policy issues has been limited. Therefore, when reading Russian literature, it is necessary to take into consideration the censorship they endured.

Theory: What kind of patron-client relations did Moscow and Syria have?

In political science, relations between states with unequal strength can be characterized in several ways: Patron-client; «the tail wags the dog» or empire-satellite. Most writers have characterized the USSR and Syria as having a patron-client relationship without defining or

⁵⁸ Dawisha was born in Iraq and is Professor in political science at Miami University. Dawisha, Adeed. *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis*. Weinberger, Naomi Joy. *Syrian Intervention in Lebanon*.

⁵⁹ Patrick Seale was a British correspondent who knew Hafez al-Assad personally. His biography includes a chapter on the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-76. Seale, Patrick. *Asad - The struggle for the Middle East*.

⁶⁰ Hanna Batatu was a well-known Palestinian Marxist and specialist in Iraqi history. Her book has a chapter about Assad's relations with the PLO. Batatu, Hanna. *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics*.

analysing it further.⁶¹ One exception was Karsh who stated that it «falls neither into the category of ‘patron-client relations’, nor into ‘the tail wags the dog’ paradigm. He saw the relation as «a mutually, beneficial strategic interdependence between two allies».⁶² This thesis will look into what kind of patron-client relations Moscow and Damascus had during 1976-77.

The Cold War was characterized by a bipolar balance of power directly between the USSR and the US.⁶³ As each superpower feared for its own security, the relation became a zero-sum game where one superpowers’ gain was seen as a loss for the other. Even small shifts were not tolerated as they could cause a «domino» effect. The growing stockpiles of nuclear arms made the potential consequences devastating. When one power acted in a way that the other perceived as a threat to its vital interests, a crisis arose and the latter tried to maintain the status quo. Thus, crisis management became important in a complicated situation where the US and the USSR were rivalling for power, and at the same time cooperating to avoid a nuclear war. In crisis management, the focus was on tactics like taking initiative, demonstrating resolve and prudence, maintaining freedom of choice, communicating effectively and different forms of coercive bargaining.

A bipolycentric crisis occurred when conflicts between regional states threatened to draw the superpowers themselves into direct conflict. So, even when small states decided to go to war with their neighbours, for example the 1973 Israel-Arab Yom Kippur War, it could lead to a superpower confrontation. Managing a bipolycentric crisis was more difficult than a bipolar emergency, as they involved regional states with regional interests. These interests were of vital importance to the regional states, but could be marginal to the superpowers. As the regional states had their own relations to regional states and the other superpower, the number of relationships increased. This made the crisis more complex and dangerous. The decisive factor was the influence the patron had over the client. In spite of being a much

⁶¹ By «patron» Ramet meant: «any power which undertakes to provide long-term and reliable support and protection to a lesser power in the hope of realizing some advantages or benefits. The most important thing that a patron-state can offer a client-state is protection from regional or other threats. By the term «client», I mean any power which contracts a patron to provide certain services it cannot provide for itself (better protection, more sophisticated arms, subsidies for economic development, professional training of certain kids), offering trade, intelligence, and limited foreign policy cooperation in return. A client is, by definition, an independent actor – as opposed to a satellite. Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship*, 1-3.

⁶² Karsh claimed that the patron-client view Ramet presented was close to the the empire-satellite view which the well-known Middle-East and Syria researcher Daniel Pipes had. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 96. Karsh, *Soviet policy towards Syria*, 7 and 33.

⁶³ Shoemaker and Spanier, *Patron-Client State Relationships Multilateral Crises in the Nuclear Age*, 1-9.

weaker state, the client could try to manipulate the patron, complicate the crisis management, and create a superpower confrontation.

In the Cold War, smaller states could have a value for each superpower because of their resources or strategic geographic location and the ability to confer an advantage in the competition with the other superpower.⁶⁴ The client state on the other hand gained greater influence by cooperating with the patron. The patron-client relationship is distinguished by: a sizable difference in military capability; the client plays an important role in the patron's competition; there is an apparent association between patron and client. Both parties try to enhance their own security and the military dimension with arms supplies security guarantees are the most important factor in the relationship. Arms transfers are potentially powerful tools of influence as training is needed to operate the weapons, and maintenance and spare parts are required to make them work over time. The relationship is not static, but fluctuates and becomes sharply defined during a crisis making it more complex to analyse.

The patron's goals and the client's threat level

How much control the patron has depends on the goals sought and the client's ability to fulfil them. The states' goals are the starting point in the analysis. The patron wants to have some kind of control over the client, who is supposed to relinquish some of its autonomy. On the other hand, the Third World client is sensitive to «neo-colonial» control and tries to uphold its independence. The way it guards its autonomy may at times seem irrational. The conflicting goals makes the relationship unstable, however both states maintain the relationship as other objectives transcend the antagonism between them.

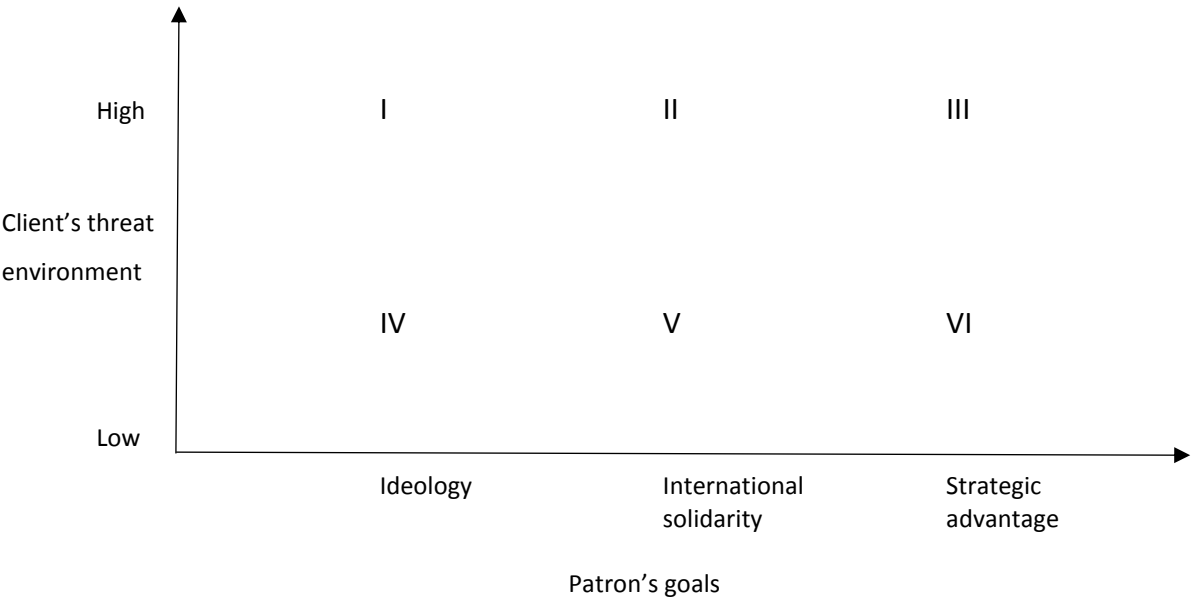
The types of goals may be: 1. Ideological to show the superiority of the patron's system; 2. international solidarity like voting at the UN, signing agreements, making visits between states of head and supporting international initiatives, the purpose is to give the impression that the client is part of its bloc and not the opposite, the patron will achieve more obvious and tangible benefits than in a relationship based on ideological goals; finally 3. Strategic advantage by controlling a piece of the client's terrain, bases or another vital resource to gain a military edge over the opponent. When the patron possess goals of strategic

⁶⁴ Shoemaker and Spanier, *Patron-Client State Relationships*, 12-24.

advantage it will go far to preserve the relationship. It may even imply intervention though it is costly and difficult to project and maintain a force. As coercing is difficult, cajoling tactics may be the only available option for the patron. To achieve these goals, the patron may be willing to pay a steep price, and these relationships were a great danger to the stability of the international system.

The client usually has very different goals, primarily because its military power is much smaller. As Third World states often exist in a very hostile environment, the patron can be a source for national survival. The threat level will shape the relationship. If the level is low, economic development, regional leadership and international prestige may be important in the relationship and the client may shop around with different patrons. If the threat level is high, the client is more willing to submit to the patron’s demands.

Figure 1: A Patron-client typology⁶⁵



The relation can be understood as a bargaining relationship where each state tries to achieve as many concessions as possible from the other. The key prizes are influence and control over resources. The more control the client has over the patron’s military and political resources, the greater risk for conflict on a global scale. When the patron sees strategic value in the relationship, he will give up most of the control. The client has most

⁶⁵ Shoemaker and Spanier, *Patron-Client State Relationships*, 23-24.

control when its environment of threat is modest or low. In consequence, the patron-client relations need to be examined by the underlying goals and threats. By combining the criteria, a typology with six different types of relationship can be established.

In the first three types, the client is in a high-threat environment. As the client is insecure, it is highly dependent on the patron and is desperate for the patron to provide security, often of a military nature. The client is willing to concede extensive commitments to achieve security. In contrast, in the last three types, the client is less willing to accommodate.

Patron-client typology⁶⁶

Type I: Patron centric. In this kind of relationship, the client conforms with the patron's ideology. The patron controls the relationship and get huge ideological concessions.

Type II: Patron prevalence. The patron demands that the client closely follows the patron's international position. Type II is more valuable to the patron than type I, as it gives the patron advantages over its opponents.

Type III: Influence parity. The patron's goals are directly related to the competition with other patrons and it will go to great lengths, and incur great expense to maintain the relation. As both states press for advantages, rapid change marks the relationship. It gives the patron little room to disengage, and is the most dangerous type for global stability.

Type IV: Patron and client indifference. It is not much valued by either state, and none of them will be very receptive to the other's demands.

Type V: Client prevalence. These relations are more important to the patron who is willing to invest more than in type IV. The client, who is not so interested, makes steeper demands, and increases its influence in comparison to the previous relationships.

Type VI: Client centric. The patron gains a significant and measurable strategic advantage over its opposing patron through its ties with the client, who it values highly. The client does not face a major threat, and can negotiate from a position of strength. The client's position improves further when it appears to be available to other patrons who are interested in bidding. Of all the types, this gives the client maximum influence over the patron and greatest access to its military and political resources. A conflict of this type is the most

⁶⁶ Shoemaker and Spanier, *Patron-Client State Relationships*, 26-44.

dangerous type for the international community as it is at great risk of escalating into a larger conflict, potentially involving the superpowers directly.

Shoemaker and Spanier argued that the field of patron-client relations was underdeveloped and needed more study. This thesis aims to place where the Soviet-Syrian relation was in this typology.

Outline of this thesis

Chapter 2 will present a historical background with the parties' long-term foreign policy strategies, key events and developments of their own history and relationships.

There were basically three ways the USSR could influence Syria. A. Directly argue with and pressure Damascus to change policy, B. Directly support the PLO-LNM; or C. Pressure, invite or accept third parties to do the same. The means that Moscow had at its disposal were of diplomatic/political, military or economic nature. Consequently, this thesis is divided into these three forms of action. Chapter 3 focuses on the Soviet diplomatic and political policy towards Syria during the intervention in Lebanon. It has a chronological presentation including development of the fighting on the ground in Lebanon.

Chapter 4 centres on military relations and is organized thematically in three themes: The Soviet military relations with Syria; the Soviet navy's central role in the crisis; and finally the Soviet, Egyptian, Libyan and Iraqi involvement supporting the PLO-LNM. Soviet-Syrian economic and cultural relations comes next in chapter 5. In Chapters 3-5, I first present an overview of the research literature. Then, I analyze the events, and using the source material found, compare it with the literature and conclude on each topic.

Finally, Chapter 6 sums up this thesis's findings, compares them with the patron-client theory and concludes.

Chapter 2 Historical background

Bilad al-Shaam, or Greater Syria as it is known in the West, is centrally placed in the Levant.⁶⁷ The region has few natural borders, is vulnerable to invasion from all directions and difficult to control from its centre.⁶⁸ The Ottoman Empire conquered Greater Syria in 1516 and divided it into *Vilayets* or provinces, each ruled by a governor reporting to the Sultan in Istanbul. During periods, today's Lebanon and Palestine were under Damascus' authority, while the northern areas were under the Aleppo province.⁶⁹ The population was predominantly Arabic and Sunni Muslim, and the Ottomans based their rule on notables, wealthy Sunni Muslim families over the next four centuries.⁷⁰ However, many minority groups, Christians, Druze and Shia Muslims lived in the region, including in the area of today's Lebanon.⁷¹

Russian, British and French Imperial interests

Russian interests

Russia's relations with the Middle East date back to the tenth century when the Byzantines baptized Vladimir, Grand Duke of Kiev.⁷² After the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453, the Russian Church became the principal seat of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Moscow declared itself the third Rome, assuming the functions of Constantinople.⁷³ However, Russia was at the time too weak to fulfil its pretensions as heir of the Byzantines. From the 1550s onwards, the Grand Duchy of Moscow expanded in all directions. The Russians fought the Turks in thirteen wars during 1766 to 1914, and gained a number of concessions from Istanbul.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ The region includes today's Syria, Turkey's Hatay province, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine.

⁶⁸ Bilad al-Shaam means the land to the left, because an Arab standing in Arabia facing north has Shaam to the left. In the West it has been called Greater Syria. McHugo, *Syria*, 35.

⁶⁹ The borders of the *Vilayets* and the subdivision *Sanjak*, were reorganized over time.

⁷⁰ Damascus was the capital of the vast Umayyad caliphate (661-750) and the Sultan ruled over areas from today's Morocco to India. The Byzantine Empire was also known as Eastern Roman empire Based in the cities, but having vast landholdings in the countryside, the notables were intermediaries between the Ottomans and the people McHugo, *Syria*, 44. Notables were state administrators, landowners and religious leaders, but seldom military officers.

⁷¹ The Christians were both Catholic and Orthodox. The Catholics came to be known as Maronites.

⁷² Dannreuther, *The Soviet Union and the PLO*, 8.

⁷³ The Byzantine Empire is also known as the Eastern Roman Empire and Constantinople was considered to be the second Rome.

⁷⁴ Vego, «Soviet and Russian Strategy in the Mediterranean since 1945», 164-65.

The Russian interests were both strategic and religio-ideological. The basic strategic objective was to secure the southern borders against any hostile foreign power. It was ever since in Russian interest to keep stable and friendly relations with the nations on the borders, and that sometimes meant to extend the influence and expand.⁷⁵ The Turkish Straits are the entrance and exit route for commercial and naval ships in the Black Sea. As Russia has no warm-water ports, the access to the Mediterranean has been especially important and Moscow wanted to secure access through, and possibly gain control over the Straits.

Additionally, Moscow wanted to protect the large numbers of Orthodox Christians and Russian pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land.⁷⁶ The Ottoman Empire recognised Russia as protector of the Greek Orthodox Church.⁷⁷ Moscow supported the Arab Orthodox' quest for independence from the Greek-dominated religious hierarchy. This underpinned the first Arab nationalist initiatives and freedom from Ottoman control. In 1915 during World War I, Russia gained the right to the left bank of the straits in a secret accord, the Constantinople agreement signed with Britain and France.⁷⁸

The French and British take control over the region

Imperial France and the UK also had interests in the region and became more influential during the 19th century. France had cultural and economic relations with the coastal Syria and Lebanon and wanted to control the area.⁷⁹ London's top priority was to maintain a safe route to India through the Suez Canal, and keep any competing power including Russia out of the way. During a Civil War in Mount Lebanon in 1860, Druze forces massacred Christians. After strong French and British protests, the Ottoman Sultan created an autonomous administrative unit, a *Mutasarrifate*, called Mount Lebanon under a Christian leader.

The UK and France fought the Ottoman Empire during World War I. To stimulate an Arab rebellion against the Ottomans, London promised the ruler of the Hejaz region in the

⁷⁵ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 8-9.

⁷⁶ France became protector of the Catholic Churches. Ziadeh, *Syria and Lebanon*, 36.

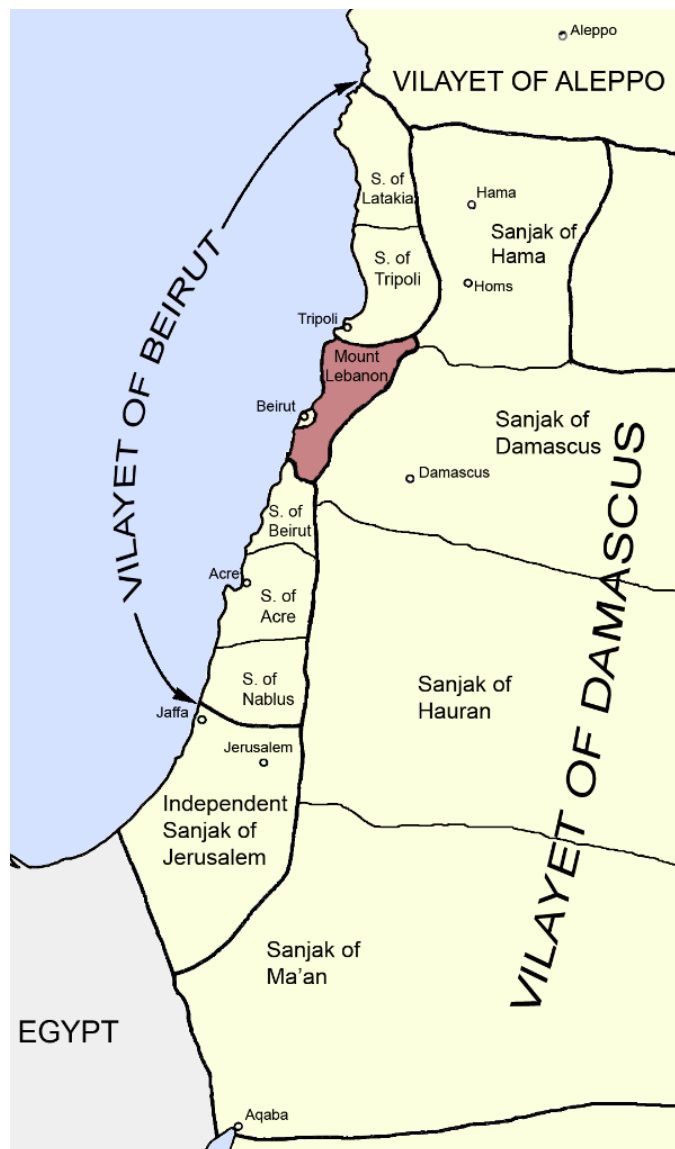
⁷⁷ Russia set up a consulate to Syria and Palestine in Beirut in 1839 and the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society did charitable work and ran over 77 schools with 9.000 pupils by 1905. Vego, «Soviet and Russian Strategy in the Mediterranean since 1945», 164-65.

⁷⁸ The parties also made a vague compromise over the Palestinian Holy Places. Dannreuther, *The Soviet Union and the PLO*, 10-11. See original British archives.

⁷⁹ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 367.

Arabian Peninsula, Sharif Hussein bin Ali Arab to rule over an Arab kingdom if he would rise up against the Turks. The borders of this new kingdom were not clearly defined and have later been heavily disputed. The Sharif started a rebellion in 1916 and his eldest son, Feisal led an Arab military force against the Ottomans.

At the same time, the UK and France secretly signed the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 dividing the Ottoman provinces into spheres of influence between themselves. And thirdly, the British government promised to work for a Jewish homeland in the Balfour-declaration in November 1917. The British army conquered most of the Ottoman Arab provinces, nevertheless an Arab army led by Feisal reached Damascus first.⁸⁰



Map: Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate.⁸¹

The Syrian National Congress proclaimed Faisal King of Greater Syria in March 1920.⁸² However, the League of Nations interfered and gave today's Lebanon and Syria as a Mandate to France, and Palestine as a mandate to Britain.⁸³ The Mandatory powers were obliged to prepare the mandates for independence, and had no rights to change the borders. Damascus under King Faisal opposed rule from Paris, but a token force was easily defeated by a French invading army in 1920. France split the mandate into semi-

⁸⁰ The Ottoman Arab provinces at the start of World War I consisted of today's Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Hejaz (the Red sea coast of Saudi Arabia) and Northern Yemen.

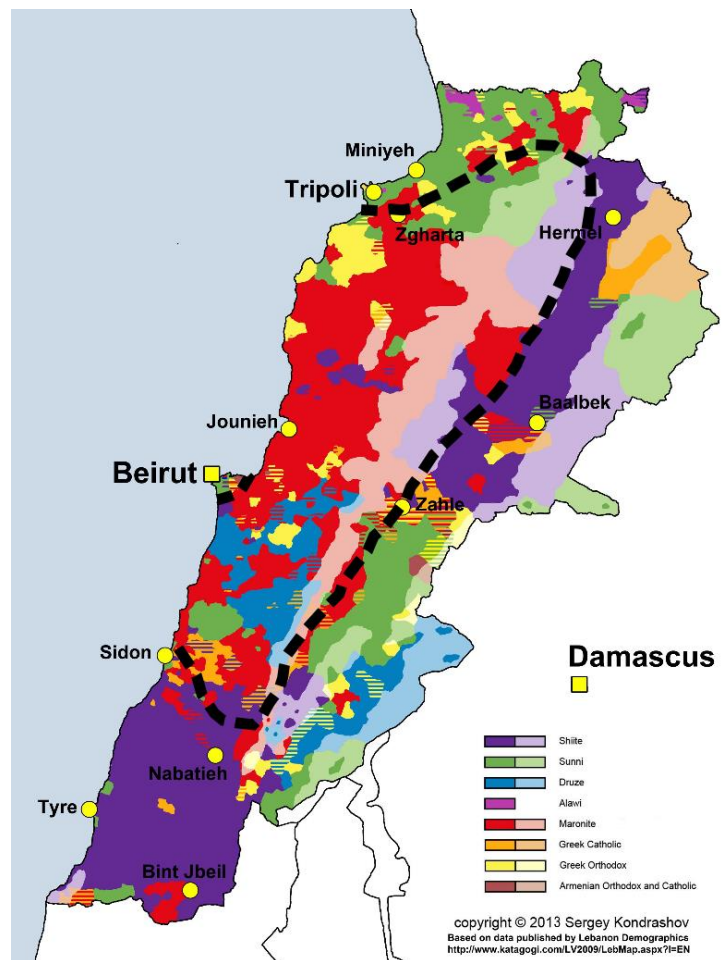
⁸¹ Wikipedia, «Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate».

⁸² The Greater Syria encompassed today's Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine. McHugo, *Syria*, 65.

⁸³ The borders between the French and British mandates were renegotiated to accommodate British demands for oil in the Mosul province.

autonomous dependent «states» under their own control.⁸⁴ Lebanon was constructed by adding Muslim areas to the Christian-dominated Mount Lebanon province. The French encouraged religious minorities to join the *Troupes Speciales*, which became the core of the Syrian army. With the army as a power base the Alawite minority, to which the Al-Assad family belongs, later took over the country.

Further south, in Palestine the majority population was Muslim, while a small Jewish had existed there for centuries. Zionism started as nationalist ideology and movement in Europe in the 1880s with the aim of creating a country for the Jews. Waves of Jewish immigrants came to Palestine over the next decades. The Muslim population of Palestine opposed the increasing immigration and settlement, but to little avail. After the Nazi's Holocaust, tens of thousands of Jewish survivors streamed to Palestine on a wave of sympathy from the Allies.



Map: Territory of the Mutassarifate over a map of the current demographics of Lebanon.⁸⁵

The Soviet Union in the Middle East

Soviet support of communist parties

The 1917 October Revolution in Russia was welcomed by many people in the Middle East who saw it as a possibility to fulfil their national aspirations to rid themselves of Western

⁸⁴ McHugo, *Syria*, 75.

⁸⁵ Wikipedia, «Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate».

domination. After the revolution, the Bolsheviks government focused on winning the civil war and secure the Soviet state. The Bolshevik government condemned the Western dishonest diplomacy and denounced the Sykes-Picot agreement and other Imperial Russian agreements.⁸⁶ The Bolshevik's ideology was atheistic and they refrained from any interest in the Holy Land and the former Ottoman Empire.⁸⁷

Still, the leader of the October Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, appealed to the Arabs in December 1917 saying, «The Arabs, as well as all Muslims, had the right to be masters of their countries, and to decide their own destinies as they wished».⁸⁸ The USSR refused to acknowledge the mandate system and concluded Friendship and brotherhood treaties with the Northern Tier countries, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. When the Communist International, Comintern, called on the Muslim peoples to attend a congress in Baku in 1921 it stated:⁸⁹

«...Peasants of Syria and Arabia! The English and French have promised you independence but now their troops have occupied your country, imposing upon you their own laws; and you, after liberating yourselves from the Turkish Sultan and Government, have become the slaves of Paris and London governments, the only difference from the Sultan being that they will keep a stronger hold on you and will plunder you more effectively».

Communist parties were established in Palestine in 1923, and Syria-Lebanon in 1924 and were recognized by the Comintern.⁹⁰ Still, in 1928, industrialization in the Arab world was low and the proletariat constituted a small group. Labour movements were nascent, met strong opposition from the mandate powers and the ideological message of the communists was too narrow to attract the peasant masses, still they endured the 1930s and 1940s.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World*, 8.

⁸⁷ McHugo, *Syria*, 40.

⁸⁸ Ismael, *The Communist Movement*, 8.

⁸⁹ Ismael, *The Communist Movement*, 9. Comintern is the abbreviation for the Communist International, also known as the Third International (1919–1943) an international communist organization that advocated world communism.

⁹⁰ The Palestinian party was recognized in 1924 and the Syro-Lebanese in 1928 respectively. Other parties were founded in Maghrib (1919), Egypt (1921) and Iraq (1934).

⁹¹ According to Professor of Political Science Tareq Ismael, two major features of the parties stand out. They adhered to a Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideological doctrine, largely due to Comintern's influence, and failed to formulate their own social analysis of the Arab world. Secondly, their organization was superior compared to other Arab political parties and this enabled them to produce high quality clandestine publications, and they survived government repression. Ismael, *The Communist Movement*, 1 and 16.

The start of the Cold War

After World War II Stalin became more active in the Middle East. In 1946, the USSR claimed that France and the UK did not have any justification to keep their troops in Syria and Lebanon.⁹² The mandate powers pulled out and Syria and Lebanon became independent republics in 1946. The year after Moscow voted for the UN Partition Plan of Palestine. Stalin was still caught in a traditional anti-British strategy, and probably voted for the creation of Israel to weaken the UK and hoped to win a new client for the USSR. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War resulted in the creation of Israel and the exodus of approximately 750,000 Palestinians to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The Soviet policy quickly reversed, and became pro-Arab and anti-Israeli, which it stayed for 40 years.

As the grip of the old colonial powers, the UK and France, rapidly decreased in the Middle East, the two superpowers tried to win their own allies, and the region became a central arena in the Cold War, which became a framework for international politics from the late 1940s. After Stalin's death in 1953, the new First Secretary of the USSR Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev changed the policy of Socialism in one country, chose to support Arab-nationalist regimes, and managed to establish good relations with the authorities in Damascus and Cairo.

The newly founded Syrian republic was badly prepared for governing and democracy and quickly became embroiled in regional and Cold War struggles. Small but ideologically radical Ba'ath, pan-Arab and communist parties competed for power in Syria in the 1950s.⁹³ Egypt, Iraq and other Arab countries rivalled to become the regional hegemon and interfered in Syria to promote their own interests. Democratic channels for expression of political debate did not develop; on the contrary, military officers took power in frequent coups.

The Soviet-Egyptian relation blossoms

In 1952, a revolution in Egypt brought the anti-British Free Officers to power.⁹⁴ However, it was not until after Stalin's death in 1953 that the USSR became interested in the *bourgeoisie*

⁹² Ziadeh, *Syria and Lebanon*, 91-92.

⁹³ Ba'athism is a nationalist, socialist ideology working for Arab unity. Michel Aflaq (Christian), the thinker behind Ba'athism, and Salah al-Din Bitar (Sunni Muslim) founded a movement in 1940. Ba'ath means rebirth, and Aflaq intended to renew Arabness and abolish the artificial borders foreigners had imposed on the Arabs. McHugo, *Syria*, 28 and 118-21.

⁹⁴ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 44-46.

nationalist Arab regimes who sought non-alignment in the Cold War. The new Soviet leader Khrushchev started a new policy of «peaceful coexistence» with the West. While the US was not interested in the Arabs demand in the Arab-Israeli conflict, it was crucial to the Arabs. The Russians tried to win over the Arabs by taking a clear pro-Arab position in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Gamal Abdel Nasser emerged as the strong leader of Egypt and in 1955, he signed a US\$250 million Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal which was seen as a dramatic entry of the USSR in the region. The Soviet Union had no history of colonialism and its anti-imperialist policy suited the anti-colonial position of the nationalist Arab regimes. After the US refused to finance the construction of the huge Aswan dam, Moscow offered loans and this sealed the friendship.

Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and Israel invaded Egypt in collusion with the UK and France. Initially the USSR did not want to take a military risk and only offered political support by referring the crisis to the UN Security Council.⁹⁵ After the US reacted strongly against the UK-France scheming, a Soviet ultimatum was presented. This demonstrated that the objective of avoiding a confrontation with the US was more important than improving the Soviet position with the Arabs.

The Soviet-Syrian cooperation starts

It was actually Damascus, not Cairo that broke the Western monopoly of arms sales to the Middle East when the Syrian army purchased tanks from Czechoslovakia in 1954.⁹⁶ As a part of the US strategy of contain the USSR and encircle it by a chain of allies, the Baghdad Pact was created in 1955. Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan became members, and both Syria and Lebanon were invited to take part. Egypt under the pan-Arab President Nasser refused to become a member. In February 1955, a crisis over the Baghdad Pact arose as Turkey and Iraq massed troops on the Syrian border.⁹⁷ The USSR publicly took Syria under its protection and declared that Western interests were in conflict with those of the Middle Eastern states.⁹⁸ The Syrian government thanked the USSR and the two parties moved closer.

⁹⁵ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 49.

⁹⁶ The tanks were former German Mark IV-tanks. Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 234.

⁹⁷ Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 234.

⁹⁸ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955*, 15-16.

In 1958, the Syrian Ba'ath Party were increasingly rivalling with the Communist Party, and the former were afraid the latter would take power.⁹⁹ The Ba'ath leaders contacted Nasser who was pan-Arabist and ruthlessly anti-communist. Nasser agreed to become the leader of a union between the two countries, the United Arab Republic (UAR). The Russians were disappointed about the UAR, but publicly applauded it. All Syrian political parties, including the Communist Party were prohibited. To Moscow's relief a revolution in Bagdad in 1958 ousted the Western-friendly government in Iraq and a regime friendly to the USSR took over.

In Syria there were misgivings with Nasser's rule and after a military coup in 1961 the new regime ended the UAR.¹⁰⁰ The Russians maintained relations but were not involved in the domestic upheavals. Two years later, in 1963 the Ba'ath Party took power in Damascus. Ideologically it was nationalist, socialist and basically anti-communist. Nevertheless, the Ba'athists were clearly anti-Western and they sought improved relations with the USSR. The left wing of the Ba'ath party made a coup in 1966 and received Soviet economic, political and military support.

The importance of the Mediterranean to the USSR

Soviet influence in the Middle East increased and the region's importance grew for Moscow during the 1960s.¹⁰¹ In 1964, Khrushchev was removed, and Brezhnev came to power, nevertheless Moscow's position in the region was clearly stronger than it had been ten years earlier. The Bagdad Pact was all but destroyed after Iraq withdrew from it, the USSR maintained diplomatic relations with almost all Arab states and Western influence had diminished. The USSR gave economic and military aid to several countries, in spite of this, in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Algeria, communist parties remained illegal and many communists were jailed.

Meanwhile in the Mediterranean the US 6th fleet deployed submarines armed with Polaris missiles that could hit targets in the USSR. The USSR responded by establishing a Mediterranean squadron, the Fifth Eskadra to cope with this threat in 1964. The expanded

⁹⁹ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955*, 24-26.

¹⁰⁰ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 142-44.

¹⁰¹ Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East*, 22-24.

fleet needed access to naval bases, and increased Soviet arms supplies to Egypt was rewarded when Nasser granted the USSR access to Egyptian ports and airfields in 1966.¹⁰²

The 1967 Six Day War

In June 1967 Israel made a pre-emptive attack on Egypt and Syria.¹⁰³ The USSR severed its diplomatic relations with Israel and threatened to take military actions, but showed no willingness to risk a confrontation with the US, and the Soviet armed Arab states were defeated. Israel occupied the Syrian Golan Heights, the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In addition to a Soviet lack of support to its clients during the war, the quality of the Soviet arms and training was questioned. At the same time, the US's position declined in the radical Arab states and Moscow mounted an immediate and massive resupply of Syria and Egypt and redoubled its efforts to oust Western influence.¹⁰⁴

The USSR sought a political solution to the Arab states' conflict with Israel and urged them to recognize Israel in exchange for return of the territories lost in 1967.¹⁰⁵ However, the 1967 Arab summit in Khartoum responded with no peace, no recognition and no negotiations with Israel. Moscow ignored this and tried to coordinate and unite the Arab states in a political solution. The USSR worked out the UN Security Council Resolution 242 (UNSCR 242) in November 1967. UNSCR 242 included an Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the recent conflict and recognition of Israel as a state. UNSCR 242 was accepted by Egypt, Jordan and Israel, but not by Syria or the PLO.

The Arabs sought to reclaim the lost territory and Egypt launched a War of Attrition in 1969.¹⁰⁶ In 1970, Nasser and the Kremlin agreed that the USSR would assume responsibility for Egypt's air defense, and 15,000-20,000 Soviet military advisers were sent to Egypt. Sadat asked the USSR for offensive weapons, however, the Kremlin which was in a process of

¹⁰² Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 56.

¹⁰³ In the May 1967, the USSR falsely informed Egypt that Israel was concentrating forces on the border and planned to attack Syria. There had been some religious demonstrations and popular unrest in Syria in April 1967. Golan speculates that the Soviet motive may have been to strengthen the Syrian regime's domestic position by presenting Israel as a threat. Nasser sent his Chief of Staff to Syria to investigate the claim and learned that the report was made up. Golan thinks Nasser interpreted the report to mean that the USSR encouraged an Egyptian attack on Israel. He sent Egyptian forces to the Sinai Peninsula on 14 May, requested a withdrawal of the UN observation force (UNEP) on 16 May and closed the Straits of Tiran on 22 May shutting off Israel's access to the Red Sea. Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 58-68.

¹⁰⁴ Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East*, 25-26.

¹⁰⁵ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 69-70.

¹⁰⁶ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 73-81.

reaching a *détente*, an easing in relations, with the US, refused. He gave the Kremlin an ultimatum, either they supported him, or he would seek American mediation in the conflict with Israel. The Russians responded by signing a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Egypt in May 1971. Sadat said the USSR continued to refuse to deliver missiles and aircraft, and in 1972, he expelled around 20,000 Soviet military advisers.

The creation of the PLO and the Soviet relation to it

The Palestinian question was a dominant feature of Middle Eastern politics for decades and most Arab governments played the Palestinian card to promote their own interests.

However, after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the USSR looked upon the Palestinian issue as a refugee problem.¹⁰⁷ Syria on the other hand had fought in 1948 on the Arab/Palestinian side. From 1964, Damascus worked closely with the largest Palestinian guerrilla organization Fatah, and its leader Yasser Arafat.¹⁰⁸ Among the Fatah founders, there were many Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers.¹⁰⁹

In 1964 the Arab League and Egyptian president Gamal Nasser took the initiative to create the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). As its armed wing, the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) was established with units formed in some Arab countries.¹¹⁰ The Syrians formed the Hittin Brigade as part of the PLA, recruiting Palestinians living in Syria. In addition, the regime in Damascus created as-Sai'qa as the Palestinian wing of the Syrian Ba'ath Party in 1966.¹¹¹ By the end of 1968 as-Sai'qa was a well-equipped force with over 5,000 men.¹¹² The Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) was created by the Arab League summit in 1964 as the military unit of the PLO.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Golan, *Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization: An uneasy alliance*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Batatu, «An in-depth study of Asad's relations with Fath and the PLO from 1966 to 1997 and the light it sheds on his aims and techniques», 287.

¹⁰⁹ Sayigh, *Armed struggle and the search for state*, 80.

¹¹⁰ Brand, «Palestinians in Syria: The politics of integration», 624.

¹¹¹ As-Saiqa recruited basically from Palestinian refugee camps. It followed the February Coup left-wing coup and the new regime called for a «people's war» to liberate Palestine. The regime wanted to control the as-Sai'qa to avoid Israeli retaliations, and it was trained by Syrian army officers and included many Syrians. Brand, «Palestinians in Syria: The politics of integration», 626.

¹¹² After Assad's took power in 1970, he reorganized al-Sai'qa, which more clearly appeared as a Syrian instrument. As-Saiqa's top leadership was replaced and Zuheir Mohsen, an experienced Palestinian Ba'athist was given the command. Syria limited as-Saiqa's operations to restrict its independence. Brand, «Asad's Syria and the PLO: Coincidence or Conflict of Interests?», 26.

¹¹³ Sayigh, *Armed struggle and the search for state*, 102.

The Soviet Union didn't react to the founding of the PLO and condemned most of its armed actions.¹¹⁴ In 1968, Moscow changed policy when Fatah leader Arafat was secretly invited to Moscow as part of Nasser's delegation. Fatah joined the PLO in 1969 and Arafat became PLO Chairman with Egyptian support. The PLO was an umbrella organization, consisting of several groups with different ideologies, from centre-right to Marxist. The PLO had bases in Lebanon from where it attacked Israel. The Lebanese government wanted to limit the Palestinian activities and in 1969 signed an agreement with the PLO, the Cairo Agreement, which regulated Palestinian activities in Lebanon.

The PLO had a very strong position in Jordan, but this was to change. The PLO attacked Israel from Jordanian bases but King Hussein also felt his own position threatened. In September 1970, a Civil War erupted between the Jordanian army and the PLO.¹¹⁵ The Syrian army intervened in support of the PLO, but the minister of Defence Hafez al-Asad, refused to send in the air force. Israel and possibly the US threatened to intervene, and the USSR pressured Syria to withdraw. Nasser mediated in the conflict, but in the middle of the negotiations, he died and Anwar Sadat became Egyptian President. The PLO was defeated and several thousand soldiers moved to Lebanon. Relations between the King Hussein and Arafat were strained over the next years.

In Syria another Ba'ath party crisis erupted after the Jordanian Civil War.¹¹⁶ The Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad ousted the pro-Soviet leader Salah Jadid in November 1970 in an intra-party coup. Before taking power, Assad was regarded as a jealous guardian of Syrian independence and an anti-Communist.¹¹⁷ In spite of this, Assad stayed close to Moscow though he refused to enter a Friendship and Cooperation agreement with the USSR. However, Syrian relations with Jordanian improved and by the mid-1970s, Hussein cooperated closely with Assad.

¹¹⁴ Golan, *The Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization: An uneasy alliance*, 5 and 8.

¹¹⁵ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 73-81.

¹¹⁶ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 145.

¹¹⁷ Assad was responsible for certain anti-communist measures in 1969-70. Assad sent his chief of staff Mustafa Tlas to China in 1969, and this was seen as an anti-Soviet move.

Soviet high point and expulsion from Egypt

The high-point of Soviet influence in the Middle East was regarded as the time before Nasser's death in 1970.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, Moscow paid a price in increased economic and military aid. There was also a higher risk of war with the US at a time when the Sino-Soviet struggle intensified.¹¹⁹ Egypt had been regarded as the strongest military Arab power and was a Soviet client in the 1960s. In July 1972, Sadat expelled the Soviet advisors in Egypt.¹²⁰ The shocked Russians increased their support of Syria, Iraq and the PLO to reduce the political losses and main its influence in the region.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War

In 1973 Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in the Yom Kippur War, and after initial successes their armies recovered some respect after the colossal defeat in the June 1967 War. In December 1973, the USSR and the US co-chaired a one-day peace conference in Geneva. The Russians considered this as very important as they were given equal status as the US in the negotiations. It became a primary Soviet goal to reconvene the Geneva conference and bring the Syrians and the PLO there to strengthen Moscow's position. However, to Soviet disappointment US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger took centre stage in 1974-75 with a very active shuttle diplomacy between Cairo, Tel Aviv and Damascus. President Sadat considered the US to be the only power to have influence over the Israelis. He ended the close relations with the USSR, and made a disengagement agreements, Sinai I, on Israeli withdrawals from parts of the Sinai.¹²¹

The Soviet Middle East strategy

The Kremlin developed one overall policy to overcome all the problems, to encourage Arab unity on an «anti-imperialist» basis.¹²² The USSR would cement together the Arab states communist parties and organizations like the PLO in a united front against Israel and its Western supporters. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, it seemed to succeed as nearly all Arab states backed Egypt and Syria against Israel and the USSR resupplied them with

¹¹⁸ Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East*, 25-26.

¹¹⁹ After Stalin's death in 1953, the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties interpreted Marxism-Leninism differently. This led to the Sino-Soviet split and rivalry.

¹²⁰ Golan, *Soviet policies in the Middle East*, 78-80.

¹²¹ During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula and isolated the 3rd Egyptian army there.

¹²² Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 61-62.

weapons and supported them politically. The Arab states imposed an oil embargo against the US and which caused a sharp price increase on oil and economic problems.

The US Foreign Secretary Henry Kissinger rebuilt the US position in the region by a very active diplomacy. Kissinger succeeded in negotiating disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Syria in 1974. The Russians were excluded from this process and opposed further disengagement, however in August 1975 Egypt and Israel agreed to a second accord, the Sinai II agreement. Egypt, that had once been the closest Soviet ally, moved over to the US side and formed a conservative axis with Saudi Arabia. They attempted to attract neutral and pro-Soviet Arab states. The Kremlin tried to stop other states from defecting to the Saudi-Egyptian camp and reconstruct the Arab unity front, which had fallen apart. Syria, which was building closer economic ties with the West, became the primary Soviet concern. However, the Soviet client state Iraq, which the Russians tried to include in the anti-imperialist front, was an enemy of Syria. Libya was moving closer to Moscow, but had strained relations with Syria, and was almost breaking relations with Egypt.

The Lebanese Civil War

In Lebanon tensions between different political and ethnoreligious groups built up during the early 1970s and these exploded in a Civil War in 1975. The PLO sided with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) against Lebanon's leading political force, the Christian Maronites, a Catholic group supported by France and the West.¹²³ The LNM was a leftist coalition including the Lebanese Communist Party. The movement, led by Kamal Jumblatt, a Druze, called for political reforms. Two of the PLO groups, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), were Marxist. They had for years showed a pro-Maoist tendency, inclined towards the Chinese Communist Party, a rival of the Soviet Communist Party.¹²⁴ The DFLP and PFLP had come

¹²³ The Maronites gained political dominance by the so-called National Pact of 1943. The Pact was an oral agreement negotiated between the leaders of the largest religious groups. It was a compromise giving Lebanon an Arabic, not Western character, but independence from Syria and other Arab countries. It gave the presidents of the Maronites, the Sunni prime minister and the Shiites the president of the National Assembly. The Christians also received the majority of seats in the National Assembly at a rate of 6: 5 compared to Muslims. The agreement was based of the 1932 census, which is the last one that has been completed. Hirst, *Beware of small states*, 11-12.

¹²⁴ Cobban, Helena. *The Palestinian Liberation Organization*, 155. Bröning, Michael. *Political Parties in Palestine: Leadership and Thought*, 174. Cubert, Harold. *The PFLP's Changing Role in the Middle East*, 155.

closer to the USSR by the time of the Lebanese Civil War, but were not strong enough to challenge Fatah.

The Egyptian-Israeli agreement of September 1975 and increased fighting in Lebanon led to increased Syrian insecurity.¹²⁵ Assad sent in two battalions, one of the PLA and one of as-Sai'qa in late September to stop hostilities in Tripoli. The Lebanese government asked for the withdrawal of the forces and Assad complied. Later Christian forces launched an offensive and Syria feared a division of Lebanon was possible. On 19 January 1976 Syria sent the Yarmouq Brigade of the PLA into Lebanon. The USSR showed little interest in Lebanon until the Civil War.¹²⁶ Even then, Soviet media coverage was meagre. The Soviet Union agreed to the Syrian intervention because Moscow wanted to prevent the Christians from defeating the LNM-PLO.



Map: Some of the events in the 1960s and 70s involving Syria and Lebanon¹²⁷.

The first Syrian intervention in Lebanon

In January 1976 made its first intervention in Lebanon.¹²⁸ Until then Syria had given both political and military support to PLO-LNM. The LNM wanted a much greater portion of power in Lebanon while the PLO sought to use the country as a base for attacking Israel. The PLO and LNM joined to confront the Lebanese Christians who wanted to maintain the status

¹²⁵ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 28.

¹²⁶ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 110.

¹²⁷ PBS, «Future for Lebanon». 19 July 2005.

¹²⁸ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 63.

quo and expel the PLO. After the Lebanese Civil War intensified in the summer of 1975, the USSR showed its preference for the PLO-LNM hoping it could shift Lebanon from the pro-Western to the pro-Soviet camp. This consisted of Syria, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen, Algeria and the PLO. The PLO was one of the Soviet main allies and Jumblatt had won the Lenin prize. Jumblatt was interior minister and legalized the Lebanese Communist Party in 1970.

Syria on the other hand was the USSR's main ally and appeared to be the Palestinians leading champion.¹²⁹ One of the strong groups within the PLO was al-Sai'qa, which Syria dominated, nevertheless, as-Sai'qa was not allowed to attack Israel. Several brigades of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), under control of a Syrian officer Masbah al-Budeiry, were also stationed in Syria. On 20 January 1976 Syria sent several PLA battalions into Lebanon to stop fighting. This led to the signing of an agreement with a more equal power sharing between Christians and Muslims.¹³⁰ Moscow hailed the Syrian moves who claimed that Israel and the imperialists wanted the Civil War in Lebanon to strike at the PLO and set up a separate Christian state which together with Israel would fight the Arab peoples. During the 25th Communist Party Congress on 24 February, Brezhnev said in a keynote address that the USSR acted in concert with Syria on many international problems, above all those of the Middle East.

Three weeks later Sadat abrogated the Soviet-Egyptian Friendship treaty signed in 1971.¹³¹ Meanwhile in Lebanon, the LNM was not satisfied with the agreement and the PLO concerned with Syrian control over the Palestinians. Muslim members of the Lebanese Army defected and a rebel Muslim «Lebanese Arab Army» was created. The regular army started to disintegrate and the commander of the Beirut garrison made a coup demanding the resignation of the President Suleiman Frangieh and Prime Minister Rashid Karami. Two-thirds of the Lebanese Parliament made a petition calling for Frangieh's resignation.

¹²⁹ In March 1975, Syria offered the PLO a «joint command», a move which Moscow hailed. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 63. After the Sinai II agreement was signed Assad said «Syria will never accept American efforts to mediate similar disengagement accord in the Golan Heights because such an accord will mainly be designed to separate Syria from the Palestinian question» in October 1975. The Kremlin responded by promising new shipments of weapons to Syria.

¹³⁰ The number of seats in the Parliament, which had been split according to a 6:5 ratio between Christians and Muslims, was now 5:5. And the Parliament would elect the Sunni Prime minister instead of

¹³¹ Sadat stated that the USSR withheld equipment and refused India to supply Egypt with jet engine spare parts. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 66.

Syria, using as-Sai'qa troops stopped an intent by the rebel army to capture the president. Jumblatt stated there would be no ceasefire until Frangieh resigned and major political changes took place. The Muslim forces continued its offensive in the mountains and took over the Beirut-Damascus highway.¹³² It seemed like partition of Lebanon was a real possibility with a Christian mini-state in the north and a leftist state in the south. Possibly the PLO-LNM could take over the whole country. Such a state would likely have close connections with Iraq and Libya and would permit PLO attacks against Israel. Tel Aviv might invade Lebanon to stop this and Syrian was not ready for a war against Israel. Assad cut the military supplies to the Palestinians and blocked Lebanese ports at the end of March and pressured the PLO to stop aiding the LNM.¹³³ Assad sent troops across the border a week later and supported a truce that had been agreed upon recently.

For the Russians the Lebanese events threatened to split its two main Arab allies, Syria and the PLO, and between the Kremlin's friend Jumblatt and Syria. Making the situation worse the US became more involved in Lebanon. Washington sent a special envoy, Dean Brown to Lebanon to mediate the conflict, and the US Sixth Fleet was stationed off the coast in case of an evacuation of US citizens.¹³⁴ As the US and Syria had coinciding interests in restricting the PLO-LNM, the Kremlin must have been fearing they were coordinating activities. Kissinger called the Syrian intervention «constructive» on 14 April, and the US helped to prevent Israel from reacting militarily against Syria.

Still, the fighting continued in the middle of presidential elections. Then Moscow presented a peace plan for the Middle East on 29 April, using the Civil War in Lebanon as a reason, in spite of this fighting increased.¹³⁵ Elias Sarkis won the 8 May elections, which Arafat supported and Jumblatt boycotted, splitting the PLO-LNM.¹³⁶ Jumblatt's relations with Assad worsened, while Arafat continued to meet the Syrian president. To counter the Syrian

¹³² Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 68.

¹³³ The PLO had been supporting the LNM with weapons.

¹³⁴ Dean Brown's activities indicated further tacit Syro-American cooperation. Brown left after the elections of Sarkis on 8 May.

¹³⁵ The three key factors of the Soviet plan was: 1. Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territories occupied in 1967; 2. Recognition of the Palestinians' national demands and the right to a state; 3. International guarantees for all Middle Eastern states right to exist and develop.

¹³⁶ The increased fighting led to postponement of the elections were for a week. It was the members of Parliament who elected the Lebanese president. Arafat's Fatah forces protected a convoy of MPs travelling to Parliament where the elections were held. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 71.

pressure Arafat approached Sadat, and then he praised Moscow to balance his move towards Cairo.

For the USSR more trouble was coming as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait tried to mediate the Syria-Egyptian conflict by inviting Assad and Sadat to meet in Riyadh in May. After the increase in oil prices, Riyadh possessed a huge new oil wealth, was clearly an ally of the US and was Moscow's regional nemesis. Afraid the Saudis might pull Syria over to their side, Moscow criticized the Saudi mediation, and to the Kremlin's relief the meeting was cancelled.

Meanwhile in Lebanon the relations between the PLO and Syria were deteriorating.¹³⁷ Another intent of mediation was made by the Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Jalloud who followed Arafat to meet Assad in Damascus. Soon a statement said that Libya, Iraq and Algeria had formed an alliance with the PLO-LNM.¹³⁸ Fighting in Lebanon increased and France offered to send troops. It was at this point that the Kremlin decided to send Kosygin to Bagdad and Damascus, probably to reconcile Iraq and Syria and reunite Syria with the PLO-LNM. On 26 May, Dean Brown said that the US «made a mistake» by discouraging Syria from sending forces to Lebanon in April. Two days later Assad agreed to renew, without any conditions, the UN observers on the Golan Heights.¹³⁹ On 29 May, a Syrian controlled newspaper wrote that Syria would join the rejectionist front with Libya, Iraq, Algeria and other states against Israel.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Syria controlled PLA-forces fought Iraqi leftist forces in the northern town of Tripoli on 14 May. Arafat ordered the PLA to withdraw, openly challenging the Syrian authority. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 72.

¹³⁸ The statement was made after Jalloud expressed support of the PLO-LNM and left Beirut.

¹³⁹ Markham, «SYRIANS CONSENT TO U.N. EXTENSION OF BUFFER FORCE», 28 May. Six months earlier Assad linked the half-year extension of the mandate to a full-scale debate at the UN Security Council about the Middle East, with participation of the PLO. Markham, «Waldheim Sees Assad in Syria On Issue of Golan Peace Force» 27 May.

¹⁴⁰ Arafat was turned back at the Syrian border and told he had to give notice in advance before entering Syria. Arafat returned to Beirut, flew to Cairo and conferred with Egyptian officials «to keep the line open with Egypt in case of further difficulties with the Syrians». Then he went on to Libya. Tanner, «Syria Turns Back Arafat At Border With Lebanon». 29 May.

Chapter 3 The USSR from confused to critical to resigned

On 1 June, Syria invaded Lebanon and the Kremlin was challenged as two clients fought each other. This chapter reviews some of the Soviet and Syrian main statements, negotiations, assessments of and messages to each other. The fighting on the ground in Lebanon is laid out chronologically as a background for the discussion.

The period viewed in the research literature

The Soviet view of Cold War competition in the Middle East

One of the questions discussed in the research literature has been what the overall Soviet policy goals and results in the Middle East were. According to Robert Freedman, there were three Western schools of thought about this.¹⁴¹ The first view sees Moscow as being «offensive-successful» as the USSR aimed at and succeeded in ousting the West from the region. The second school he calls «defensive-unsuccessful», as it viewed the Kremlin on the defensive and not able to cope with the problems. The final group, to which Freedman belongs, viewed the USSR as «offensive-unsuccessful», as it used every opportunity to oust the West, but failed in doing so.

James Collins argues that the Soviet influence in the Middle East and especially in Syria and Egypt had declined since the early 1970s. Still, the USSR had impressive advantages and attempted to win back what had been lost.¹⁴² To Moscow, the Lebanese Civil War was a problem as it damaged the Soviet position in the whole Fertile Crescent and weakened the hope to maintain the Arab regimes favorable to the USSR united. Ilana Kass sees Moscow's and Damascus' goals converging on establishing a Syria-sponsored northern Arab front; isolate Egypt and tame the PLO to make it more amenable to the USSR's line.¹⁴³

Did the USSR have prior knowledge about the Syrian invasion?

Another question has been whether the USSR knew about and approved the Syrian invasion in Lebanon in advance. The majority of writers see the invasion as a Syrian decision and that Kosygin was met with a *fait accompli*. Freedman says that Assad, unfortunately for the

¹⁴¹ Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East*, 1-2.

¹⁴² Collins, «The Soviet Union», 209.

¹⁴³ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 172.

Russians, ordered the invasion when Kosygin was in flight to Damascus.¹⁴⁴ Ramet and Collins see the invasion as highly embarrassing for Moscow.¹⁴⁵ In addition, Collins thinks Assad timed the invasion with Kosygin's visit. Golan concludes that the Syrians timed the invasion to prevent any Soviet interference.¹⁴⁶

In contrast, Efraim Karsh, as one of only two authors of books on Soviet-Syria relations, in his 1988 book, claims it was unthinkable that the USSR did not know about the invasion.¹⁴⁷ Karsh argues that Assad held several consultations with external actors in May 1976, including at least one meeting with the Soviet ambassador to Damascus. According to Karsh, the USSR supported the Syrian intervention by doubling the presence of surface combatant ships in the Mediterranean between 28 May and 4 June.¹⁴⁸ He argues it was meant to warn the US about interference in Lebanon. In 2015, Karsh writes that the invasion of Lebanon was against Soviet wishes, but Assad «had no reason to anticipate a Soviet-Syrian rift».¹⁴⁹

Of all the researchers, Ilana Kass gives the most extensive discussion to the question of Soviet involvement of the invasion. Kass titles her chapter about the invasion «From neutrality to collusion» and calls the relation a Soviet-Syrian collusion and Soviet support of Syria's anti-Palestinian policy.¹⁵⁰ She asserts that although it was «virtually impossible to determine whether and to what extent Moscow was a party to Assad's decision to invade Lebanon, one might safely assume that the decision itself did not take the Kremlin by surprise».¹⁵¹ Kass argues that the Soviet ambassadors to Damascus and Beirut had been actively involved in the crisis and that USSR had an extensive presence in Syria and to a lesser degree in Lebanon. She finds no explanation for the doubling of Soviet naval combat ships in the Mediterranean, and speculates that it was at least meant to back the Syrian

¹⁴⁴ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 74.

¹⁴⁵ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955 – A troubled alliance*, 110. Collins, «The Soviet Union», 219.

¹⁴⁶ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 151.

¹⁴⁷ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 32.

¹⁴⁸ Karsh refers to an International Herald Tribune article dated 5 May 1976. The right dating is probably 5 June as the article refers to events taking place at the beginning of June. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 33. Earlier Karsh had argued that Assad presented Kosygin with a *fait accompli*. «President Asad, however, did not appear overly bothered by Soviet reservations regarding his Lebanese policy, and when Premier Kosygin arrived in Damascus on June 1, Asad presented him with a *fait accompli*». Karsh, «Influence Through Arms Supplies: The Soviet Experience in the Middle East », 51. 1986.

¹⁴⁹ Karsh, *The tail wags the dog*, 4 and 90.

¹⁵⁰ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 166, 181-82.

¹⁵¹ As the only writer, Kass gives 31 May as the day of invasion instead of 1 June. According to Kass, a Syrian armored regiment with 2,000 troops and 60 tanks entered Lebanon on 31 May. She further reflects Karsh's argument about Syrian vacillation during the intervention and cites a US Defense Department spokesman's statement about the number of Soviet ships. As Karsh, she refers to a 5 May article in *The International Herald Tribune*. She also refers to Belgrade Domestic Service. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 171-73.

forces entering Lebanon psychologically. Kass goes further and interprets the formidable task force as a signal to the West to stay away and ensure Syria's freedom of action.¹⁵²

The first Soviet reactions

There are also differing views about the Soviet reactions after the invasion occurred. Freedman and Karsh interpret the joint communique issued at the end of Kosygin's Damascus visit as a tacit Soviet support of the Syrians.¹⁵³ Ramet investigated articles in nine Soviet newspapers in the week following the invasion, and finds divergent opinions.¹⁵⁴ Kass thinks the USSR supported the invasion.¹⁵⁵

On 9 June, the Soviet news agency TASS made a statement calling for an end to the bloodshed in Lebanon.¹⁵⁶ The research literature has described this as the turning point in Soviet reactions, but the explanations for the change vary. Ramet concludes that by the 9 June the Kremlin had reached a consensus to oppose the invasion.¹⁵⁷ Freedman sees it both as a reaction to the Syrians directly fighting the PLO-LNM after 7 June, and as a warning to the Western powers to not intervene.¹⁵⁸ Karsh and Kass on the other hand think the Russians changed opinion as a result of disappointment with the Syrian intervention which seemed to be indecisive and worsened the situation in Lebanon.¹⁵⁹

On 11 June, the Soviet Union announced the opening of a PLO office in Moscow. The decision to establish a PLO office had been declared in 1974. Golan sees the opening as a clear compensatory gesture to King Hussein who visited Moscow in June.¹⁶⁰ In contrast, Collins considers the opening a symbolic gesture to the Palestinians.¹⁶¹

¹⁵² She also argues that it was only another step in a long process of military involvement in Lebanon. The USSR and Syria had she writes, since Assad's visit to Moscow in October 1975, a coordinated strategy based on convergent goals. The common goals were to: Establish a Syrian-sponsored northeastern Arab front; isolate Egypt and counterbalance the pro-American Riyadh-Cairo axis; tame the PLO and make it more amenable to the idea of a Middle East settlement.

¹⁵³ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 75. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 32.

¹⁵⁴ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship*, 111.

¹⁵⁵ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 172.

¹⁵⁶ Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 272.

¹⁵⁷ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship*, 111.

¹⁵⁸ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 76.

¹⁵⁹ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 34. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 172-73.

¹⁶⁰ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 112. The USSR had agreed to open a PLO office in Moscow in August 1974. CIA, «USSR AGREES TO OPENING OF PLO MISSION IN MOSCOW», 1.

¹⁶¹ Collins, «The Soviet Union», 220, 307.

The July talks fails, and the USSR increases the pressure on Syria

The Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam went to Moscow on 5-8 July and held talks with Soviet leaders about Lebanon. The literature agrees that the meeting was a failure, but few details were given.¹⁶² There is disagreement about the goals of, and who took the initiative to the meeting. Freedman writes that Khaddam was invited to Moscow to show the PLO that the Kremlin made some activity.¹⁶³ Collins agrees that Khaddam was invited, but to set forth the Soviet views and clarify Syria's intentions.¹⁶⁴ Karsh claims Khaddam was summoned.¹⁶⁵

The day after Khaddam left, on 9 July, the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) made a declaration on Lebanon.¹⁶⁶ The AAPSO was a communist front organization aiming to increase Soviet influence in the Third World.¹⁶⁷ The declaration was published in *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party. Freedman considers the criticism as relatively mild, and not strong enough to satisfy the PLO.¹⁶⁸ Kass thought the Kremlin was caught between Assad and Arafat and had yet not taken a final stance.¹⁶⁹ Karsh and Collins do not mention AAPSO's statement. The latter regards the Soviet policy as monotonous for the rest of the summer, almost completely reactive and resigned to the sidelines.¹⁷⁰

On 20 July the French newspaper *Le Monde* published an alleged letter from Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to Assad, dated 11 July. In the letter, the USSR asked Syria to pull out of Lebanon. Freedman is uncertain about the authenticity of the letter, but notes that increased, though limited, Soviet criticism of Syria followed.¹⁷¹ Kass calls the letter an attempt to pressure both Syria and the PLO as a desperate effort to get out of a very difficult

¹⁶² One of the reasons for describing it as a fiasco, was the lack of a joint communique at the end of the talks.

¹⁶³ The purpose was to keep Soviet credibility among the Palestinian. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 75.

¹⁶⁴ Collins, «The Soviet Union», 220.

¹⁶⁵ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 35.

¹⁶⁶ Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 288.

¹⁶⁷ The organization was founded at the first Afro-Asian people's solidarity conference in Cairo, 26 December 1957 to Jan. 1, 1958 as the Solidarity Council of the Afro-Asian Countries. It was reorganized as the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) in April 1960. The AAPSO's aim was to unite, coordinate, and strengthen the liberation struggle of the Asian and African peoples against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, Zionism, and fascism and to ensure their economic, social, and cultural development. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia. «Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO)». When it was created it was jointly controlled by the USSR, the Peoples' Republic of China and Egypt. After the Sino-Soviet split, China withdrew in 1967 and since then the USSR dominated the organization. WikiLeaks, «COMMITTEE OF AFRO-ASIAN SOLIDARITY», 1. 20 February 1979.

¹⁶⁸ The main blame was put on the «imperialists». Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 80.

¹⁶⁹ Kass refers to Soviet media, which continued to debate the Syrian intervention. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 175.

¹⁷⁰ Collins, «The Soviet Union», 220.

¹⁷¹ The criticism was expressed through articles in *Pravda*. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 81.

situation.¹⁷² According to Karsh, Assad was offended by what he perceived as unjust criticism, but ignored it and intensified the Lebanese military campaign.¹⁷³

The Syria-Palestinian agreement

On the ground in Lebanon, fighting continued through June and July. Syria and the PLO negotiated, and signed a ceasefire agreement on 29 July. Freedman comments the Soviet positive response to both the reconciliation process and the agreement.¹⁷⁴ Collins sees Moscow routinely welcoming the agreement, and notes it was the only sign of hope that summer.¹⁷⁵ He is the only writer who refers to reports that the USSR had been involved in the talks. Kass thinks the agreement confirmed Syria's predominant role in Lebanon.¹⁷⁶ She further saw a vested Soviet interest in a Syria-Palestinian rapprochement to avoid choosing between the two.

In Beirut, the Christians renewed attacks on Tel al-Zaatar, a large Palestinian refugee camp, and after a six months siege, the camp fell on 12 August.¹⁷⁷ Hundreds of Palestinians and Lebanese were massacred. Kass notes that two days after the fall of Tel al-Zaatar a *Pravda* commentary called for a «healthy compromise».¹⁷⁸ Freedman says PLO leader Salah Khalaf complained about the Soviet request for the PLO to make an agreement with Syria.¹⁷⁹ From Moscow, the Soviet Afro-Asian solidarity Committee came out with another statement, appealing for a Syrian withdrawal and restoring Arab anti-imperialist unity.

The Kremlin becomes more critical of the PLO-LNM

On 8 September, *Pravda* printed an *Observer* article.¹⁸⁰ Kass sees this as the Communist Party censuring «certain leftist elements within the Palestinian movement and the National Patriotic Forces for their intransigence and outright rejection of all peace proposals».¹⁸¹ Kass thought that Moscow slowly concluded that imposing a *Pax Syriana*, although the PLO would

¹⁷² Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 175.

¹⁷³ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 36.

¹⁷⁴ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 82.

¹⁷⁵ Collins, «The Soviet Union», 220.

¹⁷⁶ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 177-78.

¹⁷⁷ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 83.

¹⁷⁸ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 178-79.

¹⁷⁹ Salah Khalaf's *nome de guerre* was «Abu Iyad». In spite of not challenging Syria or Israel militarily, Soviet media increased its support for the PLO. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 83.

¹⁸⁰ Articles signed «Observer» were seen as expressing Soviet official policy.

¹⁸¹ The article was published on 8 September 1976. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 178-79.

have to give huge concessions, was the only way to save the PLO from being destroyed. Reconciling the PLO and Syria would secure Soviet regional interests of separating Damascus and Washington and room to refocus on the Geneva peace conference. Freedman primarily regards the article as a continued attack on Syria.¹⁸² He also notes the warning to the «ultra leftist» elements within the PLO-LNM.

Kass writes that the Kremlin took a mediation initiative in mid-September.¹⁸³ Gromyko met the PLO leader Farouk al-Kaddoumi in Moscow.¹⁸⁴ Kass regards this and a series of meetings between Arafat and the Soviet Chargé d'affaires in Beirut, as an attempt to convince the PLO to compromise with Syria. Freedman thinks Kaddoumi went to Moscow to clarify the Soviet policy. As the joint statement had no call for a Syrian withdrawal, he speculates that the Kremlin might have given up the hope. Collins regards that the Soviet propaganda became more pro-Palestinian and critical of Syria.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, it did not take positions on the conditions for a Syria-Palestinian reconciliation or publicize the PLO's demands for Soviet suspension of military and economic aid.

In Lebanon, Sarkis finally replaced Frangieh as president on 23 September. Kass notes that the USSR seemed to succeed as Arafat on 24 September announced a unilateral stop in the fighting and pledged support for Sarkis.¹⁸⁶ The next day Assad held a speech justifying Syria's presence in Lebanon and accusing «certain Palestinian leaders» for falling into a trap set by the imperialist, published in Soviet media. Collins regards the period around Sarkis' inauguration as the USSR's last effort to influence the Lebanese Civil War.¹⁸⁷ Moscow markedly changed its public stance by stipulating acceptance of Syrian forces to stay in Lebanon and for the first time condemned Palestinian extremists and rejectionists.

¹⁸² Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 85

¹⁸³ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 179-80.

¹⁸⁴ Kaddoumi was a member of the PLO Executive Committee. Their final statement did not include any support for the Palestinians.

¹⁸⁵ Soviet media criticized Syria for aiding imperialism and Israel and gave the PLO assurances of support. Collins considers the rhetoric was within measured limits. Collins, «The Soviet Union», 220-21.

¹⁸⁶ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 180.

¹⁸⁷ Collins, «The Soviet Union», 221.

Syrian offensives and a Soviet peace proposal collapses

The Russians were once more overtaken by events when Palestinians took over the Semiramis Hotel in Damascus on 26 September says Freedman.¹⁸⁸ Syria reacted by launching an offensive against the PLO-LNM, demanding unconditional surrender and withdrawal of its forces. The Russians responded with another Afro-Asian solidarity committee statement, the strongest so far. The other authors do not mention the Semiramis attack. Kass sees the Syrian offensive as encouraged by PLO and Soviet acquiescence.¹⁸⁹ Moscow, however, became bewildered by the Syrian onslaught.

Within a few days, the Kremlin launched another Middle East peace initiative on 2 October. Freedman sees it as a reaction to threats to the Soviet policy. The Syrians halted the attack and started to negotiate with the PLO. Soon, new Palestinian attacks against the Syrian embassies in Italy and Pakistan led to a renewed Syrian offensive. The Soviet leaders reacted angrily with an 18 October *Pravda* article requesting a truce. Kass regards that the Syrian offensive destroyed the possibility to gather in Geneva in the October-November time-frame the Kremlin had set.¹⁹⁰ The collapse of the Geneva-talks distorted the image of the USSR as a credible coordinator and a partner of the peace process.

The Arab League agrees to a cease-fire at summits

Meanwhile, as the Soviet mediation completely failed, the Arab league intensified its efforts and paved the way for a Saudi brokered agreement.¹⁹¹ The heads of state of Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait met Arafat and Sarkis in Riyadh on 16 October and worked out an agreement.¹⁹² After fifty-six unsuccessful attempts, this cease-fire was relatively effective. A 30,000 man strong Arab Deterrence Force (ADF) would keep order and security in Lebanon. The Syrian troops constituted the main part of the ADF, which included symbolic units from Saudi Arabia, the two Yemeni states, and the United Arab Emirates were included.¹⁹³ Ten

¹⁸⁸ The Syrians accused the Palestinians of being Fatah members and publicly hanged them. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 86.

¹⁸⁹ Kass writes that the PLO reacted by strengthening its ties with Cairo. These had been improving since June. She says Sadat emerged as a champion of the Palestinian cause in Lebanon and the Kremlin disliked this. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 180.

¹⁹⁰ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 181-85.

¹⁹¹ According to the Algerian President Houari Boumedienne the Riyadh-Cairo-Damascus axis controlled «all decisions concerning Lebanon». Jumblatt left for Paris and in spite of a warm reception President Francois Mitterand told him that France would not help him as long as Syria and the US opposed it. Sadat refused to send troops to the Arab Security Force in Lebanon and advised Jumblatt to reconcile with Assad. Traboulsi, *A history of Modern Lebanon*, 201.

¹⁹² Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 87-88.

¹⁹³ Traboulsi, *A history of Modern Lebanon*, 201.

days later the Cairo summit ratified the Riyadh summit's agreement and secured Syria a free hand in Lebanon. In mid-November the Arab Deterrence Force (ADF) entered West-Beirut.

Total period in the research period

Freedman concludes that the successful Saudi Arabian mediation and Syria-Egyptian reconciliation demonstrated Riyadh's increasing influence in the region and this concerned the Kremlin.¹⁹⁴ He says Moscow was unable to control Syria's military operations in spite of its dependence on the USSR. On the other hand Assad did not follow Sadat into the US camp. The Syrian periodic offensives and halts, suggest that Assad did not want to liquidate the PLO but change its course and this must have been reassuring for Moscow. Nevertheless, the Kremlin had time and again been caught off-guard, and Brezhnev's claim of the two countries working in concert was mocked. He sees the Soviet policy as reactive, unable to shape events according to its own goals.

Syria on the other hand was able to manipulate the USSR to grant it military support by making use of the Soviet-US rivalry. Afraid of losing Syria to the other camp, the Kremlin tolerated the Syrians pressure of the PLO. Moscow neither succeeded in reconciling Iraq and Syria. The USSR's close ties to Libya may have been a problem, as Tripoli tried to mediate between Syria and the PLO at the same time as it supported the PLO-LNM.¹⁹⁵ In sum, the Lebanese Civil War highlighted the limits of Soviet influence in the Middle East as Moscow could not influence Syria to follow Soviet preferred policies.

Kass says the clear Russians collusion with Syria undermined the Soviet position towards the PLO.¹⁹⁶ The Riyadh and Cairo summits gave Assad legitimacy, the war ended and the Kremlin stopped supporting the PLO-LNM from trying to take control in Lebanon. The USSR went back to its original policy that it abandoned in July 1975, trying to unite its allies and work for rapprochement between Syria and the PLO. At the same time, Moscow worked to prevent the PLO from further weakening.

¹⁹⁴ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 90-91.

¹⁹⁵ Libya also supported the abortive coup in Sudan, which drove Khartoum closer to the Saudis and Egyptians.

¹⁹⁶ She sees the angry Soviet responses in October as an «acute sense of betrayal felt toward a needed ally whom Moscow had hitherto supported against all odds». Moscow's anger passed after the Riyadh summit. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 181-85.

Nevertheless, the USSR did not achieve the goal of becoming the dominant or at least equal power to the US in the region. To do this it needed Damascus and Cairo, and tried to mend fences with both after the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The war and Syria's behavior demonstrated the limits of Soviet influence.¹⁹⁷ In a patron-client perspective, the major power's possibility to decide the client's policy is minimal when the latter is under severe threat. On a regional level, the Lebanese Civil War showed the Soviet lack of available options to handle the crisis. Saudi Arabia with its new oil wealth was in ascendancy and became the main promoter of Arab unity. The Palestinian cause lost some of its effectiveness as a tool for Soviet policy.

Collins thinks the Syrian invasion was a setback for Moscow as it failed to end the fighting between its clients, and did not manage to exclude Western and Arab adversaries from playing a role in resolving the conflict.¹⁹⁸ The Riyadh summit enhanced Assad's position in Lebanon, ended Syria's isolation in the Arab world and gave Assad more independence in relation to the USSR. The PLO's military weakening was another reversal and the USSR became more dependent on Syria in Lebanon. The temporary Soviet-Egyptian congruence of interest during 1976 did not result in improved relations. As Libya and Iraq did not accept the Riyadh agreement, the chances for uniting the Arabs in a «progressive» front became smaller.

The Soviet view of competition, globally and in the Middle East

Using Freedman's theory of evaluating the Soviet Middle East strategy in terms of offensive-defensive and successful-unsuccessful, there are clear signs that it was offensive. However, it is not so clear how successful the strategy was. The CIA saw the USSR as having extensive global aims in the mid-1970s.¹⁹⁹ The Kremlin contemplated the world in terms of a struggle between two great systems, in which theirs would be victorious. The USSR sought increasing influence without going to war, and military power was the crucial tool to achieve this. The US analysts differed on how the Russians themselves viewed the power of balance. One group thought Moscow judged the West to be in decline and that the USSR had a realistic

¹⁹⁷ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 185.

¹⁹⁸ Collins, «The Soviet Union», 222-23.

¹⁹⁹ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE - SOVIET STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES», 1-2. 12 January 1977.

ability to win a war. In contrast, another group thought the Kremlin considered the West to be on the rise and had no expectations to win a war with them.

Whatever the case, the *détente*, «peaceful coexistence» agreed upon with the US, was considered to be a framework in which the USSR could nurture favorable changes in the Third World, including the Middle East.²⁰⁰ During a crisis, *détente* facilitated mechanisms to consult with the US and avoid nuclear war. Nonetheless, *détente* did not implicate a renunciation to «progressive forces» including those involved in armed struggle. In the Middle East, this thinking implied that Moscow would try to improve its position with clients including with the PLO, while avoiding risks that could lead to a war with the US. This would necessarily mean to balance policies carefully, and we will look at how difficult that was.

Soviet decision-making

So what do we know about the Kremlin's decision-making? The Soviet leadership saw themselves as disciplined policy-makers, socially coherent and steadfast in dealing with international affairs, according to the CIA. In addition, although the Soviet diplomacy suffered setbacks in the Middle East and elsewhere, it was seen as extremely patient. In relation to the West, the Russians would bargain for a prolonged time, test positions and discover the response to maintain momentum. Only then would they make concessions. Despite disappointments, the Third World was seen as moving from the capitalist to the socialist camp. Nevertheless, after two decades of both successes and failures, the Russians understood that the task was complex. They had a pragmatic world view, and were attentive to exploit situations when the West was vulnerable. This analysis of Soviet policymaking seems to be applicable to the Syrian case. As we will see, the Kremlin seemed to have been patient and stuck to established policies in its dealings with Damascus. As the Syrian regime altered its policy by invading Lebanon, it took the Kremlin quite some time to understand the changing realities on the ground and respond to them with new, customized initiatives.

Little research has been made about the Soviet political elite's international decision-making processes including towards the Middle East.²⁰¹ Alexei Vassiliev, Professor and Director of

²⁰⁰ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE - SOVIET STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES», 1-10. 12 January 1977.

²⁰¹ Vassiliev, Alexei. *Russian policy in the Middle East*, 200. Vassiliev based much of his book on interviews he made with Soviet diplomats and former policymakers.

the Institute for African studies in Moscow, writes about it in a book on Russian Middle East Policy. Real power he says was concentrated at the Politburo, and the number one person was the Communist Party leader.²⁰² Soviet diplomatic reports to the Kremlin usually reflected what the Politburo wanted to hear.²⁰³ There was a desire to see «an imaginary world», and not the imperfect one that existed in reality. The academic institutes had little access to first hand information and tried to theorize from Western sources and Media.²⁰⁴ The only analysis that reached the top was those that caught «the mood» of the officials, others were at best ignored.

Syrian dependence and struggle for independence from the USSR

The USSR and Syria had different views on their relationship. As Soviet-Egyptian relations deteriorated, Moscow considered Syria to be its principal foothold among the Arab confrontation states opposing Israel, according to a 1 June Memorandum.²⁰⁵ Syria was dependent on Soviet supplies of military hardware including during a crisis. Still, the Soviet Union had not managed to turn this into a hold over Syria as it once had toward Egypt.

The Russians were afraid that Syria, in its desire to achieve a settlement with Israel, would deal with the US in the way Sadat had. The Kremlin was also concerned that Saudi Arabian money could lead Syria closer to Egypt and the US.²⁰⁶ Assad's rejection of the Soviet proposal to sign a friendship treaty or to be bound to any country in even symbolic ways was seen as a consequence of the regime's fervent pan-Arab nationalism.²⁰⁷ The Kremlin had earlier in 1976 criticized the Syrian handling of Lebanon and Assad's close dealings with the US about Lebanon. This led Damascus to take a more independent policy and the relations had cooled over the last few months before Prime Minister Kosygin arrived. Seen in the topology of the patron-client theory introduced in chapter 1, the client's, Syria's threat environment was decreasing while its strategic advantage was increasing.

²⁰² According to Vassiliev, ambitions prevailed and a week basis of discussions. Three institutions were involved in the discussions; the KGB, the Ministry of Defense and the Foreign Ministry. In addition, the International Department of the Central Committee participated. Vassiliev, Alexei. *Russian policy in the Middle East*, 203-05.

²⁰³ Hyman, Anthony. Book review of Vassiliev, Alexei. *Russian policy in the Middle East*.

²⁰⁴ Vassiliev, Alexei. *Russian policy in the Middle East*, 210.

²⁰⁵ CIA «Memorandum: Relations between Syria and the USSR», 3. 1 June 1976.

²⁰⁶ An aborted Riyadh conference between Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait had alarmed the Soviet Union.

²⁰⁷ The memorandum noted a low risk for hostilities in the Middle East. The Syrian Armed forces had more than rearmed since the 1973 Yom Kippur War and differences over several issues. The USSR had 2.000-3.000 military advisers and technicians in Syria, and the Syrians were eager to replace them as soon as they could.

The Soviet Union had long championed reconvening the Geneva conference as they had a coequal role with the US in that forum. Syria on the other hand, was not supportive of the Geneva conference. Moscow was also critical of how Syria handled Lebanon by consulting closely with US officials and antagonizing Soviet friends like PLO-LNM and radical Arab states. The Russians had reasons to be worried, as in fact the US main goals towards Syria were to involve Assad in the peace process with Israel, restore peace and security in Lebanon and wean the country away from the USSR.²⁰⁸

The Russians actually had a long list of concerns regarding the Syrian: Crackdown on the Syrian Communist Party; military's frictions with Soviet advisers; opposition to expanded Russian use of its ports; increasing turn to Western technology and goods and finally escalating disagreement with the Soviet client Iraq.²⁰⁹ In spite of this, Moscow put less pressure on Syria than it had on Egypt, continued to supply arms and economic aid in considerable quantities and avoided open criticism of Assad. Premier Kosygin's trip to Iraq and Syria probably aimed at alleviating some of the strains in relations. It was the first visit of a principal Soviet leader since the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Assad's moves were more indirect than overtly confrontational. As Syria was dependent on Soviet support, it seems like he was balancing his policy to create as large room to maneuver as possible. The Syrian president kept his cards close to his chest, and the Russians must have been uncertain about his true motives and plans. Most was probably at stake for the Russians, however Kosygin's visit was important for both Moscow and Damascus.

Did the USSR have prior knowledge about the invasion?

In 1976, there was no friendship agreement regulating the relations between the USSR and Syria, so Assad had no formal obligation to inform or get the Kremlin's green light for the intervention.²¹⁰ In a patron-client relationship, a client state would usually inform its patron

²⁰⁸ The US Embassy in Damascus was closed from 1967. Full diplomatic relations were reestablished when President Nixon visited in 1974. WikiLeaks, «POST INSPECTION MEMORANDUM», 1. 14 September 1978.

²⁰⁹ CIA, «Memorandum: Relations between Syria and the USSR». 1 June.

²¹⁰ The USSR and Syria signed a treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1980, and some of the abovementioned concerns were formalized. Article 6 «In cases of the emergence of situations jeopardizing peace or security of one of the parties or posing a threat to peace or violating peace and security in the whole world, the high contracting parties shall enter without delay into contact with each other with a view to coordinating their positions and to cooperation in order to remove the threat that has arisen and to restore the peace».

about major decisions like going to war, because of the implications it would have for the latter. The patron might feel pressured to support the client politically, militarily or economically; and come under international criticism for its alignment with the client's belligerency. The two countries had been co-operating closely on security, military and economic issues for years and they probably had certain mutual expectations regarding information sharing and behavior on topics with huge implications for the other party.

Assad had recently demonstrated his independence towards the USSR. In 1973 Syria and Egypt planned to invade Israel to win back the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. The USSR on the other hand preferred a political solution to the conflict. Syria and Egypt were dependent on Soviet military resupply and political backing, and Sadat and Assad wanted to keep the Russians from restraining them from attacking. Sadat informed the Soviet Ambassador to Egypt about the decision to start the Yom Kippur War just three days before the invasion took place.²¹¹ Even then, the exact date was not revealed to the Kremlin.

The June 1976 intervention in Lebanon was taking place in a different context. The invasion was much smaller than the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and just one, though important step, in an escalation that had been going on for months. Moreover and maybe more importantly, this time Assad seemed to have an acceptance or even backing from the US. With what seems to be a silent US acceptance, he would have less need for political Soviet assistance and therefore less reason to inform the Kremlin about his plans. As it turned out, no protests came from Washington after the Syrian tanks rolled over the border, and Assad's calculation proved correct.

What about Soviet public declarations and speeches, do they contain any signals that reveal Soviet thinking? One hint may be found in the statement Kosygin made in Baghdad on 31 May.²¹² He claimed there was an imperialist conspiracy, meaning the US and the other Western powers, against Lebanon to «destroy the Palestinian resistance movement and at dealing a blow to the nationalist and progressive forces of Lebanon». This rhetoric had been expressed before; however, during April-May it was a combination of Syria-backed and Christian Lebanese forces that were combatting the PLO-LNM. There were publicly

²¹¹ Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War*, 70.

²¹² Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 261-62.

expressed suspicions about US support of the Syrian actions, and the Russians were worried. Kosygin further said, «Lebanon should be protected against any imperialist intervention in its internal affairs, because such affairs are the exclusive right of the Lebanese people themselves and such a legitimate right should be respected by everybody». This last part openly excluded acceptance of a Syrian invasion or anybody else's intervention in Lebanon.

Before Kosygin left Baghdad, the USSR and Iraq issued a Joint communique on 1 June. The two sides expressed their:

«...deep concern regarding the serious situation in Lebanon and the continuing attempts of imperialism and reaction to interfere in Lebanon's internal affairs for the sake of destroying the unity of the progressive forces and attacking the Palestine resistance movement. Iraq and the Soviet Union shall continue to help stop the bloodshed in Lebanon as soon as possible in order to protect its unity, independence and sovereignty and that forces opposing aggression may come out of the crisis more unified and powerful than before. The two sides assert that a positive settlement of the Lebanese crisis must be accomplished by the Lebanese people themselves».²¹³

In fact, Syria was not mentioned with a word, neither in Kosygin's speech nor in the joint communique. This was hardly a message the USSR would send if they knew about the imminent invasion. If the Russians were aware of and approved of the intervention, they could have chosen other words to argue for the Syrian moves. If they disagreed, they probably would have used stronger words to try to stop the Syrians or distance themselves from the upcoming actions.

Brezhnev later asserted in a letter to Assad that the Syrians seized the opportunity of Kosygin's visit and sent their forces into Lebanon.²¹⁴ According to Brezhnev, the Syrians told Kosygin that they only sent a token force to help maintaining security. Yevgeny Primakov, a Soviet Middle East expert and later Russian Prime Minister who served in the region at the time, claimed that Assad did not give the Russians any warning of the invasion.²¹⁵ According to Primakov, it was Oleg Grinevsky, Deputy Head of the Middle East Department of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs who informed Kosygin about the intervention and the latter reportedly responded:

²¹³ Ibid, 262-63.

²¹⁴ WikiLeaks, «Rose al-Yusuf: Brezhnev's «Secret message to Asad», 1. 27 July.

²¹⁵ Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs. Behind the scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the present*, 181.

«This whole story of sending in the troop puts both the Soviet Union and me personally in a ridiculous position. Whatever I do, things will either be bad, or really bad. If we publically state the whole truth – that our Syrian allies did not consult us – then firstly no one will believe us, and secondly they'll ask: Who's supposed to be the lead partner in this alliance – the Soviet Union or Syria? It would be a case of the tail wagging the dog. That's really bad. It'll be even worse if I come out and condemn their action. That would pour oil on the flames of the Lebanese Civil War and might even provoke the Israelis and Americans to send their own troops in. But no way can we come out in favor of the Syrian incursion. That would only encourage the hotheads to widen the conflict and drag Israel into it. Then what would we do – intervene in their war? The only option is the least bad one – to keep our mouths shut. But then they will say that their action was carried out with our tacit approval, and it was no coincidence that I'd been in Syria these past few days».²¹⁶

The «tail wagging the dog» refers to a situation where a person, organization or country is being controlled by one that is much less important or powerful.²¹⁷ Primakov could have been trying to excuse Kosygin's reactions. However, his reflections on the Kremlin choosing among different responses show vulnerability in a difficult situation. There is little face-saving in his remarks which seem open and credible.

Primakov further claimed the Soviet Ambassador to Damascus, Nuradin Mukhitdinov was very angry.²¹⁸ Mukhitdinov said, «The Syrians realized that Moscow would not support this move – and that could have spoiled the mood of crucial talks between comrades Assad and Kosygin – talks that were of great value to the Syrian government.» Primakov added that Kosygin was sickened by seeing the USSR projected as the «driving force» backing its Middle East allies. In contrast, Primakov claimed that the US was behind the invasion. Assad had discussed the prospects of sending troops with the US Ambassador on 16 October 1975. The ambassador affirmed US support, only objecting to use regular Syrian troops.²¹⁹ Further strengthening the view that the USSR did not know about the Syrian intervention beforehand is *The New York Times* on 2 June 1976, which referred to Soviet diplomats in the region expressing their preference for Syria to restrict its actions to political moves.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Primakov refers to O. A. Grinevsky, *Tainy Sovetskoi Diplomatii*, 139-140. Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs Behind the scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the present*. 181.

²¹⁷ Merriam-Webster, «the tail wagging the dog».

²¹⁸ In addition, Primakov asserted that Jumblatt doubted the USSR backed a Syrian invasion. Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs*, 188.

²¹⁹ Assad supposedly shared this during a meeting with DFLP leader Nayef Hawatmeh. Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs*, 182.

²²⁰ *The New York Times*, «DAMASCUS SENDS TROOPS AND TANKS INTO MID-LEBANON», 1. 2 June 1976.

Then we come to the weightiest argument that has been used in the research literature, the increased Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean. US intelligence confirms that large Soviet surface vessels held exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean in early June 1976 during the Syrian intervention.²²¹ On 15 June, the Mediterranean Fifth Eskadra consisted of 70 ships, 15 more than the level of a normal situation.²²² But it changed its deployment responding to the US Sixth Fleet's moves.²²³ By 24 June, the majority of the Soviet vessels were leaving as they kept monitoring the US navy.²²⁴ The Russian moves were reactive, not proactive.

Furthermore, in a report the US President Ford got from the CIA, the heavy Soviet presence is explained by a series of exercises in the area and an extensive turnover of ships. Vessels that had been patrolling the area were leaving for the USSR and replaced by incoming ships.²²⁵ By 16 July, the number of Soviet vessels were back to a normal level of 50 units. There is no reason to doubt the US intelligence, as the Sixth Fleet was present and the first to observe any Soviet extraordinary moves. This is a strong indication that the Russian presence was a normal navy procedure and not support of the invasion as Karsh and Kass claimed.

In sum, there is no evidence of Soviet prior knowledge about the Syrian intervention. On the contrary, all sources claim the USSR disapproved of the undertaking and the naval operations in the Mediterranean were normal. Aware of the Russians' critical attitude, Assad likely invaded without telling them to avoid any discussion and pressure.

A nationalist democratic Lebanon, a friend of the USSR and a threat to Syria

According to Zafer Khatib, former head of PFLP's media department, the USSR wanted a democratic state to succeed in Lebanon in 1976.²²⁶ The reason was that the Lebanese Communist Party was the strongest party within the LNM, in addition to the Communist

²²¹ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 10 June 1976», 1. 10 June.

²²² CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 15 June 1976», 5. 15 June.

²²³ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 17 June 1976», 2. On 18 June, as the US evacuated all non-official Americans from Lebanon, the Soviet Fifth Eskadra increased its surveillance of the US Sixth Fleet. CIA, «LEBANON EVACUATION SITUATION REPORT». 18 June.

²²⁴ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 19 June 1976», i. 19 June. CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 24 June 1976». 24 June.

²²⁵ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 16 JULY 1976», 6. 16 July.

²²⁶ Interview with Zafer Khatib in Sidon, Lebanon 13 November 2017. Khatib spoke to several of the main protagonists in Lebanon. He writes a Ph.D. about Soviet-Palestinian relations.

Action Organization, not Jumblatt's party.²²⁷ If the LNM had come to power, it would have supported the PLO and the USSR. It would also have served as an example for others in the Middle East to follow. Before the Syrian invasion, the LNM and the PLO controlled over 80% of Lebanon. The only region left under Christian control were Jounieh, East-Beirut and the area east of the capital. Assad did not want the LNM to win, because a social democratic state would have been a threat to his regime. Khatib also says that Fatah had supported the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Syria, which was in opposition to Assad's regime, with weapons up to 1976.²²⁸ In his youth, Arafat had been a member of the MB, but in the early 1970s, he was linked to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. These countries were supporting the MB, maybe as a move against Syria. Whatever the case, Assad wanted to maintain the balance of power between the sects in Lebanon, and reduce the influence of the PLO-LNM.

The Lebanese Christians escalate the war to have a Syrian intervention

So what triggered the Syrians to launch the invasion just when they did? During the last weekend of May 1976, Muslim forces attacked two Christian villages in Northern Lebanon.²²⁹ The Christians reacted with heavy attacks in other parts of the country, including Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut. The US analysts regarded the severe Christian attacks were meant to force the president-elect Sarkis to ask for a Syrian intervention. In spite of the escalating violence, on 30 May Sarkis actually rejected a proposal to have an Arab League conference dealing with the conflict in Lebanon.²³⁰ Sarkis and Syria were unwilling to let other countries play a part in resolving the problems. Later Frangieh said he had «made an important contribution in encouraging Syria to play a role in Lebanon».²³¹ The details in these revelations are also new and show that the Lebanese Christians cooperated with Assad about the invasion.

²²⁷ Kamal Jumblatt's party the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) was officially non-sectarian but had mainly support of the Druze minority.

²²⁸ Fatah was a mix of many ideological tendencies, including Muslim Brotherhood. Khatib said the Russians sent the weapons to the Palestinians to fight against Israel, not to be delivered to the MB.

²²⁹ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 1 June 1976», 1. 1 June.

²³⁰ The Arab League Secretary General Riad made the proposal.

²³¹ Frangieh said this in a meeting with a US delegation. Chamoun was present in the meeting. «MEETING WITH FRANGIEH AND CHAMOUN». 6 September.

From awkwardness to skepticism - Early Soviet reactions to the invasion

The Russians seemed to be puzzled by the Syrian 1 June invasion, and needed over a week to reach a position of skepticism. The invasion took place during the morning when Kosygin travelled from in Baghdad to Damascus.²³² In Damascus, Kosygin gave a speech on 1 June, blaming the imperialist forces as responsible for the situation in Lebanon. Kosygin repeated the Soviet demand for Palestinian participation at the Geneva peace conference to create a lasting peace in the Middle East. Primakov later argued that the Soviet Union gave its support to the Syrian intervention after it took place, because the Kremlin hoped it would stabilize the situation.²³³



Pictures: Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin arrives in Damascus on 1 June 1976, and is met by the Syrian Premier Mahmoud al-Ayyubi.²³⁴

The CIA analysts also concluded that the Soviet Premier was in an «awkward position» in Damascus.²³⁵ They assumed he was under heavy pressure from the Palestinians and leftists to control Assad. They considered Kosygin's speech as light criticism of Syria. At this point, the Syrians were supporting the Christians who seemed to work for partition of Lebanon, and the Syrian escalation could hardly be seen as peaceful. In sum, Kosygin's speech can be seen as a mild expression against Syrian meddling. These findings confirm the view which saw the USSR as being in a difficult position, and contradict Karsh's and Kass' opinion that the USSR supported the invasion.

The Joint Soviet-Syrian communique of 3 June

At the end of Kosygin's visit, a joint USSR-Syria communique was issued on 3 June.²³⁶ It described the meetings were held «in an atmosphere of mutual cordiality and understanding, a wide exchange of opinions concerning Syrian-Soviet relations and major

²³² CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 1 June 1976», 1. 1 June.

²³³ Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs. Behind the scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the present*, 182.

²³⁴ AP, «SYND 2 6 76 SOVIET PRIME MINISTER KOSYGIN VISITS DAMASCUS», still photos from film.

²³⁵ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 3 June 1976», 1. 3 June.

²³⁶ The Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 266.

current international affairs took place». These were code words for differences of opinion on certain subjects.²³⁷ Lebanon was mentioned in two sentences blaming the Imperialist and Zionist schemes and declaring the intention of working to restore peace and security and keep Lebanon as an independent and integrate state. According to *The New York Times*, Western diplomats interpreted this and the continuation of Soviet aid as if Moscow favored the intervention.²³⁸

The Joint communique expressed support of the Geneva conference and the PLO's participation there. Some analysts saw this as a success for Moscow as Damascus had been downgrading the importance of Geneva in the last few months. However, the communiqué did not refer to any Soviet support of the Syrian moves. The statement is probably the minimum position the parties agreed on, and the phrasing and what missing parts tells about disagreement between the parties regarding Lebanon. The Syrian leaders seemed to have miscalculated the Palestinian willingness to oppose the intervention. Still, Syrian troops advanced to Khalde, just south of Beirut and Alayh, east of Beirut.²³⁹

As we have seen, the Kremlin disapproved of the Syrian activities against the PLO-LNM. There is no reason to believe Moscow would agree to an escalation of a campaign they resisted. Kosygin's first public reaction not mentioning the Syrian intervention, resonates with Primakov's arguments and the US analysis, the Russians were caught off-guard and gave the least bad reaction, a muted response. This contrasts Karsh's argument that the Kremlin so far had agreed to the escalating intervention and Assad would not expect Soviet resistance to the 1 June intervention.

A few days after the invasion, a member of the Politburo of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) Karim Mroue visited the Soviet Embassy in Beirut.²⁴⁰ He met a Soviet official, the number two at the embassy, a friend of his, who asked him why the LCP was fighting the Syrians. Mroue in return, asked what the Soviet Union did when Hitler's forces invaded. The Russian did not accept the comparison, but Mroue insisted that the Lebanese had the right

²³⁷ Meetings described in a similar way, «in an atmosphere of sincerity and mutual understanding» «and a frank exchange of opinions» were considered code words for disagreement. Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship*, 39.

²³⁸ *New York Times*, «Kosygin and Syrians Agree on Lebanon». 4 June 1976.

²³⁹ Alayh was the home town of the Leftists' leader Kamal Jumblatt.

²⁴⁰ Interview with Karim Mroue in Beirut, 16 November 2017. Mroue was Deputy General Secretary of the Lebanese Communist Party in the 1980s.

to defend their own country against an invader. The LCP believed that the USSR did not know about the intervention before it took place, but could not understand why the Kremlin supported it. Mroue believes that the USSR was confused at the time. The only Communist parties that opposed the Syrian invasion were the French and Italian. When Mroue was in Paris later in the autumn, the exact date is not known, he asked for a meeting with the Vietnamese Ambassador to discuss the possibility of sending a LCP delegation to Vietnam. Still disturbed about the meeting more than 40 years later, Mroue says he was met by the 3rd secretary who stated: «You are fighting against the Syrians, you have nothing to do in Vietnam. The talk is finished». Which meant, «leave now». Although the dates of these meetings is not clear, they show that the Russians for some time gave the impression to their Lebanese allies that they supported the Syrians.

Increased fighting and emerging Soviet criticism

During the first few days there was no noteworthy resistance from the PLO and the leftists.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, many soldiers of the Syria-controlled Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) defected to PLO's side.²⁴² By 5 June, Syrian troops clashed with the PLA.²⁴³ Damascus withdrew some PLA-units to forestall more desertions, but the PLA soon fell apart.²⁴⁴ The Syrians then sent the entire Third Armored Division and several battalions into Lebanon.

Soon messages of Soviet concern arose. On 8 June the Soviet military attaché in Damascus told his US counterpart that the embassy was «quite confused and unhappy» over the intervention because the intention seemed to be to destroy the Palestinian-leftist coalition. The attaché claimed the Syrians had not informed the USSR, and that Soviet advisors were not with the invading troops. He interpreted the timing of the invasion as meant to embarrass Kosygin and called it dangerous. It seems like the Russians were clearly bewildered and distanced themselves from the whole affair. The day after, on 9 June the Soviet news agency TASS issued the statement referred to above.²⁴⁵ After expressing the need to stop foreign interference, it criticized Syria for increasing the bloodshed. It called for a ceasefire, and the plight and the rights of the Palestinians is stressed. However, as the US

²⁴¹ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 2 June 1976», 1. CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 3 June 1976», 1. 3 June.

²⁴² CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 5 June 1976», 1-2. CIA, «SYRIA'S ALLIES AND ASSETS IN LEBANON», 13. 7 November 1978. Brigades and other military units were later established in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan.

²⁴³ CIA, «TENUOUS PEACE IN LEBANON», 1. 30 January.

²⁴⁴ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 10 June 1976», 3-4. 10 June.

²⁴⁵ The Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 272.

analysts noted, the statement lacked any Soviet indication to pressure Syria.²⁴⁶ It was much weaker than the military attaché's expressions, and apparently tried to find a solution without unsettling the relations with neither Syria nor the PLO.

The opening of a PLO office in Moscow

On 11 June, the Soviet Union declared that a permanent PLO representative had come to Moscow.²⁴⁷ Golan argued that the objective was to forestall Kissinger's efforts to attain a Jordanian-Israeli disengagement agreement on the West Bank. However, the PLO-Jordan relations at the time were still strained after the expulsion of the PLO following the 1970 Black September in addition to disagreeing to the Jordanian claims over the West Bank.²⁴⁸ Furthermore, King Hussein of Jordan supported the Syrian intervention in Lebanon without any reservations.²⁴⁹ Therefore, it seems unlikely that Moscow would do this to please Jordan.

The establishment of this kind of office was not common. The only other national liberation movement which had a Moscow office before 1987, was the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (FNL). This shows that the USSR clearly reserved these representations to important clients. In August 1976, Czechoslovakia let the PLO open an office in Prague.²⁵⁰ The timing of opening of these offices, just after Syria started to fight the PLO, is interesting and hardly a coincidence. Therefore, the opening can be seen as a distinct signal of recognition of the PLO, giving it an increased level of diplomatic legitimacy and support against Syria. Still, it did not really cost the USSR anything, as it did not threaten the relations with Damascus.

Continued fighting in Lebanon and Arab League involvement

Back in Lebanon, Fatah representatives rejected a Syrian ceasefire proposition and demanded an instant Syrian withdrawal on 9 June.²⁵¹ Meanwhile, the Syrian 7th Infantry Division entered Lebanon and moved towards Sidon. The division had been stationed in

²⁴⁶ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 10 June 1976», 3-4. 10 June.

²⁴⁷ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 16 June 1976», 3. 16 June.

²⁴⁸ King Hussein renounced Jordanian claims over the West Bank in 1988. Ashton, *King Hussein of Jordan A Political Life*, 250-52.

²⁴⁹ WikiLeaks, «KING HUSSEIN'S INTERVIEW», 1. 11. July. Hussein negotiated a deal to buy Soviet anti-aircraft surface to air missiles (Sam). Previously a deal had been made with the US on the Hawk system, but Hussein said the US system was too expensive. He felt let down by the US in 1974 after the diplomatic swing away from the West Bank towards the Sinai II agreement. The Arabs became split, and the diplomatic process for an overall settlement was wrecked.

²⁵⁰ CIA, «MORNING SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT REPORTS 26 AUGUST 1976», 2. 26 August.

²⁵¹ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 11 June 1976», i-4. 11 June.

southwestern Syria facing the Israeli army based on the Golan Heights. This demonstrated the importance Damascus put on the Lebanese actions and at the same time its confidence that the Israelis would not strike Syria from the Golan.



Syrian troops in Lebanon on 15 June 1976.²⁵²

The Arab League became an arena for the regional powers' struggle over Lebanon. Arafat called for an Arab League meeting, and the League's foreign ministers met in Cairo on 8 June adopting a resolution for an immediate cease-fire and replacement of the Syrian troops for an Arab security force in Lebanon.²⁵³ However, Assad preempted the Arab League by saying yes to Libyan and Algerian units to deploy in Lebanon.²⁵⁴ Christian leaders hoped Syria would play a dominant role in the peacekeeping operation.²⁵⁵ After some negotiations, an agreement was made to deploy an Arab peacekeeping force consisting of 3,600 men in Lebanon.²⁵⁶ In comparison, the Syrian troops already there numbered 13,000. Kass claims that the replacement of Syrian troops with the Arab Security Force did not revoke the Soviet support of Syria.²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, given the Soviet criticism of the Syrian intervention, it is more likely that Moscow really meant that it welcomed a ceasefire between its two clients.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia kept on trying to reconcile the differences between Damascus and Cairo. A first meeting, between the Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers of Egypt and Syria, was finally organized in Riyadh on 23 June.²⁵⁸

²⁵² AP, «SYND 15 6 76 SYRIAN TROOP ACTIVITY IN LEBANON». 15 June 1976.

²⁵³ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 9 June 1976», 1. 9 June.

²⁵⁴ By 12 June neither Libyan nor Algerian units had yet entered Lebanon.

²⁵⁵ The Arab League force would just observe the ceasefire, keep security and facilitate a Lebanese dialogue led by President elect Sarkis.

²⁵⁶ NYT, «U.S. AMBASSADOR AND AIDE KIDNAPPED AND MURDERED IN BEIRUT COMBAT SECTOR», 1-4. 17 June 1976

²⁵⁷ Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 174.

²⁵⁸ The meeting had been postponed from May. CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 24 June 1976», 2. 24 June.

The July talks fails, and the USSR increase the pressure on Syria

Assad visited France, Romania and Yugoslavia during the second and third week of June and had some success in justifying his policy.²⁵⁹ In Paris, Assad criticized the Soviet Lebanon policy.²⁶⁰ In Bucharest, Assad commented that the Soviet Union was unwilling to discipline the Lebanese leftists.²⁶¹ The Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam went to Moscow on 5 July accompanied by the Soviet ambassador to Damascus.²⁶²

Khaddam's visit took place at Syrian insistence, according to the political counselor at the Egyptian embassy in Moscow.²⁶³ Khaddam asked for accelerated Soviet arms deliveries, however the Kremlin conditioned these on, and put heavy pressure on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. At the same time, Soviet media gave the anniversary of the Iraqi revolution excessive press-coverage.²⁶⁴ This support of Damascus' archrival may well have been done to put additional pressure on Assad. Khaddam said he had met Gromyko several times on his trip to Moscow, but the Russians did not change their perceptions and the trip had been very unproductive.²⁶⁵



Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Gromyko meets Syria's Foreign Minister Khaddam in Moscow at a later visit in 1978.²⁶⁶

²⁵⁹ WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN FONMIN VISIT TO MOSCOW». 6 July.

²⁶⁰ According to the French ambassador in Damascus.

²⁶¹ The source was the Romanian ambassador to Syria. He thought that in Moscow, Khaddam would ask the USSR to do more.

²⁶² WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN FONMIN VISIT TO MOSCOW». 6 July.

²⁶³ The Egyptian political counselor Farouk Shelbaya said this in a 19 July meeting. He thought the US was central to make agreements, however the USSR needed to be included. WikiLeaks, «EGYPTIAN POLITICAL COUNSELOR ON MIDDLE EAST DEVELOPMENTS». 19 July.

²⁶⁴ Russian national TV gave the Iraqi ambassador ten minutes to read a speech celebrating the Iraqi national day. This was highly unusual.

²⁶⁵ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD «a, 1-2. 17 July. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD « b. 18 July. Asad asked King Hussein to convey the message to the highest level of US government, the Shah of Iran and King Khalid of Saudi Arabia.

²⁶⁶ AP, «SYND 30 8 78 SYRIA'S FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM VISITS THE SOVIET UNION». 29 August 1978.

The Egyptian counselor also claimed that Syria, Jordan and the right-wing Lebanese had an unstated plan to weaken the PLO politically and militarily. The purpose was to make them compromise on agreements in Lebanon and the Middle East. Moreover, the counselor said Arab diplomats and Soviet experts in Moscow assumed Assad had gotten a green light from the US before the invasion.²⁶⁷ This is interesting as the Kremlin would be well aware of the allegations of Syria-US cooperation. At best, they would have been suspicious and definitely uncertain about Assad's co-operation with the US. That may well have been a reason for the pressure they exerted on Khaddam.

According to the Syrian Foreign Ministry Director of Western European Affairs, Gromyko told Khaddam that he appreciated the political objectives, but not the military solution.²⁶⁸ Gromyko asked «Quo vadis», where are you going? And to underline his point Gromyko mentioned the metaphor of the problems involved in stopping a cart half way down a steep mountain. The USSR wanted an end to the fighting between the Syrians and PLO and increased pressure on the Lebanese Christians to stop fighting and enter a dialogue. Finally, the Kremlin wanted a Syrian withdrawal, though no details of how the Soviet Union could pressure Syria were given.

The Russians' request for Syrian pressure on the Christians, a ceasefire and negotiations clearly indicate their goal of a negotiated settlement and co-operation between Syria and the PLO. Khaddam's failure to convince the Russians indicates that the Kremlin had established a clear position on the conflict and was not satisfied with the Syrian response. Whatever the case, Khaddam failed and the Kremlin immediately increased pressure for a Syrian withdrawal in two ways, a statement of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Organization followed by a peculiar letter from Brezhnev to Assad.

The Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Organization criticize Syria

On 9 July, just after Khaddam left Moscow, stated: «The involvement of Syrian military units in this conflict has further aggravated the situation in Lebanon». The Committee called for

²⁶⁷ The long-term Syrian goal was supposedly to make a confederation with Jordan and Lebanon in which the Palestinians were a part of Jordan. The Syrians had a stated goal of strengthening its position vis a vis Israel, however it would have been difficult to achieve this kind of confederation as the Jordanian King Hussein and the Maronites in Lebanon would not have been interested in it.

²⁶⁸ The Syrian director also criticized the Baath party for using inexperienced officials to explain their policy abroad in addition to being unsuccessful in explaining it domestically. WikiLeaks, «FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM'S VISIT TO MOSCOW». 15 July.

an immediate cease-fire and «the Lebanese conflict can and should be solved free from foreign interference, by the Lebanese themselves, with participation of all interested parties concerned on the basis of guaranteeing the independence, sovereignty and unity of Lebanon».

Coming right after Khaddam's departure, the US analysts saw it as a slap at Syria.²⁶⁹ The call for non-interference and at the same time have participation of all interested parties was regarded as a contradiction in Moscow's vague political line. They found the declaration less strident, but harder on the Syrians than the 9 June TASS statement had been. It was seen as an admission that the Soviet Union did not have a real, nor a reactive policy towards events in Lebanon. The statement was interpreted to be more «in sorrow than in anger».

In the Solidarity Organization's statement, the conflict in Lebanon was called a new imperialistic conspiracy against Middle East peace, a standard criticism of the US. However, the next sentence in the same paragraph condemns Syria for worsening the conditions. Thus, the Solidarity Committee can be seen as indirectly blaming Damascus for taking part in US schemes. Then follows criticism against the Christians for bombarding the Palestinian refugee camps, before calling for an immediate cease-fire.

By asking for the Arab Confrontation states to extricate themselves from the conflict and not weaken themselves nor scatter their forces any more, the USSR argues that Syria should pull out of Lebanon, unite forces with the PLO and the Lebanese leftists in the struggle for liberation of Palestine and achieve regional peace. In addition, the solidarity committee described the Syrian intervention as having complicated the situation even more.

Nonetheless, the USSR did not present any concrete proposal to solve the situation. This was arguably a huge weakness in the Soviet response, it was a signal but it was not corroborated with a proactive and clear policy of action.

Brezhnev's message to Assad: «Pull out of Lebanon»

Soon enough the Soviet pressure increased. On 20 July the French newspaper *Le Monde* published an alleged letter from Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to Assad dated 11

²⁶⁹ WikiLeaks, «July 9 Declaration of Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee on Lebanon», 2. 12 July.

July.²⁷⁰ The text was distributed to the PLO, Kamal Jumblatt and to other «friendly» governments, Iraq and Libya. From the start there were questions about the letter's authenticity including in intelligence circles, however Assad himself confirmed the message in a later interview.²⁷¹ Brezhnev first referred to how the Syrians had told Kosygin on 1 June that they had sent in a symbolic force. This attitude, he wrote, was deceptive and Khaddam's allegations were untrue and inaccurate. Brezhnev continued:

Permit me to pose a direct question for you at the start: Who is rubbing his hands with joy while observing the events in Lebanon? Naturally, the imperialists. (...) We, you and I were persuaded that the (Palestinian) resistance movement constitutes one of the principal pillars of the struggle against the Israeli aggressors and against imperialism. (...) On the moving plane we observe that efforts are under way to smash the resistance and the Lebanese National movement. Who are the assailants? They are the Lebanese forces of the right supported by the Syrian army. (...) We know that the resistance and the Lebanese national Movement are demanding an immediate cease-fire and that it is your forces which are opposed to the halting of combat. That sustains and intensifies the spilling of blood in the Lebanon. We do not understand either your course of action or the objectives. (...)

Brezhnev further exhorted the Syrian leaders to halt combat immediately and then withdraw its forces from Lebanon. If Syria insisted on her stand, the Soviet Union would pull out military experts and stop supplying spare parts.

One of the most curious things about Brezhnev's letter to Assad, was the way it became publicly known by being printed in *Le Monde*.²⁷² As a US Department of State official commented, this kind of publication was quite unusual.²⁷³ Assad himself confirmed the letter in an interview in October and further claimed the USSR leaked the letter.²⁷⁴ The unprecedented publishing led to speculation about whether the message was real, some of the researchers stated it was unverified or did not mention it.²⁷⁵

The distribution of the text to the PLO, Jumblatt, Iraq and Libya is also interesting. The PLO and Jumblatt had protested against the Syrian invasion to the Kremlin, demanding Russian

²⁷⁰ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 36. WikiLeaks, «Alleged Brezhnev message to Asad», 1. 22 July.

²⁷¹ Between various reports circulating in Damascus of Soviet pressure, the Brezhnev letter was considered to be the least credible WikiLeaks, «ALLEGATIONS OF SOVIET PRESSURE ON ASAD TO MODIFY HIS POLICY ON LEBANON», 1. 21 July. WikiLeaks, «Asad interview with Lebanese journalist comes down hard on Soviets», 2. 5 October.

²⁷² WikiLeaks, «Alleged Brezhnev message to Asad», 1. 22 July.

²⁷³ WikiLeaks, «Asad interview with Lebanese journalist comes down hard on Soviets», 2. 5 October.

²⁷⁴ Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy towards Egypt*, 226. Dawisha refers to Assad's interview in *Events*, London on 1 October 1976.

²⁷⁵ Freedman missed a verification of the letter. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 81.

reactions. The letter seems to have been a Soviet response trying to please these important allies. The way it ended up, and may have been intended from the start, was a letter from Brezhnev to Assad, with copies to close Soviet collaborators and opponents of the Syrian invasion, with full publishing through a western center-left-wing newspaper. A Soviet official suggested that the number two man in the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), Nadim A. Samid, was behind the leak to *Le Monde*.²⁷⁶ When asked why the Lebanese Communist Party would want to publish this, he responded, «It's the Middle East». The Soviet official was regarded to be close to the source of the letter.²⁷⁷ As the LCP was under Moscow's influence, it is likely that the Kremlin ordered the leak to *Le Monde*. Taken together with the distribution of copies to Arafat and Jumblatt, the purpose would have been to demonstrate to the PLO and Lebanese leftist that Moscow was putting pressure on Damascus.

The Syrian policy towards the PLO and the LNM had started to change a couple of months earlier, however the Kremlin had not responded to the PLO's cries for support. By the Syrian direct June intervention and use of brute force against the USSR's clients, it seems like Moscow had woken up and come to grips with reality. Still the Soviet leaders only came up with threats of withdrawing military experts and to end the supply of spare parts, but did not announce any direct consequences. This was a way to be clear on intent and means, giving Damascus a chance to change course without punishing them.

Soviet uncertainty and acceptance of Arab League mediation

As Brezhnev sent his 11 July letter, fighting on the ground in Lebanon increased.²⁷⁸ The Arab League General Secretary tried to reach an agreement, and Assad reluctantly agreed to meet Arafat in Damascus on 16 July. The US analysts predicted the mediation attempts to fail.²⁷⁹ *Pravda* on the other hand published an article indicating a Syrian pullback from Lebanon and a possible Syria-PLO reconciliation.²⁸⁰ Demchenko who wrote the article was chief of *Pravda's* Afro-Asian Department and an influential Middle East expert.

²⁷⁶ The Soviet official Yevgeniy Pyrlin, Chief of the Department for Near Eastern Countries, Ministry of Foreign Affairs told this to the US political Counsellor in Moscow. WikiLeaks, «Alleged Brezhnev letter to Asad: 11 July». 23 July.

²⁷⁷ WikiLeaks, «Alleged Brezhnev letter to Asad: 11 July». 23 July.

²⁷⁸ WikiLeaks, «POSSIBLE SILVER LINING IN CONNECTION WITH CURRENT LEBANESE SITUATION», 2. 14 July.

²⁷⁹ WikiLeaks, «JULY 15 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORT PLANS TO IMPLEMENT ARAB LEAGUE RESOLUTIONS» 1. 15 July. WikiLeaks, «POSSIBLE SILVER LINING IN CONNECTION WITH CURRENT LEBANESE SITUATION», 2. 14 July.

²⁸⁰ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - JULY 16». 16 July.

Demchenko expressed hope about the situation. Freedman sees him as stepping up criticism of Frangieh who would not step down and let Sarkis become president.²⁸¹ The *Pravda* article came out before Brezhnev's letter became publicly known, and seems like an attempt to support the Arab League's reconciliation efforts and lure Assad to make an agreement. Though the article turned out to be much too optimistic, it also clearly signaled the Soviet view on how to resolve the conflict and accept the Arab League's work.

A Syrian official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hamoud Shoufi thought the USSR could have overlooked the intervention if Syria had gained a quick victory.²⁸² The leftists' resistance forced Assad to change strategy and instead of a quick military solution he now tried to strangle them slowly by a blockade and military pressure. This gave the leftists time to pressure Moscow and the Russians felt compelled to increasingly support them. Shoufi spoke to a military officer who on 14 July had talked with Assad, who denied having received any letter from Brezhnev. Shoufi believed the Russians put pressure on Assad to change the direction of the campaign in Lebanon and make an agreement with the leftist. Shoufi said the USSR analyzed the situation and had concluded that the US would not give Assad something tangible. The Russians hoped Assad would sooner or later understand that the USSR tried to help him with «friendly advice».

The Soviet ambassador to Damascus met with Assad in mid-July.²⁸³ He asked Assad several questions: What was his position on the Sinai accords after the Riyadh meeting; did he have an understanding with the US; what were the Syrian intentions in Lebanon, and how did he justify the intervention when all the socialist regimes and communist parties, except the Syrian, opposed it? In addition, the ambassador informed Assad about Soviet plans to support the Palestinians in Lebanon more openly. This gives additional clues about Soviet thoughts and policies and shows deep Soviet concern on a range of issues.

²⁸¹ Freedman, «The Soviet Union and the Civil War in Lebanon», 81.

²⁸² Shoufi told this to a US Embassy official in Damascus. WikiLeaks, «ALLEGATIONS OF SOVIET PRESSURE ON ASAD TO MODIFY HIS POLICY ON LEBANON», 3. 21 July.

²⁸³ The exact date of the meeting is unknown. The source of the information, the editor of the Syrian state-owned newspaper Tishreen met with US officials on 21 July. Then he said «recently» and taking into account Brezhnev's letter was dated 11 July, it is reasonable to believe the meeting took place in mid-July. WikiLeaks, «ALLEGATIONS OF SOVIET PRESSURE ON ASAD TO MODIFY HIS POLICY ON LEBANON», 1-2. 21 July.

By making these questions the Russians seemed to be really insecure about Damascus' policy objectives. The editor of *Tishreen* further claimed the PLO-LNM's effective resistance gave them time to pressure Moscow and the Russians felt compelled to support them. The US observers found the reasoning to be consistent with the Shoufi's analysis and to be credible. Khaddam confirmed that the USSR had increased pressure on Syria.²⁸⁴ And the USSR favored its relations with the PLO.²⁸⁵ Moscow's rhetoric against Israel, the US and the Rightists in Lebanon had become more strongly worded.

As we have seen, the PLO certainly resisted and bought themselves time, and complained to the Kremlin for several weeks. What really took time was the Kremlin coming to grips with the intervention and developing a policy to counter it. The argument that the resistance of the PLO and LNM forced Assad to change strategy and strangle them slowly seem more plausible, as that is what happened in reality. However, the opinion that the Russians changed their mind when the Syrian forces met unexpected resistance does not seem credible. The Kremlin wanted Syrian cooperation with, not domination over the PLO.

A desperate message from Assad to the US and its Arab allies

In a series of meetings from 17-26 July Assad delivered messages to King Hussein of Jordan expressing deep concern about the Soviet reactions.²⁸⁶ Assad described the situation as extremely critical and wanted the messages to be passed on to the US president, King Khalid of Saudi Arabia and the Shah of Iran. Hussein added that when he himself was in Moscow in June, the Kremlin was very worried about Assad.²⁸⁷ Hussein thought Moscow was under internal constraints and in distress as they needed to show that dealing with the Arabs had not wasted Soviet resources. This has not been reported in the research literature.

²⁸⁴ The leaked report contains only title. WikiLeaks, «Khaddam confirms increased Soviet pressure on Syrian over Lebanon». 23 July.

²⁸⁵ WikiLeaks, «EVANS AND NOVACK COLUMN, JULY 23, 1976», 3. 23 July.

²⁸⁶ Foreign Minister Khaddam passed the first message, the meetings on 25 and 26 July were between Assad and King Hussein. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD»a, 1-2. 17 July. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD»b. 18 July. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - CONTACTS WITH ASAD», 1-2. 28 July.

²⁸⁷ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - LEBANON SITUATION», 1-4. 28 July.

Lebanon



Lebanon map.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 17 JULY 1976».

According to Assad, the PLO sent a message to the Libyan leader Gaddafi demanding him to urge the USSR to take a very tough stand with Syria.²⁸⁹ Three days later Moscow demanded an immediate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. The USSR accused Syria of cooperating in an imperialist plot to destroy the PLO-LNM. The USSR had informed Assad that they wanted to maintain good relations with Syria only if Damascus was ready to cooperate with Soviet attitude and policy towards Lebanon. This was a cost of its relations. If they didn't accept this, the Soviet position would become very hard, and cuts in arms and economic aid was implied, but not threatened. Assad was also concerned about an apparent alignment of Libya, the PLO, Iraq and the USSR against Syria in Lebanon. He was fed up with the Libyan Prime Minister Jalloud, and Syria had jailed 30 members of a pro-Libyan group.

The Syrian president was probably referring to Brezhnev's 11 July letter and the claim that the PLO had urged Gaddafi to act is specific and seems credible. However, the PLO had asked for support for months, even before the Syrian invasion, without getting any strong, public Soviet support. The Kremlin probably did this now, not so much out of genuine consideration for the hard-pressed allies in Lebanon, but to avoid losing them altogether being defeated or jumping over to the US side. The PLO's predicaments were also visible for the world, and the Soviet credibility with its present and potentially future clients was also at stake. So the Russians' response to finally demand an immediate Syrian withdrawal, may well have been influenced by the message through Libya.

In addition, Assad referred to other conflicts where the USSR was involved and compared them to Syria. He said he feared another Cold War armed war like «Angola» in Lebanon, which was a proxy war between the US and the USSR.²⁹⁰ Assad also mentioned the 1975 Communist-backed coup attempt against President Gaafar Nimeiry in Sudan. If Lebanon were to go, Kuwait would be next and then Saudi Arabia. Assad said that Soviet-Syrian

²⁸⁹ Libyan Prime Minister Jalloud had forwarded the message to the Libyan President Gaddafi.

²⁹⁰ After Angola became independent from Portugal in 1975, two liberation movements the MPLA and UNITA fought for power in a civil war. The USSR supported the former and the US the latter in a proxy war. Cuba, allied with Moscow, sent tens of thousands of troops, which fought South African forces allied with the US. The devastating conflict finally ended in 2002 after the MPLA won the war.

relations were at a crucial point and could turn into another Egypt-Soviet crisis.²⁹¹ He asked the Saudis, the Shah of Iran and the US to alleviate pressure, or to help if aid was cut.²⁹² Referring to Lebanon, Assad concluded that the situation of the Rightists was good at the moment, but with continued Soviet pressure it might shift. He claimed that the Russians dominated the Lebanese leftists, including Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PPS), the Communist Party, and Communist Workers Party.²⁹³ The PLO refused to come to Damascus to a scheduled meeting on 16 July. Assad's claim that the Russians controlled the Lebanese leftist seems exaggerated as Jumblatt, the dominating figure, although being a socialist he was not a communist. It was probably an attempt to scare the US with a threat of communism, and there are no reports that it resonated in Washington.

Even though the USSR threatened with hard reactions if Damascus did not comply, there was no statement about any concrete change of military or economic cooperation. Therefore, Moscow seemed to walk a fine line between threatening and making real policy changes. Assad's reference to PLO's hardened position refusing to come to Damascus to a scheduled meeting on 16 July indicate that the Palestinians had received a message from Moscow as well. Assad's message came six days after Brezhnev's letter, but before the *Le Monde* publication, and he likely refers to the Brezhnev letter. Whatever the case, from what we know today, it is clear that the Soviet message he referred to was real.

Assad's choice to contact the «imperialist» and conservative Middle East kingdoms and describing the situation as «extremely critical» shows that the Soviet threats had an impact. Assad wanted guarantees from the USSR's antagonists, meaning he would stand up to the Soviet pressure if he got support. As King Khalid of Saudi Arabia learned of the Soviet pressure, he promised Syria increased economic support if it turned out to be necessary.²⁹⁴ Assad's lobbying seemed to work.

²⁹¹ Assad pointed to unspecified developments in Egypt to prove meddling between Libya and the USSR.

²⁹² King Hussein expressed readiness to help Assad and was going to meet the Shah the next day and send a minister to see King Khalid.

²⁹³ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS», 1-4. 28 July.

²⁹⁴ King Khalid told the Jordanian minister Khammash who relayed Assad's message to him in Riyadh. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH CROWN PRINCE - JORDANIAN CONTACTS», 1-2. 22 July.

Assad's speech

The day after Brezhnev's letter was published, Assad for the first time since the intervention, explained his policy to the Syrian public on 21 July.²⁹⁵ During the three hour speech, Assad did not make a single reference to the Soviet Union. He said Syria would withdraw on the request of Lebanese authorities, but the Palestinians had no right to ask for this. *Pravda* and another newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda* concluded that Assad's speech «Deflected allegation of presence of American-Syrian deal with regard to Lebanon».²⁹⁶ A Soviet representative in Damascus stressed the strength of Soviet-Syrian friendship in a press conference.²⁹⁷ The Soviet reactions seemed intended to smooth over the Soviet-Syrian disagreements.

More Soviet pressure and a cease-fire agreement

Brezhnev wrote a second letter to Assad, which the Soviet Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vasili Kuznetsov and the Soviet ambassador to Syria Nuritdin Moukhitdinov delivered personally on 22 July.²⁹⁸ The letter was characterized as «short and tough». The same day, Syria and the PLO initiated negotiations over Lebanon, and they continued for over a week.²⁹⁹ Kuznetsov and Moukhitdinov met Khaddam and Kaddoumi at the Soviet embassy on 24 July.³⁰⁰ The ambassador said the USSR supported the Palestinians, not Syria, and presented Brezhnev's message to Kaddoumi. The letter apparently had a message of strong Soviet support to the Palestinians. Although it was not published, the Palestinians leaked it to a journalist, probably to support the Soviet pressure on Syria.

²⁹⁵ WikiLeaks, «Asad makes major speech», 1. 21 July.

²⁹⁶ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - JULY 24-26», 2. 26 July. *Krasnaya Zvezda* meaning «Red Star», was the newspaper of the Soviet Armed forces.

²⁹⁷ WikiLeaks, «JULY 24 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORT CONTINUED SYRO- PALESTINIAN MEETINGS TO REACH UNDERSTANDING» 24 July.

²⁹⁸ The Syrian journalist and Associated Press stringer Louis Fares, who told this, got the information from PLO-leader Kaddoumi, whom he met in Damascus on 26 July. Moukhitdinov left for Moscow on the 25 July. WikiLeaks, «SECOND BREJNEV LETTER TO ASAD: QADDUMI CONFIRMS SOVIET SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS», 1-2. 27 July.

²⁹⁹ Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 459-60. The information was shared by Louis Fares. In the first evening, the negotiations were close to break down, and on Kaddoumi's initiative Jalloud met Assad twice and persuaded him to change the Syrian stance. WikiLeaks, «SECOND BREJNEV LETTER TO ASAD: QADDUMI CONFIRMS SOVIET SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS», 1-2. 27 July.

³⁰⁰ The German embassy in Moscow also reported that Kuznetsov was in Damascus to talk with the Palestinians and the Syrians at the Soviet embassy. WikiLeaks, «POSSIBLE PRESENCE OF SOVIET DEP FONMIN IN DAMASCUS», 1. 29 July.

The Syria-Palestinian ceasefire agreement

Another cease-fire agreement, the 55th was signed on 29 July and took effect on 5 August.³⁰¹ The US analysts saw it as welcomed by the parties which needed a pause in the hostilities.³⁰² The PLO had been hit hard, and wanted to rearm and receive new recruits sent to them from Egypt and Libya.³⁰³ Syria on the other hand needed the ceasefire to avoid losing Soviet military supplies and Arab support.

The Kremlin both supported reconciliation and pressured Damascus at the same time. The Kuwaiti daily *al-Watan* reported that Soviet pressure had caused the Syrians and Palestinians to agree.³⁰⁴ The Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznetsov had been in Damascus in secret discussions to make the agreement work.³⁰⁵ *Pravda* published a TASS article on 3 August about the Syrian Communist Party which supported the Syria-Palestinian agreement.³⁰⁶ Moscow Arab Broadcast also expressed support of the Syria-Palestinian accord.³⁰⁷ This indicated Soviet acceptance of Syrian domination of the PLO as an alternative to continued fighting and possible destruction of the PLO.



Kaddoumi (left) and Khaddam (right) sign the 29 July agreement. Stills from Associated Press news film.³⁰⁸

³⁰¹ Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 459-60. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 12, - AUGUST 5, 1976», 1. 5 August. Sensitive sources mentioned. WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 5 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORT SYRO-PALESTINIAN TALKS, BEIRUT CEASEFIRE AND PROJECTED QUADRIPARTITE MEETING IN SOFAR», 1-3.

³⁰² WikiLeaks, «PROSPECTS FOR THE DAMASCUS CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT ON LEBANON». 1 August 1976.

³⁰³ WikiLeaks, «AUG. 4 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORTS RETURN OF PLO DELEGATION TO DAMASCUS; CRITICISM OF SINAI ACCORD CONTINUES», 1. 4 August.

³⁰⁴ WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 4 AND 5 CAIRO PRESS ON LEBANON», 1. 5 August.

³⁰⁵ Two more sources informed about Kuznetsov's presence, although a Soviet Embassy official said it was wrong. The Kuwaiti *Al-Watan* also claimed a coup was planned in Syria, and the plot included killing Assad. WikiLeaks, «POSSIBLE PRESENCE OF SOVIET DEP FONMIN IN DAMASCUS», 1. 1 August.

³⁰⁶ *Krasnaya Zvezda* wrote about continued fighting and Israel and imperialists supplying US arms to the Rightists. WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY: AUGUST 3», 1-2. 3 August. *Krasnaya Zvezda* meaning «Red Star», was the newspaper of the Soviet Armed forces.

³⁰⁷ WikiLeaks, «OFFICIAL-INFORMAL», 3. 3 August.

³⁰⁸ AP Archive, «SYND 30 7 76 KADDOUMI AND KHADDAM AT PLO PEACE SIGNING». 30 July 1976.

Nevertheless, the same day, the Soviet Ambassador Moukhitdinov told Khaddam that the USSR wanted a political reconciliation if Damascus withdrew from Lebanon and allowed the Communists and its allies to occupy the 60% of Lebanon the Syrians controlled.³⁰⁹ Khaddam made it clear that Syria would keep its positions in Lebanon until peace was achieved. Still, the Soviet pressure may actually have worked as the Syria-Palestinian agreement was signed within days after Brezhnev's second letter and Kuzhnetsov's visit and direct talks with both the Syrians and the PLO.

Internal Syrian developments relieves the pressure on the PLO-LNM

The Syrian regime faced internal problems and this affected its moves in Lebanon. Because of internal security problems and a lack of economic development during 1976, Assad became unhappy with Prime Minister Mahmoud Ayyubi's war efforts.³¹⁰ On 1 August Ayyubi was replaced with a loyal Major General and by designing a new loyal Prime Minister now, Assad seemed confident of his domestic position.³¹¹ There were in fact internal security problems as bombings and assassinations shook Damascus and other big cities.³¹² These were mounted by Palestinians and Iraqis to undermine Assad's position.³¹³ And although Moscow wanted Damascus to reconcile with both parties, the Kremlin did not protest the Iraqi and Palestinian undermining of Assad's position.

It took a week to announce a new cabinet, and the delay was probably related to the regime's internal discussions over its Lebanon policy. Taken together, the increasing number of problems were considered to be the reason for the reduced pressure on the PLO-LNM in the Sidon area.³¹⁴ This in turn facilitated reaching the 29 July agreement and the subsequent

³⁰⁹ Syrian Minister Khaddam told this to US Ambassador to Syria Richard Murphy. Khaddam agreed to compare notes with the US on occasions. WikiLeaks, «SOVIET ROLE IN LEBANON», 1. 4 August.

³¹⁰ Assad said he had been dissatisfied with Ayyubi for months. The Prime Minister himself was unhappy with President Assad's brother Rif'at. Assad told this to King Hussein, who forwarded it in a meeting with Thomas Pickering, the US Ambassador to Amman. Hussein thought moving forward with the Arab-Israeli peace process would give a cloak of truth to the charges that the US, Israel, Syria and Jordan colluded in destroying the PLO. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--SITUATION IN LEBANON AND SYRIA», 1-2. 4 August. King Hussein called Pickering "the best American ambassador I've ever dealt with." Mohr, Charles. «Bush's Selections for the United Nations».

³¹¹ Al-Ayyubi had lost an internal Ba'ath party election in 1975. Assad saw this as a move to curtail his own power, and refused to replace him at the time. The new Prime Minister was Major General Abd Ar-Rahman Khulayfawi, a key supporter during Assad's 1970 coup. He was minister of interior and PM until 1972 when he resigned because of ill health. As a Sunni Muslim from a prominent Damascus family Khulayfawi preserved both the regional and sectarian balance of the regime. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 2 AUGUST 1976», 3-4. 2 August.

³¹² CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 7 AUGUST 1976», 2-3. 7 August 1976.

³¹³ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 12 AUGUST 1976», 4. 12 August.

³¹⁴ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 7 AUGUST 1976», 2-3. 7 August 1976.

reduced fighting. By the respite in fighting, the Palestinians achieved a large scale Soviet, Egyptian and other countries' resupply through Sidon.³¹⁵ This has not been described in the research literature and reveal how Iraqi, Palestinian and Soviet backing temporarily changed Syrian military strategy. As Damascus realized that the Palestinians were resupplied, Assad decided to change strategy and pacify Southern Lebanon.

Continued fighting in Lebanon and Soviet reactions

Assad kept repeating to King Hussein that he needed Jordan and Syria's friends to see how serious the Lebanese situation was, and hinted that the USSR was pressuring him.³¹⁶ In a 7 August meeting, Assad told the US Ambassador Murphy that some Arab «elements» tried to make a revolution in Lebanon and the Lebanese Communists took advantage of the situation.³¹⁷ Prince Saud had offered mediation in July, but the PLO rejected the suggestion and Assad wanted a more active Saudi Arabian involvement. Assad was very pleased with his co-operation with King Hussein and by using him as a channel. The US fear of Communists was well-known, and it is hard to say if Assad exaggerated their strength. It is clear though that both they and the PLO kept resisting the Syrians. Assad's frank talks directly with the US, and indirectly through King Hussein, show how he kept that channel open to find support in balancing off the USSR and the PLO-LNM.

Soviet public and diplomatic reactions

The Kremlin continued to call for a Syrian withdrawal, nevertheless there seems to have been a turn to a slightly more pro-Syrian line. A Soviet official Oleg Grinevsky at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs' gave a positive but cautious reaction to the Syria-PLO agreement on 10 August.³¹⁸ Grinevsky, was still skeptical to whether the cease-fire would hold and actually expected more fighting. He said the Soviet prescription for a solution was to arrange a cease-fire, let the Lebanese parties hold talks without outside interference, and show

³¹⁵ Hares Chebab, a Christian Lebanese editor and friend of President-elect Sarkis was the source. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH LEBANESE/CHRISTIAN JOURNALIST ABOUT CURRENT PHASE OF CIVIL WAR», 1-2. 5 August.

³¹⁶ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--SITUATION IN LEBANON AND SYRIA», 1-2. 4 August.

³¹⁷ Murphy repeated that the US had wanted to avoid a Syrian military intervention in Lebanon. However, Syria could not withdraw now as this would give the opponents a victory. Assad appreciated the US support for Syrian independent policy as this was his own political principle. Assad said he was very close to King Hussein and spoke to him almost daily on the telephone. US Ambassador recommended Kissinger to share more information about Soviet activities with Assad. This could be done without hinting that the US wanted a Cold War competition with Syria as the prize. WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 7 MEETING WITH ASAD», 1-4. 7 August.

³¹⁸ Grinevskiy was Political Counselor and Deputy Chief of the Near East Division. WikiLeaks, «SOVIET MFA OFFICIAL DISCUSSES LEBANON AND ME», 1-4. 10 August 1976.

respect for the territorial integrity and independence of Lebanon. Grinevsky seems to have tried to smooth over the disagreements with Damascus, though he was realistic about the weaknesses of the ceasefire agreement.

However, rivaling Arab countries were following their individual interests and their meddling in Lebanon caused problems. In addition, the Syria-Iraqi relations were not improving, and this must have been frustrating for Moscow as it hindered the creation of the anti-imperialist front the USSR sought. Finally, Grinevsky insisted that the PLO should fully attend a Geneva conference to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict, including its initial stages. He viewed Arafat as powerful despite internal difficulties and setbacks in Lebanon. On 11 August, Arafat met with the Soviet Ambassador Aleksandr Soldatov, probably to ask for increased pressure on Syria to come to an agreement with the PLO.³¹⁹ All this indicate a Soviet confidence in, and support of the Palestinian leader.

It was claimed that Assad wanted to remove Arafat and replace him with a pro-Syrian man. This would have given Damascus more, and Moscow less influence over the PLO, so Grinevsky's comments make sense. Even though the PLO Chairman did not have the ideology the Russians' preferred, he was still seeking Moscow's support.

In spite of its small size, the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) had a role in Soviet-Syrian relations. In early August, the party declared its support for the Syria-Palestinian accord and said the USSR also welcomed it.³²⁰ The SCP claimed the agreement foiled the Saudi-Egyptian attempt to exhaust the Syrians and Palestinians and drag them into Sadat's capitulationist policy. The party was a traditional supporter of Soviet policy in the Middle East and the statement and indicated the Kremlin's support of the agreement.

The fall of Tel al-Zaatar

During the fall of Tel al-Zaatar on 12 August, the sources estimate 12,000 Palestinians were evacuated and refer to 300-400 people being massacred by the Christian forces.³²¹ Both the

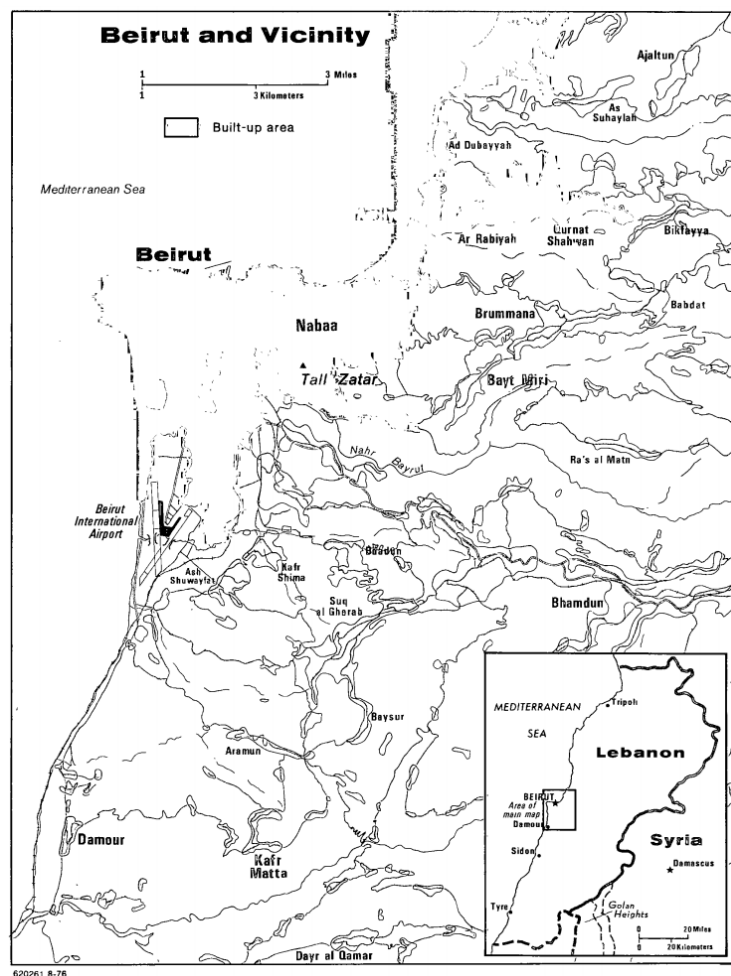
³¹⁹ Arafat directly accused Syria of supporting the Christians and increasing its own presence in Lebanon. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 12 AUGUST 1976», 1-2. 12 August.

³²⁰ The Communist Party distributed the message through flyers. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN COMMUNIST PARTY SUPPORT OF DAMASCUS ACCORD», 1-2. 11. August.

³²¹ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION AUG 13: TELL ZAATAR HAS FALLEN», 1-2. 13 August. The Nabaa neighborhood, lying just north of Tel al-Zaatar had been the camp's main supply line. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 12, - AUGUST 5, 1976», 1. 5 August. After several Leftist leaders

US and Arafat considered that Syria blocked the implementation of the agreement with the PLO.³²² That shows that Assad did not really want a ceasefire, but used the negotiations and the agreement as a tactic. The goal was probably to give the Russians and the Arab states an image of being willing to make a compromise. Tel al-Zaatar had been under siege for months, and both the *Pravda* and the Kremlin had had a long time to prepare an opinion and make a policy. To get closer to Moscow's thinking about the fall of Tel al-Zaatar it is interesting to see what *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party wrote.

Three days after the event *Pravda* mentioned it, and referred to Nicolas Shawi, the Secretary General of the Lebanese Communist Party's comment that it was time for a «sound compromise» between Syria and the PLO-LNM.³²³ No more details were given, however, the fact that the Communists showed willingness to find a solution and Moscow's referring to it showed a change in policy. This was probably instigated by the grim realities on the ground where the PLO-LNM lost terrain.



Map: The Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp just south of the Nabaa neighborhood in Beirut.³²⁴

surrendered on 4 August, Nabaa fell to the Christians, who tightened the grip over Tel al-Zaatar. WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION AUG, 6: CHRISTIANS CLEAN UP AT NABAA; CEASEFIRE ONLY SLIGHTLY SUCCESSFUL; SOFAR MEETING POSTPONED», 1-2. 6 August.

³²² Arafat directly accused Syria of supporting the Christians and increasing its own presence in Lebanon. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 12 AUGUST 1976», 1-2. 12 August.

³²³ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - AUGUST 14-16», 3. 16 August.

³²⁴ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 12 AUGUST 1976», 1A. 12 August.

A full week later, on 19 August *Pravda's* Middle East expert Pavel Demchenko said he was upset by the fall of Tel al-Zaatar, although he claimed the PLO was not.³²⁵ Still, *Pravda* had yet not decided how to respond. Given the long time this had been in the making, this is noticeable. The Soviet expert called the Lebanese Civil War «tragic» and was bitter of the US accepting Israeli supplies to the Christians. He actually confessed that the USSR had a difficult time finding a way to deal with the events in Lebanon and improve Russian policy.

He said another statement could be issued, but this would not really help the Palestinians. He hoped that the incoming President Sarkis, a banker who strangely enough was accepted by the leftists, could unite the Lebanese and stop the war. The Middle East chief of *Pravda* did not know how to respond. He was sorry and hoping for a Christian, the conservative Sarkis to do something. Demchenko's openness, admitting that the Moscow did not really have a Lebanon policy is striking.

That day *Pravda* ended up publishing an interview with French Communist Party leader Georges Marchais who demanded a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon.³²⁶ More criticism of Syria was coming through in the Soviet press, *Krasnaya Zvezda* cited the Lebanese Communist Party's comment that the Syrian forces complicated the situation.³²⁷ Both *Pravda* and the official Soviet government's newspaper, *Izvestia* referred to Italian and French organizations claiming that Syrian presence hindered a solution. *Pravda* and *Krasnaya Zvezda* ran TASS articles on continued fighting and ceasefire efforts with pessimism. They wrote, «Syria does not intend to withdraw its forces from Lebanon».³²⁸ The references to the French and Italian Communist parties, some of the strongest in Western Europe, and the Lebanese Communist Party, all criticizing Syria sent Damascus and the PLO-LNM a signal. Nevertheless, it was just that, a warning message, and no practical policy was formulated. There seemed to be little reason for Assad to change course.

The PLO had, according to Zafer Khatib, enough power to break the Christian blockade of Tel al-Zaatar, but he says US pressure stopped Arafat from relieving the camp.³²⁹ Tel al-Zaatar

³²⁵ WikiLeaks, «PRAVDA ME EXPERT ON LEBANESE SITUATION», 1-2. 19 August.

³²⁶ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - AUGUST 19», 19 August.

³²⁷ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - AUGUST 21-23», 3. 23 August.

³²⁸ WikiLeaks, «SUMMARY OF SOVIET PRESS: AUGUST 27, 1976», 3. 27 August.

³²⁹ Interview with Zafer Khatib in Sidon, Lebanon 13 November 2017.

was close to the PLO's positions, but Henry Kissinger had set a red line for the PLO not to come close to the Christian areas in east Beirut and the core Christian area in Jounieh. Crossing the red line would have led to an Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Khatib believes the USSR knew about the red line. This could explain the limited Soviet response seen above. A heavier Soviet support of the PLO and stronger Palestinian action against the Christians could have triggered an Israeli invasion. With the US supporting Israel, the Russians would risk both Syria and the PLO being defeated, and an increased threat of a superpower confrontation.

The Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee followed up with a new declaration on 26 August.³³⁰ The committee criticized Israel, but was actually more moderate than in the last declaration it made on 10 July.³³¹ It indirectly proposed that a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and cooperation with «natural allies» would contribute to a solution. The statement called for an international campaign in support of the Palestinians and the LNM. Nonetheless, it did not go into specifics about how or who would do this, so it seemed more like a general expression of support than a call of action.

Aleksandr Zotov, the First Secretary with responsibility for Lebanon and Syria in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that the Solidarity committee's statement was the least Moscow ought to do. Despite that, he denied any co-ordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Solidarity Committee. Zotov showed some comprehension for the motivation for the Syrian intervention, but said it served the Rightist-Christian groups and that it would not be possible to practice «normal» politics until Syria withdrew. He added that the Soviet view was that Syria was becoming isolated in the Arab world, but also expressed that the big powers had an extra responsibility of avoiding escalation. His partial understanding of the Syrian policy is a sign of awareness of Damascus' goals, but he was still critical of them. Seeing Syria as isolated was in fact not quite correct. As we have seen Assad had indirect and secret contact with the Saudis. By commenting on eschewing an escalation in superpower relations, he signaled a cautious attitude. Moscow did not seem to want more tensions.

³³⁰ Institute for Palestine Studies, *International documents on Palestine 1976*, 300-301. The communique was published in *Pravda* on the 27 August. WikiLeaks, «SUMMARY OF SOVIET PRESS: AUGUST 27, 1976», 3. 27 August.

³³¹ WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 27 DECLARATION OF SOVIET AFRO-ASIAN SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE ON LEBANON», 1-2. 27 August.

The PLO-leader Kaddoumi thought that Syria would not destroy the Palestinian forces in Lebanon, not because it was unable, but because of other reasons which he did not declare.³³² He also claimed the Palestinians would have won if Syria had not supported the Rightists. This is another indication that the Syrians made a limited but clear move to quell the PLO-LNM from taking power. Jumblatt on his side met the Soviet Ambassador Soldatov asking the USSR to coerce Syria to withdraw and kept demanding a reform of the Lebanese political system.³³³ This confirms the direct contact between the USSR and the LNM-leader. However, while the PLO saw its military weakness compared with Syria and was willing to talk, Jumblatt was unwilling to compromise. These internal differences in the PLO-LNM camp necessarily weakened the alliance, and also made it clear that the Kremlin was unable to dictate their political strategy.

On 29 August, *Pravda*, stated that a withdrawal would have «great significance» in solving the War in Lebanon.³³⁴ The points made were basically the same as the Solidarity committee had made three days earlier, and this now became the official line. On 30 August, the Lebanese government statement sent the Kremlin a note protesting the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee's support of the Palestinians.³³⁵ This was a rare Lebanese reaction, still, as the pro-western Maronites dominated Lebanon, it was not surprising. The reaction demonstrate the weak relations Moscow had with the Lebanese government. Consequently, the Kremlin had to walk a fine line in the maneuvering of supporting the PLO-LNM and not antagonizing the Lebanese Christians.

On 2 September, Assad told President-elect Sarkis that future talks with the PLO would **only** take place if Arafat was replaced.³³⁶ According to unnamed «observers», the preferred Syrian candidate was as-Sai'qa leader Mohsen. This clearly confirm the claims of Assad's antagonism against Arafat and that he clearly wanted him removed. In addition, Assad blamed the PLO for the problems in Lebanon and for the 1970 Black September fighting in

³³² WikiLeaks, «PLO LEADER KADDOUMI ON ARAB SUMMIT CONFERENCE», 1-2. 29 August.

³³³ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION AUG 28», 1-3. 28 August.

³³⁴ The article was the weekly international review column. WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY -- AUGUST 28-30», 3. 30 August.

³³⁵ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION SEPTEMBER 9», 1-3. 9 September. Kamal told the French Counselor in Cairo about the proposal; however, who would represent the Palestinians inside Israel? Would competition for positions divide the Palestinians? Would important countries support the government?

³³⁶ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE EVENTS», 2. 2 September.

Jordan. A Syria-controlled PLO would not have been in Soviet interest and this partly explains the Russian opposition to Damascus' intervention in Lebanon.

The Soviet ambassador's absence

The Soviet ambassador to Lebanon, Alexander Soldatov left Beirut on 2 September.³³⁷ He did not return until 14 December, but no explanation was given about his absence and this caused some uncertainty. According to the Russian Embassy, he was going on a two week vacation, however rumors said he was recalled to Moscow.³³⁸ An official publication of the Palestinian Rejection front claimed the Soldatov's recall showed that the Kremlin's wished to avoid an embarrassing situation.³³⁹ Three weeks later, the Soviet political officer in Cairo commented that the Embassy in Beirut hardly functioned. In addition, Moscow was more and more frustrated by a lack of clear understanding of the evolving situation in Lebanon.³⁴⁰ The Soviet Embassy in Cairo tried to support with some analysis, still their feeling was that the Egyptians had no role to play in Lebanon led Moscow to lean heavily on Damascus.

A three months absence for an ambassador at a time when two Soviet clients fought each other, can hardly have been a coincidence. Soldatov kept on as ambassador until 1986, and there are no signs that he did not have Moscow's confidence, so that was probably not the reason. The description by the Cairo diplomat is new, it is rare, very revealing and makes sense. It seems like the Soviet embassy in Lebanon was in chaos and this strengthens the image that Moscow simply did not manage to follow the evolving situation. The Lebanese Civil War was an important topic and the ambassador may have been recalled to advice the Kremlin more closely during this difficult period. The recall may also have been prolonged to avoid embarrassing confrontations by highly critical PLO-LNM leaders.

On the ground, there were indications of increased support for the LNM. On 8 September, a Lebanese official claimed that street gangs in West Beirut had become more communist-

³³⁷ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION DECEMBER 14-15», 5. Soldatov, who kept on as Soviet ambassador was absent for five months in 1984. New York Times, «MARINES GONE, MOSCOW IS COURTING LEBANON». 18 July 1984.

³³⁸ The Lebanese Chief of Protocol Abbas Hamieh, informed that the source of the rumors was unknown. After the vacation, Soldatov would be back. WikiLeaks, «SEP 7 MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR ABBAS HAMIEH, LEBANESE CHIEF OF PROTOCOL», 2. 8 September.

³³⁹ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION SEPT. 11». 11 September.

³⁴⁰ The Soviet Political Officer was an Arabist, and was familiar with the realities in Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «Comments by Soviet Embassy officer on Lebanon», 1. 21 September.

oriented.³⁴¹ He remarked that the leftist still believed in full victory and was afraid that a prolonged conflict would increase the Communists' strength. This backed up the claim Assad made a few weeks earlier. However, street gangs are not an organized force capable of fighting a regular army like the Syrian. In spite of all the problems, the LNM was unwilling to compromise. Moscow had not been able to convince them to compromise with Syria.

Now, the Kremlin seemed to take on the call for a compromise that the Lebanese Communist Party had made three weeks earlier. In a long *Pravda* article on 8 September, «Observer» once more criticized the Syrian invasion of Lebanon.³⁴² «Observer» stated that the cooperation between Syria and the PLO was ruined, and warned against forcing the Palestinians and LNM too far and instead asked for a compromise. On the other hand, it noted that a partial pull-back was also a new idea to solve the conflict. «Observer» said a political solution «on basis of a reasonable compromise» was the only way to achieve peace. Rejections of a peace proposals, as «some ultra-left elements» in the PLO and in the LNM would lead to more lives being lost. This alert about hard Syrian pressure on the PLO would strengthen the Palestinian «ultra-left», resonated with statements made by other Soviet Middle East experts.³⁴³ As the research literature pointed out, the Kremlin continued to publicly express its disagreement with the Syrian policy. The *Pravda* article gave no indication of what the USSR might do to work out a solution to the conflict.

The Russians made a different attempt to support the PLO. On 9 September the Soviet Ambassador to Cairo, Vladimir Polyakov suggested to the PLO Political Director Said Kamal that the time was opportune to form a Palestinian government in exile.³⁴⁴ Kamal though reported several problems with establishing a government and the PLO had seemingly rejected a similar proposal at an Arab League meeting arguing that the conflict in Lebanon ought to be solved first.

³⁴¹ The official was Lebanese Chief of Protocol Abbas Hamieh. WikiLeaks, «SEP 7 MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR ABBAS HAMIEH, LEBANESE CHIEF OF PROTOCOL», 2. 8 September.

³⁴² It said that for whatever reasons Syria intervened in Lebanon it contradicted the PLO, giving the Rightist the chance to get the upper hand. The article also cited «demands», also outside the Arab world for Syrian withdrawal. WikiLeaks, «AUTHORITATIVE PRAVDA ARTICLE ON LEBANON CALLS FOR "REASONABLE COMPROMISE"», 1-3. 8 September. Articles signed «Observer» were usually major policy announcements expressions of and approved by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's highest circles. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 179.

³⁴³ The before mentioned Primakov, who was Deputy Director at the time, and Middle East specialist Mirskiy had made recently expressed similar opinions.

³⁴⁴ WikiLeaks, «REPORT OF USSR PROPOSAL FOR PALESTINIAN GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE» », 1-2. 9 September.

Then, as the research literature wrote on Kaddoumi met with Gromyko in Moscow to talk about the conflict in Lebanon 17 September.³⁴⁵ *Pravda* reported a «warm and friendly» atmosphere in meetings with the Central Committee, however Kaddoumi's talk with Gromyko was only «exchange of opinions» in a «friendly» atmosphere. This implied a difference in Soviet and Palestinian positions. Moreover, after weeks of Soviet references to a Syrian withdrawal, *Pravda* did not report about any need for that. Combined with the timing of the meeting, just a few days before Sarkis was to access the presidency, it indicated that the Kremlin applied pressure on the PLO to move closer to Syrian positions.

In the Arab-world, accusations and demands continued to take place. On 17 September, Khaddam said the Gulf states were supporting Jumblatt, while they had cut the aid to Syria.³⁴⁶ He said Damascus had informed Saudi Arabia and other Gulf leaders about the full extent of Soviet pressure and claimed that if Jumblatt succeeded, the Gulf states would be the first to pay the price. According to Khaddam, Syria might be unable to sustain the current burdens, and change policy. This would be felt in the Gulf States, and Khaddam requested the US to ask the Gulf states to stop their aid to Jumblatt and the extremist elements of the PLO. This was a complete reversal of previous Syrian policy when Damascus claimed inter-Arab relations were only a matter for Arabs to discuss, and shows how far Assad would go to withstand the Soviet pressure.

Renewed Soviet initiatives

The Soviet Middle East Peace Conference initiative

The Kremlin tried another tactic to raise the question about a region overall peace settlement and link it to a solution in Lebanon. The Soviet co-president of the Middle East Peace Conference (MEPC) in Geneva, Vladimir Vinogradov visited Damascus 17-20 September.³⁴⁷ He proposed a two-stage process where the PLO would participate in both phases. Khaddam responded that Syria continued to demand a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, recognition of Palestinian rights and PLO participation as a full

³⁴⁵ WikiLeaks, «PLO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER IN MOSCOW FOR HIGH LEVEL TALKS», 1-2. 18 September.

³⁴⁶ WikiLeaks, «MEETING WITH KHADDAM SEPTEMBER 17», 2. 17 September.

³⁴⁷ WikiLeaks, «VINOGRADOV VISIT TO SYRIA», 1-2. 21 September. Vinogradov was Soviet Ambassador to Egypt in 1970-74.

member of the conference.³⁴⁸ Vinogradov said that Geneva could establish a base on which the Lebanese conflict could be resolved afterwards.

Meanwhile, *Pravda* backed up the message by calling for the superpowers to meet in Geneva, and the need for a separate conference on Lebanon. Soviet Premier Gromyko again raised the Geneva conference at the UN Security Council meeting on 28 September.³⁴⁹ By explaining that the situation in Lebanon was caused by the absence of an overall settlement and urging for reconvening the Geneva conference, he tried to link the two issues.

The Political officer at Soviet Embassy in Cairo gave more details about the new policy. He told US Embassy Official on 21 September that Moscow was making concerted efforts to induce Assad to adopt a more even-handed stance between PLO and Christians in Lebanon.³⁵⁰ The Political officer conceded that the Soviet policy had been inconsistent over the past six months, but now Moscow saw Syria as the only viable arbiter and were using friendly persuasion to end fighting. It took the Soviet Union a long time to realize why the Syrians had intervened in Lebanon and to get over the shock of Syrian move coinciding with Kosygin's visit. Now the Soviet Union understood that the Syrian government feared a dominant Leftist-PLO bloc might trigger an Israeli intervention. Hence, Damascus supported the Christians. The Russians further believed Syria had reached its national goals and thought Damascus' influence would continue if fighting ended.

However, Moscow was afraid that by continued support of the Christians, its «progressive» reputation in the Arab world was at risk as well as concerned about the internal dissolution. The Soviet Political officer further said Moscow was not very optimistic regarding a quick end to the fighting in Lebanon. After failed talks in Cairo the last ten days, the Soviet embassy more and more saw the Syrians as the «only game in town as far as Lebanon concerned».

Vinogradov had another goal by his trip, to make the Syrians reach an agreement with the PLO leadership.³⁵¹ The US analysts thought this could have been the theme for Kaddoumi's

³⁴⁸ Damascus Radio reported Khaddam's position.

³⁴⁹ WikiLeaks, «USUN UNCLASSIFIED SUMMARY NO. 6», 5. 29 September.

³⁵⁰ WikiLeaks, «Comments by Soviet Embassy officer on Lebanon», 1. 21 September.

³⁵¹ According to the Soviet Political Officer in Cairo. The Soviet official was an Arabist who had served in Lebanon knew the realities of the country. WikiLeaks, «Comments by Soviet Embassy officer on Lebanon», 1. 21 September.

recent talks in Moscow. As we have seen this was an important topic for all three parties. The Kremlin made clear it upheld its support of Arafat in another Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee statement on 1 October.³⁵² The committee saw Arafat as a positive force, and the Syrian attacks were portrayed as dangerous for the PLO-LNM.

Soviet use of the Syrian Communist Party

In addition, Moscow played another card, the Syrian Communist Party (SCP). TASS referred to an alleged SCP attack against Assad's Lebanon policy, and this was regarded as a reminder that the USSR could use the SCP to increase Syria's domestic problems.³⁵³ However, the Soviet position seemed to change towards accepting a Syrian role in Lebanon. The *Pravda's* «Observer» article notably modified Moscow's earlier hardline demand for a withdrawal. Soviet officials confirmed that the USSR continued to honor bilateral agreements with Syria, providing economic and military aid.

Seen together, the recent busy Russian activity indicated that Moscow wanted to be a party to all activities, and also regarded the actions in Lebanese as especially important. The PLO had been losing positions, and Moscow accused the imperialists and Israel of trying to destroy the PLO. This suggested that that the Kremlin considered the Syrians gains as irreversible, and more fighting could only lead to a complete Palestinian defeat. From the Kremlin this was a good moment to make a settlement.

Palestinians attack Damascus hotel and Syrian goes on the offensive

The Kremlin's hopes for a resolution were quickly dashed. Three days after the Lebanese president Sarkis was inaugurated on 23 September, Palestinian guerillas attacked the Semiramis hotel in Damascus taking 50 hostages and demanding 25 Palestinians released from Syrian prisons.³⁵⁴ Syrian troops stormed the hotel, the guerillas supposedly admitted they were members of Fatah and that the attack had been planned in Baghdad.³⁵⁵ This gave Damascus an excuse to act, and on 28 September, just five days after the inauguration of Sarkis, the Syrian army attacked the Palestinian-LNM forces in the Metn area northeast of

³⁵² The Lebanese situation was called an imperialist plot. WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - OCT 1», 1-3. 1 October.

³⁵³ WikiLeaks, «RECENT SOVIET INITIATIVES ON LEBANON», 1-4. 30 September.

³⁵⁴ In the debacle four hostages were killed, 34 wounded and the rest released. WikiLeaks, «GUERRILLA ATTACK ON SEMIRAMIS HOTEL IN DAMASCUS», 1-2. 26 September. The leader of the guerilla group said he was a Fedayeen from the Tel al-Zaatar camp.

³⁵⁵ WikiLeaks, «PALESTINIAN "BLACK JUNE" OPERATION AGAINST DAMASCUS SEMIRAMIS HOTEL», 1-3. 27 September.

Beirut.³⁵⁶ After a two-day battle where Syria obtained most of its military goals, on 29 September a ceasefire was agreed upon.³⁵⁷ Now the Palestinians only held one location north of the Beirut-Damascus road and were obviously weakened.

Once more Moscow was overtaken by events. The Soviet Political Officer in Cairo was stunned by the 28 September Syrian-Christian offensive, and wondered why Assad did this so soon after the inauguration of Sarkis.³⁵⁸ The USSR had in fact had so many surprises in Lebanon, that they were starting to take broader views of the events and were not «rattled by every inexplicable lurch». At the same time, Moscow confirmed the earlier mentioned patience by saying it would continue to work for a meaningful compromise. He admitted that Egypt would play a role in Lebanon, but did not think that the upcoming Riyadh meeting was the right forum to solve the crisis.

In Egypt as well the USSR suffered setbacks. The Soviet Political Officer in Cairo said on 30 September that although the Egyptian government claimed that Moscow backed up its Lebanon policy, they had a tendency to exclude the Russians. In fact, the Soviet embassy in Cairo had no contacts with the Egyptian government over Lebanon at the moment.

The question of partition

The question of partitioning Lebanon was raised by several parties. One report said everyone was accusing the other parties of working for partition of Lebanon.³⁵⁹ The Egyptian newspaper Gazette claimed in early August that the Soviet Union accepted a partition plan where Syria would get the Beqaa valley.³⁶⁰ However, none of the main Lebanese Christian leaders favored a partition of the country.³⁶¹ Their goal was a unified Lebanon without Palestinian armed forces playing a role in Lebanese politics. Nevertheless, Lebanese president Frangieh said the «de facto» partition was making the Palestinians more radical and former president Chamoun thought one part of Lebanon could be saved from «going

³⁵⁶ WikiLeaks, «SYRIA DOWNPLAYS ITS ROLE IN SEPT 28 MTN CAMPAIGN», 1-2. 29 September 1976.

³⁵⁷ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION SEPTEMBER 30», 1-4. 30 September.

³⁵⁸ WikiLeaks, «COMMENTS BY SOVIET EMBASSY OFFICER ON LEBANON», 1-2. 30 September.

³⁵⁹ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION AUG 22-23», 1. 23 August.

³⁶⁰ WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 3 CAIRO PRESS ON LEBANON», 3. 3 August.

³⁶¹ US diplomats met with several leaders in August and reported their assessments to Kissinger. WikiLeaks, «POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN LEBANON», 3. 25 August.

communist». Chamoun denied partition was an issue for the Christians if the Palestinians were disarmed.³⁶² For the Maronites the urgent goal was to end Palestinian political involvement in Lebanon and accept the Cairo accords.³⁶³ They thought this could take a long time as the Soviet Union and Arab states supported the PLO. Another Christian leader claimed the Syria intervened to achieve the political goals of reinstating a stable and conservative Lebanon.³⁶⁴

There was disagreement among the Maronite political elite. Frangieh said Syrian policy was crucial and as long as Assad stayed in power he expected his support of the Christians.³⁶⁵ In contrast, Presidential candidate Raymond Edde criticized the Syrian intervention and claimed Damascus wanted to annex portions of Lebanon and feared the country would be partitioned.³⁶⁶ He claimed Syria had never accepted that France separated the Bekaa valley, Akkar and Tripoli and adjoined it to form Lebanon in 1920. Israel was going to annex the areas south of the Litani river. Syria also wanted to destroy PLO's capacity to be independent because the organization threatened Syrian freedom of action. The Arab League force was only 3,000 strong and needed 12,000 to succeed. The problem was in Edde's opinion that moderate Arab countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were tired of the PLO and wanted them crushed.

As we have seen Grinevsky at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign affairs stated the USSR showed respect for the territorial integrity and independence of Lebanon. Ambassador Soldatov confirmed to Lebanese Prime Minister Karame that the Soviet Union backed Lebanon's sovereignty, integrity and independence.³⁶⁷ In sum, the Soviet policy was upholding all the time to keep Lebanon together as a state. The Egyptian claim seems more like part of a propaganda campaign trying to discredit the USSR.

³⁶² Frangieh wondered why the US was so silent about the American support of Syria. The US official responded that the results of diplomacy was more important than the image held by the Lebanese public. Frangieh replied that the Russians were not hiding their intentions and support of their friends. WikiLeaks, «MEETING WITH FRANGIEH AND CHAMOUN», 3. 25 August.

³⁶³ WikiLeaks, «EVOLUTION OF OVERALL SITUATION», 1. 26 August.

³⁶⁴ WikiLeaks, «MEETING WITH PAKRADOUNI», 1-2. 26 August.

³⁶⁵ WikiLeaks, « MEETING WITH FRANGIEH AND CHAMOUN». 6 September.

³⁶⁶ WikiLeaks, «CALL ON RAYMOND EDDE», 1-4. 30 August.

³⁶⁷ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION AUG 28», 1-3. 28 August.

Another Soviet call for Geneva and pressure on Cairo

Then on 4 October Kremlin again proposed to reconvene the Geneva conference.³⁶⁸ According to a TASS statement the USSR sent the proposal to Syria, the PLO, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the USA. It included four points: Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967; recognition of the Palestinian people, including the right to have a state; right to independence for all concerned parties and finally an end of the state of war. The PLO should participate from the start of the conference and as an equal party. Khatib explained that the Soviet strategy was based on the thought that a Palestinian state would be a friend of the USSR.³⁶⁹ The Kremlin wanted to have one state for the Palestinians and one for the Israelis said. The Russians supported both the Palestinian armed resistance and the convocation of a conference in Geneva.

The Soviet *charge d'affaires* in Cairo pressed Egyptian Foreign Minister for a reaction to the proposal about the Geneva conference, and especially if it could be organized before the US elections in November.³⁷⁰ The Egyptians had sent signals of reconciliation to Moscow in the summer, but got no response from the USSR.³⁷¹ Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait led Arab moderate states efforts to reconcile Egypt and Syria and saw this as the key to solve the conflict in Lebanon. The *détente* made in Riyadh on 23 June was destroyed by Assad's speech on 20 July. The Egyptian government saw Assad's policy as efforts to dominate the region and tried to counter him. Since then a propaganda war played out between Damascus and Cairo and Sadat thought the internal dissent in Syria would end Assad's rule.

Moscow tried to avoid any foreign involvement in Lebanon and let the Lebanese negotiate themselves. This was demonstrated by the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Cairo criticism of rumors about a French roundtable discussion on Lebanon.³⁷² The USSR thought any meeting should be held in Lebanon and preferably only with Lebanese parties present. Only if and when the Lebanese agreed to, the PLO and Syria could be included in the talks.

³⁶⁸ WikiLeaks, «NEW SOVIET PROPOSAL ON GENEVA CONFERENCE», 1.-2. 4 October.

³⁶⁹ Interview with Zafer Khatib in Sidon, Lebanon 13 November 2017. Arafat wanted to have good relations with the USSR, however, he did not believe in making a strategic alliance with only one part, so he maintained relations with Europe and USA.

³⁷⁰ WikiLeaks, «NEW SOVIET PROPOSAL ON GENEVA CONFERENCE», 1.-2. 4 October.

³⁷¹ WikiLeaks, «QUARTERLY POLITICAL ASSESSMENT: 1 JULY TO SEPT 30, 76», 4. 4 October. The assessments were made in a quarterly US report on the situation in Egypt.

³⁷² WikiLeaks, «COMMENTS BY SOVIET DIPLOMAT ON LEBANESE SITUATION», 1-2. 5 October. Damascus reacted with silence and Beirut with condemnation, so the French imitative soon fell.

This proposal made sense from a Soviet point of view. Because in spite of all the setbacks the PLO-LNM held considerable ground and this would give them some influence in negotiations. With a Syrian seat in the negotiations, PLO-LNM would be weakened.

Assad on his side reacted to the Soviet activities. In an interview with a Lebanese editor, he criticized the Soviet policy in Lebanon in stronger terms than before.³⁷³ Assad confirmed the veracity of the *Le Monde* version of Brezhnev's message to him and described it as:

... in this message Leonid Brezhnev asked me to pull the Syrian Army out of Lebanon, I considered this request simply as an expression of a point of view, which is not subject to compromise because it is based on our firm national principles and interests.

Assad admitted he had received another message from Brezhnev, not revealing the content of it, just saying «we disagree in our assessment of the situation in Lebanon». ³⁷⁴ Assad probably referred to the message Soviet Deputy Minister Kuznetsov brought on 22 July.

Asked about a Soviet backed Iraqi proposal to create a Libyan-Algerian-Iraqi-Syrian front, Assad said the Soviet position on UN Security Council resolution 242 was unclear. He was also unhappy with an increased number of communists and «Marxists» operating in Lebanon, mentioning the PLO groups PFLP and DFLP. Assad denied that Kosygin had raised the issue of «Syrian hostility to establishment of progressive regime» in Lebanon during the visit in June. Assad had denied several issues, in spite of other sources verifying them. This denial indicates that the USSR regarded the PLO-LNM establishing a progressive regime, one that would be a friend of the Soviet Union.

On 8 October The Syrians halted their offensive and this gave Arafat an opportunity to reconsider the situation.³⁷⁵ The US assessed Syria had the military capacity to make a new offensive. According to a US analysis, the Syrian influence over the Palestinian resistance had decreased during the last few months.³⁷⁶ The USSR, Iraq and Egypt wanted to keep the PLO as an independent force outside Syrian domination. The US assessed that Syria did not want to reconcile, but to completely submit the PLO and put it into a similar position as in Syria

³⁷³ Assad gave the interview to Salim al-Lozi, publisher of the Lebanese journal *al-Hawadith*. *Events* is the English-language weekly version of *al-Hawadith*. El-Lozi, «If we were not in Lebanon, Israel would have intervened», 19-23. *Events*, 1 October 1976. Al-Lozi was killed in March 1980, and the assassins were suspected to be Syrian.

³⁷⁴ WikiLeaks, «ASAD INTERVIEW WITH LEBANESE JOURNALIST COMES DOWN HARD ON SOVIETS», 1-2. 5 October.

³⁷⁵ WikiLeaks, «n/a», 1-2. 8 October.

³⁷⁶ WikiLeaks, «SYRIA AND THE PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON», 1-2. 11 October.

proper, where it was supervised by the Syrian army and government. It seemed like the Palestinian leaders were slowly coming to realize the Syrian goals and were looking for alternatives to a complete surrender.

The latest Soviet proposal for a Middle East settlement repeated the main elements of the Kremlin's 28 April statement.³⁷⁷ It had some new points: A direct call for action, in contrast to earlier sharing of Soviet views; specifically propose dates for reconvening the Geneva conference in October or November; PLO participation on equal footing with the rest of the participants; «Stoppage in the state of war between the concerned Arab states and Israel». The last point was likely a response to the February 1976 Israeli proposal to end the state of belligerency as a next step in the peace process. The US saw the Soviet proposal as a way to get them a role in the Arab-Israeli talks and influence discussion at the upcoming UN General Assembly along Soviet lines. The Russians main goal seemed to be to reintroduce themselves in the overall settlement process, but it was seen as a perfunctory statement as Moscow did not expect progression in the Middle East based on its initiatives. Arafat asked Brezhnev to take a clear stand on the Syrian attack.³⁷⁸

Mini-summit and agreement in Riyad

A mini-summit was organized in Riyad on 18 October with Assad, Sadat, Arafat and Sarkis. The Lebanese President Sarkis and Arafat worked out the «Riyad declaration» detailing how the PLO's relationship with the Lebanese government would be.³⁷⁹ These were similar to the terms made at the Arab League's Rabat and Algiers conferences. The declaration would be brought to an Arab League Summit in Cairo for approval by the member states. Assad avoided criticizing Egypt's second Sinai agreement and Sadat accepted Syrian supremacy in Lebanon.³⁸⁰

Assad's political advisor Adib Daoudi said that Sadat and Arafat came to Riyad ready to make an agreement.³⁸¹ Arafat had said he was prepared to force the Palestinians and the leftists to

³⁷⁷ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PROPOSAL ON THE MIDDLE EAST», 1-3. 12 October.

³⁷⁸ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION OCTOBER 14», 4. 14 October 1976.

³⁷⁹ WikiLeaks, «RIYADH MINI SUMMIT», 1-2. 18 October.

³⁸⁰ WikiLeaks, «EC,: INTSUM 178 - OCTOBER 26, 1976». 26 October.

³⁸¹ The PLO had sent moderate delegates and Assad had personally persuaded Arafat to go by supplying a Syrian military helicopter transferring him to a Saudi plane in Damascus. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN VIEW OF RIYADH SUMMIT», Section 1 and 2. 21 October.

stop fighting, and Sadat admitted the Egyptian policy against Syria had failed. Daoudi thought the Russians would see that Syria could resist the Soviet pressure and would become more lenient from now on. Arafat had himself proposed to go directly to Baghdad to convince the Iraqi leaders that he was content with the Riyadh resolutions.

Daoudi said that before the mini-summit, the Saudis had thought Syria one-sidedly supported the Christians, and had cut the economic aid to Damascus and backed up the Muslims. Assad's presentation in Riyadh made Saudi Arabia change its mind about Syrian intentions in Lebanon, and expected them to reduce the support to the PLO and the Lebanese Left. Daoudi also thought the Russians would be pleased with the new situation, as they disliked an increased role for the Saudis in the region because they regarded them as acting completely on US prompts. Daoudi stated that the Kremlin had been cautious by avoiding pressuring Damascus into a conflict.

The Russians had obviously been dissatisfied by being forced to choose between the PLO and Syria. Assad had understood this and used this insight when he replied to the criticism in Soviet media. For instance, Assad held his reaction in the interview with the Lebanese journalist. Finally, the outcome of the Riyadh meetings supported Damascus in standing up to Moscow. As the Russians were clever he assumed they would understand this and soon relieve their pressure. The Arab Security Force (ASF) was outlined to have 30.000 men.

The Soviet embassy officials in Cairo expressed suspicions of the decisions in Riyadh.³⁸² As the mini-summit was a Saudi Arabian initiative, they thought the US had been making up the scheme. A Soviet official A. Zotov at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was positive about the Riyadh agreement.³⁸³ He saw the Palestinians' loss of influence as natural because of the defeats they suffered in Lebanon. He said Syria wanted to strengthen its domination over the PLO however, he did not think Damascus wanted to wipe out the PLO. As Assad wanted a change in PLO's leadership Arafat might have to go, but Kaddoumi, who was very much like Arafat, he could not see other replacements acceptable to the Palestinians.

³⁸² All members except Libya and Iraq endorsed the proposal. WikiLeaks, «ARAB FONMINS APPROVE RIYADH RESOLUTIONS», 1-3. 21 October.

³⁸³ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET MFA OFFICIAL ON RIYADH AGREEMENT», 1-3. 21 October.

For the USSR though, the relation with the PLO could not be compared to the relationship with a state. Zotov explained the lack of a call for a Syrian withdrawal in the recent Soviet statements.³⁸⁴ He said it would have been embarrassing to once more express the Soviet position of an immediate and complete pull-out when the Riyadh conference was likely to agree upon a gradual withdrawal. The Soviet policy would remain the same, but if the Arab League found a way to achieve Syrian withdrawal it would be a step forward. Nevertheless, Zotov was satisfied with the ceasefire agreed upon, nevertheless he was skeptical if the different groups involved would agree to be disarmed. And if the Palestinians went back to the camps that would be a defeat to them. The expanded Arab Force which was going to observe the Syrian troop withdrawal, would have to be formed by Syrian troops, and he doubted the agreement would hold. The most important issue according to Zotov was what would happen to the Palestinians.

The Kremlin showed some understanding for Assad's goals intervening in Lebanon, however these were inconsistent with staying on in Lebanon. The Kremlin had informed Damascus about its view and there had been tension. Moscow had refused some Syrian «suggestions» in economic and military areas. He said the USSR and Syria had been conscious about keeping their disagreements within controlled limits.

On 25 October, Brezhnev criticized the US, other NATO states and Israel for attacking the PLO and trying to sow discord among the Arabs. The Soviet General Secretary expressed a very cautious optimism over the Riyadh agreement.³⁸⁵ He was only lightly critical of the Syrians noting more in sorrow than in anger that they had «unfortunately» been drawn into the fray. Brezhnev stressed the great importance of the reconciliation between Syria and the PLO-LNM. Nevertheless, gone were the optimistic remarks he had expressed half a year earlier about the Soviet-Syrian relations.

³⁸⁴ Zotov referred to the *Pravda* commentary of 18 October and the Afro-Asian solidarity committee's 19 October statement.

³⁸⁵ WikiLeaks, «FIRST DAY OF THE OCTOBER 1976 CC PLENUM: BREZHNEV ON SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY». 26 October.

Increased Soviet political and diplomatic pressure deflected by Syria

In sum, immediately after the Syrian intervention, the USSR was confused about it and even supported it. After more than a week, the Kremlin distanced itself from it and in July put diplomatic and political pressure on the parties through media and closed meetings.

Moscow's main negotiation attempt seems to have taken place in July and this led to the 29 July ceasefire agreement. That gave the Russians a respite from the pressure they were under from the PLO-LNM. After the Syrian offensive in late September, the Soviet and Eastern Bloc diplomats in Damascus said the Syrian intervention was necessary to sort out the Lebanese crisis. However, before the last Syrian offensive the policy shifted back to criticize the Syrian moves. Damascus responded by reducing the Soviet attempt to reconvene Geneva, which Vinogradov promoted on his visit.

The Russians may have believed that Damascus did not have an US option and was forced to maintain good relations with the USSR as a superpower and its protector, but they were not sure of this. Assad on the other hand clearly made his moves based on a belief that the Kremlin could not bear the expense of losing another Middle East client, either Syria, the PLO or the LNM. Neither party wanted to damage their relationship, so when Syrian interests of national security were at stake, Assad easily diverted the Russian diplomatic initiatives that he considered unfriendly. Moscow was not able to force Damascus to adhere to its policy. Brezhnev in his 25 October speech therefore accepted the Riyadh agreement.

Chapter 4 The USSR's and its clients' military pressure on Syria and support of the PLO

Moscow regarded military means as the most efficient way to expand influence in the Cold War, according to a CIA report.³⁸⁶ One of the questions that has been raised, is how much military pressure the USSR put on Syria after the intervention in Lebanon in 1976, and how Assad reacted. Another issue has been how much support the USSR and its regional clients gave to the PLO-LNM.

The military aspects in the research literature

Soviet military pressure of Syria

Most of the researchers agree that the USSR heavily reduced or suspended arms supplies to Syria after the intervention in Lebanon.³⁸⁷ Nevertheless, they differ in view regarding the scale and timing of the measures.³⁸⁸ The USSR suspended deliveries of military equipment and spare parts and delayed the signing of new arms contracts from July, according to Pedro Ramet.³⁸⁹ Assad retaliated by sending thousands of Soviet military advisers home according to Ramet.³⁹⁰ Efraim Karsh on the other hand says it was the Russians who held up technical assistance, in addition to significantly reducing arms supplies after Brezhnev's letter in mid-July.³⁹¹ Later he calls it an embargo that lasted until early 1977, when shipments were fully restored before Assad secured military aid during his Moscow visit in April 1977.

Contradicting them, Ilana Kass deems a report about a Soviet arms embargo as propaganda, meant to pressure Syria.³⁹² This falls in line with her view that the USSR endorsed the Syria intervention.

³⁸⁶ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE - SOVIET STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES», 15-16. 12 January 1977.

³⁸⁷ Dawisha claims that Soviet arms supplies «dwindled to a trickle» in the autumn and recommenced in April 1977. Dawisha cites a *The International Herald Tribune* article dated 3 October 1977, which is based on CIA reports. Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis*, 107 and 137. Jonathan Chanis refers to Dawisha and claims the USSR cancelled arms shipments from June 1976 to April 1977. Assad «retaliated by ordering several thousand Soviet advisors to leave Syria» and temporarily ending the program of sending Syrians to the USSR for training. Chanis, *Soviet policy toward Syria and the lessons of Egypt*, 250 and 252. Freedman does not deal with the military issues.

³⁸⁸ There are several issues involved; to what degree existing arms contracts were completed, whether new agreements were made and what happened to the military technical assistance.

³⁸⁹ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955*, 112.

³⁹⁰ Syria reduced the number of Soviet advisers from 3,000-5,000 to 1,800 and stopped sending military personnel to the USSR. Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955*, 113.

³⁹¹ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 36, 39, 43. Ramet cites a paper by Roger Pajak to the US Congress regarding the arms suspension, and a *New York Times* article 4 March 1977 about the advisor reduction.

³⁹² Kass referred to an Iraqi News agency's report of suspended Soviet deliveries. Kass, «Moscow and the Lebanese triangle», 172, 176.

The Soviet navy's activities and need for bases in the Mediterranean

The literature is relatively brief about the Soviet navy's need of bases and its actions in the Mediterranean after the Syrian invasion. Dawisha and Chanis say the Syrians believed the USSR's support of the PLO-LNM derived from the need for naval bases in the Mediterranean.³⁹³ The Syrians refused to increase the base access, and the Russians hoped to get them in Lebanon says Dawisha. Karsh disagrees with this view and says Syria gave the USSR access to facilities off Tartus in May 1976, and that a Soviet need for naval bases was not behind its PLO-LNM support.³⁹⁴ Further, Karsh says Assad threatened, Ramet says he asked, Moscow to remove Soviet vessels from Tartus in January 1977.³⁹⁵ According to Karsh, this led to the Soviet renewal of supplying arms mentioned above. The Israeli navy blockaded Lebanon writes Karsh.³⁹⁶ In addition to the Israeli, Freedman mentions the Syrian blockade of Lebanese ports, and refers to the PLO complaining about a lack of Soviet support.³⁹⁷ He argues that the Russians were not willing to challenge either Syria or Israel. Kass does not mention anything about the Soviet naval issues.

Soviet military and its clients' support of the PLO-LNM

The literature is even sparser on the USSR and its clients' military support of the PLO and leftist forces.³⁹⁸ Collins refers to repeated Christian Lebanese reports of Soviet aid to the PLO-LNM, but says these were unconfirmed.³⁹⁹ He briefly states that arms of Soviet origin came to the PLO-leftist groups through Libya, Iraq and Egypt and the Russians never objected to this. Freedman refers to the Iraqi deployment of several divisions to the Syrian border as a way to counter the Syrian invasion of Lebanon.⁴⁰⁰ Galia Golan writes «there was no Iraqi assistance during the trials and tribulations of Lebanon».⁴⁰¹ Later she added that

³⁹³ Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis*, 149. Jonathan Chanis in his Ph.D. thesis argues that the Soviet desire for a port in Lebanon was a major factor for the Kremlin's support of the PLO-LNM against Syria. Chanis, *Soviet policy toward Syria and the lessons of Egypt*, 246.

³⁹⁴ Karsh discusses a claim by the Syrian Minister of Information that the USSR wanted naval bases in the Mediterranean after losing access in Egypt. Karsh argues that because the USSR achieved naval access off Tartus, it had no interest in Lebanese naval bases. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 33-34.

³⁹⁵ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955*, 113. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 39.

³⁹⁶ Karsh notes the blockade in relation to a Radio Moscow report which set Israel and Syria on the same side in the conflict against the PLO-LNM.

³⁹⁷ Freedman cites Salah Khalaf, second in command in the PLO after Arafat, saying «We want a ship carrying flour and hoisting the Russian flag to come to Sidon and defy Israel». Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War in Lebanon 1975-76», 84.

³⁹⁸ Kass does not mention anything about military support of the PLO.

³⁹⁹ Collins also mentions Christian claims of Soviet aircraft deliveries, but says these could be rejected as there were no planes to be seen in the sky. The Soviet ambassador in Beirut denied any arms shipments. Collins, «The Soviet Union», 221, 307.

⁴⁰⁰ After the Iranian agreement was signed, Saddam crushed the Kurds in northern Iraq with Soviet weapons. Freedman, «The Soviet Union and Civil War I Lebanon 1975-76», 77.

⁴⁰¹ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 161.

Iraq sent a symbolic force of 100 soldiers to assist the PLO-LNM against Syria, and increased troop levels on the Syria-Iraqi border to force a Syrian troop withdrawal from Lebanon.⁴⁰²

Soviet arms supplies remained normal until October

In contrast to the literature described earlier and media claims, we will see that the USSR upheld its military support to Syria for a period after the invasion. In mid-July, a leftwing Lebanese newspaper claimed that the USSR had suspended arms deliveries to Syria, and this was followed by other claims.⁴⁰³ PLO-leader Kaddoumi told a Syrian journalist that the Russians suspended arms supplies a week after Khaddam visited the Kremlin.⁴⁰⁴ In early August, *The Financial Times* referred to Syrian sources who claimed that the USSR had implemented a total arms embargo on Syria and wanted Assad to be overthrown.⁴⁰⁵

On the other hand, political and intelligence sources contradict this. Moscow had recently asked Damascus for increased access to naval facilities and the chances of achieving this would be reduced if the Kremlin cut off arms supplies, in the view of US analysts.⁴⁰⁶ Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Haydar admitted there were tensions in the relations with Moscow, but he did not believe the rumors of a Soviet threat to cut military support.⁴⁰⁷ Assad himself said he feared a cut-off in arms and military spare parts.⁴⁰⁸ However, he confirmed at the end of July that arms supplies had yet not been cut.⁴⁰⁹ The government in Cairo also stated that the USSR continued to ship weapons to Latakia.⁴¹⁰ US intelligence stated that a Soviet ship brought trucks and other military equipment to Latakia on 2 August, which might be followed by several similar shipments.⁴¹¹ A senior Soviet military delegation with officers

⁴⁰² Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 170.

⁴⁰³ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 16 JULY 1976», 2-3. 16 JULY.

⁴⁰⁴ WikiLeaks, «SECOND BREJNEV LETTER TO ASAD: QADDUMI CONFIRMS SOVIET SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS», 1-2. 27 July.

⁴⁰⁵ *Financial Times* correspondent Michael Tingay interviewed King Hussein who attacked Egypt's Lebanon policy. WikiLeaks, «FINANCIAL TIMES INTERVIEW WITH KING HUSSEIN», 2-3. 9 August.

⁴⁰⁶ In addition, existing Soviet access would be jeopardized. Still, the US analysts thought Soviet shipments might be delayed to show displeasure about the invasion.

⁴⁰⁷ WikiLeaks, «DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER HAYDAR COMMENTS ON LEBANON; DOWNPLAYS REPORTS OF SOVIET PRESSURES ON SYRIA», 1-3. 22 July.

⁴⁰⁸ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD «a, 1-2. 17 July. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD « b. 18 July.

⁴⁰⁹ Nevertheless, Assad said he felt the Soviet pressure was becoming stronger and was not sure he could continue the present policy especially if the Russian military support was cut. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS», 1-4. 28 July.

⁴¹⁰ The reaction, given by an official Egyptian spokesman, was published in the Egyptian daily al-Akhbar and focused on criticizing the 29 July Syria-PLO agreement. It rejected the Syrian claim of Soviet pressure, however, as we have seen there was pressure, so this was part of the Egyptian propaganda against Syria. WikiLeaks, «EGYPT ATTACKS SYRIA OVER SYRIAN-PLO ACCORD AND COMMUNIQUE», 1-4. 31 July.

⁴¹¹ This was the first delivery since 12 July. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 7 AUGUST 1976», 3. 7 August 1976.

from the Chief of Staff visited Damascus on 20 September discussing armaments, and demonstrating that the parties sustained the relations.⁴¹²

Contradictory reports about arms shipments appeared. In mid-October, the Russians protested strongly against the fact that the Syrians used Soviet weapons against the PLO in Lebanon. About the same time, the Hungarian embassy received Soviet orders not to parley new arms agreements with Syria, and was advised not to fulfill existing ones. There were speculations that other East Bloc countries got the same message. Nevertheless, the USSR continued to fulfill existing arms agreements in late October according to US intelligence.⁴¹³ At the same time a Syrian official was absolutely sure that arms and spare parts supplies had not been cut.⁴¹⁴ On the other hand, since Kosygin's June visit, the Russians had started to demand Pound sterling cash payments for military spare parts that had usually been provided by the USSR.⁴¹⁵ A CIA-report confirmed the demand for cash payment.⁴¹⁶ In sum, there seems to have been a shift in the Soviet policy in October.

Deliveries of Soviet tanks and missiles scheduled for October were delayed until December.⁴¹⁷ When they finally arrived, it was just 30% of the agreed upon quantity. Another US report of January 1977, noted that aircraft deliveries had «slackened» in the second half of 1976.⁴¹⁸ It further said the USSR might have withheld certain parts of the military aid and weapons, still no significant cuts were noticed. The USSR reduced arms sales to show displeasure with the invasion in Lebanon, Syria's closer ties with Egypt and acquiescence to the US role in peace negotiations. Assad reacted at the reductions by threatening to cut the Soviet access to Tartus.

In addition, in 1976, for the first time since 1969, the USSR and Syria did not sign a new military agreement.⁴¹⁹ The cooling relationship was seen as the most important change in

⁴¹² WikiLeaks, «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 1-3. 26 October.

⁴¹³ The US observers thought the Russians had not done anything that could have put relations with Assad at risk. At the same time they said, the Kremlin maintained a relatively steadfast support of the PLO and denounced the Syrian intervention. CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», 24. 21 October.

⁴¹⁴ The official was Shoufi, the Director of American Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Shoufi had some dissident activities which kept him in close contact with many ranking Syrian officers. WikiLeaks, «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 1-3. 26 October.

⁴¹⁵ The information was given by Syrian Economy Minister Imadi.

⁴¹⁶ The Russians demanded cash payments in advance for maintaining aircraft and tank engines to demonstrate their displeasure with the Syrian invasion. CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 44. September 1977.

⁴¹⁷ US Embassy in Damascus reported this. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 234 - JANUARY 17, 1977», 8. 17 January 1977.

⁴¹⁸ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN», 3. 21 January 1977.

⁴¹⁹ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 1. September 1977.

Soviet relations with Third World countries.⁴²⁰ However, neither part wanted a further deterioration. For Assad, arms purchases were important and he still depended on the USSR to get them. The Russians on the other hand saw Syria as their best entry point to the region, and their stature and influence over peace negotiations would suffer further in case of a rupture with Damascus.

Nevertheless, the arms deliveries in 1976 totaled US\$290 million.⁴²¹ These were mostly sophisticated weapons that had been ordered under the October 1975 arms agreement. In the first half of 1976, arms shipments were so extensive that even with curtailment in the second half, the total was larger than in 1975.⁴²² Aircraft constituted 75% of the value.⁴²³

Table 1: Soviet arms deliveries to the Third World.⁴²⁴ (US\$ millions)

	1971-75	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976
Total	6,437	843	797	2,070	1,445	1,282	n.a.
Syria	1,691	106	152	708	535	190	290 ⁴²⁵
Egypt	1,375	340	240	565	80	150	n.a.
Iraq	1,052	30	80	352	336	254	n.a.
Libya	390	39	27	24	84	216	n.a.

Syria turns to the West and the USSR recommence arms deliveries in 1977

In January 1977, the Syrians again accused the USSR for cutting back on military shipments.⁴²⁶ A reason could be the increase Saudi influence over Syria and the fear that Assad might follow Sadat who regarded the US to hold the keys to reach a comprehensive Middle East settlement. As we will see below, Assad reacted to the renewed arms cuts by threatening to deny the Soviet navy access to Tartus. Czechoslovakia resumed shipments of T-55 tanks in January 1977 after a six months pause.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁰ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 1. August 1977.

⁴²¹ CIA, «WEEKLY SUMMARY», 4. 29 April 1977.

⁴²² CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 44. September 1977.

⁴²³ The MIG-21 Fishbed L were the first to be delivered to a Middle Eastern country. In addition, older MIG-21, MIG-23 and MI-8 helicopters were delivered. Petya-class destroyers, equipment to SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missiles, BMP infantry combat vehicles and BM-21 rocket launchers were also shipped.

⁴²⁴ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET ARMS TO LDCS: A SOVIET-US PRICE COMPARISON», 9. September 1976.

⁴²⁵ CIA, «WEEKLY SUMMARY», 4. 29 April 1977.

⁴²⁶ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN», 2-3. 21 January 1977.

⁴²⁷ WikiLeaks, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT-DECEMBER 1976 - APRIL 1977», Section 4 page 4. 16 April 1977.

Still, Syria attempted to diversify arms purchases to Western countries. During the first months of 1976, Syria bought French helicopters and antitank missiles, the first important arms purchase from the West in 20 years.⁴²⁸ In early 1977, new inquiries were made to France, West Germany, the UK and the US.⁴²⁹ There were several reasons for this change. Some Syrian officers believed that Western equipment and training were behind the Israeli superiority in the 1973 War.⁴³⁰ The Soviet deliveries were also considered to be insecure, and maybe more importantly, Assad resented the Soviet pressure and wanted to lessen the dependence on the USSR.⁴³¹ The shift was also encouraged by Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

The Syrian diversification in arms purchases may have influenced the Kremlin's to change policy. Seen from Moscow, Syria must have become more important as relations with Egypt kept worsening after and the PLO's misfortunes in Lebanon. Just before Assad travelled to Moscow for a summit in April 1977, the USSR delivered several MIG-21 fighters, which were agreed upon under existing accords.⁴³² However, there are contradicting US reports on what had been delivered in the preceding months. One report say this was the first shipment in 10 months.⁴³³ Another says some MIG-21s and MIG-23s were delivered in 1976.⁴³⁴

Whatever the case, during Assad's five-day visit to Moscow in April 1977, Syria and the USSR came closer on the military issues.⁴³⁵ In the Joint Communiqué issued on 22 April the parties had considered «steps for further raising the level» of Syrian defense. It also called for «further deepening» bilateral economic and technical co-operation. This was interpreted as the Kremlin agreeing to further weapons and economic aid. Moscow also reopened the sale

⁴²⁸ CIA «Memorandum: Relations between Syria and the USSR», 4. 1 June 1976. *The New York Times* published the story in March 1977, citing US intelligence sources. *The New York Times*, «Syria Is Said to Reduce Military Role of Soviet», 1. 4 March 1977.

⁴²⁹ Damascus sought military equipment and training of officers from France, arms from West Germany and the UK, and other equipment from the US. Syrian officers, trained by the French, promoted a shift to Western training and equipment. WikiLeaks, «SPECIAL SUMMARY NUMBER FIVE: TELEGRAPHIC AND INTELLIGENCE», 10-11. 18 February 1977.

⁴³⁰ WikiLeaks, «SPECIAL SUMMARY NUMBER FIVE: TELEGRAPHIC AND INTELLIGENCE», 10-11. 18 February 1977.

⁴³¹ The Economic Counselor at the French Embassy in Damascus assessed in October 1976 that Soviet pressure, if it actually took place, would be foolish as the Syrians would turn to Western countries. WikiLeaks, «FRENCH VIEWS ON SYRIAN ECONOMY: GENERAL VIEWS, DEVELOPMENT, RELATIONS WITH EEC, EFFECTS OF LEBANESE CRISIS, AND AID TO SYRIA», 1-2. 22 October.

⁴³² CIA, «WEEKLY SUMMARY», 4. 29 April 1977. CIA, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT - DECEMBER 1976», 2. 5 May 1977. Another report detailed deliveries of 5 aircraft containers probably MIG-21, five T-62 tanks and 200 GAZ-66 trucks from the USSR. In addition, 20 T-55 tanks came from Czechoslovakia as part of a contract of 500 T-55 tanks. WikiLeaks, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT-DECEMBER 1976 - APRIL 1977», Section 6 page 3. 16 April 1977.

⁴³³ CIA, «WEEKLY SUMMARY», 4. 29 April 1977.

⁴³⁴ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 31. 1. August 1977.

⁴³⁵ Assad would reportedly bring military advisers with him on the trip to Moscow, indicating that arms deliveries were on the agenda. CIA, «WEEKLY SUMMARY», 4. 29 April 1977.

of military spare parts.⁴³⁶ In early June, Soviet military material was delivered to Syria, but only according to former contracts and with systems that the Syrians already possessed.⁴³⁷

In sum, Syria was dependent on Soviet arms at the time of the invasion in Lebanon. Assad strived for military parity with Israel, and this was a key question for Syria. A view was raised that the Kremlin reasoned that Damascus would not get tangible results by dealing with the US. So being dependent of the Russians, the Syrians would eventually come back to them. It is not quite clear whether the Syrian official who came up with this analysis got it from the Russians or if it was his own opinion. Whatever the case, given the military pressure we have seen the Kremlin put on Syria, it seems reasonable that the USSR made such an analysis. However, the pressure was not strong enough to risk relations with Damascus, so the Russians may not have been quite sure of this analysis. They seemed to be afraid that Assad might do as Sadat and go over to the Americans. Then the USSR would lose its most important remaining client. It seems like the Kremlin had problems making up their mind and took some time to make a new strategy. In the end, they threatened to cut arms supplies. Eventually, they postponed and reduced shipments.

Reduced and delayed Soviet arms supplies, but no embargo

The USSR continued to ship arms to Syria until October 1976 probably because Moscow first tried to use threats to coerce the Syrians. Then arms deliveries were delayed and reduced to a level of 30% in December. Further Syrian complaints about lacking weapons shipments in early January 1977 signal a continued Soviet pressure. The shift may seem surprising as the political and diplomatic pressure was reduced after the Riyadh agreement. The reason was likely that the Kremlin wanted to force Syria to co-operate with the PLO-LNM and to show displeasure of Syria's improved relations with Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Assad threatened to close the Soviet access to Tartus in January 1977, and this combined with renewed Syria-

⁴³⁶ During the summit, the Kremlin reportedly agreed to sell MIG-25 fighters. Nonetheless, there were doubts about whether the MIG-25 deal was real as MIG-25s had not even been supplied to the Eastern European countries. Supply of these fighters would constitute a «major shift in Soviet policy». As the information was leaked both from Moscow and Damascus, it was interpreted as a signal to the US that Assad had been strengthened militarily. This implied that Syria needed to be «taken more seriously» in peace negotiations. In May, Soviet ships were observed offloading sixty T-62 tanks in Tartus and other «large lorries» were assumed to carry aircraft bodies. However, in early June, no MIG-25 contract had been signed. Neither were there any contracts for the modern T-72 tank that supposedly also would be included in new arms agreements. WikiLeaks, «REPORTS OF SYRO-SOVIET AGREEMENT ON MILITARY ITEMS IN MOSCOW», 1-3. 4 May 1977.

⁴³⁷ That included 90 T-62 tanks, equipment for two air defense brigades, 122 mm MB-21 rocket launchers for two battalions, trucks and spare parts. The equipment had been shipped to Syria recently. The reason for the Russians did not enter new agreements because Damascus was not able to pay their debts. Reports circulated of a Soviet agreement of a three-year moratorium on debts. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 330 - JUNE 3, 1977», 3-4. 3 June 1977.

Palestinian cooperation in Lebanon and Syrian purchases of Western weapons, may have affected the Kremlin's decision to start resupplying Syria. Soviet arms deliveries were restored on the eve of Assad's Moscow visit, but only in accordance with signed contracts. Deliveries of more sophisticated weapons were not agreed upon, partly because they were too advanced and partly because Syria was unable to pay for the weapons. All in all, the Kremlin did not cut arms transfers completely but balanced them to not lose Syria.

Eastern Bloc and Syrian military technicians

Eastern Bloc technicians in Syria

Deployment of Eastern Bloc military technicians was necessary for the Syrians to learn how to use Soviet arms and equipment. The number of Soviet and East European military technicians to Syria increased from 750 in 1970 to 3,200 in 1975 (see table below).⁴³⁸ This constituted 32% of the total number of East Bloc military technicians in the Third World, making Syria by far the most important country in 1975.⁴³⁹

As we saw in the literature, Karsh claimed that the Kremlin held up technical assistance while Ramet claimed that Assad sent several thousand Soviet military home. By late October, no Soviet withdrawals had taken place according to a Syrian official.⁴⁴⁰ Rumors circulated in the Syrian army in October that Assad would reduce the number of Soviet advisors.⁴⁴¹ At some point in the autumn, in response to Soviet pressure, the Syrians increased their efforts to become more independent of and reduce the number of Soviet military advisors.⁴⁴² At the same time, Damascus sought training of officers from France.⁴⁴³ Consequently, Syria reduced the number of Soviet advisors to 2,000 by the end of 1976.⁴⁴⁴ Including technicians from Eastern Europe the number decreased from 3,200 in 1975 to 2,500 in 1976. The decrease continued further down to 1,750 in April 1977.⁴⁴⁵

⁴³⁸ The 1976 report uses the figure of 3,050 for 1975. CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», 12. 21 October 1976. The 1977 report using the figure of 3,200 for 1975, is expected to be more correct. CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 55. 1 September 1977.

⁴³⁹ Further demonstrating Syria's importance, the number of technicians in Egypt decreased from 6,500 to 215 during the same period.

⁴⁴⁰ The official Shoufi from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who is mentioned as an informant earlier, was sure that no Soviet military advisors had been withdrawn. WikiLeaks, «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 1-3. 26 October.

⁴⁴¹ The official Shoufi from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs WikiLeaks was the source. «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 1-3. 26 October.

⁴⁴² WikiLeaks, «SPECIAL SUMMARY NUMBER FIVE: TELEGRAPHIC AND INTELLIGENCE», 10-11. 18 February 1977. CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 44. 1 September 1977.

⁴⁴³ WikiLeaks, «SPECIAL SUMMARY NUMBER FIVE: TELEGRAPHIC AND INTELLIGENCE», 10-11. 18 February 1977.

⁴⁴⁴ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 55. 1 September 1977

⁴⁴⁵ This report uses a figure of 2,250 in mid-1976. However, the later report using 2,500, is expected to be more correct. WikiLeaks, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT-DECEMBER 1976 - APRIL 1977», Section 3, page 4. 16 April 1977. According to *The New York Times* an even

Table 2: Soviet and East European military technicians in Third World countries.⁴⁴⁶

	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976 ⁴⁴⁷	1977 ⁴⁴⁸
Total ^a	13,125	12,450	12,600	9,020	9,780	10,090	9,080	n.a.
Syria	750	800	1,140	1,780	2,150	3,200 ^b	2,500	1,750
Egypt	6,500	5,500	5,500	520	200	215	190	n.a.
Iraq	320	400	500	785	1,035	1,035	1200	n.a.
Libya	-	20	20	10	145	345	845	n.a.

^a Excluding Southeast Asia, which in 1975 were estimated at 700-1,00 military technicians.

^b The 1976 report had a total number of 3,050 technicians. The September 1977 report gave a figure of 3,200.

It was not certain that the 45% reduction of advisers was only due to the events in Lebanon.⁴⁴⁹ Nevertheless, as a part of the April 1977 agreements, the number of Soviet military personnel stationed in Syria would increase.⁴⁵⁰ This growth is telling, as no new weapons systems were agreed upon. The Kremlin wanted the surge to gain influence in Syria, while Damascus either wanted it for military reasons, or compromised to gain renewed Soviet co-operation. Whatever the case, it shows that the Syrian reduction of Soviet military advisors in 1976-77 was based on political considerations. Nevertheless, the decrease was less than the literature suggests and it was initiated by Syria, not the USSR. That is important as it shows that Assad was willing to and able to demonstrate his relative independence in relation to the USSR. He had some room to maneuver and negotiate.

Syrian military personnel in the USSR

The only writer mentioning this topic is Ramet who says that Assad halted sending Syrian personnel to the USSR in 1976.⁴⁵¹ The sources show that Syrian military personnel sent to train in the USSR increased sharply from 1971 to a climax in 1973, before falling to 300 in 1975.⁴⁵² It turned out that in 1976, 200 Syrian military personnel departed for the USSR.⁴⁵³ No more information about the reason for the decrease was given. The cut from 300 to 200

sharper reduction took place, from 3,500 after the Yom Kippur War to 1,500 military advisers in March 1977. *The New York Times* referred to US intelligence sources. NYT, «Syria Is Said to Reduce Military Role of Soviet», 1. 4 March 1977.

⁴⁴⁶ CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», 12. 21 October 1976.

⁴⁴⁷ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 54-55. 1 September 1977

⁴⁴⁸ WikiLeaks, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT-DECEMBER 1976 - APRIL 1977», Section 3, page 4. 16 April 1977.

⁴⁴⁹ Some contracts might have come to an end, and as the Syrian air force had been flying MIG-23 for three years it should be able to operate them by themselves. WikiLeaks, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT-DECEMBER 1976 - APRIL 1977», Section 6, page 2. 16 April 1977.

⁴⁵⁰ WikiLeaks, «REPORTS OF SYRO-SOVIET AGREEMENT ON MILITARY ITEMS IN MOSCOW», 1-3. 4 May 1977.

⁴⁵¹ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955*, 113.

⁴⁵² CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», Table 4, 56. September 1977

⁴⁵³ In addition, another 120 military personnel went to Eastern European countries.

was part of a downward trend which had been going on since 1973, and it was modest. Nevertheless, it is likely that it was another signal from Assad to the Russians that he would not tolerate interference in his Lebanon policy.

Table 3: Military personnel from the Third World in the USSR.⁴⁵⁴

	1955-75	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976 ⁴⁵⁵
Total	37,495	660	2,320	2,155	3,400	3,965	2,490
Syria	3,325	50	530	700	530	300	200
Egypt	5,665	300	220	100	-	-	-
Iraq	2,950	40	145	350	700	250	300
Libya	900	-	-	-	300	600	200

Syria was the largest recipient of Soviet military technicians in the Third World. Nevertheless, Syria tried to become less dependent on these and after the Soviet pressure started Assad countered by accelerating the reduction of Soviet advisers and Syrians in the USSR. This was probably to send Moscow a warning that Syria could chose to reduce the relations further.

In conclusion, Assad reduced the number of Soviet military technicians in Syria in 1976-77 to show displeasure with Moscow's pressure. Syria also sent fewer of its own personnel to the USSR. This demonstrates not just Assad's ability to press for political influence, but the military threat to Syria was low enough for him to be able to do that.

The Soviet Navy needs bases in the Mediterranean

The USSR had a strong desire to get access to new naval repair and supply facilities after Egypt expelled all Soviet military personnel and ended all use of ports and anchorages in April 1976.⁴⁵⁶ The Soviet navy was able to support 42 combatant ships through a 45-day period and capable of doing that in another war.⁴⁵⁷ However, in wartime operations the support system was expected to decrease sharply as combat progressed. Major repairs at sea were impossible. Still, in 1976, the Fifth Eskadra kept up the same level of surface activity as

⁴⁵⁴ CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», Table IV, 16. 21 October.

⁴⁵⁵ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 56. 1 September 1977.

⁴⁵⁶ CIA, «Prospects for Soviet Naval Access to Mediterranean Shore Facilities», 1. 2 August.

⁴⁵⁷ CIA, «Special National Intelligence Estimate», 7. 30 January 1975.

it had in previous years.⁴⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the number of Soviet diesel submarines decreased from 11 to eight after the expulsion from Egypt, and the operational level was lower.⁴⁵⁹



Mediterranean map.⁴⁶⁰

Soviet requests for increased access to Syrian ports

Prior to 1976, the Fifth Eskadra, about 50 vessels strong, included some of the USSR's most modern and effective surface combat ships.⁴⁶¹ Syria was close to the Fifth Eskadra's primary deployment area, and the extensive military investment the Russians had made presumably guaranteed a continued search for improved port access. The facilities in Tartus and Latakia were improved. However, both ports were crowded and lacked a dry dock, trained shipyard workers, and other required facilities. The ports were inadequate, especially for submarine maintenance, also before the loss of Egyptian facilities. Still, since the 1973 war, support ships were almost continuously present in the one of the ports servicing visiting Soviet diesel submarines and minesweepers.

⁴⁵⁸ The surface ships could access the Russian bases in the Black Sea. CIA, «Prospects for Soviet Naval Access to Mediterranean Shore Facilities», 1, 6. 2 August.

⁴⁵⁹ The diesel submarine force deployed from the Northern Fleet needed shore access or supply ships to a higher degree than surface ships. The Montreux Convention (Article 12) stated that Black Fleet submarines could only exit the Turkish straits for overhaul outside, after notice to the Turkish government and on the surface. Submarines from other fleets were not allowed to enter the Black Sea, and because of this, the USSR deployed Northern fleet submarines in the Mediterranean.

⁴⁶⁰ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 19 JULY 1976», 2. 19 July.

⁴⁶¹ CIA, «Prospects for Soviet Naval Access to Mediterranean Shore Facilities», 1-10. 2 August.

The majority of the Soviet support ships, including a large storage barge, a small ammunition ship, and small support ships were relocated from Alexandria to Tartus.⁴⁶²

According to a US report, the USSR asked Syria for increased access to port facilities after the expulsion from Egypt.⁴⁶³ In mid-July Assad claimed he had refused the Soviet request to use Syrian naval facilities and believed a Soviet motivation for its Lebanon policy might be to establish new facilities there.⁴⁶⁴ Prominent Syrian officials said that Egypt went too far in letting the Russians extend facilities in Alexandria.⁴⁶⁵ They claimed that Damascus, in contrast to Cairo, only agreed to a Soviet presence that was in their national interests. US observers regarded the Russian access as a *quid pro quo* for political, economic and military support. In August, Syria continued to insist on limiting access to bases, still the Soviet prospects were considered slightly better there than in Yugoslavia.⁴⁶⁶

In Tartus, submarines and minor combatant ships were replenished alongside auxiliary ships in October.⁴⁶⁷ The Russians were important in the construction of several new commercial docking and warehouse facilities. These would double the port's berthing capacity. Syria also received Soviet assistance in improving the transportation system, rail, road and airports. The Soviet lack of influence over Syrian actions in Lebanon did not bode well for future pressure on port access.⁴⁶⁸

Soviet and US nuclear-armed ships collide

The dangers of the superpowers' military deployment was demonstrated when a Soviet nuclear submarine and a US frigate collided on August 22, 1976 southwest of Greece.⁴⁶⁹ The K-22 Soviet Echo II-class submarine was nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed, while the US frigate *Vogel* is believed to have carried nuclear ASROC anti-submarine rockets.⁴⁷⁰ The Soviet

⁴⁶² Water and provisions were probably provided in the Syrian ports, but apparently not fuel oil. CIA, «Prospects for Soviet Naval Access to Mediterranean Shore Facilities», 7 and 20. 2 August.

⁴⁶³ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 16 JULY 1976», 2-3. 16 JULY.

⁴⁶⁴ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD «A, 1-2. 17 July. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD «B, 18 July. Assad told Hussein that he had rejected a Soviet proposal to use Syrian naval bases. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS», 1-4. 28 July.

⁴⁶⁵ CIA, «Prospects for Soviet Naval Access to Mediterranean Shore Facilities», 1-10. 2 August.

⁴⁶⁶ Other options were in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Malta, Lebanon and Albania. CIA, «Prospects for Soviet Naval Access to Mediterranean Shore Facilities», 2. 2 August 1976. The USSR increased pressure on Yugoslavian leader Tito for more access after the closure of Egyptian ports on 16 April. Soviet naval activity reportedly rose in Yugoslavian waters. WikiLeaks, «SOVIET NAVAL PRESENCE/PRESSURE ON YUGOSLAVS», 1-2. 13 August.

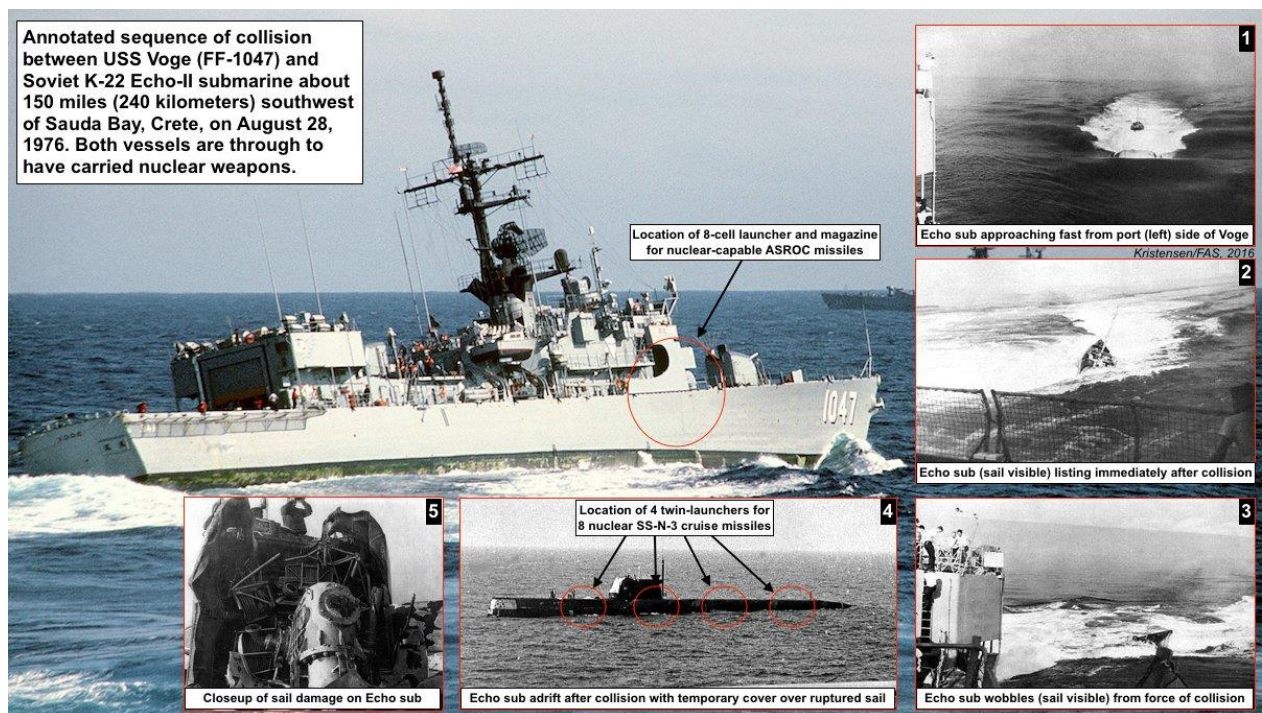
⁴⁶⁷ CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», 24. 21 October.

⁴⁶⁸ CIA, «Prospects for Soviet Naval Access to Mediterranean Shore Facilities», 7 and 20. 2 August.

⁴⁶⁹ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 30 AUGUST 1976», 5. 30 August.

⁴⁷⁰ According to Hans Kristensen, the director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists, the US Navy had been following the Soviet Echo II-class attack submarine for ten days. On 28 August, the Soviet sub surfaced alongside the USS *Vogel*,

submarine and the US vessel had been in contact for several days, but not immediately before the collision.⁴⁷¹ The USSR sent a diplomatic note to the US, however the latter disagreed with the conclusions of the note and claimed the Soviet submarine attempted to overtake the US vessel.⁴⁷² The way the Kremlin reacted is interesting. The incident could, whoever had the responsibility for it, have been used to try to justify more powerful Soviet actions. After the diplomatic note, no more is heard of the incident, indicating Soviet restraint. Apparently, Moscow did not want to escalate the situation.



A starboard quarter view of the frigate USS VOGUE conducting a high-speed evasive maneuver while operating with the aircraft carrier USS John F. Kennedy battle group.⁴⁷³

Syria threatens to deny Soviet access to Tartus

Syria threatened to deny Soviet ships access to Tartus and in late 1976 or January 1977.⁴⁷⁴ An Israeli report stated that the Syrians actually gave the USSR orders to leave Tartus.⁴⁷⁵ This was yet another demonstration of Assad's chagrin with the Soviet policy towards Syria, which

turned right and ran into the frigate. The collision caused severe damage to the Soviet submarine to its sail and some to its front hull section. The Voge lost its propeller and the hull got punctured. Kristensen estimates there were around 430 U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in the Mediterranean at the time. Kristensen, Hans. «Declassified: US Nuclear Weapons At Sea».

⁴⁷¹ WikiLeaks, «COLLISION WITH SOVIET SUBMARINE», 1-2. 29 August.

⁴⁷² WikiLeaks, «COLLISION WITH SOVIET SUBMARINE», 1. 2 September.

⁴⁷³ Kristensen, «Declassified: US Nuclear Weapons At Sea».

⁴⁷⁴ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN», 6. 13 January 1977.

⁴⁷⁵ The Israeli Military Intelligence got the information from a sensitive source who they described as very good. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 234 - JANUARY 17, 1977», 8. 17 January 1977.

he knew was their only «respectable» client state in the Middle East.⁴⁷⁶ By sending this signal, Assad made the Kremlin aware that both parties' opinions mattered. The US Embassy in Damascus saw it as a response to the reduced arms deliveries that finally arrived in December.⁴⁷⁷ Another intelligence cable said the Syrians again accused the USSR for continued cuts on military shipments and linked this to the threats regarding Tartus.⁴⁷⁸ However, the Syrians quickly cancelled the evacuation order. In mid-January five Soviet vessels remained in Tartus and a submarine arrived. This was similar to the situation before the evacuation order.

None of the parties wanted further deterioration of their relations.⁴⁷⁹ The Soviet reaction to the threat is not known, but taking into consideration the Soviet need for naval facilities, they would have taken the threat seriously. As we have seen, Czechoslovakian arms deliveries restarted in January 1977 and the USSR shipped MIG-fighters in April. This taken together with the Soviet need for naval bases suggests that the Kremlin promised to resume arms deliveries after the Tartus episode.

Syria rejected Soviet requests for increased naval access

The USSR needed naval bases for their Fifth Eskadra in the Mediterranean. This was a strategic goal as it involved defending the USSR and its shipping lines against the US. After the expulsion from Egypt, the Russians requested increased access in Syria, which Assad rejected. Assad was aware of the Soviet vulnerability, and to achieve arms supplies he threatened to deny them access to Tartus. Both parties needed each other and in April 1977, they re-established the pre-conflict level of relations.

Syria and Israel blockade access to the PLO-LNM in Lebanon

The USSR and its Arab clients, Egypt, Libya and Iraq wanted to support the PLO-LNM militarily to strengthen them in the fight against the Syrian army in Lebanon. However, the

⁴⁷⁶ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN», 6. 13 January 1977.

⁴⁷⁷ The Israeli Military Intelligence got the information from a sensitive source who they described as very good. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 234 - JANUARY 17, 1977», 8. 17 January 1977.

⁴⁷⁸ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN», 2. 21 January 1977.

⁴⁷⁹ CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN», 3. 21 January 1977.

only way to reach the PLO-LNM in Lebanon was by sea or air, and the Israeli and Syrian navies imposed blockades of Lebanese ports.

The Syrian and Israeli blockades

The Israeli and Syrian navy blockaded the Lebanese coast to stop supplies to the PLO-LNM. The Syrians imposed a sea blockade of Lebanon and the Soviet ambassador told Assad in July that he wanted to avoid problems with it.⁴⁸⁰ A US diplomat also noted the Syrian blockade saying it was partly successful in reducing arms shipments to the PLO-LNM.⁴⁸¹ On 17 August, Israeli state television published news of Israeli naval ships stopping boats and confiscating arms sent from Egypt and Libya to Lebanon.⁴⁸² The Israeli newspaper *Davar* reported that the PLO urged the USSR to send a supply ship to break the Israeli naval blockade. Jumbblatt commented on the blockade complaining about the lack of Soviet support to break it.⁴⁸³

Possibly, as a result of this the Soviet *Chargé d'affaires* to Washington, Yuli Vorontsov actually sent a *démarche*, a formal diplomatic correspondence, to the US accusing Israel of stopping and even sinking ships supplying the PLO-LNM.⁴⁸⁴ The USSR perceived the US as supporting the Israeli moves, and warned of extensive and dangerous implications if this continued. *Pravda's* Demchenko described the Civil War in Lebanon as not serving anyone except Israel, and was bitter towards the US for approving the Israeli blockade of Lebanon.⁴⁸⁵ Nonetheless, the First Secretary of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs Aleksandr Zotov was unaware of any Soviet plan to try out the Israeli blockade.⁴⁸⁶ The PLO, was clearly unsatisfied with this as Arafat, two months later, in October asked Brezhnev to take a clear stand on the Israeli naval blockade.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁰ WikiLeaks, «ALLEGATIONS OF SOVIET PRESSURE ON ASAD TO MODIFY HIS POLICY ON LEBANON», 1-2. 21 July.

⁴⁸¹ Talcott W. Seelye, who worked as the Lebanese President's Special representative reported this after a four-week assignment.

WikiLeaks, «POLITICAL BALANCE SHEET IN LEBANON AS OF JULY 26, 1976», 2-3. 26 July. Seelye succeeded Murphy as US Ambassador to Syria in 1978. The American Presidency Project, «United States Ambassador to Syria Nomination of Talcott W. Seelye».

⁴⁸² The daily Israeli *Haaretz* claimed a Soviet *démarche* to the US Government demanding a lift of the Israeli blockade. *The New York Times*, «Israel Broadcast Tells Of Lebanon 'Blockade'», 1. 17 August. The Israel Defense Minister Shimon Peres rejected that Tel Aviv blockaded the Lebanese coast. Nonetheless, he admitted that the Israeli navy stopped ships violating Israeli territorial waters. *The New York Times*, «Israeli Official Disavows Any Blockade of Lebanon», 1. 18 August. The Israeli newspaper *Jerusalem Post* detailed that the Israeli navy had stopped six vessels going to or leaving Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «EXPLANATION OF ISRAELI NAVAL ACTIVITY OFF LEBANON», 1-2. 18 August.

⁴⁸³ In general, Jumbblatt complained on the lack of Soviet support and doubted that Moscow really wanted to see the development of what Jumbblatt called a moderate, democratic socialism in the Middle East. Jumbblatt, I speak for Lebanon, 24.

⁴⁸⁴ The *démarche* claimed Israel prevented food and medicine to the PLO-LNM, and at the same time sent weapons and munitions to the Rightists in Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «SOVIET NOTE ON ISRAEL AND LEBANON», 1-2. 18 August.

⁴⁸⁵ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - AUGUST 17», 3. 17 August.

⁴⁸⁶ WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 27 DECLARATION OF SOVIET AFRO-ASIAN SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE ON LEBANON», 1-3. 27 August.

⁴⁸⁷ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION OCTOBER 14», 4. 14 October 1976.

A powerful Soviet navy

So what was the capability of the Soviet navy to break the blockade? A CIA analysis concluded that the USSR in general was capable of airlifting and shipping military aid to clients during war.⁴⁸⁸ The new Soviet aircraft carrier *Kiev* left the Black Sea on 18 July on its first voyage outside home waters.⁴⁸⁹ She conducted antisubmarine warfare operations with other ships in the eastern and central Mediterranean for two weeks before leaving through the Strait of Gibraltar for Murmansk.⁴⁹⁰ The fighter aircraft stationed onboard were not operational; still the ship posed a formidable threat.⁴⁹¹ At the end of July, the US considered the Fifth Eskadra could possibly be stronger than the US 6th fleet.⁴⁹² Therefore, there is no doubts regarding the Soviet capacity to supply materiel to Lebanon.

The Syrian navy was small, weak and limited to coastal defense.⁴⁹³ Nevertheless, the Soviet note that they wanted to avoid problems with the Syrian blockade shows a clear moderation in the activity. The Israeli blockade posed another challenge for the USSR. The Israeli navy, although small was stronger than the Syrian one. The main problem for the Russians was that the Israelis had US backing. The démarche to the US and some media articles blaming the Israeli activities were signals of protest. However, no actions were taken to enforce an opening of supply lines to the PLO and leftist in Lebanon. The USSR did not want to have a confrontation with the Israeli or the US Navy.

Soviet direct supply to the PLO-LNM

The USSR had provided the PLO with weapons before 1976.⁴⁹⁴ Most of the arms were provided through third countries, and until late 1975, Syria was the main transshipment

⁴⁸⁸ The US analysts agreed that the Soviet willingness to take foreign policy risks depended on «Moscow's perception of interest and power at the particular time and place». CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE - SOVIET STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES», 67, 13-16. 12 January 1977.

⁴⁸⁹ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 2 AUGUST 1976», 2. 2 August. The Kiev was the first of four ships built of the Kiev-class. To circumvent the Montreux Convention's restrictions on aircraft carriers, the class was designated as heavy aircraft-carrying cruisers.

⁴⁹⁰ Two destroyers that escorted the Kiev sailed to refuel from a tanker north of the Azores. They were expected to sail to Cuba, the first Soviet naval visit to the Caribbean island since June 1975. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 7 AUGUST 1976», 15. 7 August 1976.

⁴⁹¹ The aircraft were still not operational by April 1977 when the Kiev sailed with the Northern Fleet. She was expected to return to the Black Sea at some point. A second carrier was of the Kiev-class was near completion, a third was under construction. WikiLeaks, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT-DECEMBER 1976 - APRIL 1977», Section 3 page 2. 16 April 1977.

⁴⁹² WikiLeaks, «EVANS AND NOVACK COLUMN, JULY 23, 1976», 1-3. 23 July.

⁴⁹³ Global Security, «Syrian Arab Navy».

⁴⁹⁴ In November 1974, the Russians reassured Arafat that they would provide enough weapons and equipment to maintain and expand commando operations in Israel. They also gave the PLO military training in the USSR. CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», 24. 21 October.

country. At some point, the Russians seemed to directly ship an unknown number of arms to the PLO, as well as through Iraq, Egypt and Libya. A leader of a PFLP organization confirmed in an interview that the USSR supplied weapons to the PLO by sea. The arms were small arms and light weapons like AK-47s, Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) launchers and B-10 recoilless rifles, not heavy weapons.⁴⁹⁵

In mid-July 1976, Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Haydar asserted that the USSR had tried to smuggle in arms to the PLO-Leftist coalition, but he believed the attempts had been «largely unsuccessful».⁴⁹⁶ Assad also claimed that a Soviet ship brought Russian arms to Lebanon.⁴⁹⁷ When a Lebanese Christian-controlled gunboat came to investigate the incident, it came under fire from an unknown, presumably Soviet ship. From air reconnaissance and other sources, the Syrians were certain there were Soviet naval ships in the area at the time.

About the same time, the Soviet ambassador in Damascus told Assad the USSR would support the PLO more openly.⁴⁹⁸ The ambassador said that Soviet ships with cargo for the Palestinians so far had not used the Soviet flag, but from then on they would show the Soviet flag. Meanwhile, a US diplomat reported that the USSR increased arms supplies to the PLO-LNM.⁴⁹⁹ In spite of the Syrian sea blockade, there was «evidence in past week that several important arms shipments have arrived». Assad asserted that a huge Soviet ship in Sidon offloaded large quantities of arms, ammunition and unspecified heavy weapons.⁵⁰⁰ Assad told King Hussein that he had clear proof of several Soviet ships delivering arms to the PLO and leftists.⁵⁰¹ According to Farouk Kaddoumi, the leader of the PLO's Political Department, the USSR augmented arms support to the Palestinians in late July.⁵⁰² As Damascus did not allow these to pass through Syria, Moscow sent them by sea, including with the carrier *Kiev*. The Fifth Eskadra was reportedly more active, and a Soviet ship

⁴⁹⁵ Interview with Haitham Abdo, head of the Palestinian Youth organization, part of the PFLP, said this in an in Beirut in 6 November 2017.

⁴⁹⁶ Haydar said this to the US Ambassador Murphy in Damascus. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER COMMENTS», 1-4. 16 July.

⁴⁹⁷ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD» B, 3. 18 July.

⁴⁹⁸ The source of the information was editor of the Syrian Tishreen newspaper, Dr. Ghassan Rifai who spoke to a US Embassy official on 20 July. WikiLeaks, «ALLEGATIONS OF SOVIET PRESSURE ON ASAD TO MODIFY HIS POLICY ON LEBANON», 1-2. 21 July.

⁴⁹⁹ Talcott W. Seelye, who worked as the Lebanese President's Special representative reported this after a four-week assignment.

WikiLeaks, «POLITICAL BALANCE SHEET IN LEBANON AS OF JULY 26, 1976», 2-3. 26 July. Seelye succeeded Murphy as US Ambassador to Syria in 1978. The American Presidency Project, «United States Ambassador to Syria Nomination of Talcott W. Seelye».

⁵⁰⁰ He referred to a message the Syrians had intercepted, which asked whether the heavy weapons were for groups directly subordinated to the USSR. Assad said this was part of increased Russian activity.

⁵⁰¹ King Hussein shared the information from his conversation with Assad in a meeting with US Ambassador Thomas Pickering about.

WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - CONTACTS WITH ASAD», 1-2. 26 July. Pickering became ambassador in 1974. U.S. Department of State. «The Foreign Service: Through Ambassador Pickering's Eyes». May 1999.

⁵⁰² WikiLeaks, «SECOND BREJNEV LETTER TO ASAD: QADDUMI CONFIRMS SOVIET SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS», 1-2. 27 July.

delivered large numbers of arms and ammunition including heavy weapons in PLO-controlled Sidon.⁵⁰³

In early August, there were other signs of Soviet arms supplies to the PLO both directly and through other countries according to the US State Department.⁵⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the report stresses that the Russians did not do anything that would put their relations with Damascus at risk. Meanwhile, Cairo authorized the USSR, Iraq and Libya to send materiel to Lebanon through Egyptian ports.⁵⁰⁵ There were also other reports of USSR sending arms to the PLO and Lebanese left through other Arab countries.⁵⁰⁶ In October, a CIA report asserted that the Russians provided the Palestinians with small arms and light weapons deliveries.⁵⁰⁷ The light weapons consisted of machineguns, mortars, 75mm antitank guns and armored personnel carriers.⁵⁰⁸ However, no tanks, artillery or other heavy weapons were reported to have been delivered. The Syrian army was well-equipped with heavy weapons and the Soviet supplies of small arms and light weapons would not suffice to fight major battles.

In addition, Moscow supported the Lebanese Communist party (LCP). The LCP benefitted handsomely during the 16 months of civil war, according to the Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Haydar.⁵⁰⁹ The Mitrokhin files confirm Soviet financial support of the LCP. On 26 July 1976, the KGB sent a diplomatic car from Damascus to Lebanon providing the LCP with US\$50,000.⁵¹⁰ In September, the KGB delivered another US\$100,000. Financial support undoubtedly helped the Lebanese Communists, nevertheless these amounts would hardly be enough to make Syria withdraw from the country.

⁵⁰³ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - CONTACTS WITH ASAD», 1-2. 28 July.

⁵⁰⁴ WikiLeaks, «OFFICIAL-INFORMAL», 3. 3 August.

⁵⁰⁵ WikiLeaks, «EGYPT VERSUS SYRIA IN LEBANON», 2. 4 August.

⁵⁰⁶ WikiLeaks, «ACTION MEMORANDUM: HOUGHTON/MACK VISIT TO LEBANON (S/S NO.7618293) FOR THE SECRETARY FROM DAY», 3-4. 28 August.

⁵⁰⁷ CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», 24. 21 October.

⁵⁰⁸ (a) «Small arms» are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for individual use. They include, inter alia, revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns; (b) «Light weapons» are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for use by two or three persons serving as a crew, although some may be carried and used by a single person. They include, inter alia, heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of a caliber of less than 100 millimeters. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, «International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons», 3.

⁵⁰⁹ He did not specify how this happened. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER COMMENTS», 1-4. 16 July.

⁵¹⁰ Andrew and Mitrokhin. *The World was going our way*, 206.

In addition, Assad claimed that volunteers from Cuba, Eastern Europe and other countries were combatting in Lebanon.⁵¹¹ Later he admitted that no Cubans were present.⁵¹² A Cuban Embassy official in Syria denied the presence of any military advisors, and commented that the situation was too complicated to send soldiers the way Havana did to Angola.⁵¹³

Military supplies through Palestinian airfields in Lebanon

The Syrians also said the Palestinian and leftists were constructing two airfields in Southern Lebanon in mid-July and claimed the USSR presided over the airports in addition to one heliport.⁵¹⁴ Assad himself repeated these assertions to the US Ambassador Murphy.⁵¹⁵ The PFLP leader said the USSR maybe supplied weapons through Sidon airport and another airfield.⁵¹⁶ So it is possible that the PLO received some small arms and light weapons by air. Less likely are the claims by former Lebanese President Chamoun that French communist technicians planned to assemble 16 F-1 Mirage fighters in Southern Lebanon.⁵¹⁷ He called the Soviet Union's involvement an intervention and asked for US aid. However, no French planes were ever reported over Lebanon, revealing Chamoun's claims as political propaganda. Nevertheless, the statements reveal the Lebanese Christians' view of the USSR.

Limited Soviet military support of the PLO-LNM

The several reports, from different sources, show that the USSR did send arms supplies directly to the PLO-LNM after the Syrian invasion of Lebanon. Although the quantities are unknown, the volume was not enough to enable the PLO-LNM to stand up to the Syrian army. The Soviet navy had, as we have seen, the military capacity to break the blockade, so

⁵¹¹ Assad said he believed Soviet interference would increase. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS», 1-4. 28 July.

⁵¹² Assad asserted that Cubans and other non-Arabs were actively recruiting, training and supplying volunteers for the PLO-LNM. A large group of volunteers entered Tripoli in the beginning of August. In a meeting with Assad, the US Ambassador Murphy repeated that the American government had wanted to avoid a Syrian military intervention in Lebanon. However, Syria could not withdraw now, as this would give the opponents a victory. Assad appreciated the US support for Syrian independent policy as this was his own political principle. Murphy recommended Kissinger to share more information about Soviet activities with Assad. This could be done without hinting that the US wanted a Cold War competition with Syria as the prize. WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 7 MEETING WITH ASAD», 1-4. 7 August.

⁵¹³ If the situation had been easier they could have sent troops. He further said Cuba did not support any «volunteers» on the ground. However, they knew of some «Spanish-speaking fighters, perhaps from Mexico» supporting the leftist. WikiLeaks, «AUG. 4 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORTS RETURN OF PLO DELEGATION TO DAMASCUS; CRITICISM OF SINAI ACCORD CONTINUES», 1. 4 August.

⁵¹⁴ Assad thought the 800 and 2,000 meters long runways would soon receive Iraqi, Libyan and maybe Cuban «elements». WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD «b, 3-4. 18 July. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS», 1-4. 28 July.

⁵¹⁵ The Syrian president said that he had not believed his own intelligence reporting about runways earlier, but now he did. He claimed that the fields were close to completion, and would be able to receive Soviet Antonov transport aircraft. WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 7 MEETING WITH ASAD», 1-4. 7 August.

⁵¹⁶ Interview with Haitham Abdo, head of the Palestinian Youth organization, part of the PFLP, said this in an in Beirut in 6 November 2017. He also said the US made an agreement with Syria to enter Lebanon. He was young at the time and not present at the weapon shipments himself but had been given the information internally in the PLO.

⁵¹⁷ WikiLeaks, «MEETING WITH FRANJIEH AND CHAMOUN», 3. 25 August.

this was a political decision. The purpose was probably to try to a certain degree satisfy the PLO-LNM and enable them to fight. At the same time it was not enough to threaten Syria on the battlefield by a force strong enough to put them on the defensive.

Egyptian and Libyan support of the PLO-LNM

The Egyptian President Sadat wanted to keep the PLO-LNM fighting the Christians and Syrians to a standstill. In his plan, an Arab League truce would halt Syrian dominance over Lebanon and the Palestinians, and this would be to Egypt's gain. Consequently, and in spite of its tensions with the USSR, Iraq and Libya the Egyptian government authorized these countries to send military materiel to Sidon and Tyre through Egyptian ports.⁵¹⁸

Around the 10 June, there were unusual Egyptian transportation flights to Dresden, which might have carried arms.⁵¹⁹ Since mid-June, Egypt, and to a minor degree Libya transshipped Iraqi and possibly Soviet and East European arms to the PLO-LNM in Lebanon. The Syrian navy prevented some ships from entering Sidon, but several shiploads managed to get through the blockade and delivered their cargo at Tyre.⁵²⁰ In July, Assad also said the Egyptian government actively cooperated in Soviet arms deliveries.⁵²¹ He added that Palestinian and Libyan volunteers arrived in significant numbers in Lebanon.

A Lebanese pro-Christian radio reported on 30 July that a Libyan ship unloaded 48 armored vehicles and 22 amphibious armored troop carriers of Soviet origin.⁵²² US analysts briefly stated that Libyan troops and equipment arrived in Sidon, and saw the Syrian offensive towards Sidon as a possible reply to the Libyan move. The Lebanese President Frangieh also complained that Libyan military units were fighting the rightists in Lebanon.⁵²³ According to King Hussein, Libya sent military equipment including 60 armored personnel carriers to Lebanon.⁵²⁴ The propaganda war between Egypt and Syria increased. Syrian media attacked

⁵¹⁸ WikiLeaks, «EGYPT VERSUS SYRIA IN LEBANON», 2. 4 August.

⁵¹⁹ The information was given by Egyptian officials to the US Embassy. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 11 JULY 1976», 2. 11 July.

⁵²⁰ The number of vessels and amount of arms was unknown. The arms shipped by the Libyans were of their own stock.

⁵²¹ King Hussein shared the information from his conversation with Assad in a meeting with US Ambassador Thomas Pickering about. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - CONTACTS WITH ASAD», 1-2. 26 July. Pickering became ambassador in 1974. U.S. Department of State. «The Foreign Service: Through Ambassador Pickering's Eyes».

⁵²² A few weeks earlier Arafat had called for volunteers, especially all Palestinians to come and fight in Lebanon. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 2 AUGUST 1976», 2. 2 August.

⁵²³ WikiLeaks, «AUGUST 4 AND 5 CAIRO PRESS ON LEBANON», 1. 5 August.

⁵²⁴ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--SITUATION IN LEBANON AND SYRIA», 1. 4 August.

Egypt for supporting shipment of Iraqi soldiers to Lebanon.⁵²⁵ Libya received more Soviet arms than they could absorb.⁵²⁶ Gaddafi was also reported to host training camps and supply small arms to terrorist organizations and guerilla groups in several countries. So Libya was able to supply the PLO-LNM with arms. During the Riyad Summit, Sadat pledged to end the cooperation with Iraq.⁵²⁷ Egypt probably stopped its own arms transfers to the PLO-LNM.

Egypt and Libya supplying the PLO-LNM

Egypt had had tense relations with the USSR, Iraq and Libya. However, the conflict with Syria was arguably more important than their mutual conflicts. Egypt cooperated with the USSR, Libya and Iraq in shipping weapons to the PLO-LNM.

Iraqi conflict with Syria and support of the PLO

The USSR established relations with Iraq after the pro-Western monarchy in Baghdad was overthrown in 1958.⁵²⁸ Since then, the two countries officially kept a «strategic partnership» for most of the following three decades.⁵²⁹ Iraq became a Soviet client state, usually ranked only after Egypt and Syria in the region. Moscow both sought to keep Iraq out of the US sphere of influence and to make profits on weapons sales.⁵³⁰ In contrast to Syria, Iraq signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR.⁵³¹

Baghdad supported the Palestinians' armed resistance, but in contrast to the USSR, it rejected the UN Resolution 242, negotiations with Tel Aviv, and Israel's right to exist.⁵³² Iraq was ruled by the Baath party, and Vice-President Saddam Hussein was in reality the

⁵²⁵ According to Beirut Radio 150 Iraqi troops had travelled by plane from Bagdad to Cairo and the Egyptians arranged shipment to Tyre. The information was allegedly collected from captured Iraqi soldiers in Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «AUG 6 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORT SYRO-LEBANESE- PALESTINIAN MEETING WILL TAKE PLACE IN SOFAR TODAY; EGYPTIANS AND IRAQIS CRITICIZED FOR JOINT EFFORTS TO FACILITATE ENTRY OF IRQQI TROOPS INTO LEBANON», 1-2. 6 August.

⁵²⁶ CIA, «SOVIET MILITARY POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD», 24. 21 October 1976.

⁵²⁷ WikiLeaks, «EC.: INTSUM 178...» 26 October.

⁵²⁸ Smolansky and Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq*, 13.

⁵²⁹ Kreutz, Andrej. «Russian-Iraqi Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis», 2.

⁵³⁰ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 157.

⁵³¹ Smolansky and Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq*, 17. The 15-year agreement was signed in April 1972. Iraq bought TU-22 medium range bombers, the first outside the USSR and Eastern Europe, and MIG-23s the most advanced fighter of the USSR. Baghdad also received SA-3 Surface-to-air missiles and Scud surface-to-surface missiles. In January 1975 an unknown number of armored personnel carriers, artillery, Osa patrol boats and P-6 torpedo boats arrived inn Iraq. In the economic field the USSR also made a huge contribution. After Iraq nationalized the Iraq Petroleum Company in June 1972, the Russians agreed to receive payment of Iraqi loans in oil and in 1973 the USSR imported 4 million tons of Iraqi oil. Moscow received the oil at 70% of the price. After the 1973 price-increase of oil, this turned out to be lucrative for Moscow as they paid US\$3 a barrel for the Iraqi crude and sold it for US\$18 a barrel to the West.

⁵³² Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 161.

strongman in Baghdad from the early 1970s.⁵³³ However, Iraq was, much to Moscow's frustration, a bitter rivalry with its in sister-party in Syria. In addition, Saddam suppressed the Soviet-friendly Iraqi communist party. Iraq also had a conflict with Iran over the border and Tehran supported Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq. In 1975 Iraq and Iran settled their border dispute, and this decreased Baghdad's need for Soviet arms and political support.⁵³⁴

The Iraqi strategy and collaboration with the USSR in 1976

Iraq sought, like Syria, to become more independent from the USSR, but was still dependent on Soviet arms in 1976.⁵³⁵ This necessarily put limits on Baghdad's freedom and although Moscow wanted Syria to withdraw from Lebanon, it was not hostile to Assad as the Iraqi leaders were. At the same time, both countries had coinciding interests in supporting the PLO. It turns out that Bagdad had, in vain, pushed Assad to allow Iraqi troops to pass through Syria to Lebanon since mid-May.⁵³⁶ After the Syrian invasion, an Iraqi official noted that Moscow became more critical of Assad, and Baghdad supported a Lebanese roundtable meeting without foreign intervention.⁵³⁷ This was the same position as the Kremlin had.

Saddam's strategy included several components: To have an Iraqi contingent in the Arab Peace-keeping force in Lebanon; increase the Iraqi army on the Syrian border; commit attacks inside Syria; and support the PLO politically and militarily. Iraq succeed neither in influencing the Arab League's Lebanon policy, nor to form a part of the Arab peacekeeping force.⁵³⁸ In spite of this Baghdad continued the pressure. A pro-PLO-LNM and anti-Syrian conference was held in Baghdad on 26 June, however, it had little impact.⁵³⁹

⁵³³ Saddam was formally number two in the Iraqi power hierarchy after president al-Bakr, the latter was chronically ill and his health was declining. After August 1976, Saddam tried to publically project an image as being a dynamic leader, apparently to prepare the Iraqis for Bakr's early departure as president. CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN», 5. 16 November.

⁵³⁴ Smolansky and Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq*, 25.

⁵³⁵ WikiLeaks, «ECONOMIST-FOREIGN REPORT ARTICLE ON SOVIET-IRAQ RELATIONS», 3. 2 November.

⁵³⁶ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 10 June 1976», 2.

⁵³⁷ The official, Ibrahim al-Wali Director General for Political Affairs at the Foreign Ministry was worried Syria might annex Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «IRAQI OFFICIAL DENIES THAT IRAQ WILL ATTACK SYRIA», 1. 22 June.

⁵³⁸ The Iraqi foreign Minister was coldly received in Cairo on 25 July and the supply of Iraqi weapons through Egypt phased out. WikiLeaks, «FRUSTRATIONS OF IRAQI REGIME», 1. 27 July. WikiLeaks, «IRAQI OFFICIAL DENIES THAT IRAQ WILL ATTACK SYRIA», 1. 22 June.

⁵³⁹ President Bakr inaugurated the conference. The delegates, who were invited in a personal capacity, were considered by the Americans to be «a motley collection of leftist trade unionists, professional associations, journalists, student organizations, Palestinian organizations, intellectuals and political splinter groups...». Arafat, who came to Bagdad, was bitter towards Syria and asked the Iraqis for help. WikiLeaks, «POPULAR CONFERENCE IN SUPPORT OF PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE AND LEBANESE NATIONAL MOVEMENT», 1-2. 2 July.

Iraqi troop build-up threatens Syria

On the Syria-Iraqi border region, Iraq normally had 20,000 soldiers deployed.⁵⁴⁰ In early June Baghdad started to send troops to the area. Interestingly the first report appears on 10 June, a day after the 9 June TASS statement.⁵⁴¹ Damascus in turn sent troops to eastern Syria to meet the threat, and King Hussein of Jordan was worried Iraq might intervene in Syria.⁵⁴² By 18 June, there was more than 40,000 soldiers in western Iraq.⁵⁴³ This was a considerable force compared to the strength of the Syrian and PLA/Sai'qa forces, see the table below.

Table 4: Approximate strength of major troop deployments in June 1976.⁵⁴⁴

	Syrian	PLA/Sai'qa	Iraqi
Lebanon	12,000	8,000*	-
Lebanon border area	5,000	-	-
Syrian-Iraqi border area	12,000	-	45,000
Golan heights	75,000	-	-
Total	104,000	8,000	45,000

* An unknown number of troops had relocated to Syria the last few days.

Bagdad denied allegations that Iraq would attack Syria.⁵⁴⁵ However, by mid-July the Iraqis had 70,000 men on the border, and the CIA saw two possible purposes behind the increase: to relieve pressure on the PLO, or encourage the domestic opposition in Syria.⁵⁴⁶ Both seem credible as Bagdad already instigated attacks in Syria and supported the PLO. The Israeli Foreign Minister Yigal Allon thought that the Iraqi moves were arranged with Moscow as a threat to intervene if Syria went too far in Lebanon.⁵⁴⁷ This may well have been the case as both parties wanted to limit the Syrian role in Lebanon. However, by mid-July the CIA concluded that the Iraqi troop build-up did not work.⁵⁴⁸ Yet, as they thought Iraq might attack Syria with little warning, there was an Iraqi military threat.

⁵⁴⁰ WikiLeaks, «IRAQI OFFICIAL DENIES THAT IRAQ WILL ATTACK SYRIA», 1. 22 June.

⁵⁴¹ Sayigh, *Armed struggle and the search for state*, 781. Sayigh refers to the Lebanese daily *al-Safir* of 10 June. By 11 June, Baghdad had sent more than 13,000 troops to the area. Assad said it was unclear to him whether the buildup was meant to threaten Syria or be part of an Arab peacekeeping force in Lebanon. CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 11 June 1976», 1. 11 June.

⁵⁴² King Hussein planned closely with Assad how to best respond to such an event.

⁵⁴³ By 12 June the troops in western Iraq consisted of more than two armored divisions in addition, other units were deployed. CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 12 June 1976», 3. CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 18 June 1976», 2. 18 June.

⁵⁴⁴ CIA, «The President's Daily Brief 18 June 1976», 3. 18 June.

⁵⁴⁵ The official, Ibrahim al-Wali Director General for Political Affairs at the Foreign Ministry was worried Syria might annex Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «IRAQI OFFICIAL DENIES THAT IRAQ WILL ATTACK SYRIA», 1. 22 June.

⁵⁴⁶ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 17 JULY 1976», 4. 17 July.

⁵⁴⁷ Journal of Palestine Studies, «Syrian Military Intervention in Lebanon and Its Consequences», 135.

⁵⁴⁸ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 17 JULY 1976», 4. 17 July.

Iraqi support of Syrian armed opposition

Iraq called for the regime in Damascus to be overthrown, and did its best to stir up internal problems against it.⁵⁴⁹ At its disposal, Baghdad had a strong Syrian exile community willing to execute covert operations in Syria.⁵⁵⁰ A high-ranking Baathist official was assassinated in Damascus on 10 July.⁵⁵¹ Syrian media accused Saddam of the assassination, and security in Baghdad was tightened.⁵⁵² Attacks in Syria continued throughout the autumn. In early August, the Latakia Governorate building was partly destroyed by explosives just before President Assad was going to visit it. On 31 August, a bomb went off in front of the president's brother Rif'at al Assad's house.⁵⁵³ On 2 September, two more bombs exploded in Damascus. Two Palestinians attempted launch rockets towards President Assad's house.⁵⁵⁴

Iraqi support of the PLO-LNM

Several reports disclosed Iraqi military support of the PLO-LNM in Lebanon. On 10 June the Iraqis began airlifting small arms destined for the Lebanese leftist to Egypt.⁵⁵⁵ King Hussein said the Jordanians had caught truckloads of weapons from Iraq destined for Lebanon, suspecting several had got through already.⁵⁵⁶ At the end of July, Assad asserted that three Iraqi battalions were present in Beirut, and Baghdad shipped arms through Egyptian ports. Egypt and Libya authorized Iraq to send soldiers and materiel to Lebanon through their ports.⁵⁵⁷ The flow was reportedly not enough to tip the balance of forces in early August, but it was possibly enough to undermine the recent ceasefire agreement. More Iraqi volunteers

⁵⁴⁹ The events of Lebanon were the most important topic in the press and the US analysts called the Iraqi press near-hysterical. WikiLeaks, «IRAQI REGIME FRUSTRATED BY COURSE OF EVENTS», 1-2. 13 July. Syrian state-run news agency SANA charged both Iraq and Fatah with exploiting the situation on behalf of the US and Israel to distort the Syrian position. WikiLeaks, «JULY 10 SYRIAN MEDIA ON LEBANON», 2.

⁵⁵⁰ The Americans expected the Iraqis to increase support of these actions. WikiLeaks, «IRAQ-SYRIAN RELATIONS», 2. 2 July.

⁵⁵¹ Baath National Command member Ahmed al-Azzawi died in a bomb explosion at the headquarters of the Baath Party National Command. Ahmad al-Izzawi had participated in the Baghdad Revolution of 1958 and became a member of the Iraqi Baath regional command in 1970 before joining the Baath Party's National command in 1971. The National command was the Pan-Arab organization controlled by Syria. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN MEDIA ANNOUNCE ASSASSINATION OF BAATHIST OFFICIAL», 1. 12 July.

⁵⁵² The Syrians also claimed Iraq was sowing discord in the Beqaa valley in Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «JULY 13 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORT ARAB LEAGUE», 1-2. Syrian media also made verbal attacks on Iraq. WikiLeaks, «JULY 13 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORT ARAB LEAGUE», 1-2. 13 July. Saddam stopped taking his walks in less populated areas of Baghdad. WikiLeaks, «FRUSTRATIONS OF IRAQI REGIME», 2. At the same time rumors of a Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq was seen by the US as a Syrian attempt to subvert the regime in Baghdad. WikiLeaks, «IRAQI REGIME FRUSTRATED BY COURSE OF EVENTS», 1. 13 July.

⁵⁵³ WikiLeaks, «BOMB EXPLODES NEAR RESIDENCE OF RIF'AT AL-ASAD», 1. 2 September.

⁵⁵⁴ They set up rocket launchers in a neighbor house, but were caught and executed in October. In addition, three Alawite majors were killed in Hama in October, possibly by the Youth of Muhammad group seeking revenge for the death of their leader Marwan Hadid. The Baath Party Deputy Secretary General Abdullah al-Ahmar survived an attempt on his life. A bomb exploded in the car of Ba'ath Party Regional Command member Mahud Hadid. WikiLeaks, «RECENT ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS AGAINST SARG LEADERS», 1. 14 October.

⁵⁵⁵ The information was given by Egyptian officials to the US Embassy. CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 11 JULY 1976», 2. 11 July.

⁵⁵⁶ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING - LEBANON SITUATION», 2-4. 28 July. Some of the Leftist groups that escalated fighting probably did it with Iraqi support according to US analysts. CIA, «Lebanon's dissolution», 28. 1 August 1976.

⁵⁵⁷ WikiLeaks, «EGYPT VERSUS SYRIA IN LEBANON», 2. 4 August. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 12, - AUGUST 5, 1976», 1. 5 August.

were also reported to come into the country.⁵⁵⁸ A US State Department cable citing a «clandestine source», also reported that Iraqi volunteers, mainly from the Iraqi-controlled Arab Liberation Force (ALF), were regularly coming by sea through Egypt and Libya.⁵⁵⁹

Syrian media claimed 500 Iraqi soldiers had arrived in Lebanon with Egyptian assistance.⁵⁶⁰ The goal was supposedly to inflame sedition when peace negotiations were concluding successfully. The Israelis also claimed that the USSR sent weapons to Lebanon through Iraq.⁵⁶¹ Lebanese President Frangieh speculated that the PLO wanted to turn Lebanon into a Soviet satellite state.⁵⁶² He and former President Camille Chamoun were worried about the help the PLO got from the outside, especially Iraq and Libya. Chamoun said there were 1,000 Iraqis troops present in Lebanon and that Baghdad aimed to add another 5,000 soldiers. He further claimed that the Iraqis used modern Soviet tanks in battles in Beirut. On the other hand, a Lebanese military intelligence agent asserted there were 3,000 Iraqis in Lebanon.⁵⁶³ Some of them being Palestinians who had been living in Iraq might explain this increase.

In October, the Norwegian Ambassador to Lebanon, Tancred Ibsen referred to a report about 4,000 Iraqi troops in Lebanon.⁵⁶⁴ There was also a report about Cuban experts training Palestinian commandos in Iraq in guerrilla warfare.⁵⁶⁵ As we have seen, in Riyadh, Sadat pledged to end cooperating with Iraq and that seems credible as he reconciled with Assad.⁵⁶⁶

Soviet influence over Iraq

The question is not if Moscow supported the Iraqi policy towards Syria and the PLO-LNM, but its intention and the level of involvement. In July, Soviet media favourably covered the

⁵⁵⁸ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--SITUATION IN LEBANON AND SYRIA», 1. 4 August.

⁵⁵⁹ One hundred volunteers flew from Baghdad to Cairo on 28 July before being shipped to Lebanon by sea. WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 12, - AUGUST 5, 1976», 1. 5 August.

⁵⁶⁰ The Iraqi soldiers flew to Cairo and the Egyptians provided ships to transport them to Tyre. The information was allegedly collected from captured Iraqi soldiers in Lebanon. The goal was supposedly to destroy the successful peace negotiations. WikiLeaks, «AUG 6 SYRIAN MEDIA REPORT SYRO-LEBANESE- PALESTINIAN MEETING WILL TAKE PLACE IN SOFAR TODAY; EGYPTIANS AND IRAQIS CRITICIZED FOR JOINT EFFORTS TO FACILITATE ENTRY OF IRQI TROOPS INTO LEBANON», 1-2. 6 August.

⁵⁶¹ The arms were sent by plane to Egypt where reportedly the Egyptians transshipped them to «terrorists» in Lebanon. WikiLeaks, «EXCHANGE OF NOTES WITH SOVIETS ON ALLEGED ISRAEL BLOCKADE», 1-2. 20 August.

⁵⁶² WikiLeaks, «MEETING WITH FRANJIEH AND CHAMOUN», 3. 25 August.

⁵⁶³ WikiLeaks, «LEBANESE SITUATION AUG 28», 1-3. 28 August.

⁵⁶⁴ A Christian officer in Southern Lebanon shared the information with a Norwegian correspondent who in turn informed the ambassador. As the Iraqis had little combat experience, they had been «slaughtered like sheep» and 1,500 were killed or badly wounded. WikiLeaks, «NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR'S REPORT RE IRAQI TROOPS IN LEBANON», 1. 29 October.

⁵⁶⁵ WikiLeaks, «ECONOMIST-FOREIGN REPORT ARTICLE ON SOVIET-IRAQ RELATIONS», 3. 2 November.

⁵⁶⁶ WikiLeaks, «EC.: INTSUM 178...» 26 October.

18th anniversary of the Iraqi revolution.⁵⁶⁷ However, the USSR did not respond to an Iraqi request for modern MIG-25 fighters, showing the limits of support.⁵⁶⁸ At earlier instances of increased Iraq-Syria tensions, the Russians tried to reconcile them as the USSR certainly did not want a war between its two main Middle East clients. Now, however, given the USSR's displeasure with Syria, the Kremlin would probably have supported the Iraqi policy to pressure Assad and warn him that the USSR had the means to escalate in case they wanted to. The Kremlin accepted a limited Iraqi pressure on Assad and support of the PLO-LNM. This may have curbed the Syrian pressure in Lebanon somewhat, however, it did not stop it.

Bearing in mind Iraq's strong independent policies it is not likely that Iraq would do this solely to please the Soviet leaders. With the increased oil prices, Saddam had more wealth and economic independence from the USSR than Syria had. Iraq did not share a border with Israel and did not fear an attack from Tel Aviv to the same degree as Syria did. In sum, Iraq led a more independent policy towards Moscow than Assad did, and could act with more freedom regarding the PLO and Lebanese leftists.

The Syrian threat perception

Assad was forced to take into consideration the Iraqi pressure. The Syrian armed forces had been increased from 130,000 in 1974 to somewhere between 177,500 and 230,000 in 1975.⁵⁶⁹ After such a rapid growth, the quality of the new units would necessarily be limited. Moreover, Syria was fighting in Lebanon, needed to secure the frontier with Israel, and sought control over the domestic opposition. The 70,000 strong Iraqi border force was a threat, though probably not overwhelming as Assad knew the Kremlin would not tolerate an Iraqi attack. The Syrian regime met it by increasing its own troop level. The domestic security was tightened, and this worked. The Iraqi troops and material support of the PLO-LNM in Lebanon seems to have prolonged the conflict without changing the balance of power. In sum, Assad probably became more cautious in his moves against the PLO-LNM in Lebanon.

⁵⁶⁷ Central Press published the telegram from USSR leaders who congratulated the Iraqi president al-Bakr. The mouthpiece of the Soviet Communist Party, *Pravda* referred positively to the Iraqi daily «al-Dzhumusiya» article on «Strategic union of Iraq with the socialist countries». WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PRESS SUMMARY - JULY 17-19», 4. 19 July.

⁵⁶⁸ Baghdad made the request in the spring of 1976. «FRUSTRATIONS OF Iraqi regime», 2. 27 July.

⁵⁶⁹ Fitzgerald gives the lower figure derived from The Military Balance 1981/82. Fitzgerald, «The Syrian Army: An activist military force in the Middle East», 12. Ramet use the higher figure. Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian relationship since 1955*, 102.

Chapter 5. Soviet economic and cultural relations with Syria

This chapter analyses to what degree the economic and cultural relations between Moscow and Damascus were affected by the Syrian intervention in Lebanon. A country's vulnerability towards another state is influenced by the strengths and weaknesses of its domestic economy and international relations. Therefore, it is also necessary to look at Syria's domestic economy, and how other countries who wanted and had the means to influence Syria, primarily the Arab oil countries and the US, acted.

Economic relations as a key to Syrian development 1955-75

During the 1950s and 60s the economic aspects of the Soviet-Syrian relations were as important as the military features.⁵⁷⁰ It was only after Assad took power in 1970 that the military dimension took predominance. The first trade and payment accord was signed in 1955, and a large economic agreement was made in 1957 providing Soviet assistance for industry and irrigation.⁵⁷¹ In the late 1950s a US-German company discovered oil in Syria.⁵⁷² However, the Syrian state took over the fields in 1958 and developed an oil industry where the USSR later played a decisive role. The Syrian left-wing regime of 1966-70 emphasized economic development and increasingly relied on the USSR to achieve their goals. Economy became the major theme of cooperation, and the largest Soviet project, launched in 1966, was the building of a huge dam and power plant on the Euphrates River.

In the late 1960s, Hafez al-Assad, defense minister at the time, criticized the economic policy claiming that it had a negative impact on the armed forces.⁵⁷³ Apart from blaming the policy for the defeat against Israel in the 1967 Six-day War, he resented the economic dependence on the USSR. Assad wanted to liberalize the economy and after taking power, he encouraged development of the private sector.⁵⁷⁴ The goal was to accomplish a strategic balance with Israel, not just in the military, but also in the economic, cultural and social spheres. The

⁵⁷⁰ Karsh, *Soviet Policy*, 52.

⁵⁷¹ Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship since 1955*, 219.

⁵⁷² By 1972 Syria actually supplied the Soviet Union with oil Karsh, *Soviet Policy*, 55.

⁵⁷³ Karsh, *Soviet Policy*, 52.

⁵⁷⁴ In 1971 private companies were allowed to import goods with certain restrictions. The next year transit-trade and tourism was introduced and in 1974 foreign capital including Arab oil money was welcomed.

strategy was to modernize the economy and achieve rapid growth by giving the bourgeoisie and merchant class a more extensive role.⁵⁷⁵ However, to Moscow's relief, the state maintained the leading role in the economy accounting for over 75% of the industrial production.⁵⁷⁶ Arab petrodollars financed a vast public investment program.

In spite of Assad's proclaimed bias against the USSR, he did not just keep up the economic relations with the USSR, but strengthened them. New economic and technical assistance agreements for oil industry, railways and water resources were signed in 1972. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Moscow tried to pre-empt US-Syrian cooperation and on a visit to Damascus the Soviet foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko offered a \$2,2 billion economic-military agreement in 1974. By the mid-70s, fifty projects were in progress and the economic relations were closer than during the left-wing regime of 1966-70.

Trade and aid

Trade was another tool Moscow used to strengthen the Soviet-Syrian relations. The trade between the two countries grew from next to nothing in 1955 to \$65 million in 1970.⁵⁷⁷ (See table below). Under Assad's rule, by 1975, it more than tripled to \$233 million. In addition, East-bloc countries purchased 22,4% of the Syrian exports and supplied 16,6% of the imports in 1975. Nonetheless, the Russians were somewhat worried about Syria's substantial commerce with Western Europe which purchased 53,8% of the Syrian exports and supplied 49% of the imports in 1975.⁵⁷⁸ On the positive side, Syrian trade with the US was small.

In January 1976 the USSR and Syria signed a five-year trade agreement regulating Syrian exports of crude oil, cotton products and wool, and imports of Soviet machinery and industrial equipment. The groundwork was laid for increased Soviet-Syrian economic relations, but how did the Syrian invasion of Lebanon impact them?

⁵⁷⁵ The economic policy became known as *infitah*. Perthes, «The Syrian Economy in the 1980s», 38.

⁵⁷⁶ Karsh, *Soviet Policy*, 54.

⁵⁷⁷ In 1955 the USSR only exported for \$0,3 million to Syria, and did not import anything. Karsh uses Vneshnyaya Torgovlya SSSR as a source. Karsh, *Soviet Policy*, 56.

⁵⁷⁸ On the other hand, the trade with Western Europe dated back to the early 1960s, so it was not seen as a new threat.

The writers' views on the economic problems of 1976

Of the authors investigated, it is primarily Karsh who writes about Syria's economy and relations with the USSR. He describes a worsening domestic situation and gives figures for increases Soviet-Syrian trade. However, he gives no information about Soviet aid or the parties' mutual statements and reactions. According to Karsh, the Syrian intervention in Lebanon led to a steep increase of the military expenditure, from \$450 million in 1974 to \$900 million in 1976-77.⁵⁷⁹ At the same time, the Arab countries' economic contributions to Syria declined. After years of increase, oil exports stagnated between 1975-78. On top of this, the rising number of Lebanese refugees in Syria, lost remittances from Syrians working in Lebanon, and a halt of transshipment of goods through Lebanon, resulted in an economic downturn. The government responded by tightening its 1976 budget and cancelling many projects.

Still, the Soviet-Syrian trade increased during 1976, and the USSR's net trade surplus increased. During Assad's Moscow visit in April 1977, an extensive economic and technical agreement including Soviet assistance in irrigation, land reclamation and railway expansion was signed.⁵⁸⁰

Table 4: Soviet trade with Syria in US\$ millions.⁵⁸¹

Year	Soviet exports	Soviet imports	Net Soviet trade
1955	0,3	0	0,3
1970	46,4	19,2	27,2
1975	137,5	95,6	41,9
1976	183,7	128,5	55,2

Syria's economy worsens in 1976

By investigating the sources it becomes clear that Syria experienced increasing economic problems in 1976. The Arab oil-producing countries of the Persian Gulf had pledged to give

⁵⁷⁹ Karsh, *Soviet Policy*, 57.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 54.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid*, 56.

Syria US\$581 million a year.⁵⁸² However, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were pressuring Assad and Sadat to reconcile their conflict, and by May 1976 the two Gulf states had not paid the yearly subsidies to Damascus.⁵⁸³ In addition the conflict with Iraq had an economic effect. Before 1976 an oil-pipeline had transported crude oil from Iraq through Syria to Mediterranean ports. Because of the Iraqi-Syrian conflict, Baghdad closed the pipeline, and transit revenues fell from US\$138 million in 1975 to zero in 1976.

It is quite clear that the Lebanese Civil War did, as the earlier writers say, cost Syria extra in military expenditures. In May it cost 3 million Syrian Pound (US\$770,000) a day. In September, after the invasion, it increased to 10 million (US\$2,6 million) a day.⁵⁸⁴ In addition, 500,000 to 1 million Lebanese fled to Syria and this created strains on the economy.⁵⁸⁵ High-level corruption was also a serious problem.⁵⁸⁶ Consequently, the Syrian budget was reportedly cut, possibly as much as by half to 8 billion Syrian Pound (US\$2 billion), and the launch of the upcoming five-year plan was delayed.⁵⁸⁷ All of this led to increased inflation and a lack of some consumer goods in Syria. Considerable price increases on food, fuel and construction materials in July indicated that inflation was out of control.⁵⁸⁸ The increased costs of living led to a rising popular discontent. In July, it was not considered to be a major problem by US analysts, still, it came on top of the political unrest, and constituted an growing internal threat to the regime.

Soviet increases its aid

In spite of political, diplomatic and military pressure, the Soviet economic activity in Syria remained at the same magnitude as before, and in some instances increased. In 1974 the USSR provided US\$100 million in economic aid to Syria, but in 1975 no new aid was given.⁵⁸⁹ During Kosygin's 1976 visit, Moscow pledged US\$300 million in aid to oil-, irrigation- and

⁵⁸² The pledges were made at the Arab League summit in Rabat in 1974. Egypt was promised the same amount as Syria, while the PLO would get US\$27 million and Jordan US\$175 million. WikiLeaks, «RABAT SUMMIT AND ARAB LEAGUE CONTRIBUTIONS», 1.

⁵⁸³ WikiLeaks, «POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SYRIAN ECONOMIC PROBLEMS», 2-6. 21 May.

⁵⁸⁴ Assad informed the Ba'ath Party Regional Command about the figures. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON FOLLOWING INSTALLATION OF SARKIS», 1-4. 22 September.

⁵⁸⁵ WikiLeaks, «SARG ECONOMIC TROUBLES AND USG ASSISTANCE», 2. 26 October.

⁵⁸⁶ Deputy Prime Minister Haydar and the president's brother Rifa't al-Assad were rumored to regularly request 5-25% commissions for approving contracts. The gains were split and shared with other officials. WikiLeaks, «POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SYRIAN ECONOMIC PROBLEMS», 2-4. 21 May.

⁵⁸⁷ WikiLeaks, «POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SYRIAN ECONOMIC PROBLEMS», 1. 21 May.

⁵⁸⁸ The inflation was possibly over 30%, which the US Embassy estimated it had been in 1975. WikiLeaks, «INFLATION IN SYRIA», 3. 14 July.

⁵⁸⁹ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1975», 28 and 33. July.

power development.⁵⁹⁰ This amount was the double of any previous agreement which up to 1975 had summed up to US\$468 million. It constituted more than a third of the US\$875 million Soviet aid given to all Third World countries in 1976.⁵⁹¹ This was a significant increase and a clear expression of how the Kremlin prioritized Syria. Necessarily it was planned before Moscow knew about the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, but it was not reduced afterwards. This demonstrate that the Kremlin's main economic policy continued undisturbed.

The aid stimulated the Syrian economy. With the help of Russian exploration, new oil reserves of 9 billion barrels were discovered and Syria became a net oil exporter.⁵⁹² In addition, a refinery at Homs, which had been built with Czech credits of US\$40 million, was expanded in 1976. The production in Homs to a large degree met the national demand for petroleum products. The USSR also carried on reconstruction of the railway system.

The Euphrates dam had been the focal point of the Soviet program and Moscow had given it US\$185 million in credits.⁵⁹³ The first stage of the dam was planned to be completed in 1977 with a capacity of 800MW. As it neared its completion, the Soviet contribution was naturally reduced, and the Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Haydar commented that the economic relations with the USSR were probably smaller than those with the US.⁵⁹⁴ Still, more power generators were installed, and new power lines from the dam continued to be built in 1976.⁵⁹⁵ Water from the dam was planned to irrigate 1 million hectares of land, and the project included the building of a new city, Tabqa, and 15 villages housing 40,000 agricultural workers.⁵⁹⁶ Moscow could have reduced its contributions, but chose not to, indicating a willingness to continue to support Syria economically.

⁵⁹⁰ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 6. September 1977.

⁵⁹¹ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 45 and 59. September 1977.

⁵⁹² Soviet technicians were perhaps less capable than their Western counterparts, but came to a third of the cost . Oil exports were estimated to reach US\$500 million in 1977. CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 32. August 1977.

⁵⁹³ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 32. August 1977.

⁵⁹⁴ Haydar did not believe the rumors of a Soviet threat to cut economic support. WikiLeaks, «DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER HAYDAR COMMENTS ON LEBANON; DOWNPLAYS REPORTS OF SOVIET PRESSURES ON SYRIA», 1-3. 22 July.

⁵⁹⁵ The capacity increased to 500 MW by 1976. CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 32. August 1977.

⁵⁹⁶ The Russians had built training-facilities that had already graduated 12,000 technicians for the power industry. CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 45. September 1977.

The USSR starts to pressure economically

However, in July 1976 the USSR began to constrain the economic relations, and continued to do so during the autumn. The Kremlin put some economic pressure on Syria when Khaddam visited Moscow in July, although no details were specified.⁵⁹⁷ Then the USSR rejected a Syrian request for emergency financial assistance to support the Lebanese invasion.⁵⁹⁸ Assad notified that a Soviet economic delegation, which was supposed to come to Damascus on 14 July, was cancelled, and he feared a cut in economic aid.⁵⁹⁹ The economic coercion was upheld during August and September, when the Russians postponed several contracts.⁶⁰⁰ Khaddam said that in spite of a reduced public Soviet criticism of Syria, the «material pressure» had actually increased, though the Syrian leaders did not want to publicize this.

Dispute of Soviet oil technicians

The Soviet oil technicians became another contested topic between Moscow and Damascus. In early September, the Syrian Deputy Minister of Petroleum, Nader Nabulsi informed that the USSR had threatened to withdraw Russian oil technicians.⁶⁰¹ However, they had not done it yet «because they need Syria as much as we need them». Three weeks later the situation changed completely as the Syrians let the contracts for Soviet oil technicians run out without renewing them and this continued in October with some outright refusals to renew contracts.⁶⁰²

Soviet-Syrian trade

Another measure was the Soviet demand for cash payment for goods and services that earlier had been provided by a so-called Clearing agreement avoiding cash transfers.⁶⁰³ In addition to payment for arms and military spare parts, the USSR demanded cash payment in Pound sterling for commodities and equipment to the Homs refinery and a fertilizer

⁵⁹⁷ WikiLeaks, «EGYPTIAN POLITICAL COUNSELOR ON MIDDLE EAST DEVELOPMENTS». 19 July.

⁵⁹⁸ CIA, «THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF 16 JULY 1976», 2-3. 16 JULY.

⁵⁹⁹ WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD «a, 1-2. 17 July. WikiLeaks, «TALK WITH KING--MESSAGE FROM ASAD « b. 18 July. Assad asked King Hussein to convey the message to the highest level of US government, the Shah of Iran and King Khalid of Saudi Arabia. asked him.

⁶⁰⁰ WikiLeaks, «MEETING WITH KHADDAM SEPTEMBER 17», 2. 17 September.

⁶⁰¹ WikiLeaks, «SOVIET PETROLEUM TECHNICIANS IN SYRIA», 1. 10 September. The Deputy Minister said the Soviet were less competent than Western technicians were, nevertheless they came at a third of the price.

⁶⁰² The information was shared by the Italian Counselor in Damascus. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN/SOVIET ECONOMIC RELATIONS; SYRIAN PETROLEUM TECHNICIANS», 1. 30 September. WikiLeaks, «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 3. 26 October.

⁶⁰³ The Syrian Minister of Economy told this to the US Ambassador. WikiLeaks, «MORNING SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT REPORTS», 1-2. 19 October 1976. The Syrians had a clearing agreement with the USSR. A clearing agreement is designed to force a balance of trade with exports being offset by imports and the use of cash remittances minimized. Merriam-Webster. «Clearing agreement».

factory.⁶⁰⁴ However, the impact of cash demand was relatively small as the USSR was only the seventh biggest trading partner providing 3,2% of imports to Syria and buying 5,9% of its exports. In addition, Syria countered the Soviet measure by delaying the approval of a protocol detailing how to set the conversion rate of payments in rubles. Moreover, the Minister of Economy Imadi underlined that Syria still had access to commodities of the Soviet Bloc countries. So the demand for cash payment was not really a big concern.

Arab oil states pressure and the US supports Syria economically

Saudi Arabia worked to reconcile Egypt and Syria, and both Assad and Sadat seemed willing to talk.⁶⁰⁵ King Khalid of Saudi Arabia discussed the events in Lebanon with Sadat and Arafat in Riyadh on 21 June.⁶⁰⁶ Then the Syrian and Egyptian Prime Ministers met in Riyadh on 22-24 June.⁶⁰⁷ They continued to disagree over the Sinai II agreement and Lebanon, but took some steps to reduce the gap. James Collins writes about Moscow's misgivings to this, and claims that this was the reason for inviting Khaddam to Moscow on 5-7 July.⁶⁰⁸ Whatever the case, the Saudi-Syrian relations improved after the meetings in Riyadh, and Saudi Arabia pledged Syria a US\$200 million grant and increased a loan from US\$75 to US\$101 million.⁶⁰⁹ On the other hand, Kuwait did not restore its aid to Syria, probably because of Palestinian opposition to this. In spite of this achievement, Syria needed a further US\$250 million in assistance for 1976.

However, in early August, things did not seem to go as planned. King Hussein was going to ask King Khalid of Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Arab heads of state to pay the yearly subsidy to Syria, Jordan and Egypt.⁶¹⁰ And in September, Khaddam said the Saudi aid to Syria was interrupted.⁶¹¹ On the other hand, Saudi Arabia continued to support the PLO with US\$700,000 a month. Khaddam asked the US ambassador Murphy for Washington to

⁶⁰⁴ WikiLeaks, «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 1-3. 26 October.

⁶⁰⁵ Bannerman, «Saudi Arabia», 129.

⁶⁰⁶ *The New York Times*, «SADAT, SAUDI KING AND ARAFAT MEET». 22 June.

⁶⁰⁷ Bannerman, «Saudi Arabia», 129.

⁶⁰⁸ Collins, Lebanon in crisis, 220.

⁶⁰⁹ The information was shared by the Syrian Minister of Culture, Fawzi Kayyali WikiLeaks, «RENEWAL OF SAUDI FINANCIAL AID TO SYRIA», 1. 10 July. CIA, «NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN». 13 July. The Minister of Economy Muhammad al-Imadi confirmed that Saudi aid had been restored.

⁶¹⁰ WikiLeaks, «FINANCIAL TIMES INTERVIEW WITH KING HUSSEIN», 2-3. 9 August.

⁶¹¹ WikiLeaks, «ACTION MEMORANDUM: KHADDAM'S REQUESTS», 2. 18 September.

counsel Gulf leaders to restore aid to Syria and stop helping the PLO-LNM.⁶¹² Kissinger promised to talk to the Saudis and the other foreign ministers.⁶¹³ These are new findings showing Assad had a strategy to reduce the external economic threats to Syria.

The Syrian government invited the US to make investments in the country and Damascus and Washington signed an agreement of Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) on 9 August.⁶¹⁴ This facilitated American private investments in Syria by making US investors eligible for insurance and guarantees.⁶¹⁵ Later, in October, the US studied different ways to support Assad economically.⁶¹⁶ Clearly, the accord with the US would not be to the Kremlin's liking as it opened up for more economic links with the Americans and less dependence on Moscow. Nevertheless, the economic difficulties Syria experienced, seemed to be serious and combined with some of the political unrest we have seen, could make the regime nervous. Therefore, the Russians would have had mixed feelings about the Syrian economic problems. A situation with real instability would sooner or later make Damascus more susceptible to Soviet pressure, but could also make Assad vulnerable and possibly seek help from the Arab Gulf states or the US.

It is not clear how serious the lack of Arab aid was for the Syrian domestic economy, as reports give divergent views. On one hand, the Syrian Minister of Economy said the Syrian state was bankrupt in October because of the combination of extra expenditures spent in the Lebanese Civil War and the Gulf states withholding money.⁶¹⁷ In contrast to this, a French assessment described the economic situation as healthy because of Saudi and Kuwaiti payments in July and August. As long as Damascus obeyed Saudi Arabia, the Arab aid was coming and there was no currency shortage. The Syrian transit revenues for goods had increased significantly after the Lebanese ports closed and tourists from the Gulf travelled to Syria instead of Lebanon. The political dangers to Syria were far more important than the economic threats. After the Russians had completed the Euphrates dam, the Soviet economic projects were not critical to the Syrian economy. However, as Khaddam and King

⁶¹² WikiLeaks, «MEETING WITH KHADDAM SEPTEMBER 17». 17 September.

⁶¹³ WikiLeaks, «ACTION MEMORANDUM: KHADDAM'S REQUESTS», 2. 18 September.

⁶¹⁴ U.S. Government Printing Office, «United States Treaties and Other International Agreements», Volume 28, Part 6 1976-77, 7141.

⁶¹⁵ One of the US enterprises involved was Ford motor company to produce tractors.

⁶¹⁶ WikiLeaks, «SARG ECONOMIC TROUBLES AND USG ASSISTANCE», 1-4. 26 October.

⁶¹⁷ WikiLeaks, «MORNING SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT REPORTS», 1-2. 19 October.

Hussein raised the issue of the Arab subsidy, and asked for help on several occasions to restore it, the subsidy was important to Syria. This gave the Arab oil exporting countries leverage over Damascus, and this was likely the main reason for Assad to make an agreement at the Riyadh mini-summit.

Signs of Soviet-Syrian and Saudi-Syrian reconciliation

After the Riyadh agreement, there were signs of reconciliation in the Soviet-Syrian relationship. President Assad congratulated the Soviet leadership on the anniversary of the 1918 October Revolution.⁶¹⁸ The short cable was a standard form of praise for the Soviet-Syrian cooperation. More importantly, a delegation of the Soviet-Syrian friendship society led by the Soviet Minister for Light industries arrived in Damascus on 8 November. The delegation held meetings with Ba'ath officials and discussed next year's cooperation. Actually, the Minister for the Euphrates dam received so many Soviet officials that he was unavailable in October-November. The Syrian People's council (Parliament) ratified the Soviet-Syrian economic agreement and the accord on Ruble-Sterling conversation rate which regulated the repayment of loans.

However, the problems for Damascus were far from over. In December, the Kuwaiti economic support for Syria was still delayed because of Kuwait's relations with the PLO.⁶¹⁹ It was not until April 1977 that Syria seems to have overcome the economic problems caused by the intervention in Lebanon.⁶²⁰ The sanctions Iraq had imposed were overcome by Saudi Arabian financial assistance. The Soviet leadership offered Syria a Rubles 65 million (US\$ 86,7 million) grant or loan on advantageous conditions.⁶²¹ In addition a five-year Rubles 1 billion loan (US\$ 1,33 billion).⁶²² By June 1977, in contrast to the military issues, all the economic requests Damascus made to Moscow were met.⁶²³ These focused on completion of existing aid projects.

⁶¹⁸ WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN MEDIA PUBLICIZE ARRIVAL OF SOVIET MEMBER OF SYRO-SOVIET FRIENDSHIP SOCIETY», 2. 10 November.

⁶¹⁹ At the 1974 Rabat summit, Kuwait promised to make a yearly contribution of \$US180 million to Syria. Damascus also claimed a large loan had not been approved yet. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN FONMIN'S VISIT TO KUWAIT», 1-2. 3 December.

⁶²⁰ WikiLeaks, «MEDITERRANEAN REPORT-DECEMBER 1976 - APRIL 1977», Section 4 page 2. 16 April 1977.

⁶²¹ The Romanian embassy in Damascus which was often used by the Russians to divulge stories they wanted to come out passed on the information. Syrians had asked US officials for details about the performance of MIG-25s, and this gave credence to the information given by the Romanian Embassy. WikiLeaks, «REPORTS OF SYRO-SOVIET AGREEMENT ON MILITARY ITEMS IN MOSCOW», 1-3. 4 May 1977.

⁶²² Rubles have been converted to US\$ with an exchange rate of US\$ 1 = Ruble 0,75. U.S. Department of the Treasury, «Treasury reporting rates of Exchange as of March 31 1977», 4. 31 March 1977.

⁶²³ WikiLeaks, «INTSUM 330 - JUNE 3, 1977», 3. 3 June 1977.

The Saudi economic pressure was stronger than the Soviet

In conclusion, the Syrian regime had survived an economic turbulent period. Moscow had the opportunity to pressure Assad economically, but chose to only make some limited measures. Damascus on the other hand reacted by taking measures that deflected the Soviet policies. It seems like the parties needed each other, they both knew it and set limits to the reductions of economic relations. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf oil states on the other hand flexed their economic muscles more clearly and coerced Assad to negotiate. The Saudis achieved what they wanted, a Syria-Egyptian reconciliation and an agreement over Lebanon.

Increased tensions in Soviet-Syrian cultural relations

Receiving students from the Third World was another way Moscow used to extend its influence. Syria had sent students to the USSR and Eastern Bloc countries since 1956.⁶²⁴

Table 5: Syrian students studying in the USSR and Eastern Europe.

	1956-75 ⁶²⁵	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976
In the USSR	4,955	707	n.a.	548	447	514	550
In Eastern Europe	3,340	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	400

However, also in this area the Russians sent signals of dissatisfaction with the Syrian policy in Lebanon, and Assad retaliated. The Soviet Ministry for Higher Education informed Syrian authorities in early October 1976 that they would cut the number of scholarships for Syrian students in the USSR.⁶²⁶ Assad interpreted this as pressure to change the policy on Lebanon and responded by cancelling all 1.300 students that were supposed to go to the Eastern bloc countries.⁶²⁷ It was not informed how many would have gone to Moscow, but based on the recent years' statistics, the US analysts thought it would have been about half the total of 1,300 students, meaning 650. Instead, the Syrian President ordered the Ministry of Higher Education to arrange studies in Western Europe.⁶²⁸

⁶²⁴ All numbers except the first column is from an October 1976 report. WikiLeaks, «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 3. 26 October.

⁶²⁵ CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 68. September 1977.

⁶²⁶ WikiLeaks, «SOVIETS CUT SCHOLARSHIPS FOR SYRIAN STUDENTS», 1. 3 October.

⁶²⁷ WikiLeaks, «SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS», 3. 26 October.

⁶²⁸ Already in 1974, the Syrian government approached the US Embassy in Damascus and asked for a cultural agreement with the US. The Americans welcomed this, Damascus however hesitated for 1,5 years. Then in February 1976, the Syrian ministry of Education made a new initiative. The US Embassy proposed an agreement could follow the broad outlines the UK recently worked out with Syria. That accord included student scholarships; exchange of researchers, teachers, authors, composers and painters; contacts between libraries,

In the end, 550 Syrian students went to the USSR in 1976.⁶²⁹ The figure is probably lower than the planned figure, still it was higher than in 1975. Another 400 students departed for Eastern Europe during 1976. A total of 950 Syrian students left for the Eastern Bloc, 350 or 27% less than planned.

In conclusion, there was a reduction in the number of Syrian students in the East Bloc countries, though not dramatic. As we have seen with the other issues in question, the parties came up with statements and threats. However, the topic of Syrian students in the USSR and East Bloc was not crucial neither for Moscow, nor for the Syrians. That is probably why it was not a theme for more controversy and debate between the two countries. Therefore, in reality the implemented policy was more modest.

museums, research and teaching institutions; exchange of books, periodicals, publications etc. and cultural events. WikiLeaks, «SYRIAN INITIATIVE ON "FULBRIGHT" PROGRAM», 2. 5 February.

⁶²⁹ We do not know if they left before or after the mutual threats of reduction occurred. At the end of 1976, there were 2,100 students in the Soviet Union and 1,320 in Eastern Europe. CIA, «COMMUNIST AID TO THE LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OF THE FREE WORLD, 1976», 68. September 1977.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

The Soviet-Syrian type of patron-client relation

Now we will look at the findings of this thesis in relation to the patron-client theory introduced in Chapter 1 and Freedman's question about the Soviet Middle East goals.⁶³⁰ As for the patron-client theory, it stipulates that the Soviet Union had three types of goals: Ideology, international solidarity and strategic advantage. For the client, Syria, the perceived threat level was the important factor for determining how much it would give in to the Soviet goals.

The Soviet Union's goals in the Middle East

Ideology

The Soviet media continued to speak about anti-imperialism and the struggle against Israel in its rhetoric. This was intended to win the Arabs and liberation movements around the world over to the Soviet side. Anti-imperialism was not a clear idea restrained to the Western powers, for instance Sadat accused the USSR for being imperialist. Neither was it a very strong unifying concept. Several Arab states were against Israel and the US; however, they had conflicts among themselves that split them more than anti-imperialism could unite them. In addition, the USSR recognized Israel as a state, while the Arab governments did not.

There are no indications that Moscow, as in the rest of the world, used any arguments of communist ideology in its direct relations with neither the PLO nor Syria. Syria under Assad, although it had certain socialist features with a strong state and public sector, was highly nationalistic and guarded its independence. As we have seen, Assad simply stated that Brezhnev, asking Syria to pull out of Lebanon, had a different view that did not coincide with the Syrian national interests.

⁶³⁰ See pages 15-19 in Chapter 1.

The PLO, a nationalist liberation movement, was an umbrella organization with a wide specter of political and religious tendencies. Fatah was the largest group in the PLO and its leader Arafat and most of its members came from the *petite bourgeoisie*. He was not a socialist and even less a communist, still, the Russians were, as we have seen, outspoken in their support of Arafat. They did so because he was PLO Chairman and leader of the largest and most powerful PLO-group, which could be used in the anti-imperialist struggle. Assad's intents to replace Arafat with a pro-Syrian leader would have weakened the PLO's independence and consequently the Soviet influence over it. The Marxist groups in the PLO, PFLP and DFLP, were not strong enough to challenge Fatah.

In conclusion, anti-imperialism was used rhetorically, but it had in practice too little unifying appeal to be important for the Kremlin. Communism had little support in the Arab world and it was not an important Soviet goal to promote it.

International solidarity

Moscow wanted to have more political influence in the Middle East. One of the goals was to win Syria's support to reconvene the regional peace conference in Geneva. This was important to the Kremlin, as it would put the Soviet Union on par with the US in the Middle East. Moscow accepted and guaranteed the existence of Israel, and did not support the Palestinian goal of winning back all of the historical Palestine. The Russians also wanted to make a united Arab front opposing the US, its Arab allies and Israel. The USSR hoped Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria, Jordan, the PLO, Egypt and other states would take part in this Arab front. The Kremlin needed Assad to achieve both of these objectives and was willing to go to lengths to accomplish these goals.

Assad was certainly aware of the Soviet objectives, and at the same time they were not so important to him. He certainly would like to be a part of, and preferably lead, a united Arab front against Israel, but he was in conflict with several of the Arab states. He would not accept an agreement with Israel on the same terms as Moscow did. For Syria, it was paramount to get the Golan Heights back and it was also important to appear as the Palestinians' champion. In 1976, Assad wanted to dominate the PLO and cooperate closely

with Jordan. The first goal was clearly not shared by Moscow, so the Syrian and Soviet goals regarding the PLO were incompatible.

Strategic advantages

The Soviet Cold War struggle with the US was on a strategic level. In a zero-sum-game, the loss of a client was considered as a win for the other superpower. As we have seen, the US enjoyed good relations with Syria, and the Kremlin was suspicious about Syria-US collusion against the PLO-LNM. The USSR could simply not afford to lose Syria, an important Arab state, as a client. The Kremlin would not like to lose the PLO either, but in the larger perspective, Syria was more important.

In addition, the Soviet navy in the Mediterranean, the Fifth Eskadra, protected the USSR militarily against the US Sixth Fleet, and secured access for the navy and commercial shipping to the Mediterranean and beyond. After the Fifth Eskadra's expulsion from its Egyptian bases, the need for similar naval facilities in the Mediterranean became a priority. The Soviet navy could sustain itself for periods of peace-time operations, but for long-term maintenance and warfare, it depended on access to resupply and maintenance facilities in the region. Consequently, vital military interests were at stake for the USSR. Syria was one of the best options to achieve bases, and the Kremlin made repeated requests for expanded access to facilities in Tartus. Syria depended on Soviet arms, ammunition and spare parts. However, the Soviet interests were not that important to Damascus and its influence over Moscow increased as the Soviet dependence of its client incremented.

Syria's threat level

Assad faced possible threats on three levels: Domestic, regional and international. There was internal opposition within the Syrian regime to Assad's Lebanon policy, but he had enough political and military support and control to overcome this.⁶³¹ The assassinations of Ba'ath Party officials and bomb attacks in Syria had Iraqi and PLO backing. However, the Syrian regime tightened security, and managed to hinder an escalation that could have threatened

⁶³¹ As we have seen, internal opposition to Assad voted down the Prime Minister in 1975. Assad was strong enough to change the Prime Minister in 1976 and replace him with a pro-Assad officer.

it. In sum, there was a domestic political opposition and a tense security situation, but the threat level was manageable for the regime in Damascus.

Syria had several rivals in the Middle East. Israel, which had fought three wars against Syria and was its regional nemesis, had very powerful armed forces. Assad was afraid that if the PLO-LNM came to power in Lebanon, Israel would possibly invade the country to eliminate the threat from another hostile state. Israeli troops occupying parts or all of Lebanon would constitute an increased danger to Syria. Therefore, by invading Lebanon and supporting the Lebanese Christians, Syria reduced the Israeli threat. Another goal was to gain dominance of the PLO. By controlling the PLO, including its ability to attack Israel from Southern Lebanon, Syria's power in negotiations with Israel and the US would increase.

In addition, the US convinced the Israelis that it would be to their advantage that Syria defeated the PLO-LNM. Tel Aviv set a red line for Assad in Lebanon, and as long as he kept it, the Israelis would not attack Syria. This enabled Assad to move Syrian army units, facing the Israelis on the Golan Heights, to Lebanon. In conclusion, the Israeli threat was low.

Of the Arab states, Iraq was the militarily most dangerous to Syria. Iraq had strong armed forces and shared a border with Syria with no geographical obstacles to invade. However, Iraq was a Soviet client, and its military was dependent on resupplies of arms, spare parts and ammunition from the Russians. The Kremlin would never have tolerated an Iraqi invasion of Syria, its main Arab client, as it would have seriously weakened the Soviet position. In any case, by Assad's tacit understanding with Israel, he was able to strengthen the Syrian military forces on the Iraqi border. In conclusion, the Iraqi threat was low.

Egypt and Libya supported the PLO-LNM in Lebanon politically and with limited military supplies. Nevertheless, this support was not enough to change the balance of power, and Syria could use its militarily superior forces when they found it appropriate and defeat the PLO-LNM. Egypt and Libya did not have sufficient military strength to deploy an adequate force across the Mediterranean to challenge the Syrians directly.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states had even less military force to project, but on the other hand, they were strong economically. Their goal was to reconcile Syria and Egypt, and to achieve this they pressured both countries by withholding the yearly subsidy. As Syria had a

difficult economic situation, the Saudi policy was perceived as an economic threat in Damascus and this was the measure that finally halted the Syrian army in Lebanon.

On the international level, the only two states with enough power and interest to threaten Syria were the two superpowers. As we have seen, the US accepted Assad's intervention in Lebanon. The USSR could have deployed a strong military force and threatened or attacked Syria, in spite of certain limitations on resupplying such a force. However, a direct confrontation with Syria would certainly have led to losing it as a client, so this was not an option for the USSR.

In sum, Syria's threat level was low, and this gave Assad influence over Moscow's policies.

In conclusion, the USSR had political and strategic goals in Syria. At the same time the Syrian threat level was low, and the US was making bids to Damascus. Consequently, the type of patron-client relation was a mix of number V *Client prevalence*, and VI *Client centric*.⁶³² The patron has important international political and even strategic interests at stake, and is willing to invest many resources in the relation. The client, Syria does not face a major threat, and negotiates from a position of strength. For the international community this was a dangerous kind of conflict as it had the potential to escalate into a superpower confrontation. Having gone through a series of superpower conflicts in the 15 years preceding the Lebanese Civil War, both the USSR and the US were aware of this. *Détente* still prevailed between the superpowers, and their crisis management implied to avoid escalation of a conflict. This gives an additional explanation to why the Kremlin limited its pressure on Syria and only gave a measured support of the PLO-LNM in Lebanon.

An offensive and unsuccessful Soviet strategy

Robert Freedman discusses whether the Soviet strategy was *offensive-defensive*, and *successful-unsuccessful*.⁶³³ The Kremlin attempted to win clients to its side in the Middle East by supporting Syria, the PLO, Iraq, Libya and trying to win back Egypt. The overall strategy

⁶³² See Pages 18-19 in Chapter 1.

⁶³³ See page 38 in Chapter 3.

was political as the USSR sought to form a pro-Soviet united Arab front and reach an overall settlement in Geneva. Military and economic aid were key measures to establish and maintain the relations with the Arab clients. The combined support of the PLO-LNM was meant to change Lebanon into becoming a pro-Soviet state, not to keep the status quo. In this sense, the Soviet policy was offensive.

So how successful was the Soviet policy? The Syrian intervention hindered the PLO-LNM alliance from possibly winning the Lebanese Civil War. The Soviet response seems to have been based on two major goals; to pressure Assad to withdraw without losing Syria as a client, and to sufficiently satisfy the PLO to keep it as a client. The USSR did not have enough influence over Syria to coerce it into following Moscow's line, and in the end gave in to Assad's policy. The limited support Moscow gave to the PLO-LNM, was not sufficient for it to defeat both Syria and the Lebanese Christians. Even though the PLO survived as an organization and Arafat kept on as its leader, the USSR ended up with a weakened Palestinian client and a more self-confident and independent client in Damascus. Moscow did not win back Egypt, on the contrary Sadat moved closer to Saudi Arabia and the US. All in all, the USSR did not succeed with its offensive strategy.

In conclusion, after the Syrian 1976 invasion of Lebanon, the USSR balanced its diplomatic, political, military and economic policies towards Syria and the PLO to keep both as clients. The Kremlin did not understand Assad's goals and political abilities in time to save the PLO as a strong independent actor.

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