

Defensive driving in Damascus

Examiner News Service

DAMASCUS — Syrian and American security met their biggest Middle East challenge so far yesterday — getting President Nixon 18 miles from the airport to downtown Damascus without harm.

The two security services have been working closely since the visit was announced to counteract the threat posed by 180,000 Palestinian refugees living in Syria.

But in the end, Nixon and his host, Syrian President Hafez Assad, were so confident that they pushed back the top of the presidential limousine and stood up smiling and waving, through five of the most teeming, potentially dangerous miles in the Middle East.

Hundreds of soldiers carrying Russian-made rifles, stood at three-yard intervals as Nixon passed along Baghdad Street, in the ancient heart of Damascus.

But the soldiers — part of a 6,000-man security force — were only the visible part of the safety net around Nixon.

The part that he never saw included:

- The dozens of Syrian security men who infiltrated into the Palestinian refugee camps to keep an eye on militants.

- The quiet warning that the government sent to Palestinians in the camps not to leave their walled compounds until Nixon leaves.

- The two high-ranking

Syrian intelligence officers who joined Nixon's bodyguard.

Neighboring Lebanon had also cooperated by telling Syria whenever any suspected militant left that country recently.

Despite apprehensions for Nixon's safety during his fast-paced visit, the trip so far has proceeded with surprisingly few difficulties.

The U.S. Secret Service, working closely with the

host governments, has put together an efficient and well-organized protective program. It includes the heavy use of military guards as well as local police, but in the end the responsibility falls, as it does at home, on the highly trained Americans.

The American agents are fully armed, and some carry light Jewish-made sub-machine guns in their attache cases. Americans shudder at the thought of the diplomatic problems that

could result if an American agent were to fire his weapon during an overseas Presidential trip. Experienced presidential travelers do not recall an instance when a Secret Service agent drew his weapon, much less fire it.