

PRESIDENT ASSAD knows how to honour an agreement," former minister Menachem Begin declared in the Knesset in the early days of the Lebanon War. The former premier may have been dissembling with regard to his intentions at that time; but the respect he expressed for the Syrian leader was genuine.

I sensed a reluctant admiration for Israel's most dangerous and implacable enemy last week when I spoke to experts in the light of rumours that the Syrian president is seriously ill, or possibly even dead. "Cool," "intelligent," "shrewd," "patient," "pragmatic," were only some of the complimentary adjectives used to describe Hafez Assad, who has held power in Syria for an unprecedented 13 years.

"If he is healthy, you can be sure that he is in control," says Prof. Joshe Maoz, chairman of the Hebrew University's Department of Islamic Studies. "He has managed to create a strong, stable, presidential regime in Syria, the first in modern times."

"He is the sole leader in Syria," says Prof. Itamar Rabinovich, head of Tel Aviv University's Shiloah Institute for Middle East Studies. "His 13 years of stable rule are important in themselves."

Assad's power is based on both the army and the Ba'ath party, says Maoz; but it is the army which is the most cohesive and the most important. The "man on horseback" always wins in Syria, agrees Rabinovich, "but he also needs the party to stay in power." Assad has both.

"If he has had a heart attack, I'm not surprised," observes Maoz. "He holds down a lot of jobs." As well as being president, Assad is supreme commander of the army, secretary-general of the Ba'ath party and the

# Assad's secret

By DANIEL GAVRON

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head of several intelligence units. He receives reports from all branches and is personally involved in everything that happens in the country.

ASSAD'S WEAKNESS, notes Maoz, is the fact that he is an Alawi. The Alawis comprise only 12 per cent of Syria's population, and the Sunnis, who constitute 70 per cent, mostly don't regard them as Moslems. The Alawi sect is a 9th century offshoot of the Isma'ili movement, which split from orthodox Islam in the 7th century. The Alawis have ruled Syria for almost two decades; but Assad is the first who dared to seize formal power, making himself president and confirming it in a plebiscite.

Assad has placed Alawi officers in key posts in the army and intelligence services. More than half the sensitive positions in the military are manned by Alawis. Another group backing him is the clique of ambitious career officers, who benefit from the growth and prestige of the armed forces. Apart from his military control, he has also placed himself at the head of a powerful political coalition, led by the Ba'ath, but including the communists and other left-wing groups.

This includes important Sunni Moslem figures such as Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam, Defence Minister Mustafa Tlas and Chief of Staff Hikmat Shehabi. Having surrounded himself with a group of loyal associates, he has

prevented any of them from gaining positions of real power.

His regime, unlike that of other Arab states, is essentially secular. Islam is not defined as the "state religion" of Syria as it is in most Arab states, although the Syrian constitution does specify that the head of state must be a Moslem.

Assad has won considerable support among the peasant class, who have benefited from his land reform programme and from the workers in the towns, who now work an eight-hour day and who have secured paid vacations and pensions under his regime. There is also free education to university level, even if the standard of education at all levels is not very high at the present time.

Syria has a reasonably stable economy, with a flourishing agriculture, recently enhanced by the Euphrates Dam project. It is self-sufficient in oil.

Assad has done his best to placate the Sunni majority by granting funds for building mosques and by making a point of attending prayers; but this has not really helped. The Sunnis, particularly the rich landowners, whom he dispossessed in the land reform programme, hate him. But where the carrot did not help, he has not hesitated to wield the stick, as proved by his ruthless suppression of the Moslem Brotherhood revolt in Hama last year.

Assad has concentrated enormous resources in building up his

army, working towards what he calls "strategic parity" with Israel. With half a million men under arms, and several hundred thousand more in the reserves, the Syrian army is one of the largest military forces in the world, after those of the super-powers.

RABINOVICH is reluctant to speculate about what will happen when Assad goes, merely noting that a number of potential conflicts might emerge. There is a possible personal-factional split in Assad's immediate circle, a military-civilian split between the army and the Ba'ath and, above all, an Alawi-Sunni split.

The Alawis are in real danger, if Assad leaves the scene, says Rabinovich, as "a lot of Sunni blood has been spilled." He thinks the Alawis are preparing for this. Rifa'at Assad, the president's flamboyant brother, commands the powerful Defence Detachments, which could defend Alawi interests. Another brother, Jamil, is recruiting an Alawi militia in the Latakia region, where most Syrian Alawis live. He does not discount the possibility of some sort of autonomous Alawi region and near-anarchy when Assad goes. But he hastens to point out that there is no sign of this at present. And since there is no real evidence of this sort of nervousness, he tends to believe that Assad is still in control.

Maoz thinks that there is enough interest in continuity within the ruling clique to maintain stability if Assad is unable to rule. He cautions against a report that the president's powers have already been transferred to a committee of five; but he adds that this is probably just what will happen when Assad is unable to continue in power.

Defence Minister Tlas, Foreign

Minister Khaddam, Chief of Staff Shehabi, Rifa'at Assad, together with some important Alawi officers, such as Mahmud Khouli, head of air force intelligence, and Ali Douba, commander of a key armoured division, would probably form a coalition before one of them emerged as the top man.

Mustafa Tlas, a colourless figure and a Sunni, might well serve as caretaker president, suggests Maoz, noting that before Assad seized the presidency, the Alawis controlled Syria, with Nureidin Atassi serving as the figurehead (Sunni) president. Rifa'at Assad is obviously a strong contender to assume his brother's mantle; but he is intensely hated — even among the ruling clique — for his ruthlessness and alleged corruption. Despite his doctorate from Moscow University, Rifa'at has the image of a swashbuckling bandit chieftain — very different from the cool careful, modest Hafez Assad.

HOW WILL Hafez Assad's eclipse, if and when it comes, affect Israel?

Rabinovich comments that Assad is "the devil we know," and a man who can "deliver the goods," if an agreement is reached with him. The question, though, is not one of policy, but of the ability to conduct policy. Assad has been skilful and determined about pursuing what he sees as Syria's interests.

Maoz thinks that there could be a period of several months during which Syrian policy would be less activist, as the new men concentrated on shoring up their power.

If Assad's Alawi-dominated coalition is overthrown, says Maoz, it is possible that Syria will adopt a stand as "moderate" as that of Iraq, which today is prepared to accept

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Mary Ann's material -  
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