

NOTE of a meeting between the Vice-President of Syria, Rifaat Al Assad and the Rt. Hon. Julian Amery, M.P. Saturday, 31st March, 1990 at Al Banus near Marbella. 8.00 p.m. - midnight.

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I had a meeting with Vice-President Rifaat lasting two hours (interpreted conversation) followed by dinner. He had been asking for a meeting for some time. In the event he did not have anything very new to say. I think, he was simply anxious to keep open the contact.

Rifaat began by saying that he had had high hopes of a major change in Syrian policy in August of last year. These were stillborn. The situation, in his view, had not greatly changed since then but for the improvement in relations between Syria and Egypt. He was inclined to think that these were public relations exercises in both Cairo and Damascus.

In Syria itself the situation was deteriorating for a number of reasons. The economic situation was worse and could not be improved without a major departure from the command economy. The Lebanon was eating up resources and manpower, Jordan's return to parliamentary government was raising awkward questions in Damascus. Soviet support was visibly declining. Moscow was still sending arms but had cut back pretty sharply on other material and moral support and this was becoming visible. Saudi support also seemed to be on the decline. There remained the hope of American support.

Rifaat did not think ex-President Carter's recent initiatives were taken on the instruction of Washington. Carter had always had a good personal relationship with Hafiz Al Assad. He, Carter, regarded Camp David as his greatest achievement and wanted to complete it by arranging a deal between Syria and Israel. No doubt he would have consulted both Egypt and Israel as well as Washington before going to Damascus.

Turning to his own position Rifaat said that he had made it clear (presumably to President Hafiz with whom I think he is in contact) that he would not go back to Damascus unless reinstated in his former command and allowed to bring back with him a number of officers who had followed him into exile. If he were to go back one of his first steps would be to call for an immediate dialogue with Israel.

In his judgement Hafiz Al Assad was in a position not altogether different from Ceausescu and other pro-Soviet leaders in Eastern Europe and Ethiopia. He might want to turn round and adopt a pro-Western profile but it would be difficult for him to do so and carry conviction with the other countries involved.

He, Rifaat, if allowed to return on his own terms, would be in the best position to convince other countries in the area that Hafiz's conversion was genuine. So far, however, there seemed to be no give in this direction from Damascus. In the circumstances he had no option but to wait upon events.

Our conversation at dinner was more general (our earlier meeting had been simply through an interpreter). Rifaat, however, knows the Soviets quite well. He thought they were bound to fall back onto their <sup>Soviet</sup> heartlands where they would still be a formidable military power. They could presumably keep important connections with those "colonial" territories which they would have to abandon.

Rifaat came to see me off next afternoon to say goodbye. He asked about my relations with Yasser Arafat. When I said that I had never met him he said that he had only asked because he had thought that I might want to send him greetings as he was coming to see Rifaat that evening. (I understand that Hafiz Al Assad backs a rival Palestinian group to the PLO so perhaps the PLO are courting Rifaat).

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3.4.90

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q.v.?

Rice Amery

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3 April, 1990

Mr Charles.

In case it may be of interest I attach a copy of a note of a talk I had with the Vice-President of Syria, Rifaat Al Assad, over the weekend (31 March - 1 April).

V's ans

Julian

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3 April, 1990

I went to see Rifaat Al Assad at the weekend at Al Banus near Marbella where he has a property. He had been trying for some time to arrange a meeting.

I attach a note of our conversation.

I do not think there is much that we can do to influence the situation. On the other hand if Rifaat were allowed to go back, on his own terms, this might dilute the present Baathist regime in Damascus and perhaps weaken the pro-Soviet mafia that still surrounds Hafiz.

It may be that we should encourage American, Egyptian and Israelis concerned to ask whether it might not be helpful if President Hafiz were to recall Rifaat as a token of a change of heart or policy in Damascus.

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I am copying this to No. 10.

Julian Amery

The Rt. Hon. Douglas Hurd, M.P.

Copy: Charles Powell