

A LOOK AT... *The Mideast Minuet*

The Mind of Hafez Assad

*After a Career Built on Rejectionism,
He's Still Playing a Double Game*

By Daniel Pipes

IN MAY 1966, a full year before Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel, Syrian Defense Minister Hafez Assad forecast a future of total conflict with the Jewish state: "We shall never call for, nor accept peace. We shall only accept war and the restoration of the usurped land [i.e., Israel proper]. We have resolved to drench this land with our blood, to oust you, aggressors, and throw you into the sea for good."

Never accept peace? Assad, now the president of Syria, has for the last three years been talking to Israel about ending the conflict. Contrary to his 1966 vow, he is offering Israel "the peace of the brave, the peace of the knights." He has proposed "full peace for full withdrawal" and even promised to "meet the objective requirements of peace that are agreed upon." Meanwhile, his foreign minister actually spoke of creating a "warm peace" with Israel.

This week, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher is scheduled to visit Damascus. Christopher predicted no breakthroughs, but before leaving, he said, "I wouldn't be going out there unless I thought that it was worth the trip. It is a very significant time on the Syrian track."

What does this change mean? Has Assad truly renounced his old ways and accepted the Jewish state? The record is mixed, and the truth is that Assad may himself not know what comes next.

Still some evidence suggests major changes. The regime has taken modest but real steps to prepare Syrians for accord with Israel: "Peace" and its synonyms have replaced "steadfastness" and "confrontation" as the leitmotifs of public discourse about Israel. Syrian media coverage of Israel no longer shows unremitting hostility. Most dramatically, Syrian television covered the meeting of Jordan's King Hussein and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the White House live and in full, including Rabin's prayer in Hebrew.

More generally, Syrian media covered the Jordani-

an-Israeli story straight.

Contacts between Syrians and Israelis have proliferated in the past year. An Israeli journalist was let into Syria on a *laissez passer*, and Syrian diplomats in Berlin publicly greeted their Israel counterparts. The minister of the economy and foreign trade gave an on-the-record interview to an Israeli newspaper, and an administrative attaché at the Syrian embassy in London told another Tel Aviv newspaper that Israelis who travel on non-Israeli passports are welcome in his country. In July 1994, the Syrian chargé d'affaires attended the Hussein-Rabin event and shook hands with Rabin.

The enormous distance between Assad's '60s policy and his current one has convinced the U.S. and Israeli governments that he has opted for peace with Israel, with only the details to be worked out. After a marathon meeting with Assad in January 1994, President Clinton was asked if he felt the Syrian leader had made a firm commitment to normalize relations with Israel. Clinton replied without hesitation, "The short answer is yes." As for Israelis, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres holds that "Assad has made a strategic decision to opt for peace." Uri Saguy, the head of Israeli military intelligence, argues that Assad is ready to make peace. A former negotiator with Syria for the Likud Party, Yossi Olmert, likewise refers to "Syria's change of heart" vis-a-vis Israel.

The sense that it's just a matter of tying up the details has created an atmosphere charged with expectation. The Arab press reports that Damascus and Jerusalem should achieve "palpable progress" by the end of 1994, while Fawaz Gerges of Princeton University has prophesied in the Los Angeles Times that "a breakthrough in the Syrian-Israeli peace talks is imminent."

But the Assad record has a darker side, one that raises questions not only about current policies but also about the long-term intentions of the government in Damascus.

Yes, Assad did send diplomats to Washington for

official, direct meetings with Israelis. But then why did he condemn his own dealings with Israel? That was his unusual gambit of a year ago when Syria voted against a United Nations resolution expressing the General Assembly's hope "for achieving rapid progress on the other tracks of the Arab-Israeli negotiations"—a reference to the talks with Syria and Lebanon!

There are many other small but disturbing signals. The Lebanese government (a wholly owned subsidiary of Damascus) charged Lebanon's beauty queen, Ghada Turk, with collaborating with the enemy for posing in a joint picture with Miss Israel. Assad banned Israeli journalists from his press conference with Bill Clinton. The Syrian press lambasted Oman for hosting an Israeli delegation to the multilateral peace talks and criticized the United Arab Emirates for dropping antisemitic textbooks. A handbook for Syrian teachers issued in 1994 instructs them to present to their students the "liberation of the land occupied in 1967 as an intermediate goal." In May 1994, Damascus launched an effort to keep the economic boycott of Israel in place until Israel withdrew from all the territories occupied in 1967.

Syria's media continues to bristle with hostility on the subject of Israel, using terms such as "occupied Palestine," "occupied Jerusalem," "the Zionist enemy" and "the Zionist entity." They exult at the killing of Israeli citizens and justify terrorism against Israelis as "just punishment." The press sometimes still publishes lunatic antisemitic articles. This past May, the English-language Syrian Times ran an article which claimed that American Jews are legally excused from paying taxes and that "30 percent of Protestant bishops in the U.S. are originally Jews who did not quit Judaism."

Assad's cramped diplomatic style—using passive constructions, abstractions and indirectness in his speech—conveys deep reluctance to come to terms with Israel; it may also indicate an intent not to let go of the rejectionist option, an impression reinforced by the steady increase in Syrian military power since the Kuwait war. A new armored division has been deployed, and a Scud-C brigade is in formation. Planes and tanks pour into Syria from around the world. Missiles are now capable of reaching most of Israel's population. Damascus has thousands of chemical bombs and warheads, appears to be near weaponizing deadly anthrax viral agents and is starting nuclear research. In all, according to Israeli intelligence sources, Damascus has spent \$1.4 billion on military modernization efforts since Operation Desert Storm; the military budget amounts to 44 percent of the national budget.

Syrian forces have engaged in impressive military buildups several times before, but the post-1991 effort has been unprecedented in terms of size, quality and reach. Israeli analysts concluded by late 1991 that the Syrian military arm had attained a stronger position vis-a-vis Israel than ever before. In June 1994, Israel's prime minister stated he "could not remember such a large quantity of arms reaching Syria, and of the most advanced type."

In contrast to the widespread expectation of a breakthrough, the leaders of both Israel and Syria have publicly dampened expectations. Rabin quips that if Assad's recent record "shows a readiness for peace on the part of Syria, then I don't know what opposition to peace would be." Assad asserts that "so far, no significant progress has been achieved in the peace process."

Consistent with these downbeat assessments, some American and Israeli analysts conclude that Assad has not in fact opted for peace. Middle East scholar Barry Rubin writes that "a 'no war, no peace' situation—perhaps with new safeguards—would seem more attractive to Syria than a diplomatic resolution capped by a peace treaty and mutual recognition." Even Israel's outspoken army chief of staff, Ehud Barak, has declared himself "not sure that Syria knows for a fact that there will be peace with us."

Assad simultaneously pursues political and military options vis-a-vis Israel, offering both friendly and antagonistic faces. He takes part in American-sponsored negotiations but also talks like an Arab nationalist. He tries, in the words of Israel's current chief negotiator with Syria, quoted in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, to "prove to the Arab public that while it might advance in the peace process, it has not abandoned its principles," not an easy task.

Assad, in short, keeps options open: Even while pleasing the United States by talking to Israel, he signals hard-core anti-Zionists that his heart remains with them. He hints at readiness to work with Washington to make peace with Israel, if need be; if possible, he would rather make war on it with his Iranian friends.

Assad has overseen an evolution in Syrian policy from outright military confrontation to a more nuanced conflict involving diplomacy as well as armed force. The difficulty lies in establishing exactly what this means, whether a gradual acceptance of Israel or a more subtle way of trying to eliminate the Jewish state. Does Assad intend to use diplomacy to make real peace or to buy time? Are his changes strategic or tactical? The evidence is unclear and lends itself to contrary interpretations.

The widespread expectation that Assad will soon be standing on the White House lawn may well be wrong. If forced to accept Israel's existence, Assad will do so grudgingly and with hedges. He will probably try something down the middle, a semi-hostile semi-peace. If Egypt's peace with Israel is cold, Syria's will, in all likelihood, be icy.

At the same time, Washington (and the other capitals of the West) have over the past decade shown great patience with the Assad regime, giving it the benefit of the doubt, not subjecting it to the same stringent measures as the many other rogue states of the Middle East. The time has come for more forceful policy that actively pressures Assad to make peace with Israel. Given Syria's present vulnerabilities, this ought not to be very difficult to achieve. It does, however, require a readiness to confront Damascus, something the notoriously soft policies of recent years have avoided.

The U.S. government ought to lose patience with Assad's prevarications. It should present him with a stark choice: "You're with us or against us." He can work with the West or enter on a collision course with it; make basic changes or stick with the policies of the last quarter century. The choice, Assad must understand, is his, and he cannot evade it.

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