

Facing Assad

American Diplomacy toward Syria, 1973-77*

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When Henry Kissinger landed at Damascus Airport on 15 December, 1973, he became the first American secretary of state to visit Syria since John Foster Dulles, two decades before. Years of frosty indifference, with barely any diplomatic contact, preceded Kissinger's visit. In October 1973, Syria and Egypt's shocking surprise attack on Israel obliterated that logic. Though ultimately losing militarily, the Arab allies, aided by OAPEC's oil embargo, brought into being a new political situation which neither the US nor Israel could choose to ignore.

In the war and its aftermath, Henry Kissinger sensed an opportunity to promote the influence and perceived national interests of the United States. Through negotiations with the leaders of the erstwhile Soviet satellites Egypt and Syria – Anwar Sadat and Hafez al-Assad – Soviet influence might be reduced, the free flow of Middle East oil restored and the security of Israel bolstered.¹ The war woke the United States from its slumber with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and resulted in the rekindling of US diplomacy toward Syria. An American-led political process began, which would transform the region for decades to come.

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In this, the American diplomacy would, as it always had, focus on Egypt and Israel, these being viewed as the crucial states involved. Through diplomatic ups and downs, Henry Kissinger's relationship with Hafez al-Assad matured. Kissinger came to see Assad as someone whom he could deal constructively with. Not as a friend, but as a partner, on occasions where American and Syrian interests aligned. The beginning of the Lebanese Civil War proved to be one such occasion.

The present study can be divided into two distinct periods – before and after the Syria-Israel disengagement agreement of June 1974. The same is true for the historiography. Many authors cover the former part; only two really cover the second. Several books discuss the Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement of 1974, but then only as a step in the process leading to later Israeli-Egyptian deals. These accounts thus treat Syria as a waypoint on Egypt and Israel's path to peace. There is, however, a different story here as well, of Syria, the United States and the rebooting of their diplomatic relationship, even as the grand diplomatic drama of the time took place elsewhere.

Telling that story is the object of the present account.. With Egypt and Israel seen as the crucial states, how did Syria fit into the equation? What was the anatomy of the American diplomacy toward Syria? How did Henry Kissinger's relationship with Hafez al-Assad develop throughout the period, and how – if at all – did it impact policy?

Two existing accounts – Patrick Seale's *Asad of Syria* and Jasmine K. Gani's *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations* – address similar questions, and provide sustained portrayals of American dealings with Syria, before *and* after the 1974 disengagement agreement. In his biography of Hafez al-Assad, Seale presents the Syrian president as the clever, yet ultimately naïve victim of American, Israeli, Egyptian, and Soviet schemes, among

which Kissinger's was merely the worst. To demonstrate Kissinger's intentional obstruction, he juxtaposes Syria's (not highly favorable) political outcome from this diplomatic process with Assad's own claims about these events and a selective reading of Kissinger's memoirs. The resulting portrait shows Kissinger willfully seeking to weaken both Syria and Assad, which he achieves in the end. Seale's book was written long before the declassification of the archives examined for the present study. This article demonstrates that Kissinger's approach was in fact more nuanced. He does not appear to have had any particular animosity against Assad or Syria, but rather, seems to have developed a measure of personal admiration and sympathy for his Syrian opposite. Nevertheless, as Seale asserts, the outcome of this encounter with Kissinger and the United States was far from optimal for Syria and Assad, partly because of US policies. The causes of this outcome, however, were different and more complex than Seale claims. However, as one of a rare few regime outsiders to have had a personal relationship with Hafez al-Assad, Seale is able to provide insights into the Syrian perspectives of the events under study which no other published account can match.²

J. K. Gani's aligns her assessment with that of Seale, painting the Kissinger's involvement in a decidedly cynical light. She counterposes this to the idealism of Assad and Syria, champions of the Arab cause, the Palestinians and international law.³ She fails to consider, however, that these professions of idealistic ends also might happen to serve narrowly Syrian interests in an instrumental fashion. For instance, when Assad demanded that Egypt and Syria should fight, negotiate and make peace together, not separately, did he do so because of his unshakable belief in the unity of the Arab nation, or because Syria depended on such unity as a means to achieve its objectives vis-à-vis Israel? Or a mix of both?

Gani's main objective is to study the impact of differing ideological outlooks in the Syrian-American relationship. This is well done and highly illuminating if one wishes to grasp how disconnected Syria and the US truly were before the 1973 War. For example, how was it that high-level US diplomatic operatives write page after page of memos detailing the search for peace between Egypt, Israel and Jordan, while simplistically dismissing Syria, often in a single sentence, as 'radical' or 'irrational'?⁴

A greater number of works cover the Syria-Israel disengagement negotiations of 1974 within the framework of the Egypt-Israel peace process. To the extent that there is contention concerning this period, it has to do with how each author assesses Henry Kissinger's role, and, to a lesser extent, that of Hafez al-Assad. One notable example is Kenneth Stein's *Heroic Diplomacy*. In contrast with Seale and Gani, Stein portrays Assad as a far more adept diplomatic opponent to Kissinger, who quickly grasped his position vis-à-vis Sadat, Kissinger and the Israelis, what they sought from Syria in the negotiations, and how Syria should respond to achieve its goals. In Stein's assessment, Syria's gains in the 1974 Disengagement Agreement were limited not primarily because of Assad's naiveté and US, Egyptian and Israeli deception (though the latter certainly contributed), but rather because Syria's geopolitical position made greater gains difficult. Assad, Stein suggests, played his difficult hand well.⁵

Salim Yaqub's *Imperfect Strangers* focuses on US policy and motivations, specifically the role of Henry Kissinger. Yaqub argues that Kissinger in his diplomacy did not truly seek an Arab-Israeli peace along the lines of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 242, at least not if one interprets 242 as calling for Israel's *full* evacuation of the territories occupied in the 1967 June War. Rather, he sought to shield Israel from being forced

back to the (in his mind) indefensible pre-1967 borders, while defusing the Arab-Israeli conflict and the attendant dangers it posed for the US. However, Yaqub argues, Kissinger disingenuously implied, to the Syrians among others, that his diplomacy was leading towards a fulfillment of 242 (including full withdrawal from the occupied territories).⁶

Steven Spiegel's *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict* and William Quandt's *Peace Process* similarly focus on Kissinger's mediation with Israel and Egypt. In this context, both devote several pages to the Syria-Israel negotiations of 1974, but thereafter shift back to Egypt. After reviewing Kissinger's foray in the Middle East throughout the period, Quandt finds that the American was both an innovative diplomat and extraordinarily effective, given the circumstances he worked under. Finally, Quandt speculates that, had Ford won the 1976 election and thus reinvigorated Kissinger's political backing, the Secretary of State may have sought to tackle the many difficult issues remaining in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, as the present account shows, Kissinger was hinting as much towards the end of his term, to both the Syrians and his own subordinates.⁷

Finally, Henry Kissinger's voluminous memoirs are a special case. Written by the pivotal character of the post-war diplomacy, in staggering detail, based on recollection and archival material, they are among the most frequently cited sources in the works discussed above. Kissinger clearly hoped to shape his own historiography and portrayed his efforts in a positive light. The memoirs paint a picture wherein the Syria-Israel disengagement agreement, negotiated by Kissinger, was as good an outcome as either side could have achieved. Thereafter, further progress was nigh on impossible, for reasons that were not of Kissinger's making. As with most of the authors discussed above, Kissinger too frames the Syria negotiations as merely a part of the greater tale of Israel and Egypt. While his narrative does

sugarcoat his own actions (and inactions), it is on the whole not markedly dishonest, as measured against the findings of the present study.⁸

With the exception of Gani's, all significant accounts of these events have to a large extent been based on the personal narratives of people involved in the diplomacy – Kissinger through his memoirs, Assad through his interviews with Patrick Seale, plus interviews with and memoirs by several secondary characters. The present account is based on in-depth research in the holdings of the Nixon and Ford presidential libraries, where large bodies of archival material has recently been declassified, supplemented by several digital collections and newly declassified Israeli documents. It is the first chapter in the history of American relations with the Assad dynasty in Syria, kept alive through chronic troubles ever since.

1. The October War and the Disengagement Negotiations

During the 1967 War, Israel had captured the Golan Heights. Retaking them became the rallying cry of Syrian foreign policy. Moreover, Syria severed its diplomatic relations with the United States and rejected United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 242, seen in Washington as the fundamental framework for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. When Secretary of State William Rogers launched his first Middle East peace initiative in December 1969, the so-called Rogers Plan, he effectively omitted Syria.⁹ Rogers argued that '[i]nsofar as Syria is concerned, we should continue to avoid taking any position and to let sleeping dogs lie. ... We certainly should not agree at this juncture to any Soviet proposal which calls for Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.'¹⁰ Consequently, while Syria refused to accept UNSCR 242, policymakers in Washington were quite content with avoiding making Syria and the Golan issue part of any new peace efforts.

In 1970/1971 presidents Anwar Sadat in Egypt and Hafez al-Assad in Syria began secretly planning a game-changing war, a two-front assault, aimed at reversing Israel's 1967 victory. In March 1972, Syria accepted UNSCR 242, though conditioned upon an interpretation of the resolution as requiring Israel's *full* retreat from *all* occupied territories, as well as the restitution of Palestinian rights.¹¹ Washington took note of this move by the formerly staunchly rejectionist Syrians, though it led to no change in US policy. Since accepting UNSCR 242 implicitly meant that Syria, for the first time, recognized Israel's right to exist, this move could be interpreted as a Syrian olive branch. However, given that Assad and Sadat were planning a war, two different interpretations seem plausible: that recognizing 242 was part of a ruse, to sow confusion about Syria's true intentions; and that Syria thus positioned itself to partake in whatever diplomatic process might follow the war, within the same framework as Egypt. In the morning of 6 October, 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel, catching the Israelis off-guard. Assad hoped the day had finally come to overturn years of Arab humiliation and reclaim the Golan Heights. Though the war began with early Syrian and Egyptian triumphs, the Israelis struck back, reclaimed lost territory and then some, including a salient protruding ominously toward Damascus. After intense consultations between the Soviet Union and the United States, and two ignored or broken ceasefire resolutions from the UN Security Council (338 and 339), a third one (340) took hold on 25 October.¹²

While Egypt and Syria lost the war militarily, it was nothing like their collapses in 1967, nor was it a defeat in political terms. The October War restored morale throughout the Arab world. Having shocked Israel with their initial advances, Syria and Egypt were again perceived as credible military threats. Israel, meanwhile, had had its sense of military superiority bruised, and thus, its sense of security. Moreover, the war made clear how

dependent it was on American support (notably the arms re-supply). The Israelis could not easily brush aside American demands for earnest negotiations..¹³

UN Security Council Resolutions 338-340 were passed to end the war, specifically reaffirming the role of UNSCR 242 of 1967 as the basic framework for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Syria accepted UNSCRs 338-340, though again conditioning it on interpreting 242 as calling for a full Israeli evacuation of *all* territories occupied in the 1967 War *and* the restoration of Palestinian rights.¹⁴ Syria thus publicly declared itself open to negotiations.

While the war still raged, President Richard Nixon had advised Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger that ‘we must have a diplomatic settlement there. ... [W]e must not under any circumstances allow them [the Israelis] because of the victory that they’re going to win - and they’ll win it, thank God, they should - but we must not get away with just having this thing hang over for another four years and have us at odds with the Arab world. We’re not going to do it anymore.’¹⁵ Kissinger agreed. Israel’s security and welfare was by this time perceived as key national interest for the United States. However, the same was also true of maintaining western access to Middle East oil, and of reducing Soviet influence in the region. Israel’s intransigence in the preceding years, and the United States acquiescence, had provoked the 1973 war, which threatened all three of these key interests. A more stable Arab-Israeli arrangement had to be reached.¹⁶ For the Israelis, meanwhile, the war had demonstrated the importance of their superpower ally, particularly through the massive and critically important arms resupply during the war. This gave the Americans political leverage over the Israelis, and the latter knew it. Egypt and Syria, meanwhile, found new confidence in the relative success of their war; the political support received, especially from the Arab oil states and USSR; and their ability to overturn a deadlocked situation.¹⁷

The White House had always viewed Egypt as the pivotal Arab frontline state. Moreover, President Sadat had long signaled his desire for improved relations with Israel and the United States. The Arab publics, however, which were still attached to the idea of Arab unity, would not tolerate an isolated Egyptian move with Israel. Thus, the Americans realized, to achieve a sustainable solution on the Israel-Egypt front, they might also need to tackle the Syrian and Jordanian aspects of the conflict. Egypt and Sadat, however, would be the ultimate focus.¹⁸

2. Shuttle Diplomacy

Following the October 1973 ceasefire, Kissinger's next objective was the separation of Egyptian and Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula. Kissinger spent the final months of the year arranging an international peace conference in Geneva. It would serve as a public smokescreen, masking the real talks he would lead behind closed doors.

Assad's post-war goal was the restoration of Golan to Syrian control, and toward that end, he held three cards. First, Syria had captured an undisclosed number of Israeli prisoners of war (POWs), whom Israel desperately wanted returned. Second, Assad had influence over the Arab oil-producing states and their ongoing embargo against the West. Third, Syria might reopen hostilities against Israel, be it full-scale or as a low-intensity war of attrition, which might in turn force Egypt to join the fighting.

Thus, when Hafez al-Assad, through Saudi intermediaries, indicated Syria's willingness to partake in the post-war diplomacy, Kissinger saw good reasons to hear him out. On 15 December, the secretary of state made his first visit to Damascus. Assad demanded a disengagement deal with Israel that would restore nearly the entire Golan Heights to Syria.

This was presented as a pre-condition to Syria's attendance at Geneva. With the conference a mere six days away, however, Kissinger saw no time for reaching such an agreement. A second problem soon arose. If Syria were to attend the conference, Israel demanded a list of the Syrian-held Israeli POWs as a precondition for *their* attendance. This, Assad refused. For Kissinger, it thus proved a blessing in disguise when Assad revealed that although Syria would refuse to attend the conference, it also would not actively oppose it. Thus, Syria and Israel's respective pre-conditions for attendance needed not be met, while the conference could be held without the Syrians railing against it.¹⁹ The Geneva conference convened on 21 December, 1973, never to reconvene. Syria's place at the seven-sided conference table stood symbolically empty.²⁰

In early January 1974, Kissinger launched the first round of his shuttle diplomacy between Egypt and Israel, aimed at reaching a negotiated agreement for the separation of their dangerously entangled armies in Sinai and by the Suez Canal. Syria was not involved. On 17 January, the day before the Egyptians intended to sign such an agreement, a furious Assad screamed at Sadat over the phone: 'Do you understand the meaning of what you are doing? ... It means that Israel will move to our front every tank and gun it has in Sinai.'²¹ In Assad's view, Sadat was unilaterally weakening their two-front pressure on Israel, and thus weakening one of their strongest negotiating advantages. Sadat was more eager to move quickly with Israel, and more certain of his domestic position than Assad. Syria's leadership needed to acclimatize before it could tolerate talks with the Israelis. Meanwhile, Egypt and Israel on 18 January signed what became known as the Sinai I agreement.²²

To avoid ostracism in the Arab world for abandoning the common cause against Israel, Sadat needed a Syrian-Israeli disengagement deal signed before he could seek a farther-

reaching, second deal with the Israelis. This became Kissinger's next objective. Probing for a viable route to that end, Kissinger returned to Damascus on 19 January. While Assad again refused to give Israel a POW list, he gave Kissinger three maps with his proposals for where and how Syrian and Israeli forces could separate on the Golan Heights. To Kissinger's surprise, Assad encouraged him to immediately present the proposal to the Israelis.²³ Meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon in Tel Aviv, Kissinger stated that his intention toward Assad was 'to get him involved in the process, even if it blows up in four weeks. You know the joke about asking a girl, "Will you sleep with me for \$1 million?" She says yes. Then you ask, "Will you sleep with me for \$2?" She's offended, but she's conceded the principle.'²⁴ In other words, if the most tenaciously rejectionist of the Arab frontline state would agree to the principle of negotiations, that concession equaled a political win for Israel, irrespective of whether the negotiations succeeded or not.

On 28 January Israel's ambassador to the United States, Simcha Dinitz, conveyed to Kissinger the Israeli government's response to Assad's map proposal: Israel refused to commit to an official reply, nor would the Israelis offer Kissinger any sense of a disengagement plan they could accept.²⁵ Kissinger erupted: 'Mr. Ambassador, you remind me of a man who has won the grand prize in the lottery and is now trying to spend it as fast as you can.'²⁶ Dinitz blamed Syrian stubbornness for any stalemate.²⁷ A frustrated Kissinger launched back in plain terms:

'It doesn't make a goddamn bit of difference as long as we can isolate the Syrians eventually. ... And that we cannot do if all hell starts breaking loose again within the next two months Once there is a disengagement agreement with the Syrians, they're pregnant. ... Then you can see what you can get from the

Egyptians. And once you've done that, you can sit forever. Because the Syrians by themselves can do nothing.'²⁸

Kissinger thus suggested that Israel make limited Golan withdrawals now in exchange for a limited agreement with Syria. This would free Egypt to negotiate a sufficiently comprehensive deal with Israel and conclusively break its alliance with Syria. Without Egypt threatening Israel's southern front, Syria's military threat in the north would be so impotent as to render the country incapable of reclaiming lost territory, be it through diplomacy or force. A small Golan sacrifice now was the price Kissinger suggested Israel pay for the subsequent opportunity of isolating Syria from its allies.²⁹

Hafez al-Assad, meanwhile, maneuvered to preserve one of his best negotiating assets, his influence with the Arab oil producing states. Reacting to US emergency aid to Israel during the October War, these states had implemented an embargo against the Western bloc, as well as production cutbacks. One effect was a rapid price increase on everyday necessities such as gasoline in the United States. The White House worked ceaselessly to have it lifted, and it weighed heavily on President Nixon's mind. Ending it seemed an opportunity for political relief from his ongoing Watergate woes. He knew well that King Faisal of Saudi Arabia - the largest Arab oil producer - maintained close contact with Sadat and Assad.³⁰ As Nixon told Kissinger, 'my only interest is the embargo. That's the only thing the country [the United States] is interested in. They [the American people] don't give a damn what happens to Syria.'³¹

In early February, per Assad's request, the Saudis informed the Americans that they would only lift the embargo *after* the conclusion of a Syrian-Israeli disengagement deal. In response, Kissinger presented Assad with an ultimatum: Either he backed down on the oil

issue, or the Americans would back out of the process. Breaking complex problems into discrete, manageable issues was central to Kissinger's diplomacy: Syria should be broken from Egypt, from the Palestinian issue, and from the Soviet Union, while the oil embargo should be separated from the Arab-Israeli negotiations. Kissinger worried that mixing too many elements would deadlock the process. It seemed, however, that the oil producers might now link the oil issue to the resolution of every possible Arab grievance.³²

On 7 February, as one step in a diplomatic plan formulated by Kissinger to get negotiations moving, Assad informed the secretary of state of the exact number of Israeli prisoners being held in Syria (sixty-five). To Kissinger's oil embargo ultimatum, however, Assad responded with a short, oblique message refusing the American demand. Nevertheless, on 18 February, the Saudi and Egyptian foreign ministers Omar Saqqaf and Ismail Fahmy conveyed to Kissinger that the oil embargo would be lifted within fourteen days. Assad had reportedly agreed to a partial lifting, followed by a full lifting once Israel began withdrawing its forces. The Americans thus felt freed to continue their efforts, and the overall process picked up momentum. From the Syrians, Kissinger received a sealed envelope naming the sixty-five Israeli POWs. As specified in a five-point plan by Kissinger, the Israelis were to begin work on an initial, concrete disengagement proposal, after which negotiations might follow. Since Syria had done its part by delivering the POW list, the ball was in Israel's court.³³

While awaiting Israel's next proposal, Kissinger made another Damascus visit. There, Assad made it clear that an acceptable disengagement deal for Syria required the return to Syria of all territory captured by Israel during the 1973 War and in skirmishes that took place in the months that followed. Additionally, Assad demanded the return of at least some portion

of the territory captured by Israel in the 1967 War. Avoiding specifics, Kissinger answered that if Syria accepted limited, negotiated gains now, the Americans would remain committed to achieving more in a post-disengagement negotiated deal.³⁴

For tactical reasons, however, Kissinger advised the Israelis to postpone their proposal. Ten to fourteen days could be won, Kissinger argued, a period within which an upcoming conference of Arab oil ministers was expected to conclusively end the embargo. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir accepted Kissinger's plan, and the discussion turned to Golan. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan argued that although he desired a political solution, the Israelis had little to gain by entering negotiations with the Syrians at this point. Their current positions in Golan were better than before the war. Kissinger countered that Syria on its own was not the issue. Israel should make a deal with Syria to bolster the deal with Egypt and relieve their American friends from international pressure. Thereafter, Syria alone could not threaten Israel militarily, impose an oil embargo, or unite Western Europe and the USSR in opposition to Israel and the United States. An isolated Syria would be nearly powerless. Achieving that end, Kissinger reasoned, should be Israel's argument for negotiating a limited agreement with Syria.³⁵

Kissinger soon returned to Damascus, where Assad asserted that Syria saw disengagement as a first step on the path to a full Israeli withdrawal from Golan. Kissinger responded that for now, restored 6 October lines were all he could promise. If Assad accepted limited withdrawals in a disengagement deal, Kissinger spoke of a 'second phase' thereafter, bringing further Israeli retreats.³⁶

On 18 March, the Arab oil states voted to end the oil embargo.³⁷ As the final, and by far the most intense, phase of the Syrian-Israeli disengagement negotiations approached in

late April, Kissinger still had not convinced the Israelis to make the minimum concession he believed necessary for Syria to accept a deal - the return of all Syrian territory captured by Israel in the 1973 War. To Dinitz, he repeated his key argument for why Israel should make such a concession: '[I]f you after that would reach a second agreement with the Egyptians, then I would actually have finished my job and I will not implore you to make additional steps because the problem in the Middle East would have lost its sting.'³⁸

By no means sure of success, Kissinger, in a veritable marathon of shuttle diplomacy, began the diplomatic end run on 27 April. Syria and Israel sought mutually agreeable disengagement lines. A particular sticking point was Quneitra, a Golan town that had been the capital of Syria's Quneitra Governorate until captured by Israel in the 1967 War. Its return to Syrian control would give Assad something tangible to present to his people as a gain from the costly war with Israel. Kissinger considered this an unavoidable necessity.³⁹

Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, meanwhile, wanted an American commitment - that the Americans not pressure the Israelis to withdraw from Golan.⁴⁰ Such pressure, Meir threatened, would come up against 'unequivocal opposition in Israel.'⁴¹ Though Kissinger dismissed a formal commitment, he gave his personal assurance that he would not demand an Israeli withdrawal from Golan and that he would resign if such a demand were made.⁴²

On 18 May, Kissinger notified Nixon of a significant breakthrough. Having accepted an approximate Israeli proposal on dividing lines in Golan, Assad stressed to Kissinger 'it is not for Israel but for the US that I am doing this.'⁴³ Such affirmations of Syria's commitment to its new relationship with the United States had by now become common in diplomatic exchanges, and would remain so.

Through numerous crises, Syria and Israel eventually neared agreement on two approximate disengagement lines in Golan, between which there would be Syrian civilian administration and a UN presence. Practically every issue, however small, was subjected to detailed, bitter negotiations.

In a meeting with Kissinger on 27 May, Assad seemed convinced of a deal being reached. However, he questioned Kissinger's commitment to further diplomatic steps after finalizing this agreement. On the eve of this landmark agreement, Assad emphasized that Syria's goals remained unfulfilled. He would work to keep all options open against Israel, warfare included.⁴⁴

[Suggested placement of Figure 1] [Suggested placement of Figure 2]

*Figure 1 (left): Proposed Israeli-Syrian disengagement lines.*⁴⁵

*Figure 2 (right): The Israeli-Syrian Disengagement Lines.*⁴⁶

On 29 May, Richard Nixon announced the success of the Syrian-Israeli disengagement negotiations. The agreement would be signed in Geneva, returning all Syrian land captured by Israel during the October 1973 War, plus very minor territorial concessions from Israel's 1967 conquests. A narrow demilitarized zone would be set up athwart the dividing line between the two sides. It would be patrolled by the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), which the UN Security Council created on 31 May, 1974, the same day as the disengagement agreement was signed. Quneitra, notably, ended up on the Syrian side of the demilitarized zone, under Syrian civilian - but not military - control.⁴⁷ The agreement's final documents also included a number of American assurances. A formal letter from Nixon to

Assad affirmed that the agreement was ‘only a first step toward a just and durable peace.’⁴⁸

Moreover,

‘the United States will give full, and continuing support, including our active involvement within the year in the next stages of the negotiations, to the achievement of the full implementation of [UNSCR] 338 in all of its parts ... [T]he peace settlement should be in accordance with the interests of all the states in the area, consistent with their independence and sovereignty, and should take fully into account the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people.’⁴⁹

This statement was, on the face of it, highly sympathetic to the Syrian viewpoint. Still, these words were no more than indications of intentions. They were certainly not guarantees to which the Syrians could hold the Americans. For months, Kissinger had told the Israelis that they should conclude this deal, so that they might thereafter isolate Syria from Egypt, and then do nothing more with the Syrians. A 31 May record from Kissinger’s meeting with US congressional leaders suggests a change in his analysis: ‘This is an important first step, but we have monumental problems ahead of us --Jerusalem, Palestine. If there is no movement, this front could erupt again, because the Syrians are unstable. ... But we now have maneuvering room.’⁵⁰ Had Kissinger begun to believe that the Golan agreement and a second Sinai deal might not suffice to neutralize the Syrian threat?

[Suggested placement of Figure 3]

*Figure 3: Richard Nixon greeted by Hafez al-Assad at Damascus Airport, 15 June, 1974.*⁵¹

On 15 June, Richard Nixon, by then greatly weakened by the Watergate scandal, arrived in Damascus. He was the first-ever American president to visit Syria. From Nixon, Assad sought assurances on the next steps toward restoring Golan to Syria, and the American's view of Israel's ultimate borders.⁵² While somewhat circumspect, Nixon's response was far less so than those of his secretary of state: 'I can see your view that any Syrian territory which has been occupied must be restored. But what Dr. Kissinger wants to get across is that if you put that on the table with Israel, this would stop all progress. ... We must move inexorably in that direction. ... But remember that only we can do anything with those who block the goal you seek.'⁵³

Nixon did not say outright that, at the end of all of this, Syria would have Golan fully restored to its control. However, he made strong insinuations to that effect. Moreover, the Syrians interpreted these as promises, and subsequent archival documents all but confirm that Kissinger - although claiming differently in his memoirs - understood it likewise. Thus, the assurances that Kissinger had resolutely avoided were now seemingly offered to the Syrians by the American president.⁵⁴ Curiously, Assad does not appear to have made any reference to this in his subsequent encounters with American officials during the Nixon and Ford years. Records of Kissinger's meetings with Assad do not mention anything of the sort, nor do the reports of American diplomats' encounters with officials in Damascus. Whatever the reason, the documentary record suggests that Nixon's pronouncements in Damascus made scant impact the US-Syrian diplomacy that followed. Nixon's Damascus visit would prove significant as a symbol of the rapidly improved Syrian-American relationship, not as an occasion for substantive, game-changing discussions.

3. Containment

On 17 June, the day after Nixon left Damascus, the United States and Syria restored full diplomatic relations. The Golan Agreement was only the first milestone in the new Syrian-American relationship. Washington's policy experts and decision makers immediately began developing ideas for further Middle East negotiations. The Arab-Israeli conflict remained precariously unresolved. Both Nixon and Kissinger saw great danger lingering between Syria and Israel, and the secretary told Nixon to expect further Syrian-Israeli warfare before the end of his term.⁵⁵

Throughout the summer and fall, Kissinger received Middle Eastern envoys in the United States. Israeli Foreign Minister Yigal Allon came first. Meeting at Camp David on August 1, Allon asked about US views on Israel's final borders. Kissinger had avoided this controversial issue like the plague, rather focusing on tackling the immediate issues while avoiding discussions of final outcomes.⁵⁶ His answer, then, was unusual:

'I don't think it is impossible to do it with the 1967 frontiers with Egypt; I do think it is impossible to accept the 1967 frontiers with Syria, and I think it is impossible with Jordan. ... On the Syrian side it can't be 1967 but it can't be the present line - because I think it may be necessary to go one more move with Syria. But it will be some clear distance from 1967. ... But I have never discussed it with any of my colleagues - or with any Arab.'⁵⁷

Kissinger did not foresee peace anytime soon. Perhaps he imagined a final peace settlement as the distant conclusion of his step-by-step process, but barely ever discussed what ultimate outcome he envisioned. Kissinger would take all the small steps he thought necessary. What, then, were the prospects for another Golan step? According to a White House memo, it was

unclear whether or when there could be further negotiations to satisfy Syria. It noted that Richard Murphy, the new US ambassador to Syria, would need to sustain the dialogue with Syrian leaders and build confidence through a period with little diplomatic movement for Syria.⁵⁸

On August 9, Richard Nixon resigned his presidency over the Watergate scandal. Vice-President Gerald Ford took over. That same day, a cable from Ford to Assad specifically affirmed ‘everything told you by President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger’ and emphasized Ford’s strong commitment to continue working for ‘a just and durable peace in the Middle East.’⁵⁹ Whereas Nixon’s Watergate woes had kept him from playing a significant role in this diplomacy, Ford’s lacking foreign policy experience meant that this would remain, as it had, Henry Kissinger’s domain.

The Washington meetings between American and Middle Eastern officials resumed. Ahead of his meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Abdel Halim Khaddam, Ford received a memo, approved by Kissinger, arguing that since none of Syria’s goals could currently be met, the US strategy should be to buy time and ‘contain’ Syria while the diplomatic focus lay elsewhere.⁶⁰ Damascus had, the memo noted, repeatedly threatened war if further negotiations did not rapidly lead to the return of occupied Arab territory and the restoration of Palestinian rights. Syria’s army had been fully reequipped, and its fighting capability restored. Jordanian leaders believed a Syrian resumption of hostilities might come before the year’s end. Syria’s threats, the memo argued, could not be taken lightly. But the Israelis strongly opposed further Golan withdrawals.⁶¹ With nothing specific to offer, Ford should reassure Khaddam of US intentions to reach a just and lasting peace, with the next steps coming ‘as fast as possible.’⁶²

Israel also had a change in government during the summer of 1974, following Meir's resignation. Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's new prime minister, visited Ford and Kissinger in Washington on 12 September. He asserted that opportunities existed for further constructive step-by-step moves with Egypt, and perhaps with Jordan. With Syria, however, Rabin saw no prospects.⁶³ To Rabin, Ford affirmed the promise made by Kissinger in May that the United States 'would not push Israel off the Golan.'⁶⁴ However, the formulation did *not* preclude major Israeli withdrawals, just a *complete* withdrawal.

After the meeting with Rabin, Kissinger sent a message to Assad: '[O]ur objective was to obtain a firm Israeli commitment to enter the next stage of negotiations. We have now, with great difficulty, achieved this. Furthermore, the Israelis have agreed to give us some ideas in the near future about what the elements of the next step might be.'⁶⁵ This was classic Kissingerian ambiguity: present a truth - that the Israelis had indeed agreed to 'give some ideas' - but do so in a way that might be interpreted as relevant and positive to a Syrian perspective, which it was not. Records from these meetings show Rabin framing Syria as a threat, one that should cause the United States to increase arms supplies to Israel. He did *not* speak of Syria as a potential negotiating partner. The negotiations and Israeli ideas to which Kissinger referred focused on Egypt and Sinai - the one place where Assad did *not* want further movement. For the Syrian president, Egypt's threat to Israel had to remain in the equation until Syria's post-war goals were reached, a calculus that another Sinai move would wreck.⁶⁶

From Damascus, Ambassador Murphy warned that while Assad had opted for a negotiated solution, he persisted in maintaining Syria's military option, backed by a supportive populace and Arab and Iranian oil money.⁶⁷ For further American initiatives on the

Egypt-Israel front to remain possible, a Syrian return to the battlefield, or some other Syrian disruption had to be avoided. However, the Americans were uncertain if the Syrians would keep still. Between meetings in Cairo, Kissinger visited Damascus in October. He found Assad suspicious, probing to find out more about Sadat's willingness for further, separate negotiations. To Assad, Kissinger falsely claimed that his ongoing talks in Egypt were non-specific, and that Sadat remained uncommitted. Assad reiterated his clear preference for simultaneous negotiated progress on all fronts, which Kissinger dutifully reported to Ford.⁶⁸ Kissinger assured an unimpressed Assad of Ford's 'firm intention to support further negotiations on the Syrian-Israeli front "at the right time" in the future.'⁶⁹

In late October, the Arab League met in Rabat. Kissinger feared that the Syrians might use Rabat to build pressure against Sadat and his negotiations with the Israelis. While Assad could see President Sadat abandoning their alliance for a second Egyptian-Israeli agreement, he saw no concrete signs of further moves toward restoring Syrian territory in the Golan Heights. Neither portended well for Syria's goal of reclaiming Golan. However, Assad also knew that King Hussein of Jordan and the Israelis were eager to avoid an expanded political role for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Syria's long-time position as a champion of the Palestinian cause offered Assad a countermove.⁷⁰ Through its claim to Palestinian leadership, the PLO could harness some of the Arab sympathies toward their cause and would thus become a stronger ally of Syria. For Assad, the Rabat Summit became an opportunity to have the Arab League formally invest the PLO with political legitimacy.

The summit was a battle for the voice of the Palestinian people, and for the legitimacy it carried in the Arab world. When Assad and his allies succeeded in having the Arab League recognize the PLO as 'the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,' the

ramifications were broad.⁷¹ With an empowered PLO at his side, Assad scored a victory at Rabat. King Hussein was barred from negotiating the future of the West Bank with Israel. That authority now belonged to the PLO, with whom the Israelis refused to talk. Thus, if Sadat was unable to secure parallel negotiations for Egypt, Syria, and the PLO, his sole option for further diplomatic progress would be to negotiate with Israel alone. While Sadat himself might be so inclined, he knew that separate negotiations would meet with strong opposition from Arab audiences at home and throughout the Middle East. In many ways, Kissinger's 'carefully constructed policy had been derailed' by Rabat.⁷² He nevertheless argued that further Egyptian-Israeli negotiations remained the only option.⁷³ Shortly after Rabat, Israel's prime minister Rabin publicly rejected any negotiations 'with terrorist organizations whose avowed policy is to strive for Israel's destruction,' by which he meant the PLO.⁷⁴

Kissinger returned to Damascus on 7 November. A briefing prepared for him ahead of the visit warned that after Rabat, the Syrians believed they wielded 'the collective political and financial strength to force the issue' if Israel would not enter a second round of Golan negotiations.⁷⁵ Assad confirmed to Kissinger the goal of his PLO strategy - to block further Sinai negotiations without a Golan parallel.⁷⁶ However, Kissinger also detected 'anxiety on the part of Asad as to how now to proceed in light of Rabat. ... [I]t was unlikely [that] some negotiation would be going on that would exclude Syria, while at the same time concern over the probable impasse he has helped create as a result of the support he gave to the PLO.'⁷⁷ Clearly, Assad worried that although he had strengthened Syria's hand, this would be of little use if the overall peace process foundered.

Despite Rabat, another Egyptian-Israeli agreement remained the focus of Kissinger's diplomacy. Syria's role would be determined by the degree to which Damascus could inject

Syria into the United States-Egypt-Israel triangle. By successfully empowering his PLO allies, Assad had, it seemed, made one successful move to restrain Egypt from further separate negotiations. But would it suffice?

When American diplomats spoke to their Syrian counterparts, they took great care to note how resolving Syria's grievances with Israel were integral to their diplomatic efforts. Step by step, they promised, a just and final settlement was approaching. The Israelis, though, promised no such thing. In a 3 December, 1974 interview, Rabin asserted that Israel 'must try to isolate Syria and thus block the tendency of Syrian policy, which is to draw the region into a new war-- this time on three fronts-- against Israel. If [a] new war in 1975 cannot be avoided, it is in Israel's interest that it be confined to [the] northern front against Syria.'⁷⁸ Rabin was not ignorant of how this would be read in Syria, and indeed, the Syrian government's reaction was 'swift and angry.'⁷⁹ Though Kissinger had privately urged such an approach to the Israelis throughout early 1974, saying so publicly was something else - why should Syria remain committed to diplomatic progress if Israel was not?

In February 1975, Assad nevertheless indicated Syria's acceptance of further step-by-step moves in Golan, some kilometers at a time. Kissinger related this in Jerusalem, albeit without any call for action on the Israelis' part. Any further Golan move would require the evacuation of Israeli settlements. Kissinger would not risk controversy with Israel unless it facilitated his preferred next move - a second Egyptian-Israeli negotiation.⁸⁰ To that end, Kissinger made a preliminary trip to the Middle East, including a Damascus visit on 14 February. Assad explicitly threatened to 'cause problems for Egypt both internally and in the Arab world if Egypt went it alone' in the coming negotiations.⁸¹ Days later, Assad surprised everyone when, in an interview, he explicitly said that a second Syria-Israel negotiated deal

could be a permanent peace agreement. Perhaps Assad wanted to signal that Syria would be serious about negotiating if it were allowed to take part, but would be just as serious about wrecking Kissinger's upcoming Israeli-Egyptian negotiations if it were kept out.⁸²

Between 7 and 22 March, Kissinger conducted another round of shuttle diplomacy. His goal was to conclude a second-stage Egyptian-Israeli deal, while keeping Hafez al-Assad from sabotaging Anwar Sadat's negotiating attempts.⁸³ Meeting Assad in Damascus, Kissinger declared himself and Ford ready to employ 'American pressure' to help Syria regain as much land as possible.⁸⁴ Assad asked whether exerting such pressure was being discussed not just in general but in the ongoing negotiations. Kissinger replied: 'Yes, but I don't want to mislead you. ... I'm preparing the political and psychological groundwork. ... [I]t must be done in a way that can succeed and not just be a theoretical exercise.'⁸⁵

Kissinger's vague 'groundwork' talk was a stalling tactic, but he was not entirely dishonest. The matter of another Golan move was discussed in Egypt, in Israel, and among the Americans.⁸⁶ After negotiating the Golan disengagement agreement in May 1974, Kissinger had abandoned his professed strategy of isolating Syria. While his new approach to Syria could best be described as an amiable containment strategy, he also came to believe that US interests in the Middle East necessitated another round of Syrian-Israeli negotiations. Kissinger repeatedly told the Israelis as much, but no pressure backed his words, and no political capital was spent. Israeli opposition meant that Ford would have to apply extraordinary pressure to achieve movement on the Golan front. As long as an easier but eminently important second Sinai deal lay within reach, this remained Kissinger's focus.

In Damascus, Kissinger found Assad deeply suspicious of being sidelined through a second Sinai agreement. The Syrian threatened that a solution would not come without

another war. Kissinger, however, concluded that Assad had adopted a wait-and-see attitude regarding the Egypt-Israel negotiations. Assad stressed that any differences arising between the United States and Syria over these negotiations, should not be allowed to impact their overall relationship. Such utterances had become a fixture of Assad's exchanges with American diplomats, yet another affirmation of the priority he placed on their new bilateral relationship.⁸⁷

Kissinger related to Ford how Assad had made an 'impressively eloquent statement in front of his colleagues' to explain why he was now saying publicly, for the first time, that Syria wanted peace with Israel.⁸⁸ A similar report was made to the Israelis the next day in Jerusalem. When Rabin asked whether Kissinger believed a serious agreement was achievable with Egypt and Syria, Kissinger responded in the affirmative.⁸⁹ However, as he then reported to Ford, there was no Syria option on the table: 'Syrian suspicion is so strong, and Israeli opposition to giving up anything more on the Golan so great, that a stalemate is likely to result.'⁹⁰ Maintaining progress thus remained a matter of keeping Syria from actively spoiling another Sinai deal, by warfare or otherwise.

Kissinger pushed ahead toward another Sinai deal, knowingly risking Syrian disruption. As the negotiations entered their critical phase, Israeli Defense Minister Shimon Peres worried that a deal with Egypt would cause a blow-up on the Syrian front. Kissinger had long shared that worry, but, in an apparent change of heart, he replied to Peres' concern that '[t]his I no longer believe.'⁹¹

Kissinger had by this time heard many Syrian threats of war, heard other leaders worry about this, and read numerous reports of Syrian military preparations. He had, however, seen few signs that they would act. The threat of renewed warfare was Syria's strongest negotiating

card against Israel. Another war might place unbearable international pressures on Israel and the United States, compel Soviet and Egyptian involvement, and cause another oil embargo. As in 1973, Syria needed not win militarily to gain politically. However, as Syria continued to threaten war, but ultimately always pleaded for negotiations, those threats rang increasingly hollow.

In any case, the Sinai negotiations in March 1975 failed, largely due to Israeli intransigence.⁹² The Syrians expressed their fear that the United States might now ‘wash its hands of all peace efforts in [the] area.’⁹³ While publicly pronouncing his joy at the failure of Kissinger’s negotiations, Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam recognized that a wholesale American withdrawal from the diplomatic process would not be in Syria’s interest. Apart from seeking to reclaim Golan through another war (which Syria would almost certainly lose), American diplomacy, backed by pressure only the United States could exert on Israel, remained Syria’s best option.⁹⁴

In April, Kissinger launched the so-called Reassessment. Ordered after the failed Israel-Egypt negotiations in March, this ostensible policy review process was mainly intended to demonstrate American displeasure with Israeli intransigence during the March negotiations and soften the ground for further Egyptian-Israeli negotiations. During the Reassessment, however, Kissinger earnestly discussed abandoning this Egypt-first approach. While he believed another Sinai deal would defuse the Arab-Israeli conflict, the danger of Syrian disruption made him uncertain of the option’s viability. Kissinger and his colleagues briefly dabbled with the idea of focusing negotiations on Golan rather than Sinai. Greater attention, however, was given to the idea of some sort of comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, whereby all aspects would be tackled in a grand peace settlement. Syria would have

to be included, alongside Egypt and the Palestinian issue. To Kissinger, the March breakdown seemed to suggest that achieving a second Sinai agreement would require immense White House pressure on Israel, which would lead to a furor with pro-Israeli groups and politicians in the United States. If Ford and Kissinger must brave such a storm in any case, so Kissinger's argument seemed to go, they might as well risk a somewhat greater storm in order to pursue a comprehensive Middle Eastern peace settlement right away.⁹⁵

Ultimately, however, the comprehensive option did not stand out as better than the more easily achievable default option - a second Sinai deal. If nothing else, the Israelis had shown some grudging willingness to pursue further Sinai negotiations. This was not the case vis-à-vis Golan or the Palestinians. Moreover, Ford faced a presidential election in 1976, where it would do him little good to be at odds with Israel and its American friends. Back to square one, Kissinger concluded that a second Egypt-Israel agreement remained the only politically viable goal.⁹⁶

US diplomatic efforts soon resumed, again focusing on another Sinai deal. However, the Syrian aspect of the conflict regularly came up during talks. Rabin met Kissinger and Ford in Washington where he refused the notion of evacuating any Israeli settlements as part of another limited Golan agreement.⁹⁷ Israel would only consider evacuation in the context of a full-fledged peace settlement and described any possible territorial offerings in another step-by-step agreement as 'cosmetic.'⁹⁸ Meeting Rabin again some days later, Kissinger described his favorite concept for how to include Syria in the process: '[T]he best way would be to start disengagement talks through us without me at that stage. We would both understand that they would not be likely to succeed. Then at a time when a stalemate appears near, you would make some cosmetic changes unilaterally as a gesture of good will. Then we would jointly

recommend that the negotiations be moved to the overall stage.’⁹⁹ This ‘overall stage’ was a reference to a reconvened Geneva Conference. At no point did Kissinger earnestly discuss Geneva as a forum for successful negotiations, but rather expected stalemate to result from any negotiations in such a public forum. Thus, Kissinger suggested the Syrian-Israeli negotiations be sent to Geneva to buy time, resulting in stalemate, but not another Arab-Israeli war. Blame would befall everyone involved, not just the United States or Israel.

Kissinger’s strategy had first been to isolate Syria from Egypt, and then, from mid-1974, to contain Syria’s ability to disturb the Egypt-Israel process. With changing circumstances, however, Kissinger saw two reasons why this might no longer be doable. Firstly, the Syrians and their Saudi and Palestinian allies were much stronger than before, while Egypt had experienced a relative decline in power. The Rabat Summit had illustrated that Egypt was no longer the uncontested leader of the Arab world.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, Kissinger argued that ‘[t]he heart of the Palestine problem is in Palestine, not in the Sinai Syria is the ideological heartland of Arab nationalism and is deeply committed to the resolution of the Palestine problem. The Saudis may well support Syria and not Egypt on this issue if they are forced to make a choice.’¹⁰¹ Kissinger listed Assad’s PLO strategy at Rabat as one of several ways Syria could hurt American interests vis-à-vis Egypt, the USSR, Israel, and oil supplies.¹⁰²

Flaunting this recent Syrian ascendance and Syria’s opposition to a second Egypt-Israel deal, Kissinger launched another Sinai shuttle in August. Whatever risks it carried, he saw this as not only the most desirable option, but also the only politically viable one. He visited Damascus twice, ‘to keep Asad calm.’¹⁰³ The second visit, on 3 September, would be his last meeting with Assad. As he had increasingly done during the last year, Kissinger again

spoke of renewed progress on the Syrian front after the American presidential elections in 1976. Assad pressed on where this was leading.¹⁰⁴ Kissinger's reply: 'This is in extreme confidence: We (USG) are thinking of the 1967 boundaries as a basis for a final settlement. If you, or the Palestinians, don't rock the boat, I think we can achieve that goal in some five years from now.'¹⁰⁵ Seemingly unmoved by Kissinger's extraordinarily specific proclamation on Israel's final borders, Assad merely replied that 'I will be thinking of all you have said.'¹⁰⁶ Perhaps he sensed that Kissinger was now, more than anything, desperate to keep Syria from wrecking the Egypt-Israel deal he had gotten both parties to accept. The meeting ended, and, the next day, Egypt and Israel signed the Sinai Interim Agreement, better known as Sinai II. Secret, written American assurances and guarantees to Egypt and Israel were crucial to securing the deal, among which were assurances to Egypt that Israel would 'not initiate military action against Syria,' and to Israel that Egypt would not join in any Syrian-initiated fighting. The Americans reaffirmed to the Egyptians, in writing, their intention of making 'a serious effort to help bring about further negotiations between Syria and Israel' toward 'a just and lasting peace on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 338.'¹⁰⁷

However, another particular assurance in a letter from Ford to Rabin made such a peace all but impossible: 'The US has not developed a final position on the borders. Should it do so it will give great weight to Israel's position that any peace agreement with Syria must be predicated on Israel remaining on the Golan Heights.'¹⁰⁸ Israel had few reasons to retreat in Golan unless subjected to massive pressure. With the Sinai II agreement greatly reducing the chance of another Arab-Israeli war, and a presidential election in the coming year, the Ford administration's motivations for exerting such pressure dwindled.¹⁰⁹ Syria would therefore have to relinquish most or all of its Golan claims to win a lasting peace, which was an unlikely prospect.

Despite displeasing the Americans with his PLO strategy at Rabat and vocal opposition to negotiations for another Egypt-Israel deal, Assad had abstained from harsher measures, which might have included limited warfare with Israel. Kissinger's own misgivings notwithstanding, the containment approach to Syria had succeeded.

Assad quickly and publicly denounced Sinai II. The Syrian-Egyptian rift grew.¹¹⁰ But Syria was not isolated. With significant military capabilities, economic support from Saudi Arabia, and good relations with the PLO and the USSR, Syria remained capable of causing trouble for Israel and the United States. The Americans realized this and wanted another round of negotiations between Israel and Syria. On 5 September, however, Yitzhak Rabin publicly declared that there was 'virtually no chance' of a second Golan deal, since Israel could only offer one hundred to two hundred yards of further withdrawals.¹¹¹

Syrian displeasure with Sinai II was aired both in public and in private. In off-the-record remarks made during an interview - statements that reached the Americans - Assad threatened that Syria might resume hostilities with Israel. He claimed that the Syrians could succeed as they had in October 1973, by precipitating a major international crisis and an oil embargo. Moreover, Assad suggested, if Israel then threatened Syria with total defeat, the USSR would not stand idly by. In such a scenario, he might even allow Soviet troops on the ground in Syria to compel the United States to 'understand what it had to do.'¹¹² Although Assad's threats were troubling, Kissinger argued that Assad would 'subside after three or four months.'¹¹³ In October, a message arrived from Assad, declaring that the recent agreement had made further negotiations impossible for Syria, unless they simultaneously concerned the Syrian and Palestinian fronts of the conflict.¹¹⁴

From November onward, the Syrians campaigned for a new negotiating concept, whereby the UN Security Council (UNSC) would replace the Geneva Conference, which Assad considered dead after Sinai II. The concept materialized as a precondition for Syria's biannual renewal of the UNDOF mandate, which operated in the buffer zone between Israeli and Syrian forces in Golan: only if the UNSC passed a resolution assembling the peace forum Assad wanted would Syria renew. Though unenthusiastic, the Americans voted yes in the UNSC. They saw it as a largely symbolic gesture, a cheap price to pay for avoiding a crisis over the UNDOF mandate.¹¹⁵ Warning Assad against taking this campaign too far, a 27 November message from Kissinger mixed carrot and stick: '[W]hen we speak of a major effort in 1977, we are not just talking about procedural ways of continuing the peace process or of further step-by-step agreements, but of a comprehensive peace settlement that would deal with all aspects of the problem on all fronts -- borders, the Palestinians, guarantees, etc. [President Assad] should furthermore understand this in the context of all of the conversations and communications he has had with two American presidents and with me. ... A needless confrontation between the Arabs and the United States would put this prospect in serious jeopardy.'¹¹⁶ As for Syria's key diplomatic concern - the Golan - nothing was happening.

4. Epilogue: Lebanon, Golan and President Ford's Second Term

Assad nevertheless persisted in showing 'continued interest in a political solution' under American leadership.¹¹⁷ Both Washington and Damascus remained committed to their by-now mature diplomatic relations. That relationship would soon yield strange results amidst the drama of the Lebanese Civil War, which had broken out in April 1975. For its first two years, the war mainly pitted Maronite Christian factions against a loose coalition of Palestinians,

leftist Muslims, and Druze.¹¹⁸ Intimately linked to Lebanon by geography, history, politics, and kinship, the war presented Syria with numerous challenges. When the war broke out, Damascus geared its significant political clout in Lebanon toward a peaceful resolution. Syria long supported a coalition of Palestinians, radical Muslims, and Druze against nominally conservative Maronite factions, a policy that was fully in line with Syria's traditional leftist and pro-Palestinian alignment. However, Assad sought a politically balanced outcome in Lebanon, not a clear-cut military win by any one faction. When, in March and April of 1976, the radical/leftist factions stood on the brink of victory, Assad shifted his support to the same faction that Israel supported in Lebanon, the conservative Maronites.¹¹⁹

The first years of the war vividly illustrated how far US diplomacy toward Syria had come since 1973. In Lebanon, the Americans found common ground with the Syrians, and viewed them as crucial to resolving the conflict in a way that avoided a dangerous Israeli intervention. In October 1975, a formal Syrian-American dialogue on Lebanon opened through diplomatic channels. Syria invaded Lebanon on the night of 31 May, 1976. Israel remained still. This was no accident: American diplomats, trading on their mature relationships with Jerusalem and Damascus, had spent the preceding months as diplomatic go-betweens. The Americans consulted each side on what it would and would not accept in Lebanon, and conveyed this onwards as advice to the other. Over time, a tenuous, unwritten understanding was reached. While there is no direct evidence of a green light given by either Israel or the United States, the nature of Syria's invasion suggests they heeded the advice given them by American diplomats.¹²⁰

The Americans proceeded to lobby their wealthy Saudi and Iranian friends to assist Assad. Soviet aid to Syria had been severely cut due to the Lebanon issue, where the two

states now supported opposing forces.¹²¹ In an August 1976 meeting, Kissinger warned three US Middle East ambassadors that ‘a Syrian defeat in Lebanon would be a disaster’.¹²² It would squeeze the Syrian leader between radicals in Iraq and Lebanon and ‘probably mean the overthrow of Assad.’¹²³ To the Americans, Assad was a known, responsible entity in a country where such leadership had been an exception.

Repeatedly throughout 1976, Kissinger spoke optimistically and with apparent conviction, to both his American colleagues and President Ford, of his plans for renewed Arab-Israeli negotiations following Ford’s election in November.¹²⁴ In August 1976, he told an assembly of US Middle East ambassadors: ‘Our strategy is to bring Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Egypt together and to go for an overall settlement. After the overall attempt, we might end up with a Sinai III [agreement.] ... I would prefer significant territorial progress on all three fronts, Egypt, the Golan and the West Bank, with Jordan beginning to get back into the West Bank. But the 1967 boundaries are unrealizable in a first stage.’¹²⁵ Kissinger mentioned five to ten kilometers of Israeli Golan withdrawals as a goal. With Ford’s defeat in the 2 November presidential election, however, Kissinger ran out of time. He could do no more than send Assad a warm farewell letter, painting him a vague picture of an approaching ‘moment of historic opportunity for the cause of peace’ in the Middle East.¹²⁶

5. Facing Assad

Before 1973, American leaders paid little attention to an isolated and seemingly impotent Syria. In this way, their Arab-Israeli peace efforts could avoid the diplomatic conundrum presented by the Golan: the Syrians demanded the return of the entire territory while the Israelis showed no will to withdraw. However, following the Syrian-Egyptian surprise attack

on Israel in October 1973, the Americans could no longer avoid dealing with Syria. An intensive six-month diplomatic effort followed. It sought the seemingly modest goal of separating Syrian and Israeli forces facing off in the Golan Heights. Henry Kissinger mediated this deal as part of his plan to divide Syria from its Egyptian ally, seeking to leave the Syrians isolated and powerless.

Such an outcome, Kissinger had imagined, would allow another Egyptian-Israeli negotiated deal, which would in turn defuse the entire Arab-Israeli conflict. This had numerous benefits for the United States: the security of its Israeli friends would greatly improve; the risk of a dangerous confrontation with the Soviet Union would greatly diminish; and likewise reduce the risk of a conflict threatening other US interests in the region, including its access to Middle East oil. Whichever shifting tactics Kissinger used to get there, these ultimate goals of his Arab-Israeli diplomacy remained fixed.

The Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement was signed on 31 May, 1974. By then, Kissinger's growing familiarity with President Assad and his influence in the region had changed the American's analysis (though not his ultimate goals): Syria could not be isolated or be made powerless. Instead, if Kissinger's next objective - a second Egyptian-Israeli Sinai agreement to follow the one signed in January 1974 - were to be realized, Syria's power to disrupt it must be contained. The alternative to containment - parallel, negotiated deals between Egypt, Syria, and Israel - seemed all but impossible due to Israel's strong objections to further retreats in Golan.

The Americans attempted to contain Syria by two methods: Firstly, through trust building. Kissinger's Damascus visits, the reception of Syrian officials in Washington, and the work of American diplomats in Damascus all aimed at instilling in the Syrians the notion that

they were being kept informed and remained part of the peace process. Second, through these contacts, Assad received repeated, though mostly vague assurances about what Nixon/Ford and Kissinger would help Syria achieve in the future.

The three Sinai and Golan agreements required plenty of US pressure and diplomatic finesse; another Golan move would have required more still. Despite Kissinger's increased respect for Assad and apparent desire to comply with some of his demands, his strategic outlook favored Egypt and Israel as the core of his diplomacy. Moreover, the special US relationship with the Israelis, who were unwilling to move further in Golan, disfavored Syria. After dislodging Egypt from the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1975, and with a US presidential election nearing, Ford and Kissinger's motivations, abilities, and appetite for pressuring Israel dwindled. Without such pressure, nothing more would happen on the Syrian-Israeli front. Kissinger's talk of a second, American-led round of Golan negotiations - which was vague and often deceptive through 1974 and 1975 - grew concrete and seemingly earnest in 1976. However, Ford's loss in the 1976 elections ended Kissinger's leadership of American foreign policy, and his apparent visions of further negotiations.

The diplomacy following the 1973 War did more than merely revive diplomatic relations between the United States and Syria. It gave American leaders and diplomats a far better understanding of Syria's significance and role than before the war, both in the Arab-Israeli conflict and in the geopolitics of the Middle East. Kissinger's increasingly intimate understanding of Hafez al-Assad developed through years of diplomatic ups and downs. By mid-1976, the continuation of Assad's regime as a pragmatic, known entity in Syria had become a distinct American priority. When Lebanon descended into civil war, the Ford administration understood and trusted the Syrians enough for nuanced, constructive

diplomacy to take place, which proved central to achieving the Syrian- Israeli understanding preceding Syria's invasion of Lebanon in 1976.

Simultaneously, the American post-war diplomacy facilitated the detachment of Egypt from the Arab-Israeli conflict, effectively ending the Arab military option, and in turn making Syria the sole remaining frontline state confronting Israel. With scant future prospects on the Golan front, Assad was involuntarily freed to direct Syrian ambitions and political efforts elsewhere in the region, including, notably, Lebanon.

Seale and Gani argue that Kissinger tried and succeeded at fooling Assad. In his discussion of the disengagement negotiations, Yaqub similarly suggests that Kissinger was duplicitous with Assad, but without any assessment of whether he succeeded or not. Stein, contrary to Seale and Gani, presents Assad as wringing a decent outcome out of the disengagement negotiations through sheer tenacity and political savvy.¹²⁷ Through plenty of ambiguity and the occasional outright deception, Henry Kissinger did indeed try to mislead Hafez al-Assad. The American sought outcomes that were beneficial to US national interests, as he construed them. Assad likewise appears to have pursued his idea of Syrian national interests. Although these visions overlapped somewhat, in many crucial ways they did not. The geopolitically weak Syria would therefore have to manoeuvre with extraordinary skill to achieve its goals in this complex duel with Israel, Egypt, the US and others, whose goals were different. In the end, Assad had been dealt a weak hand, and, despite all his considerable skill, could not wrest a favorable outcome from it. Through these contacts, Kissinger came to value the Assad regime as a known, stable and trustworthy entity, and appears to have preferred getting Syria a better deal with Israel than he did. But for Kissinger, the geopolitical

arguments for helping Syria achieve this were in the end far too weak, and the counterarguments far too strong.

¹ William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2005), 130-135; Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 303–304; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 747–750; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 248–249; J. Rosenberg, ‘The Quest against Détente: Eugene Rostow, the October War, and the Origins of the Anti-Détente Movement, 1969–1976,’ *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 4 (2015), 732, 737, 741.

² Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³ J. K. Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the quest for Arab-Israeli peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁶ Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2016).

⁷ Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict : Making America's Middle East policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Quandt, *Peace Process*.

⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*.

⁹ H. Henriksen Waage and H. Kjeang Mørk, ‘Mission Impossible: UN Special Representative Gunnar Jarring and His Quest for Peace in the Middle East,’ *The International History Review* 38, no. 4, (2016), 830-853;; Rogers, speech, ‘Rogers Plan,’ *Wikisource*, 9 Dec. 1969, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Rogers_Plan, last accessed 4 Aug. 2015; Quandt, *Peace Process*, 67–70; Folders, ‘NSC Meeting - Middle East [Folders 1 and 2],’

10 Dec. 1969, [Yorba Linda], R[ichard] N[ixon] P[residential] L[ibrary and Museum], N[ational] S[ecurity] C[ouncil] I[nstitutional] F[iles], Box H025.

¹⁰ Folder, 'NSC Meeting - Middle East [Folder 2 of 2],' 10 Dec. 1969, RNPL, NSC IF, Box H025..

¹¹ Resolution 242 is non-specific on whether Israel should retreat from 'territories' captured in 1967, or from 'all the territories'. Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1991), 105–108; Saunders to Kissinger, 'The Middle East, 1973-1976 (3 of 4),' 14 Nov. 1972, RNPL, NSC, Box 1190.

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²⁰ Briefing, 22 Dec. 1973, RNPL, [National Security Council Files] H[enry] A[.] K[issinger] O[ffice] F[iles], Box 43; Quandt, *Peace Process*, 130–143.

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⁶⁰ Niehuss, Kissinger to Scowcroft, memo, 21 Aug. 1974, GRFL, N[ational] S[ecurity] A[dviser], P[residential] C[ountry] F[iles], M[idle] E[ast and] S[outh] A[sia], Box 30.

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⁶⁴ Rabin et al., memo of conversation, 13 Sep. 1974, *FRUS*, vol. XXVI, doc. 100.

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¹¹⁹ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 267–271, 275–277; David M. Wight, ‘Kissinger’s Levantine Dilemma: The Ford Administration and the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon,’ *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 1 (2013), 155–156; Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 500.

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¹²⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 1051–1058; Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft, memo of conversation, 10 May 1976, GRFL DC, MOC; Kissinger, et al., memo of conversation, 22 June 1976, *FRUS*, vol. XXVI, doc. 290.

¹²⁵ Kissinger, et al., memo of conversation, 7 Aug. 1976, *FRUS*, vol. XXVI, doc. 292. An interesting side note from this document is the fact that Kissinger confirms the accuracy of recent rumors of a secret meeting between Syrian and Israeli officials in Geneva.

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