



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

RELEASE IN PART B6

October 13, 1978

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MEMORANDUM

To : S/P - Mr. Lake

From : INR/RNA/NE -

DISSENT CHANNEL

Subject: DISSENT CHANNEL MESSAGE: The US and Syria:
The Special Relationship Crumbles

This memorandum presents a Dissent Channel view-point of , INR/RNA/NE. The drafter does not wish to restrict distribution of this message, and suggests that distribution include INR, NEA, NEA/ARN, and Ambassador Talcott Seelye.

The special relationship between the US and Syria, established with considerable difficulty following the 1974 Golan Disengagement Agreement, has largely crumbled during recent months. Consequently, the drift of bilateral relations toward incompatibility continues, and is likely to accelerate as a result of the Camp David summit and the fighting in Beirut.

The drift was stimulated by three developments:

- differences about the direction of Middle East peace negotiations which surfaced after the Sadat visit to Jerusalem;
- the Syrian perception of declining US support for Damascus' burdensome intervention in Lebanon; and
- the overall unfavorable impact on the Damascus leadership of the cutback and restoration of the AID program to Syria.

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B6

B6

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

- 2 -

The Decline of US Influence

The drift is serious because it undercuts the ability of the US to influence Syrian policy at a critical juncture when:

- priority attention is being devoted to promoting support in the Arab world for the Camp David Framework for Peace; and
- urgent attempts are underway to strengthen the fragile ceasefire in Beirut in order to contain the fighting from escalating and provoking renewed Arab-Israeli clashes.

Amidst efforts to achieve the above two goals, it may be worthwhile to pause and reappraise the utility of the special relationship. While it flourished, it seemed to hold forth the prospect of gradually expanding cooperation toward peace with Israel. In this environment of growing trust, the US was able to influence Syrian policy by fostering serious expectations within the Damascus leadership that Syria's willingness to coexist with Israel would be rewarded by tangible progress in the direction of a settlement.

Assad's startling break with Syria's traditional Lebanese leftist and Palestinian clients during an earlier phase of the Lebanon civil war appeared to reinforce the inclination in Washington to cultivate the Syrian leader. The emergence of tacit common interests between Syria and Israel in Lebanon, moreover, served as a valuable adjunct to the US-Syrian link.

Rebuilding the Relationship

The uncertain prospects for implementing the Camp David Framework and for restabilizing Lebanon in the weeks ahead without Syrian cooperation draw attention to the potential damage resulting from the drift in bilateral ties. Mutual confidence has diminished to the point that:

- Assad has become sharply critical about the lack of US responsiveness to Syrian concerns; while

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- 3 -

--decisions by the Syrian leader have stoked suspicions in the US about the authenticity of his commitment to a Middle East settlement and of Syria's intentions in Lebanon.

But the assets that Assad possesses with the Palestinians, the Jordanians and Lebanese, logically, would be useful -- and perhaps crucial -- to those intending to facilitate a resolution of the West Bank and Lebanon issues. Bearing in mind the potential cost to US interests of proceeding ahead on these two fronts in the face of Syrian obstructionism, policymakers might consider the advantages of undertaking concerted efforts to rebuild the special relationship.

A successful rebuilding effort, however, would require some rethinking of assumptions by officials on both ends of the bilateral relationship. In the US, assumptions regarding Syria seem to have remained intact despite the transition of the peace process from the start-up phase to the implementation stage. In this new context, Assad appears well-positioned to help integrate the components of a comprehensive settlement, if the special relationship were reconstructed.

It is perhaps not too late to restore ties to a satisfactory working level. Several alternative strategies might advance this goal. A discussion of these alternatives remains premature, however, until a commitment is made to reappraise the utility of US-Syrian relations. The decision for US policymakers at present, accordingly, is whether to approach the new realities created by the Camp David accords without first attempting to rebuild the special relationship with Syria.

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B6

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December 7, 1978

MEMORANDUM

TO : INR/RNA -

FROM : S/P - Anthony Lake

SUBJECT : Dissent Channel Message: The US and Syria:
The Special Relationship Crumbles

B6

Your memorandum on US-Syrian relations is a timely and thoughtful reminder of an inherent problem confronting any global power when it attempts to bring its influence to bear on regional problems. Inevitably, one or more states within that region will take umbrage with the regional policy being pursued, with attendant strains on bilateral relationships. Having made our decision a year ago to support the Sadat initiative as the most likely course to produce tangible movement toward a comprehensive Middle East settlement, and having pursued that course to the threshold of a treaty between Egypt and Israel while confronting differences along the way over Lebanon as well, the fact that our relationship with Syria remains as good as it is can be viewed as cause for satisfaction.

Ambassador Seelye has, in fact, described the US-Syrian relationship as "Troubled But Intact" in a cable assessing that relationship, which was sent to a number of posts and was prompted specifically by your memorandum. I am attaching a copy of that cable with which those in the Department who have reflected on your memorandum are in substantial agreement.

I would like to address one assumption which appears to form the basis of your concern -- that US policy-makers are not convinced of the importance of US-Syrian relations. I can assure you this is not the case.

US efforts in the summer of 1977 to reconvene the

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GDS 12/7/84 (LAKE, Anthony)

CONFIDENTIAL

-2-

Geneva Conference were undertaken at least partly because it was deemed that in that context Syrian interest could best be aroused. President Sadat's initiative occurred at a time when it had become apparent that we were unlikely to be successful in returning to Geneva and that, accordingly, Egyptian-Israeli negotiations offered the best hope of movement toward a comprehensive peace. The decision to support that initiative was made with the full realization that such a course would not be popular with the Syrian government. As a result, the administration, while remaining engaged in the peace process as it has unfolded, has at the same time taken special pains to preserve the bilateral aspects of our relationship with Syria. The prime example of this was the restoration of the full economic assistance program in the face of strong Congressional opposition, an effort in which the highest levels of the government were engaged. If, as you state, consideration of the AID bill had a negative effect on US-Syrian relations, the problem may in some respects be an understandable one of Syrian perceptions of US actions rather than the actions themselves.

You raise a very good point at the end of your memorandum by alluding to the increased importance of a positive Syrian role as the peace process moves beyond the conclusion of an Egyptian-Israeli treaty to negotiations concerning the future of the West Bank and the complex of Palestinian issues. Indeed, the eventual cooperation of Syria will be crucial to the success of those negotiations. You suggest in your final paragraph that alternative strategies may be available to elicit such cooperation, but you do not spell them out.

Starting from the premise that our policy-makers are indeed concerned about the state of US-Syrian relations and about Syria's posture toward the peace process, I would welcome your further thoughts on specific steps our government might take to produce a more favorable Syrian attitude toward negotiations based on the Camp David Framework. I assure you that your recommendations will be shared with those most closely involved in our mediation effort.

Drafted: S/P:WKirby
x28986:11/29/78

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