

# HAFEZ ASSAD: 'A JUST PEACE CAN SURVIVE'

In the first interview he has given since Syria and Israel signed the disengagement accord, Syrian President Hafez Assad spoke with NEWSWEEK Senior Editor Arnaud de Borchgrave at the Presidential Palace in Damascus last week. Assad told de Borchgrave that Henry Kissinger's work in the Middle East was not yet complete, but that under proper terms a "just peace can and will survive." A resumption of full diplomatic relations between Syria and the United States, he said, was "not far away now." Highlights:

**De Borchgrave:** What are the major Israeli concessions as you see them?

**Assad:** You cannot say that Israel has made any concessions. Withdrawing from Arab territory, as Israel is required to do under U.N. Resolutions 338 and 242, is hardly a concession. However, one can say that a positive step has been taken to implement these resolutions. It means that Israel is beginning to realize that occupation does not provide security.

**Q.** And which concessions do you think you have made?

**A.** We haven't made any, either. But a number of arrangements were agreed upon in the light of how we envisage disengagement as a means of stabilizing the cease-fire so that we can now achieve complete withdrawal.

**Q.** What is the link you feel you now have between disengagement and a subsequent Israeli withdrawal?

**A.** We have, of course, viewed disengagement as an integral part of a lasting solution. The agreement stipulates that it's a step toward the full implementation of U.N. resolutions—which means complete withdrawal and securing Palestinian rights. This is the way we understand the link between disengagement and the next stage.

**Q.** Assuming Israel agrees to evacuate the Golan Heights under permanent peace arrangements in the future, would some permanent demilitarization formula for the Heights themselves be acceptable to Syria?

**A.** Israel now faces the same problem I had. My doctor told me I had to give up smoking—or face a dangerous health hazard. Continued occupation has become injurious to Israel's health. When they occupied our land, we were faced with two alternatives—either to find some political and diplomatic way to get them to withdraw, or fight to get our land back. Six years of talking led to nothing, so we opted for war. It was the only choice after exhausting all other avenues prior to October 6. Like when I gave up smoking, Israel will have withdrawal

symptoms. But they'll get over it. As you know, all we want is a just peace. It's not much to ask. And when the prerequisites for this peace have been realized, there will be no need for special measures such as demilitarized zones.

These zones mean nothing in the age of rockets and missiles and long-range artillery. We can hit their settlements and their cities, so a narrow demilitarized stretch on Golan won't make a particle of difference to Israel's security.

**Q.** What was the most difficult part of the disengagement negotiation?

**A.** Everything was difficult—particularly for us. More so than for Israel. And the reason is quite simple: we are talking about our land, not theirs. When you hear Israel saying, we will withdraw from this part but not from that part, it is not only very difficult for us but also emotionally painful.

**Q.** What is the next move on the road to a final peace after a disengagement on the Syrian front?

**A.** We will now have contacts with our brother Arab states to agree on these next steps in such a way as to ensure a successful outcome. Believe me, our only concern is to find the ways and the means to implement complete withdrawal from Israel's 1967 conquests.

**Q.** Will Syria now be ready to take its place at the Geneva peace conference along with the Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis?

**A.** If we find out that the Geneva conference would be an effective way—and we sincerely hope it will be—to bring about withdrawal, not only will we go to Geneva but we will also deploy our best efforts to achieve a just and durable peace in the area.

**Q.** What is your personal opinion of Dr. Kissinger after so many hours of negotiation with him?

**A.** Very good and positive impressions. He made enormous efforts and our talks were always constructive. It could not have been done without him.

**Q.** After five weeks of talks, do you feel your views and Kissinger's on what could constitute a lasting settlement in the Middle East are now similar?

**A.** As a matter of fact, our talks concentrated on disengagement and our views were similar, otherwise there would have been no agreement. As for all the elements necessary to establish real peace in the area, we had discussions, but they were not intensive enough. We can, however, disclose that perhaps there was some similarity in our conceptions of certain aspects. Important elements will require further discussions as again perhaps we don't have similar views. More talks with Kissinger are required for each of us to form precise convictions about the views of the other.

**Q.** Israel says it hopes the disengagement agreement with Syria leads to a

genuine peace treaty. What is your idea of real peace with Israel?

**A.** We hope and endeavor for the kind of real peace in the Middle East that will enable us to get on with all phases of our development—economic, educational, technological and cultural. That will only happen after a complete withdrawal and a solution of Palestinian rights. Peace is only possible after these grievances have been removed. It is not in any one's interest that they continue. Quite the contrary. And I mean every country's interest in the area. These grievances must be removed forever.

**Q.** It is generally agreed that there will be no lasting settlement until the Palestinians achieve their legitimate rights—and this presumably means the creation of a Palestinian state. In your judgment, are the West Bank and Gaza viable as that Palestinian state?

**A.** The Palestinians have their leadership, namely the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], recognized by all Arabs as their representatives. A decision is up to this leadership. I can, however, say that I think that it is within our capability to find in U.N. resolutions at least a guide to a lasting solution of this key problem. We shall support any decision taken by the PLO.

**Q.** Even if that decision is to dismantle the state of Israel?

**A.** I would imagine that what the PLO decides will not exceed the spirit of U.N. resolutions. And these do not call for the dismantling of Israel.

**Q.** Do you then mean the Palestine partition plan of 1947?

**A.** I am not referring to anything specific. What I mean is any resolution that treats Palestinians as a people that have a problem that must find a just solution.

**Q.** Is there any reason why Israel and its Arab neighbors, including a Palestinian state, could not live in peace?

**A.** That would mean peace based on justice for all. And it would also create the opportunity for all of us in the area to carry out our roles in the light of our various problems in order to solve them and achieve better levels and standards for all. Therefore, everything that will be created by such a just peace will not only be viable but it can and will survive.

**Q.** How soon do you expect a full resumption of relations with the U.S.?

**A.** Things are moving along satisfactorily. There is no doubt relations will return to normal. It's not far away now.

**Q.** Will Mr. Nixon come to Damascus?

**A.** Perhaps. It's a good possibility.

**Q.** But can he come without full relations first?

**A.** Yes, it's possible.

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