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"The Master of Brinkmanship: A Look at Negotiating, Asad-style"

by Kenneth W. Stein

In the decades-old conflict between Israel and Syria, there's now a whole new generation of Israelis at the helm. But they're facing the same formidable Hafiz al-Asad who, in the wake of the October 1973 war, with the sides mired in a protracted stand-off on the Golan Heights, sat down opposite American officials to negotiate what became the Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement of May 1974. The talks lasted five months, with the last month witnessing almost daily shuttles between Jerusalem and Damascus by secretary of state Henry Kissinger and his entourage.

Officials involved in the current attempts to negotiate an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty are sometimes mystified; while Asad's negotiating methods and core attitudes have become clear over time, one can only guess at his true long-term intentions. Will a "political settlement good enough to be called peace," as Lebanese Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss has put it, mean the end of the historical struggle? Or is Asad merely prepared to fulfill Israel's minimum conditions in order to regain the Golan? And can he be trusted?

In 1974, Asad was younger, healthier, but at least as inscrutable as he is now. So the impressions of those who negotiated and concluded an agreement with the Syrian president that last time around might be instructive to the current negotiators. From interviews I have conducted over the last 10 years with participants in the 1974 talks, a consensus arises: Asad used his own timepiece--more often a calendar rather than a clock. Then as now, he was not prepared to be rushed into reaching an agreement with Israel, even though his military position vis-a-vis Israel on the Golan Heights was poor. And he was viewed as a man of stamina, who proudly defended Arab honor and never permitted the concerns of his former ally, the Soviet Union, to take precedence over Syrian national interests. (The interviews were for my recently published book "Heroic Diplomacy," about Arab-Israeli negotiations in the 1970s.)

Unlike Anwar al-Sadat, who was later to negotiate with Jimmy Carter and Menachem Begin, Asad was deeply enmeshed in the details of the agreement, which covered Israeli withdrawal from portions of the Golan Heights, the exchange of POWs and the maintenance of a quiet border. "He negotiated every inch, every tree," recalled Joseph Sisco, then undersecretary of state for political affairs and a member of the

American negotiating team.

Added Roy Atherton, then assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs: "When it turned to the text, to the actual terms of the disengagement negotiation, it quickly got down to precisely a tank here and a kilometer here and a coordinate there and what about those observation posts on Mt. Hermon ... Asad had his military people there. And he would occasionally turn and ask them a question, but he was the negotiator of even the minutest detail."

Asad did not demand a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights back then, because that would have required Syria's full political acceptance of Israel. Today, all signs indicate that he is prepared to recognize Israel's existence, though he remains uncomfortable with Israel as a reality and will therefore keep his distance even after agreements are signed.

It quickly became clear in the 1970s that when it came to Israel's strategic strength, and how that would dictate the outcome of any agreement, Asad was a realist. Syria's opening positions--a demand for full Israeli withdrawal from a substantial portion of the Golan Heights with no implied Syrian recognition of Israel-- were eventually modified to meet the restricted twin criteria of full Israeli military withdrawal back to the 1967 lines and specifically, the return of a portion of the Syrian city of Kuneitra that had been controlled by Israel since the end of the 1967 war.

But getting to the point of a deal required the patience of saints. As Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan told an aide in early 1974, "You need much more patience with the Syrians [than the Egyptians]; you cannot go fast with them."

An equal overdose of patience is evidently being required today; in discussions with Asad, fits and starts built into the negotiating clock should be considered routine. For the Syrian president will not be stampeded into a decision or compromise Syrian interests even if time is running out on the Clinton presidency.

Kissinger's first meeting with Asad, on December 15, 1973, focused on possible Syrian attendance at the soon-to-be convened Geneva Arab-Israeli peace conference. (In the event, the Syrians chose not to participate.)

Recalling that initial encounter, Atherton remarked that it "certainly did not produce the kind of common relations of trust and confidence that Kissinger had with Sadat. But it did produce a respect for Asad as a shrewd, intelligent, and in the final analysis, practical person,

with whom he could work out some deals."

Following the January 1974 signing of the first Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement, Kissinger's discussions with Asad picked up in earnest. According to Atherton, it was very important for Asad to come out of these talks with "some symbolic recovery of territory that had been occupied at the time of the 67 war. And, of course, it started out with a third, a half of the Golan, and ended up being meters, literally."

But it didn't come easy. "About the 23rd or 24th day" of the final month's shuttles, Sisco recounted, "all of us were saying, 'Henry, we can't keep flying between Damascus and Jerusalem every day. You've been away as secretary of state; it's over 20 days.' And so I remember myself suggesting to him that I write out a short sentence which said, in effect, 'I'm sorry, we can't really come to an agreement and we're going to suspend the talks. I actually gave that to Henry in my longhand and said, 'Henry, at the key point, hand it to Asad, because this guy is all about brinkmanship.'"

Indeed, commented Peter Rodman, a note-taker on the Kissinger shuttles, Asad "flaunts his ability to block an agreement."

A few hours later, Kissinger suggested to Asad that perhaps the sides weren't able to get any further and said he was thinking of making a statement to that effect. At that point, Sisco recalls, Asad "said 'Just a minute,' and he gave us a few more feet right at the end of that particular meeting. This is literally the way it happened. We went back to Jerusalem for another round."

Despite Asad's calculated circumspection, his goals were clear to some at least. "I didn't have any doubt that [Asad] wanted to put an end to [the war of attrition on the Golan Heights]," stated the late Mordechai Gur, Israel's military chief of staff at the time, in a July 1993 interview with me. "There was no doubt in my mind that in spite of his behavior-- and he's a tough guy--Asad wanted the negotiations in earnest, and he wanted an agreement."

And once Asad accepted the final details of the disengagement agreement, to quote Israeli general Herzi Shafir, who was involved in the manpower discussions with the Syrians, he "fulfilled it completely."

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