

# Assad's grip on Syria may

**S**yrians don't as a rule defect to Israel. At least not until this week when a Syrian major flew his MiG-23 to Israel and asked for asylum.

This curious episode was not only an embarrassing blow to strongman Hafez el-Assad, who used to command the air force, but also another sign of the seething political tensions inside Syria. The tough, wily Assad has ruled Syria for the past 19 years through his control of the armed forces and a dizzying collection of special military units and intelligence agencies.

Assad and most of the key men who surround him are members of the secretive Alawi sect. The majority of Syria's 11.3 million people are Sunni Moslems, though there are important minorities of Christians, Shia Moslems, Druze, devil-worshipping Yazdis and Alawis, who form about 12% of the population.

Ethnically, Syria is complex and brittle mosaic made up of Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Circassians, Armenians and desert nomads. Mainstream Sunni Moslems scorn the Alawis as heretics and have chafed for years against being ruled by Assad and his Alawi guard. Militant fundamentalist Sunni groups, spearheaded by the far-right Muslim Brotherhood, have tried without success to overthrow the Assad regime, using assassination, terror bombings and, occasionally, mass uprisings.

The last and bloodiest of these occurred in 1982 at the fundamentalist stronghold of Hama. Supporters of the regime were slaughtered by enraged Sunnis. The army was sent in, led by Assad's hotheaded younger brother. After three weeks of fighting, Hama lay in ruins and 5,000-10,000 of its people dead.

Ironically, Syria, which has been branded a "terrorist state" by the U.S., has probably suffered more terrorist attacks than any other nation over the past decade. The

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iversity of California Press, splendidly details all of these complex struggles. *Asad* is by far the best work yet to appear on Syria and a must for anyone who wants to understand the Mideast. It also reads like a spy thriller and is packed with fascinating facts and some sensational charges.

Such as that Jordanian intelligence gave Israel the plan for the 1973 Arab surprise attack months before the event. Or the secret U.S. involvement in Lebanon's civil war. And, most controversial, the claim that the infamous attempt by Nizar Hindawi to blow up an El-Al airliner in London was actually a "false flag" operation staged by Israeli and British intelligence to discredit Syria. All this may sound hopelessly complicated, but it's vital to better understand Syria, a nation without which no lasting Mideast peace can be made.

At some point, Israel will have to face the issue of the Golan Heights, which it seized from Syria in 1967 and has virtually annexed. There will be no peace between Israel and Syria until the strategic heights are returned. Israel, however, is dead set against even discussing the issue and is hoping the Assad regime will be overthrown. A coup in Damascus would probably plunge Syria into a long period of internal turmoil, coups and counter-coups or even civil war. Syria could even turn into another Lebanon: A chaotic and endless battle between hostile ethnic, religious and regional factions.

This would remove the only serious military challenge to Israel. But, like Lebanon, it might also turn into a highly dangerous morass into which Israel, Iraq and Jordan might be drawn. If the Assad regime falls, the Mideast could be facing one of its worst crises in decades. And whoever replaces the unloved Hafez Assad will likely be an even less lovable figure.



**Eric MARGOLIS**

regime has fought back with merciless ferocity. Just as ironically, many of Syria's underground opposition groups have been armed and funded by the intelligence service of neighboring Jordan, a close U.S. ally. Jordanian intelligence is partly funded by secret CIA subsidies. In effect, American money paid for some of the terror campaign, including car bombings and assassinations, against the Assad regime.

Iraq, a bitter foe of Syria, has also been working for years to overthrow Assad. At the same time, Syria has been locked in a long struggle with Israel for domination of Lebanon and, to a lesser degree, Jordan.

Henry Kissinger, the former U.S. foreign policy czar, was determined to bring down Hafez Assad, who he considered to be Israel's greatest foe and the major impediment to American domination of the Mideast.

Not surprisingly, Syria today is a nation under internal and external siege, surrounded by enemies and with no firm allies except for distant Iran and a not very supportive Soviet Union. Mired down in Lebanon, almost bankrupt by spending on its large armed forces, Syria is ripe for revolt.

A recent work by British writer Patrick Seale, titled *Asad* (Seale spells it with one 's') published by the Uni-